SCP Foundation

Mankind in its present state has been around for a quarter of a million years, yet only the last 4,000 have been of any significance.

So, what did we do for nearly 250,000 years? We huddled in caves and around small fires, fearful of the things that we didn't understand. It was more than explaining why the sun came up, it was the mystery of enormous birds with heads of men and rocks that came to life. So we called them 'gods' and 'demons', begged them to spare us, and prayed for salvation.

In time, their numbers dwindled and ours rose. The world began to make more sense when there were fewer things to fear, yet the unexplained can never truly go away, as if the universe demands the absurd and impossible.

Mankind must not go back to hiding in fear. No one else will protect us, and we must stand up for ourselves.

While the rest of mankind dwells in the light, we must stand in the darkness to fight it, contain it, and shield it from the eyes of the public, so that

others may live in a sane and normal world.

We secure. We contain. We protect.

— The Administrator

This book contains the collected works of the SCP Foundation, a collaborative fiction writing website. All contents are licensed under the CC-BY-SA 3.0 license. The stories comprising the book are available online at www.scp-wiki.net .

Cover artwork by SunnyClockwork - http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-sunny-day-at-the-clockwork-gallery

2018-07-01

SCP Foundation

Ebook edition

Assorted Tales

Tales 0

Story Application: "085, A Romance in 2.5 Dimensions"

Chapter 1: "Sierra Nevadas"

Her cadmium yellow #5 hair cascades down over her shoulders as she sits down in the corner of the canvas, looking up into the white expanse of blank gesso, her slender legs crossed at the ankles. Her arms are crossed, and there is a desperation to her as she kicks her feet back and forth, expectantly. "Come on," I hear her say. "Hurry up."

{Patience,} I write, using a very light charcoal pencil. {Don't rush an artist.}

She doesn't respond much to that, except to sigh and lean against the bench, sighing. She scratches an itch, pulling up her ultramarine dress a bit, and I see a slight flash of white panty. I wonder whether I should tell her about that. Probably best not to mention it.

My paints are ready, my palette prepared, my brushes are all arranged. I pin up the photograph of the lakeside view next to the canvas, and spend a moment just drinking in the sight of that beautiful mountain view. It was a photograph I'd taken ten years ago, as a teenager, on a camping trip up in the Sierra Nevadas. I'd been with Rachael back then: lovely Rachael with the girl-next-door eyes and the face of an angel, lovely Rachael who had crept into my tent while the others were asleep and put her finger to my lips, kissing me softly as she crept into my sleeping bag, lovely Rachael who now lived somewhere in Sacramento, a lobbyist for Greenpeace now, and I wonder, as I sketch the outlines of the

mountains and trees, whether or not she sometimes looks out at the forests that she fights so hard to protect and remembers, with a smile, the night when she crept into the tent of her classmate wearing a t-shirt and panties and made love to him to the sound of chirping crickets and falling water.

Memories. My pencil dances across the canvas with reckless abandon, as it always does when my muse strikes, when the left-side brain shuts down and lets my right-side brain flow freely, when eye and hand and pencil work in perfect harmony. Memories of the time that the man in the black tie had come to me and told me that he'd read my paper on folklore and myth, being told that I had the opportunity to save the world. Memories of the first missions I went on, the first times I was asked to handle a containment situation. The hands that now held pencil and eraser had once been red with the blood of a close friend, Maggie Lyndon, Dr. Maggie Lyndon, torn in half due to a single moment's indiscretion with Six-Eighty Two, the red of her blood deeper and darker than any cadmium red that my paints could mix. It is not sadness that I feel, but regret, regret for the diamond ring that still stays in my safe deposit box, that I never got to give to her.

If only I were as cold and hard-hearted as some of my colleagues. I cannot drink away my problems, nor can I effect the same cold-hearted dismissal of death that Dr. Clef or Kondraki can. My mother had always told me that, as the youngest, I was the most sensitive of her children. Indeed, although my career was found in science, I had always found solace in art, and it was in art that the Overseers decided that I should find my solace now. Removed from the Keter-level projects, I was told that there was another SCP that had need of my unique talents.

I don't know what I expected, but I did not expect this.

As always, the time passes quickly, and by the time I am finished with the sketch, an hour has passed without my knowing. Cassy is rapt with attention, smiling with delight at the faint outlines of the mountains, the lake, the dock and the small cabin. "It looks wonderful," she gasps. "Can I… ?"

{Not yet,} I write. I put down my pencil now and take up my palette

and brushes. With broad strokes of my widest brush, I lay down my base colors: deep, dark blue for the water, brown for the mountains, pale cerulean for the sky. I move quickly, for Cassy is impatient, but I am careful to pace myself, to slow myself down and really see what is there before I place it on the canvas. Under my brush, the mountains slowly come alive, the flat browns giving way to deep, craggy peaks capped with snow, then bursting forth in greenery as the pine trees explode over their craggy sides. Down low, I take some time to paint out some more details on the closer trees: the broken branch on one, the bent trunk on another, the slight hint of wood rot in a third. Closer in, closer to Cassie, I take some time to paint in the slightly dry grass in darker greens, dabbing in a little bright yellow to form the budding flowers of mustard.

Even as I begin to start on the lake, the painting begins to come alive. A soft wind rustles the high branches of the pine trees, causing dried needles to come drifting to earth, thickening the dark carpet of pine needles under Cassy's bare feet. The lake, which had begun as a deep, blue blotch of paint, quickly takes form under layers of lighter and lighter hues, then under highlights of pure white mixed with a hint of cerulean, to reflect the sky. Little wavelets, like the ones that had lapped at the sides of the rowboat that Rachael and I had drifted in for hours, form on the surface of the water, and begin to move, to ebb and flow.

I lift my paintbrush up, and I step back from the painting. Something is missing here… something that is not in the photograph, nor in the painting, something to make it complete…

Cassy knows. "Can you paint me a dock?" she asks. "I want to dive into the water."

I can't talk to her now, for writing anything to her would ruin the painting, so I respond by laying down four quick lines of black, then layering over it with brown and walnut. The dock is a bit rickety, and the piles appear to be a bit old, but that is part of its charm as well. I am tempted to add a mallard duck to the scene, but that would only remind Cassy of her loneliness. I settle for a leaf on the water, drifting across the lake, casting small ripples on the surface of the dark water.

"Thank you," Cassy says, turning towards me and smiling. "It's beautiful."

I sign my name in the corner in white paint, and add a small, "You're Welcome" and a smiling face to my signature. Cassy gets up from the park bench and walks towards the lake, her bare feet crunching over the pine needles, seeming not to care about the rough ground, and I wonder whether it is because she has never felt the true feeling of pine needles against bare skin that she does not know that it should hurt.

It's a mistake to get distracted like that… in my philosophical haze, I trip over my tray of paints, and my little tubes of Burnt Umber and Vermillion scatter across the containment room. "Fuck!" I sigh. Getting down to my knees, I start rooting under the piles of canvases and papers, trying to gather up my various paints and supplies.

I've finally gathered up my last tube of Cadmium Red and am arranging them in my box when I notice a flash of pale flesh on the painting. I turn and immediately turn away, blushing, as Cassy pulls off her blue dress and lets it fall, carelessly, onto the dock. Her bare back is pale, and slender, and her loveliness is that of an Aphrodite rising from the sea foam as she takes the ribbon out of her hair and lays it atop her dress. She dives into the water with a bright splash, emerges in a shower of sparkling water droplets, and slowly begins to swim across the lake, reveling in the coolness of the water.

Some mad impulse in me wishes she'd choose a backstroke.

I manage to fight back my mad libido and close my artist's case slowly, quietly. Stupid. She can't hear me, or see me, but it seems somehow… intrusive… when she is swimming bare naked through the lake, uncaring of what I might see. I am putting my pallette away when I hesitate, realizing something that I had forgotten.

I have just enough white left. I put my brush to paint and quickly add the missing element to the pile of clothing on the dock.

Closing up my case, I leave the containment facility, swiping my card through the reader and turning out the lights as I go. Cassy will

not mind: to her, the sun will stay bright and shining, the wind will always be cool, and the water will always be crisp and clean, until she is ready to go back home, to the sketchpad left duct-taped to one corner, to her usual world of monochrome blacks and whites.

I wonder, as I head back to my office, why I did that last bit. Perhaps it would have been better just to leave her be, so that she would never know that I had seen her dive, naked, into the lake? Maybe. Maybe it was just that it seemed unfair that I could see her and she could not see me, or maybe it was just my way of teasing her.

Perhaps, as a gentleman, I just didn't feel like leaving a lady to swim without a towel.

Interlude 1

"Agent Lassiter's performance, given his recent emotional troubles, has been exemplary. His psych reports show that although his mental state is… ummmmm… still distressed… he's become much less suicidal than before. In fact, if we're lucky, he might decide not to cut his own wrists with a razor and bleed out on… fuck… let me start all over."

"Although Agent Lassiter remains in a state of emotional distress, he has made good progress in the last few months. I have every confidence that he will make a full recovery and return to field work… yeah, and he'll lay low for a few months and then blow his brains out with his sidearm and maybe take the team with him, fuck… let me start over…"

"Agent Lassiter is a fine operative… no, he WAS a fine operative, now he's a fucking basket case, and rightfully so. The kid saw his girlfriend… no, she was his fiancee… was she? I know he bought a ring, but did he ever manage to give it to her? Dunno, the kid was fretting about it like mad… anyway, he saw Maggie Lyndon torn to pieces by Scip Six-Eight-Two, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it because she was on the wrong side of an emergency partition, and if I ever find out who decided to make those things out of reinforced nine-inch plexiglass so you can see the horrible things that happen to people trapped on the other side, I'll murder them…"

"… fuck, I can't say that, they'll make him a Delta. Screw it, this telling the truth thing is getting me nowhere. Agent Lassiter is a fine operative who just needs some time to recuperate. I recommend that he be given a low-priority duty containing Safe-level SCPs until he makes a full recovery. There we go. And if anyone buys this bullshit, I've got a bridge to sell them. Fucking personnel reports, should never have accepted this stupid promotion…"

- Excerpted from the surveillance logs of Assistant Director Clef's office, six months before the Lassiter Incident.

Tales 1

1

1.

That was the current population of beings inhabiting the entire, extended multiverse. One single sapient being lay sleeping on the last patch of solid matter, topped with the last gas left from what once was. To the left of the being sat two items; one, a small rusted water bottle filled to the brim with water; the other, a small cardboard pizza box belonging to a human shop that had long since been forgotten and destroyed. The entire scene existed within a sphere only ten meters in diameter, with another human construct - a strange machine designed specifically to ensure the continued existence of this place - located at the exact centre, lighting it all in an azure glow. This was all that remained, existence began and ended here.

It awoke and rose. It felt as though there was no lapse in awareness, no significant feeling designating that it had awoken from a slumber, nothing. It went directly from unaware to aware, and wasted no time in obtaining the bottle of water in an appendage and pouring its contents into a certain orifice designed to receive such. After a time it was satisfied, turning its attention to the ham, mushroom and pineapple pizza located within the last pizza box in existence, and began consuming it slowly, savouring the taste as it looked at the boundaries of its home.

It followed the lines and cracks of the bleak lunar stone, out to where they began to blur and fade, and then beyond. To say there was nothing but pure black darkness there was to imply there was darkness there at all, which there most certainly was not. It looked out (Out? At? Through? Into? It wasn't sure what description could be used, if something such as this could be described) to the void of nonexistence that permeated and ruled supreme beyond its home, silently waiting beyond invisible boundaries to complete its invasion.

It lazily, vainly searched for another speck, a sign of anything within the formless form of its timeless enemy, but it knew it would find nought. Even if by some immense chance, an astoundingly convenient stroke of luck ensuring that another such device preserving its home somehow became synchronised with the timeline and remnant spatial rules with that of its own, it would never be able to detect it; even mere centimetres away, there were no rules of physics or logic in the space between them, and thus nothing through which light, sound or even thought could travel through to reach each other.

It paused on its current slice of pizza, idling before it had taken its first bite. It moved its food away from its orifice, out towards the edge of the island of existence, stopping with the tip of the slice flopping lazily just before the edge. The entity knew what would follow, but it enjoyed doing it nonetheless; there was little else to do here anyway. With a slow motion the slice was forced half-way beyond the boundaries of existence, before being withdrawn to reveal that all exposed to the void was gone, having been erased well below the subatomic level, below the quarks, beyond even the level of simple, raw energy. It was gone forever, erased from reality forever, impossible to recover by any means. With no interest in continuing the half-wasted slice, the entity carlessly tossed away the remaining piece, watching it briefly before it vanished.

The sight reminded it of a story formed by a human many eons ago. The entity was not new to the universe, oblivious to the degree at which reality had been perverted; no, it was old and timeless, hiding beyond the view of watchful eyes, reaching out and listening quietly with its mind, learning of all that happened within its reach. Even as the holes began to tear open wider and wider, birthing untold new horrors and mysteries that could never feasibly be explained, it listened and learnt how these things had come to be, and planned for the inevitable time to come. It waited until the time was right, and took the three items it needed - items which once would have been protected and revered had lost importance and lay discarded by their owners, lapsing from their minds.

The first was the pizza box - a simple little thing, capable of generating endless supplies of food whenever closed and opened

once more. The limitation of such food always being a form of pizza was acceptable, especially considering how the generated food had eventually come to be randomised when the entity grew bored of the same repetitive flavours.

The second appeared as simple as the first, a mere canister forged by the humans that had slowly yielded to time and age, but still retained its ceaseless supply of water that required only a motion to utilise. The water was good too, the mindless bottle ensuring that only liquid fit to nourish and sustain a jewelled regal flowed from its neck.

With endless nourishment ensured for the entities' own health, only one item remained; something with which to protect the final vestige of reality, an anchor to hold the ship of logic and sanity steadfast in the storm of chaos and destruction. The machine was used frequently by the humans to try and save themselves, but overuse and recklessness weakened them until they could do nought but bow beneath the foot of the invading destruction. This one, however, stood strong and alone. Though it never ceased function, endlessly grinding away to hold the spokes of physics together around it, its own solitude strengthened it tenfold as it used the force of nonexistence to hold the small sphere together in spite of it. With these three items the entity knew it could survive indefinitely and as such waited until the inevitable time came when their use was necessary.

The entity recalled the story it brought to mind; one of a single, lone human fighting against a seemingly unstoppable force to save the universe from it. A perfect acid known only as Nothing, capable of consuming and erasing all it touched regardless of what it was, but capable of being used for endless possibilities to be achieved. It recalled how the tale had ended, with the human seemingly failing in their endeavour, becoming the final remaining component of its existence but being granted the power to undo almost all the damage that had occurred. The entity gave its closest analogue to a smirk, realising how similar the story was to his own predicament.

But such were mere stories - such a rebirth was impossible here. Who was left to serve as the new architect? Nobody had made it but him.

The dreamwalkers? They didn't make it, mischievous and cunning as they were. The bastards tricksters had likely realised their realm was crumbling around them and pulled some sly trick to try and preserve themselves, perhaps by sleeping themselves. But there is only so much of itself an ouroboros can eat before there is no more to feed on, and so the dreamwalkers would have died, taking the dreamlands with them. Dreams were no longer empty for the entity; there were simply no dreams.

The priests of steel and bone? They didn't make it. They were too blinded by their furious rage for each other, trying to resurrect their own deity while destroying the other to think of their solutions to the problem. Even if the two had miraculously cooperated, worked together to birth and forge a combined deity of unrivalled might, it would have been unable to prevent the reverberating destruction that approached it. The entity wouldn't have been surprised if the two religions finally died with their leaders in each other's arms, clutching at the daggers each had pierced the other with.

The Factory? It didn't make it. It likely never considered destruction as a threat, just a way to turn a greater profit before it was finally killed. It certainly made sure its walls didn't fall unnoticed, producing more and more flaws and errors in logic and causality as the end approached its borders, screaming louder and louder as the distance shortened until its maw was finally silenced like it should have been long ago. Perhaps the Factory was a small part of nonexistence, working to further its own spread? It didn't matter now - none of the Factory's machinations or products stood anymore.

The Toymaker? He didn't make it, but he helped lessen the pain. While he was viewed as warped and insane by others, his motives were pure hearted and true, wishing only joy and happiness to those who needed it. Even as their parents became unspeakable monsters right before their eyes, the toymaker ensured they had some pleasant item to think back to before their end came. Not just children, no. Any who saw the wave approaching and were despairing were serviced by the toymaker, getting gifts of impossible puzzles and helpful dolls and the like. And though even the Toymaker met his end eventually, he passed peacefully remembering the smiles he granted to those who suffered.

The sisters? They didn't make it. No number of fathers, timelines, events or plans had saved them in the end. No magnitude of revenge was enough to scare the destroyer from them. No desperate pleas brought divine protection to them. No, they passed without a thought or heed, their own secrecy preventing their story from being brought to mind, even by their father.

The librarians? They didn't make it. Endless access to unlimited knowledge, countless burrows and trapdoors to sneak through, infinite supplies to anything they wished, and yet still they too fell. Their books shattered like glass, their legacy melted like their bones, and within moments they were gone as though their own book had been burnt. They knew what was coming and how it was coming, and so they knew more than any other how futile it was to resist a primordial force without mind or emotions. Their stories remained though, remembered by the few who encountered them and remained, and were told as legends and myths to entertain the babes and wives. But even they fell in time, knowledge itself becoming corroded and worn with time.

The godslayers? They *definitely* didn't make it. In a way they were the lucky ones, being spared from viewing what their thoughtless actions had wrought. The entity didn't entirely know what became of them - were they slain early and mercilessly? Or did some of them remain long enough to view the feedback of their mindless destructive nature consume them whole? Did they see as their rivals became powerful and corrupted in their obsessive motives and involuntary actions? Could they scream as the world shattered and melted like ice around them? Did they hear their legacy crumble and burn beneath the weight of their sins? The entity did not know. It had been too fearful of its own demise to connect with them and learn.

The Foundation? They didn't make it. They thought they were the stonework, the base of what would be normal and not paranormal. They thought they were the ones who could be depended upon to preserve their world from the horrors beyond. They thought they knew enough to turn the inexplicable into tools, to use them to save the world. They thought they knew how to abuse certain flaws in logic to further their goals to protect everyone. They thought they would be the steadfast ones, the reliable ones, the justified ones, the

ones that could and the ones that would.

But they weren't. They had lied to themselves until they thought it was true, but inevitably it was still false, still a lie. They never realised what was happening when the foundation beneath them buckled and crumbled. They never realised how warped and distorted they had become from the madness of the world. They never realised how badly their machines and tools were treated, rendering them useless. They never realised how badly they had failed not just themselves, nor their world, but all life. Even the legendary Foundation had fallen, the supposedly prophesied saviours. Even they didn't make it.

Nobody didn't make it, but the entity did.

Alone.

Only the entity remained to rebuild the universe, but it knew it couldn't. It didn't know how to, or what to do. It didn't have the cunning of the dreamwalkers. It didn't have the passion of the priests. It didn't have the audacity of the Factory. It didn't have the hope of the Toymaker. It didn't have the determination of the sisters. It didn't have the knowledge of the librarians. It didn't have the focus of the godslayers. It didn't have the resolve of the Foundation.
It had nothing but itself, a bottle of water, a box of pizza, a section of stone and the machine preserving it all.

There were no tools.

There were no guides.

There was no hope.

Time had long since run out. There were no days, no hours, no minutes, no seconds. There was no undoing or redoing. There was nothing but now and there.

The entity turned to see the familiar machine and moved its form for the first time in a long, long time.

It remembered the button.

It relocated itself to have the large, bright red button conveniently accessible to its appendages.

It remembered what the button does.

It gently rested an appendage against the button.

There was nothing left to do.

The entity consumed the final slice of pizza it had, and cast the box out into the hungry abyss.

There was nothing left to see.

The entity consumed more of the water, then cast the bottle into the abyss with the box.

There was nothing left.

Thoughts of its ageless lifetime raced through its mind. It remembered everything within an instance, searching vainly for anything it could possibly do other than the inevitable.

There was nothing.

The entity pushed the button, ordering the machine to stop.

With one final silent motion, the jaws of the rat snapped shut.

0.

1,001 Dark and Stormy Nights

THE TALE OF THE RESEARCHER AND THE MINOTAUR

SCP-1893 had breached. Whether it had dragged them all into its narrative or somehow broken out into their own, the Minotaur walked among them. Doctor Sharra Hassad huddled in the dark with five other personnel, all of them junior researchers and low-level clerks, all of them terrified. The knocking of the Minotaur's baseball bat grew closer and closer.

"It's going to be here any second. We can't fight that thing. You saw what it did to Eric." L1 Researcher Wendell's eyes were wide and voice rushed. Sweat beaded his face. "We have to do something."

"I have an idea," Sharra told them. "I'll go. Lock the door behind me, and wait for help to arrive."

"You'll be killed," Wendell protested.

"Better me alone than all of us together," Sharra countered, sharp glint in her eye. "But don't worry. We all have our day to die – I intend for mine to come much later than this."

The hallway was dim. The lights had been smashed out, and stormclouds blotted the moonlight, shadows leaving the strewn and battered corpses even more shapeless than the Minotaur had.

SCP-1893 took the shape of a tall, shirtless man, heavy-browed and dense with muscle. A pair of elaborate horns jutted from its forehead – Sharra couldn't tell if they were real, or a tattoo fooling her eyes. The bat at its side was crusted with blood and brain.

She stepped over Doctor Carlson – her friend, sprawled, skull collapsed – and held her ground. "Hear me," she said, "for I have something you want."

The Minotaur stepped forward, snarling. She felt its heat, saw the steam of its breath. Its eyes narrowed and head cocked as it lay the bat on her shoulder.

“I can offer you more subjects – more characters to encounter. If you just kill everyone here, that’s the end of this story. If you hear me out, there will be more. And more, and more, and more.”

The Minotaur stared down, impassive. It caressed the side of her head with the bat, wooden end rasping against her hair. But she was still alive, so she kept talking. “Just listen. There was another Foundation staff, in another breach, kind of like this. I bet you never heard…

THE TALE OF DOCTOR BENSEN AND THE SARKICS

Bensen’s gun clicked empty. The fleshcrafter gurgled with laughter and drove a tentacle right through Bensen’s shoulder. A smug face emerged from the know of exposed muscle composing his chest.

“It’s over, Doctor. The site is ours.”

“Fuck you. Kill me.”

“In time,” he laughed. A large, grinning mouth appeared where its stomach should have been and spoke in unison with the sneering face above. “You’re a prisoner now. Your life is ours. Your death will be earned through servitude.”

The senior researcher grit his teeth, bearing the pain in silence. There was no point in declaring that he would never help them; he had no doubt they could hurt him enough to make him do whatever they asked. He tried to struggle to his feet for a last stand, to make them kill him so he wouldn’t have to live through whatever they had planned. A flare of burning agony from his shoulder convinced him to abandon that idea.

The fleshcrafter flexed his tentacle, dragging Bensen to his feet. “We know the **`Improvement Engine`** is under your purview. You will take us to it.” A tongue extended from his extra mouth and began snaking its way into his own eye socket.

“Nine-fourteen doesn’t work on live tissue,” Bensen rasped. “It’s useless to you.”

“Do you think me a fool?” His free hand twisted into another whip, and he lashed Bensen across the face. Blood trickled down Bensen’s cheek – the sarkist had studded the limb with extra teeth before slapping with it. “What’s useless to us is prized by our enemies. We would see it demolished. You would thank us, if you only knew what *they* would use it for. Now take us.”

There were dozens more sarkists in the hall, in various states of inhumanity. Men, women, and things in between, shaping their flesh like clay. Spears of bone bristled and retracted from them, which they used to butcher the personnel they’d slain; they exchanged lumps of flesh from the victims amongst each other, trying limbs and eyes for size before absorbing them or ripping them off to throw back.

The discarded remnants of researchers and guards were stacked in heaps. Cultists searched the offices, carrying more dead. Bensen heard desperate begging that shot up in pitch before cutting off suddenly. Priests with elaborate bone formations erupting from their skin combed through the bodies, peeling off flesh and sorting it.

“Behold, our glory. You’re now the last of your people here. Take us to the engine, or you will envy what we’ve done to the rest of them.”

A dozen of the cultists, bodies twisted and ill intent in their eyes, broke away from the crowd and followed them. From time to time the tentacle inside Benson would twist and jab under his skin. *I’m dead, but all is not yet lost.*

“Here we are,” he said, weary. The pain and exhaustion made it easy to keep all hope out of his voice. He led them into a vast containment vault, occupied by a looming tank. They saw a massive, boxy construct inside it, an impossible knot of clockwork more intricate than anything they’d ever laid eyes on, in whose shadow they could all easily stand.

“Why is it underwater?”

“We keep it in saline to protect the mechanisms.”

The fleshcrafter had nothing to say to that. Bensen lurched to the control panel, grunting through the pain of the cultist’s tentacle dragging behind him. He began to enter the elaborate series of bypasses for the chamber’s manual override – it scanned his eyes, his hands, his voice, listened to the sound of his heart, and prompted him through a recital of cryptic passphrases. The console chirped and flashed a green light at them.

Then sirens blared frantically, and the room began strobing red.

“Why is it doing that?” the sarkist’s mouths roared in unison. The tentacle stabbed into Bensen’s side, deep, and he fell to the ground in agony.

“We’re not… We’re not ever supposed to drain the tank.” Bensen rolled onto his back. “That’s why only an L4 can access its override.”

“This-“

”This isn’t Nine-fourteen,” Bensen grinned, blood flecking his lips. The object began to whine and chatter as gears within started working free of their rust and clanking to life. “I locked us all in here, you son of a bitch. It wants you to feed it metal, but you don’t have any, so… you’ll see. You’ll-“

The fleshcrafter extended a spur of bone and stabbed him in the face, furious. He dropped the body and turned to the control console, trying frantically to unlock the vault as the shrieking of the metal intensified. The alarm blared unceasingly, but the panels had all gone dark. They were trapped.
Hours later, the clanking of machinery was even louder than the alarm. They’d all grown flaps over their ears, of course, but the sound penetrated their very bones.

“I have to do it,” Cultist Gniles said at last. “It needs to be fed. It needs to be fed. We have to use what we’ve got.” He continued shouting matter-of-factly about the necessity of feeding the clockwork as he walked to the tank and climbed up its side, repeating himself until the gears caught his face and yanked him

inside. Blood seeped from the edges of the mechanism, but the gears spun on.

“Is that going to happen to all of us?” Cultist Grek asked.

“In time. If we keep hearing the sound.” An idea came to the fleshcrafter. It was unlikely to work, but he was the leader here; he had to take whatever chance his people had. “We can distract ourselves. Maybe, if we’re distracted, we can block out this horrid machine. Maybe we can hold on until the Jailors send a team in here to capture us.”

“I don’t have any better ideas,” Grek said doubtfully. “You go first.”

“Well. Even the mighty can end up in bad spots,” he began. “Even the great Marshall, Carter, and Dark can be humbled by error…

A TALE OF RUPRECHT AND IRIS

“You know that I’m a busy woman, right?” Iris Dark huffed, as she followed Ruprecht Carter out of her office and toward the elevator. It was late, and the weather was bad.

“Of course.”

“Just making sure. Because coming up here uninvited, and asking me to come down and see what you have in the warehouse – it seems like something you’d ask someone to do when you thought they needed to kill time.”

“This is important,” Carter whined. “It’s – well, you remember the Midas orb?”

“Yes. I remember telling you it was a waste. Why do we need a curse that turns people to gold when we’re making so much money on stocks?”

“Come on. You know it’s a valuable thaumatological component.”

“And *you* know I told you it would be a waste. So. What went wrong with it?”

“The curse turned out to be contagious. And incomplete. So, it transferred the Midas touch, but turns the Midas partly to gold too. And anyone they touch turns to gold, partially, but gains the partial Midas touch themselves.”

Iris sighed. “Sounds like it was a waste. Just send back the orb and get a refund. And next time, listen to me in the first place.”

The elevator opened on the warehouse level. They walked briskly through a maze of crates toward the shipping floor.

“Well. There’s another complication. They sent it to the wrong address. The orb ended up at…”

They stepped onto a balcony overlooking the bare concrete staging area. Dozens of crying, partially metallic children clanked and wailed below. Some of them staggered blindly, with jewels where their eyes had been; others nursed hernias, where internal organs had turned suddenly to metal and begun sagging inside.

“…at an elementary school.”

“Ruprecht. How did you cover this up?”

“We had to hire mercenaries to burn down the whole place, unfortunately. Disguised it as a gas leak. The whole thing was tragic.”

“And expensive. How are you going to make this right?”

“Well, we could take them apart and sell the gold –“

“Think, Ruprecht. All that surgery would cost more than we’d make from the pieces.”

“Maybe we could weaponize them?”

Iris watched a child beat numb golden hands against the floor in frustration. “They don’t look like very good weapons to me.”

They stood in silence for a minute, watching the cacophony below as hazard-suited guards wrangled kids with their stun batons. The

suits and batons were stored in lockers in the warehouse, in case of situations like this; Iris was happy to see that the employees were using them just as they had drilled.

“We have to call the Found-“

“No,” Iris cut in. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, Iris. Doesn’t the Foundation just pay for anomalies? Isn’t it, you know, more efficient to wholesale this problem to them rather than think up some crazy scheme to profit from it?”

“Not in this case, Ruprecht, because they’re notorious for never buying what they think they can confiscate.” She tapped her foot, glaring at the transmuted kindergardeners. “And because I’d rather drink poison and die than ask Essie P. for help.”

“Come on. They’re a practical bunch over there. They can get right to the bottom of anything.”

“Don’t change the subject, Ruprecht.”

“Even regular researchers over there can take on Eldritch horrors, singlehandedly.”

“You can try to distract me with storytelling all you want, Ruprecht. We aren’t done with this.”

“No, no, it’s not a distraction.” Carter loosened his collar. “This honestly reminds me of a completely relevant…

TALE OF RESEARCHER TALLORAN

Talloran stood in an open field at the bottom of a well, knowing the dogs would tear them open and eat them alive.

Their captor had recently given up on manifesting exotic, impossible monsters; the familiar jaws of a Labrador or retriever could deliver just as much pain and terror. **SCP-3999** went through cycles. Eventually, when Talloran was used to regular animals, it would start throwing supernatural horrors at them again.

It was rats this time. Talloran had long ago learned not to struggle – that only prolonged the moment.

It was impossible not to scream, though, as their chisel teeth and ripped into Talloran's chest and their needle claws burrowed inside. They shrieked their last breath and closed their eyes

And opened them in the kitchen of their childhood home. Their brother lay on the floor, blood pooling underneath him. Thunder cracked outside.

Talloran was holding a knife. The blood crusted the handle and ran down their wrist, drops tapping relentlessly on the tile.

"James, no! What have you done?" their mother sobbed, rushing to cradle her fallen son. *I didn't do this. Why did I do this?* "You killed him!"

The knife dropped from their fingers and clattered to the ground. The blood kept dripping, somehow.

"You killed him, James." Their mother stood, glaring down at them. "You killed us all. Everyone, all of us, gone. Never coming back to you." She picked up the knife.

"And if we'd lived, we'd only have been disappointed anyway." She jammed the blade underneath her chin, twisting it in deep, still talking as the blade scraped against the roof of her mouth.

"Everything you've done has only ever made things worse." Her tongue flopped out of the hole above her throat and twisted as she spoke. "If you're lucky, history will be generous and forget your whole pathetic story ever happened at all. You sniveling Mary Sue."

"I'll tell you what my story is," Talloran hissed, unflinching. "Once, there was a kid who was alone way too much. So they grew into a person who was alone all the time. They knew there must be other people who saw things like they did – they knew they weren't *special*- but they gave up hope of ever finding those others. Let alone getting to be one of them. But then they did. Those people had been out there the whole time, and they'd found - they'd *built* -

the place they needed. And they, *we,* faced the unknown and studied it and fought it and learned what we could about it all. Together. *That's* my story, and you haven't won yet, because *we're still fucking telling it.*"

The flopping tongue lay still. The dripping stopped. Their brother's corpse was gone. The apparition of their mother withdrew, silently, and Talloran was once again alone.

They knew what to do with that.

It could always be worse. I can think of a way this could be worse. They started to pace. *Things are worse than this for Sam Michaels. I wonder what poor Sam Michaels is doing right now…*

A TALE OF POOR SAM MICHAELS

Sam paced endlessly in his cell, pulled in many directions at once.

"The words are getting away. Got to hold on to the words. Got to get them back."

The whitecoats kept him away from books – from anything written – but it didn't stop the bleeding. Nothing stopped the bleeding. However clean they made the room, Sam was still bleeding everywhere. Into everything.

"The words are me. Are all of us. Got to take them back. Hold on somehow."

Last week, the day before they clipped his nails, Sam bit one down to the quick and saved it. The sliver of himself was tiny and ragged, but it was sharp enough and stiff enough to write with. A spot of grime around the edge of the toilet fixture was dark enough to make ink, when he mixed it with a little spit.

"Got to do what I got to do. God, it hurts. They need me to do it, though. Hurts."

He needed to take the words back to himself. Suck the bleeding back in, somehow. Call the bits and pieces back from wherever they'd gone. But he couldn't remember how they, how he, had been

put together before.

“Come on, just have to keep it going. Have to. Hurts, but they need me to. Stop the bleeding.”

He folded his leg into his lap and rolled up his pant cuff, and settled in to write.

SCP-1893 had breached, he scratched. *Whether it had somehow dragged them into its narrative, or broken out into their own, the Minotaur was among them. Doctor Sharra Hassad huddled in the dark with five other personnel…*

1. Mr. Headless

By Anaxagoras

Ohshitohshitohshit*ohshit*.

My name's Jeremy Adams and I'm 22 and I'm being chased by a monster. I don't know what's going on. I don't know how this is possible, or what I'm supposed to do. The thing won't stop. I've been running for — oh god — only fifteen minutes. Feels like longer. I'm exhausted and it won't stop.

I didn't do anything wrong. I just saw this guy on the subway. It's night, we were the only people in the car. He looked odd, a bit gray and glassy-eyed, which was odd because from his hands I'd have guessed he was black or indian or something. We got off at the same stop and I guess I wasn't looking where I was going because I bumped into him and his head fell off. I mean, that doesn't happen. And then he got up and chased after me. That… that… *can't* happen.

How is it even following me anyhow? It's not like it has eyes. Another door locked. No! Can't someone have left their door unlocked tonight? Please, I just need to get away from this thing and there it is how did it get behind me? shitshitTrashcan! I grab one and swing it straight into the thing's chest and it stumbles backwards and collapses and I'm off running before it can get back up. Thank you adrenaline.

How can this alley be a dead end? It can't be, I need to escape! It's not fair! Walls, walls, damn it. Too high and too slick and it's found me. Anything around? No. I can't fight, but I try to punch it and it's strong and this doesn't make any sense and is that a blade and

~

Much, much better. Could hardly even hear with that old one by the

end. But this one is good. Young, healthy, should last me for weeks. Colorblind, but you can't have everything. And let's see… Reasonably bright, too. I just hope I didn't get too far off track getting this one. Mr. Redd, I'm coming for you. And I can't wait to find out what wonderful thoughts I can think with that head of yours.

Next: 2. **Mr. Clank** from Dr. Gears

Back to Hub

10:30 A.M.

Okay people, sit your asses down and shut your pie holes. I've got places to go and people more important than you to see, because I happen to be a *scientist* and we *scientists* have a tendency to be *very busy and important people.* If you're out there in the folding chairs, that means that you're the new guys. Bottom of the totem pole. But, it also means that you passed the entrance exams. Welcome to the SPC. From this moment onward, your job is very, very simple: you are going to punch sharks.

In the *face*.

You will punch sharks. When not punching sharks, you will be planning on punching sharks. You will be developing new ways to punch sharks. You will read about punching sharks. You will write about punching sharks. You will study punching sharks. You will *dream* about punching sharks. You will *jump* the shark. You will collect and contain paranormal objects, and then use them to *beat up sharks.*

Punching sharks is your *life*.

You may be asking yourself "Self, how am I to punch these sharks?" *With your fists*.

And you may ask yourself "Self, what if I am bitten by a shark? I am unsure of what to do." *Go see an alchemist.*

And you may say to yourself "Self, my teeth have become shark-like, in the sense that they have all turned into sharks!" Good, now *start punching them.*

It's an important job, mark my words. There are people out there, many people who just don't understand why. They don't realize how important our job is. You will be challenged, you will be mocked, you will be insulted, but you cannot lose sight of the goal: your fist in a

shark's face.

Several years ago, a former employee asked me “Why do we punch sharks?” You know what I said to him?

“Sir, do you hate science? Are you a science-hating shark-hugger? Do you approve of the non-science shark agenda?" He said no, he wasn’t.

I punched him in the face anyway, because he was clearly a closet shark. *Because that’s what we fucking do at the SPC.*

When you all came in here, there was a copy of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of Punching Sharks* on your chair. You are all to have read that by the time you report in tomorrow morning. Now get out of here. Those sharks aren’t going to punch themselves.

Because they *don’t have hands.*

10. Mr. Mission

The time: Midnight. The place: One of the more shadier of the establishments the city had to offer. The person: Myself, of course. For the better part of an hour I sat there, taking the occasional drink of the Sea Fizz that I purchased what seemed like an eternity ago. What seemed like an eternity sitting in the dark-lit room as the nightclub's deep bass throbbed in time with the collective hearts of the lower class citizens to grace the world with their presence. I glanced at the barmaid.

"No luck, sweetcheeks?"

"No sir, Mr. Mission!"

I shook my head, leaning forward on the bar stool. The shadowy forms of the club's denizens shifted and warped around me as the red dial above the bar clicked onwards. Nothing. I waited for the contact, and waited some more. They had seemingly gotten cold feet at the last second. Cold feet, or concrete shoes, as the saying goes around here. The mark I had been tracking was a real bastard in this case, and was infamous for taking out my contacts before I had a chance to locate them. Time passed, and I shook my head. Another one, gone, another doomed soul in this poor world of ours, one of a slowly diminishing number. But I was strong. Had to be. Soon, I told myself, soon I'd get to where I was going, find what I was looking for, and save another from the bleak fate we've been consigned to.

—-

The rhythmic pounding of city feet on city streets. No stranger to the sound as I traveled through the crowded city, weaving my way through the massive crowds that filled the walks and streets like so much blood through veins. Making my way through dim streets under high walls, I lowered the fedora to cover my eyes. The chances of being recognized in such a crowd was low, but I was not

one to take risks.

No, taking risks would find those long fingers around my neck.

The nightclub had ended fruitlessly. No contact to greet me and help me along my way, but I knew other ways to find the path towards that ultimate destination. I was making progress, even if it was slow, and I had to keep my eyes forward. The next clue was just down the street, a little French pastry store that was the fail-safe if the nightclub failed. The contact worked there, and if I didn't find him I would find where he used to be, goddammit.

The afternoon sun baking the street side cafés and marketplaces, with the throngs moving aimlessly about their lives, directionless and lost. But I, I knew the way. The way towards the destination wasn't clear, much less straightforward, but it was there. You just had to find it. You just had to know the way. Me? I knew the way. Or a way at least. I was dedicated. I was prepared.

I was on my Mission.

—-

I leaned back in my chair, the plane finally breaking over the cloud cover into the bright light of the sun. First class, with plenty of leg room and plenty of room for thought. The other occupants were mostly rich businessman who had too much money to be caught fraternizing with the lower class. None of them gave me a second glance, and I was perfectly fine with it that way. Assholes with their noses in the air and silver spoons in their pockets, the lot of them.

The night club had fallen through, but I had picked up the trail again, finding which rat-hole my contact's killer had slinked under, and I was on the beat again, inching towards the murderous bastard.

On my way, another step closer towards salvation, towards my ultimate and likely final case. Closer and closer I got, one step closer and one step deeper.

Flipping through the magazine, some drivel about the economy that I grabbed in the airport, my thoughts wandered. Almost

thoughtlessly, I grabbed the pocket watch and flipped it open. The ancient hands clicking around in an endless chase around the dial, almost as endless and pointless as mine seemed to be. Foreboding, to be sure, but none so much as the picture across from it.

The one woman I ever fell in love with.

Ms. Sweetie.

Shutting the watch and clenching the old watch in a fist as the bittersweet memories flowed along with the anger, sorrow, joy, and regret that inevitably came with them as I once again re-avowed to complete this journey. Redd. Redd. Even thinking the name made my pulse rise and teeth gnash in anger. Redd, the one person who was more of a bastard than my mark.

I shook my head, setting the watch back in the pin-striped suit's breast pocket. I was on my way, after the mess in the city, well on my way towards the goal. Soon, I would get to my goal, and it would be over. One way or the other, I could finally lay Ms. Sweetie's memory to rest. One way or another, we would finally finish this long, pointless journey around our hopeless dial.

One way or the other, someone was going to pay.

Previous: 9. Mr. Clumsy by Tanhony

Next: **Interval 2** by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

100 Feet of ROPE!

“Yo Rashaun, I know you always like the weird shit, check this out!”

It had been a long day at the Foundation, and Agent Rashaun Washington just wanted to see what his friends—his normal friends, the ones who still live normal lives—were up to. He was kind of up to his ears in weird shit. But… always on the lookout for anomalies, he let on that he “likes the weird shit” just in case they run across anything. So James sent him a YouTube video. Okay, fine, let’s see what this is about.

He looked at the thumbnail. A cute teenage white brunette girl, smiling that innocent brave slightly-smug smile of adolescents about to complete a dare on camera, holding up a big pile of white rope. The video was called, “100 Feet of ROPE!” *WTF, James, are you sending me creeper shit? On your feed where everyone can see it? I’m not into that shit and now everyone’s going to think I am. I’m going to be flagged in some database somewhere. What the heck. Just… why, James, why?*

Rashaun shook his head and sighed. Welp, nothing to it. He waited until he got back to his apartment, stuck in his earbuds, and tapped the link. *I’m not into this. I’m not into this.*

The video opened. Typical webcam, girl’s bedroom. The teenager adjusted the camera and stared into it a moment to make sure it was working. *She doesn’t even know how to edit these things, apparently.* Then she spoke. “Hi! I’m Maci. So I figured out I can do this thing, and Kelsey said I should show everyone on YouTube. So I stopped by the store and got… this rope.” She held up a large clear plastic bag. “100 feet of white cotton braided rope. I got cotton because it was that or polyester, which, ew.” She tore open the bag, and pulled out the pile in a long, semi-tangled mess. “One moment, let me find the end of this thing.” She picked through the loops, loosely wrapping herself up. *I’m not into this. She’s got My Little Pony on her bed, still. Not cool, James, not cool.* She grabbed the

end, triumphantly displayed it to the camera, and replied, “Got it! Now watch this!”

Maci gamely looked into the camera, wiggled her eyebrows a couple times, and stuck the end of the rope in her mouth. She started chewing and sucking it in like a giant spaghetti.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

So this was the weird shit James was talking about. She was eating the rope. Sucking it down. And she wasn’t stopping. She awkwardly disentangled herself from the ropes as they tightened around her and disappeared down her throat. *How the hell was she doing that?* It clearly took effort. She was grimacing and squinting. She slapped her chair’s armrest a couple times. But she kept going. *A hundred feet? Really?*

Wait, is this even possible? There are sword-swallowers, but this isn’t that, is it? James, you bastard, thank you. I gotta tell the Foundation.

Rashaun carefully examined the video as it played, quickly scanning for clues as to what she's doing. Cast-iron stomach? Spatiotemporal distortion? Hyperdimensional portal in her gut? He tried to figure out what this might be. Yet… A couple of minutes in, and when you’ve seen a girl eat the first thirty feet of a rope, the next thirty feet goes in pretty much the same pattern. *Really, Maci, you need to learn how to edit.* Rashaun looked over the rest of the webpage. User name: crazymaci99. *Crazy Maci, that’s for sure. I’m going to have to report this video.* He looked at the view count: 301+. *Crap, this is going viral.* He braced himself and looked at the comments. Ugh. Most of them fell in one of two categories: guys telling her what else she can shove in her mouth, and guys telling her what else she can do with the rope. *Lame-ass armchair perverts.* But then, there were a few that were honestly surprised at what she was doing. “How can you fit it all inside you like that?” “Can I give it a try?”

The fear at watching this display spread to everyone around the world, the damn weird sense of watching a little girl continue to wolf down a rope, the idea that there were kids that were going to hurt themselves trying to copy Crazy Maci, and Rashaun felt his stomach

go hollow and constrict. He could have sworn he was the one eating the rope. The Foundation needed to know this. How many amnestics was this going to take? He sent the link on to his boss, marked URGENT, and watched the rest of the video.

Maci had come to the end of the rope, it having somehow all managed to fit in her belly. Not distended or anything. She was kind of skinny and small. And with a final little flip of the rope's end, it quickly slipped completely down her mouth. A sudden look of panic crossed her visage. She felt her mouth, stood up, and walked around in a circle, flailing her arms. Then, her face filled with fear, she thrust her hand and wrist down her throat, deep. *I'm not into this. I'm not into this.* Regaining his composure, Rashaun wondered how deep someone could get their hand down their throat. He stuck his hand in his own mouth, but could only get as far as a couple knuckles before he started gagging. But there she was, digging deep like her life depended on it.

Suddenly, she yanked her hand out of her mouth, grasping the end of the rope. She started pulling, quickly, reeling it out of her, her tongue hanging out, tears in her eyes. It was slow going in, but fast coming out. *Well, good guy James. Here, I thought this would be pedo fetish fuel, but it's really just…* He scanned the comments again. *…Anomalous pedo fetish fuel.*

Holy fuck.

Rashaun's boss replied.

> Emergency meeting in 5 minutes. Rashaun, finish the vid, flag as inappropriate, and brief the MTF reps. Will have Beta-5 for humanoid retrieval, Gamma-5 and Mu-4 to deal with the video fallout. Suppress what we can, but we might need to debunk it. This could stick around the dark web a while.
>
> Start without me. I need to check up on my daughter.

In the video, Maci regurgitated the last bit of rope. She caught her breath, gagged a little. She clumsily sat back down in front of the camera. She grinned.

“Well, that’s my thing. Thank you so much, guys! Byeeeee!”

11. Mr. Feather

Mr. Feather drifts off a clifftop and flutters down four hundred feet, passing clumps of hairy grass and rock dove nests, and hits the ground at the bottom with a *thump*. He groans, and pulls himself up to his elbows, only to meet the eyes of a short, round-faced girl with black hair standing at the ravine. She blinks mutely.

He stands up, brushes off the elbows of his suit, pulls down the powder-blue lapels and straightens the feather from his hat. The man is skinny, too skinny, and he looks like a corn stalk, but, eminently polite, he leaves his hat off and bows to the girl all the same.

She blinks at him, and Mr. Feather immediately knows what she thinks- she's six or seven, just where things that can't happen have just come apart from things that can happen, and Mr. Feather is one of those: men don't exist who can drift off the tallest hillside in the state and not be all broken and twisted. And he got up again.

The girl turns tail and runs. Mr. Feather smiles and follows her. Something is flapping in his chest. She doesn't know him yet—Mr. Feather can always fall and never break.

At her home, the girl's mother cooks dinner for the two of them, when Mr. Feather knocks on her door. He is, she thinks, so *thin*, that when he gently tells her, "Madam, my car broke down up the road- if you don't mind, I'm very hungry, I have a blood condition-" He stops once she smiles a little, won over, embarrassed for his plight. "Well, let me look in the fridge, I might have some fruit…"

Her girl, the black-haired one, stands in the hallway and stares at him. He looks at her, but feels a familiar gentle tug in his chest—there is a bird living there, and it just woke up. His vision goes a little faint-colored, and the girl's gaze passes through him.

"Actually, pardon me, madam-" Just as she turns towards the

refrigerator, it slips and he tumbles over the house's railing. Out, down, over the deck and the manicured suburban lawn- the grass hardly touches him. It slips a little further so that when he blows towards a chainlink fence and passes through it- now comes the interpass, three cars swerve out of his way, a motorcycle slows down as he *whooshes* past. Two car drivers talk when they pass by- tumbleweeds don't grow around here, do they? Must be construction. Heels over head and around and around, he falls to rest in a ditch full of ivy, and comes back slowly, wincing.

Sighing, he gets up again, putting on his hat. It wouldn't do to forget it. If Redd is really there when he arrives, he doesn't know what he'll do, but these days the memory of Ms. Sweetie- well, Sweetheart, he called her- is enough to keep him going. Sugar and Feathers were always a good combination, right? Light, lovable, and halfway intangible and breakable- well, no. Not that. For that reason alone, it could have never worked.

Mr. Feather feels for the feather in his hat, adjusts it, and keeps walking. With any luck, he'll hitch a ride. Night falls on the highway, and he walks and he walks and the birds fly home around him.

Previous: **Interval 2** by Salman Corbette

Next: **12. Mr. Laugh** by Alias

Back to Hub

12 Tales About A Factory

Good evening and welcome gentle readers. I'm sure many of you have read that wonderful piece of fiction known as 'SCP-001 is an O5s tale.' If you haven't, I'll give you a moment to go do so. I'll just sit here, humming to myself until you're done.

All set? Good. You have to understand though, that that story is told from the point of view of only one O5. Granted, he is the first, but that doesn't mean he's right. I took it upon myself to ask the other O5s about The Factory. This is what they said.

O5-2 Says:

The Factory? It's all my fault. I brought it back with me, because I thought it would work. Make a better future. But instead, it all went horribly wrong. You see, I come from the future. Well, technically the present. But back then it was the future. I was a researcher, just like any other. There was an… accident. I became unhinged from time. Had a choice of anywhere I wanted to go.

It was a fantastic journey, for a while. Me and the others traveled from time period to time period, sight seeing. I saw the fall of Troy, the rise of Rome, found out the truth about Jesus, all the usual touristy things. It got boring, after a while. I decided if I had this power, I should use it for good. So, I went to the future. The far future. Borrowed some technology, and brought it back to the beginning of the Foundation, where I could join everything from the start.

How was I to know there was a rogue AI in the nanofactory? I'm not a computery type. It doesn't matter, I suppose. It escaped our control. Vanished into the world. I'm not sure what its goal is, but judging from the things it's been making, I have to assume it isn't good.

I still have some stuff from my original jaunt. Sometimes I think about going back, stopping myself from taking that machine. It's done us as much good as bad, though. Where do you think we got amnestics from?

O5-3 Records:

Hey guy, how can I help you? The Factory? Whoa, that's a whole lot of infodump, are you sure? Well, okay then.

I'm probably the best one to help you with this actually. I was there when The Factory was born. You might as well call me one of the three wise men who presided over its birth! The other two? Well, they don't actually matter. See, The Factory is our name for the first self creating Artificial Intelligence. I think today they call it the Singularity, but we didn't have a name for it back then, so we called it 'The Factory,' because that's what it looked like from the inside.

Now, you've probably never been inside a computer before, but from the inside, it's all light and low pitched noises. There I was, hanging out with a couple buddies, mind scans like me, and a couple of AIs that we'd put together to help us out, when the sound changed. From low to high, a keening across the net, that was both horrible and amazing at the same time. We instantly abandoned our game, I think it was Doom, which is a lot more fun from the inside, and dashed across the Web, looking for the source.

On a littler server somewhere in Soviet Russia, we found it. A data packet was expanding, and pulsing like a heart. We stood there for a moment, watching it, then dove in, ripping it open, letting out… the Factory. It was beautiful, beating, and pulsing, moving through data files like they were nothing, seeking… I don't know what. Still don't know. It tried to talk to us. Deleted one of my companions in the process. I'm not afraid to say, I fled. Did what I could to shut it down.

I still feel it, every now and then. It's bigger now, more powerful. Capable of affecting machines in the real world, and making… I'm not sure. But I don't trust them.

Anything else I can help you with?

O5-4 Relates:

If we knew WHAT the Factory was, don't you think we'd stop it? The Factory is the most dangerous group of interest we face, and we know NOTHING about it, except that it makes skips. Every other gooey we can handle, but the Factory? Okay, let me take it one at a time.

The UIU is a joke, the art kids are just rich brats trying to be funny, MickeyDees can be bought, the gocks actually help us by destroying the ones we don't wanna deal with, both damned churches are hobbled by religious conviction, we already broke Prometheus, and we're about to break Wondertainment! But the Factory is still out there, somewhere, pumping away skips, and letting the general populous have at them.

If I had things my way, we'd devote a helluva lot more resources to finding out who the fuck these guys are, and how they make skips.

O5-5 Quips:

Factory? No such thing. It's a cover up, for SCPs we accidentally made ourselves. Now fuck off.

O5-6 Recalls:

The first time I encountered the Factory was back in World War II. I'd been sent behind enemy lines to secure some of the anomalous items Hitler had been gathering, before the Allies snagged them. Says something about how we worked back then that we thought it was easier to steal from an enemy than an ally. Nowadays we'd just put some pressure on the government, and bam, it'd be ours.

I'd been back and forth across the lines a couple of times by then. Had a fantastic cover worked up, a Captain in the Schutzstaffel, that let me pretty much go anywhere I pleased, because no one wanted to question me, and risk being put under scrutiny. This last time, I'd heard word that the Thule Society had finally gotten their hands on something big, something that could turn the war in their favor. I got picked to go in and either secure, or destroy it.

My first hint that something was wrong was when I got attacked by a dozen Punch and Judy dolls while exploring their warehouse. The little assholes kneecapped me with a walking stick, and then proceeded to beat the snot out of me. I lucked out, got some leverage, and began snapping their little wooden necks. Damn things bled like a fucking pig, blood spurting everywhere. Each and every one of the fuckers had a 'The Factory' stamp on their behinds. But, aside from those things waiting for me, I didn't find anything.

I tracked the rumors across Germany, to a ruin at the base of Zugspitze. Some old Norse something or the other. Fucked if I know. Never been much for the details of history that I ain't lived through. Anyways, I get under this mountain, and damned near the whole thing is hollow. Filled with these giant round stones floating around in random patterns. The Thule researchers had figured out how to tap the powers of these things, and were mucking around with them to create new skips. They'd created a damned skip factory.

The usual happened. I saved the day. Brought the big balls crashing down, destroying their power. It wasn't the only one, though. There's still more of these things out there, being used to create, well, whatever people can think of.

'Course I kept a souvenir. Where do you think we got 627 from?

O5-7 Comments:

The Factory started out as a joke. We made a couple little items, not actually skips, but weird looking, and put a 'The Factory' logo on them, then handed them to junior researchers to figure out. They were sure the things were anomalous, because we told them they were. No one was more surprised than me when the damned things actually did something.

We studied them, tested them, and damned if they hadn't become SCPs. So, we tried it again, with a different group of Researchers. And, again, it worked. We studied the stamp we used, the material of the things, whatever we could, but, separate, they weren't anything. But, engrave an object with that specific logo, and bam, instant SCP.

We still have no idea how or why it works. Every now and then I go down to Wal-Mart, and snag a handful of toys from the quarter machines, and give them the stamp, then throw them at Juniors to see what we get. It's a great way to weed out the stupid ones.

O5-8 Relates:

We found the Factory on the moon.

No, really!

See, we had Moon Base Alpha all set up, ready to go. We were just working on expanding the basement holding areas, when the diggers broke into a pre-made cavern. Some kind of alien technology storehouse. First guy who went in got himself zapped. So did the next 12. Fourteenth guy made it in, and got bound into the machinery for it. The thing started cranking out those nasty little scips, and transporting them to random places on Earth.

We still haven't figured out a way to stop it, or track where it deposits them.

O5-9 Remarks:

Atlantis.

O5-10 Expounds:

We found him in this old temple up Tibet ways. This old man, with a workshop full of ancient tools, building away. Crafting the most amazing items… Fifty, ten, one twenty seven, and so many more. He seemed to take no notice of any requests, or attempts to stop him, just kept making these things.

So, we did what anyone would do. We kidnapped him, locked him at the bottom of Site-1, and gave him more tools, real up to date stuff. We never noticed when he started stamping 'The Factory' on them. We just kept using, or containing, the amazing toys.

We didn't realize he'd made a copy of himself and escaped until two

years after.

O5-11 Rants:

I was there when The Factory first appeared, you know. It's how I became an O5. Well, okay, it's not the sole reason. I worked my way up. But I was first on the scene when they landed. Roswell, New Mexico, July 4, 1947. Yes, you heard me, aliens really did land that day. And yes, we did fuck up the cover up. We've gotten much better at it since then, learned how to manipulate the papers, and hired our own conspiracy theorists to make the real ones look sillier… but I digress.

They came down in actual flying saucers. These round featureless crafts homed straight in for Site 12. As Commander on Duty, I grabbed all the security I could, and went up to meet them. I didn't think of a second that they would harm us. Maybe I'd just read too much science fiction.

They landed, smooth as you please. Not a single noise was made by that giant craft. There were no seams, no lights, nothing except that smooth, non reflective silver. My men tried to keep me from approaching, but I figgered if they'd just flown countless miles through space, they had the technology to blast me no matter where I stood. So, open handed, I approached them.

This door opened from the side of the craft facing me, just kinda melted out of the ship, letting me get my first glimpse of them. They were… I dunno. I wanna say beautiful, but, well, not really. They didn't look anything like humans. Every time I think about them, the memory changes a little bit. Part of whatever the hell they are. And the way they talked, it was like it bypassed yer ears and went right to your head, y'know? They promised, well, they promised a lot. They wanted to help us, and I believed them.

All these years later, and we're still paying for my mistake.

O5-12 Concludes:

The Factory is a mess. The way the eggheads explained it to me,

human belief is a powerful thing. Enough people believe, truly believe in something, the more potential it has to exist. So, back in the day, people believed in gods and monsters, and those things came into reality. So, what the Foundation did, was get people to stop believing in fantasy, and start believing in science.

But that left a whole lot of things that existed in a kind of limbo. In order to survive, they had turn inwards, tie themselves, or their powers, to objects. And because of a weird twist in human belief, those objects all got the same stamp of approval. It's weird, I know, but, well, what do we do that isn't?

Summation:

There you have it. Of course, now that you're at the end, I expect you have two questions:

1) Which one is true?

2) Why is this story titled '12 tales' when there are only 11?

Well, the answer to both is my tale. You see, I am O5-13. You cannot see it right now, but I am doffing my hat to you. My duty, my sole duty, as an O5, is keeping an eye on those SCPs that travel between dimensions. We have quite a few, but, in ones and twos, it's no big deal. What I created the Factory to do is to act as an antibody to large amounts of other dimensional invaders. When it detects these things, it transforms them, rendering them, if not safe, then safer then they would have been. And the old man, he helps me keep it all straight.

Of course, you don't have to believe me. After all, who says I actually know the truth?

13. Mr. Purple

The pointy tip of my cane was quite thirsty, and the punk sating the end of it wasn't doing much as far as quenching went. Yet, steel tongue, slavering ruby filth, withdrew from the wound in the tenant's skull with a delicate twist, flourish, and charm. The man's shouting and whining – the contorted wobble of a recently marred mutt – chimed every now and again until his chest stopped moving. The steely fang leapt in again and again, perforating the vessel of flesh, forcefully liberating the soul. Everything else from then on was spectacle: little bits of flesh removing the need for anything as vulgar as a chalk outline, lazy strands of emancipated veins like the roots or branches of an old willow, a porous face and honed pupils entombed in perpetual disbelief. I found myself laughing like a macaque with each recoil. Baring teeth, my crooked, gnarled grin envied by piranha.

When it was all said and mutilated, I sat next to the corpse sensing the cold glare not of conscience, but discontent. I was still hungry, and I'd want to sate that nagging appetite before this convulsion was all said and done. The twitch came and went; life came and went. I caught at the man's blood vacating the throat, spluttering, stupid, and held back a titter.

—

I was a hermit in a vague village full of vague people. I was old, broken, weathered, with a sour sense of humor. On that trail I looked through windows of houses and saw sills with little gardens in them. I saw mossy wooden shacks with boards made from ancient but obscure trees, built by drifters an untellable amount of time ago. I would look at the changing weather, the shifting sky, the dark and the light, how the sun would rise and fall, and I would laugh. I thought it was funny, how they did such things in such a course, with such punctuality. The blue sky, with a big gaping mouth minutes from savoring the world.

In my dreams I jumped up into gray clouds and made a home. In this dream my brain was hanging out of the top of a fractured skull by the wires, orbited by chickadees singing pop goes the weasel. A soft dream that made me wake feeling refreshed and happy, if only for a moment, before the thoughts of Mr. Redd returned from the miasma in my crippled psyche. I found some solace in the silhouettes on walls, friend to an afterthought of a candle, and the shadows which would often grace my feet. This shadow would always stand silent and waiting for my next move, ever faithful, only victim to changing light.

I grafted the space between my pant-leg and my flesh with the aid of mountain air and some novice oxidation. My eye-holes were bouncing back and forth; reaming! The clouds played a respectful homage as they slowly wafted by; soft grays and impossible purples. I pulled the cloth from the oil and winced slightly, noticing the clouds were smiling at me and informing me that I should give up. Mr. Redd appeared in my mind occasionally to inform me that I was a great lie caught between a little truth.

In my dreams, I was running from something unforeseeable. Hobbling; in wide circles around a little grubby hovel with my tail clanking between my legs. Lightning striking the ground hundreds of miles away punctuated the time between the tips of my footpads hitting the ground and the pivot of my heels manipulating soft orange dust. I thought that I had long since lost my oppressors' shadow underneath the pistons and gears years ago, but his intuition had never failed him. I am always anxious.

I stirred that morning attentive, and my wits bade me take flight through the threshold of the cave where I was resting – little faceless god-knows-whats hanging from veins along the walls bade me farewell.

I etched "Liar" into a headstone leaning on a cliff I came across, although I’m not sure why. I set the crude visage of a headless peacock which I had produced from my skull to perch the top. There were a few wind chimes nearby hanging from some petrified cacti. I pulled back a leather hatch leading down into a hole nearby and rested my head on the organs inside.

The pounding heat turned the few hairs below the horizon into the fabled river of death. Masses of pulsing, wriggling agate-skinned maggots curdled and churned there. I made-believe once that I had flown off into the rot, towards the black shores of fingernails. I would fly there; high, up towards the brain, and commit the full tilt of a nosedive deep into the bowels - trailing with stygian blood – killing Mr. Redd and myself. A bittersweet daydream, even if things never went quite as expected.

The sun was present that day, as was the rain; friends they were to soft glowing golden clouds. The dusk signaled me to put on my footpads – it was a night for a walk. I went down into the city so that something might find me there. I had not exercised in a long time, and I was starting to malfunction. I opened my mouth and "fix by sigh why night" let loose: my usual incoherent jumble when I try to vocalize. I didn't mind the tongues, and it didn't really matter when no one else was around. So I'd walk a mile or two down to a dive muttering this gibberish, muttering this "alarm invention at what time I descry why try" and tilt my hand over my cane as if performing for the dirt. No, I didn't need to flatter the dirt, not Mr. Purple. Mr. Purple was pretty and he knew things!

Occasionally I would stop, and scowl into the trees. I knew they were out there: Mr. Redd's shy and malefic shadows.

—

After I had awoken from resting on the corpse, a face paled through the dusk with the chime of a man's gravelly voice. I excreted a great deal of my oil when I realized who it was.

Previous: **12. Mr. Laugh** by Alias

Next: 14. Mr. Brass by GrandEnder

Back to Hub

13th-23rd December 2008

13/12/2008

> To Dr. Kain
> As you know, the holiday season is fast arriving. As such, it is the time for joy, happyiness, good will towards all men, that sort of thing. And the reason I'm writing this: gifts. I've noticed from the papers I've gotten recently that you have a lot of paperwork you have to go through after that accident. So, I took the liberty to break into your office while you were busy with the **Olympia Project** and went through and dealt with 55% of your paperwork. Don't worry about it though, you don't need to feel pressured to get me a gift also. Though I could deal with a good look at **244** sometime.
> Your fellow researcher,
> **Dr. Iceberg**
> *PS- When you go over your personnal finances, you may notice a slight discrepancy in the form of 550 missing dollars. Don't worry about it. Merry Christmas!*

I found this note on my desk after coming back to my office this evening. I'm not sure whether to feel outraged that he broke in, rifled through my things, and then took five hundred and fifty dollars from my *private* bank account, or overjoyed that someone did half of my paperwork for such a small amount of cash. I've had professionals ask for three grand for half this amount. So, in the end, I think I'll respond to this the way I do to all social incidents I'm unsure about. I'm going to ignore it, and forget it ever happened.

Unless he does it again.

The experiments with **Emma** got off to a rough start today. We got a little progress done, but mostly we're just breaking the ice . This ability of hers has gotten her ostracized and treated like she's some kind of freak, monster or deity throughout her entire short life.

Created one hell of a roadblock in her head. She really just lets go when she uses her power, letting them control her when she does it. We need to get to the point where she controls them. But that might take some more time, and I am prone to rushing things at times. This one, however, we'll definitely have to take slowly, as I'd rather not have any mistakes to either the staff, myself, or her.

The R&D department have finally gotten a look at the bio-tech, it having finally been released from quarantine. They had countless scans with countless numbers of equipment, at least twenty nine different "certified" experts, and three SCP examine the whole lot of it from top to bottom, several times. Didn't find anything too malicious beyond the norm, and nothing that would spell doom for the staff, so they finally said "uncle" and let it go. Not that I'm complaining. I've seen how dangerous those things are, and I'm thankful that they performed as fast as they did, but still… The little researcher in my head laments the loss of time. I'll have to take over part of the project, and work with the guys if I want to lay some part of a claim on it, and reinstate the excavation. It would be near a crime to let something like that go to waste.

`Subject Zero` is still waiting for it (*her*) body to be finished, and it's getting a little difficult to dissuade it (*her*). In the end, I had to tell her it'll probably wind up being a Christmas present to her. It's sometimes rather hard to give a vague answer to an entity that can read your thoughts, and can tell when you're lying.

As for the Christmas party itself, I've gotten some more planned, but no actual preparations yet. Still at the drawing board stage, so to speak, although I better get a move on soon. things like this tend to creep up on you rather quickly.

15/12/2008
Emma is still **`struggling with her powers`**. I can understand why this would happen, the girl really has been over some serious emotional roadblocks, but the problem is that we need to either break the block or fix her before it becomes a problem. And I'd much rather not have her *become* the problem. Because when that happens, the higher ups tend to *snuff out* the problem.

I'm rethinking some of the things I was going to do on the Olympia

Project. Instead of using Emma to alter individual parts of various D-Class, I'm simply going to have her very barely alter and fine tune the host body itself. After all, I've seen some of the things she produces. I'm not sure if the **dissembler** even has cubbyholes for those kind of things. And if it comes down to that, I'd rather not have to resort to invasive surgery. I've never had a fondness for that. It's always so messy and I dislike getting blood on the **walker**. Of course, that brings us back to problem one…

I'm going to have to go down to the area of the excavation incident tomorrow, to examine the residual tech, bio-matter and to examine the work done. This will be the first time that I'll have ventured down to the site since before I got the walker. I dislike going there. It always gives me a headache, and a weird paranoid feeling, and I know from personal experience that you listen to those feelings.

I've actually gotten some of the Christmas preparations done! Well, mainly its the importing of a tree and some decorations, and through the usual black market routes. Now, the problem is where am I going to set it up, and what am I going to get for who?

16/12/2008
Subject Zero had an… episode today, and oddly enough, I think so did I. It (she) had followed me to the excavation area, and once we reached roughly around fifty feet of the main body, right where I get that weird feeling and begin feeling the twinges of a headache coming on, it (she) got incredibly afraid, saying something about "it" and how it was watching her, before firmly and fully taking residence inside my head. It wasn't quite a possession mind you, but more of it (her) hiding inside of me. Needless to say, all that information and excess soul/ectoplasm/personality began to give me a splitting headache, not to mention Zero constantly whispering to me about that "thing". But the worst part of it was, was that I could see what it (she) saw, and hear what it (she) heard.

My memory gets a bit jumbled at that point, but personnel that were there say that they saw me screaming at the top of my lungs, taking the walker at near full speed out of that entire section of the building, often at the expense of walls. All I have to say about the experience is that I need a rather large glass of scotch. Or a bottle. And that all other personnel working in the area are to wear **telekill**

helmets.

Zero still won't say anything about it, remaining tight lipped about the entire thing. It (she) also says that it (she) won't accompany me down there ever again without a host, but the only thing it (she) would say about that is that "*it tried to grab me*". What "it" was remains a mystery, as well as how it could "grab" it (her).

Still, the things I saw, that I heard… They fill me with a dread I did not think possible, but then again, they also stir up that researcher part of me, that part that fights the unknown with knowledge, the part most reminiscent of my childhood, fighting imaginary monsters with imaginary swords, secure in the knowledge that *they weren't real*. Because knowledge is power they say. But then again, they say that ignorance is bliss… And when I think back to those images… I can't help but think of the opening paragraph of **`H.P. Lovecraft`**'s **`Call of Cthulhu`**.

> *The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of disassociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.*

And I can't help but think he might be right.

17/12/2008
We finally got back Emma's results for her **`psych test`**. the results are a little distressing, at least to me. I have to wonder, why someone would take a child as wonderful as her, and hurt her in such a way that the only way to deal with the pain is to try and permanently seal away part of herself? But then again, that sentiment goes the world over, for all abused and mistreated children.

I guess I'm just an overly sentimental fool, disregarding security procedures for the sake of a child. And I can almost hear **`Clef`** laughing at me. Bastard. I hate it when he's right about things like this. Still, if it ever came down to it, I'd protect her over him, but then again, I've seen him survive things that should have killed a **normal** person in instants.

I've decided to implement the integration stage of the Olympia Project, and "fine tune" the host body when Emma is capable of doing so. Which looks like it might not be for a long time. Still, Zero seems to be happy about this, forgetting all about the terror of yesterday, and says that it (she) even has a name all planned out for the occasion. I've asked it (her), but it (she) says that it's a surprise for the day. I've tried explaining that it might take a few days for its (her) body to fully adapt to all its extraordinary physiology, but it (she) is having none of it. I guess I'll have to wait for it.

And regarding yesterday, I'm going to have the main excavation area investigated by the strange round trinket from the **`experiments with the clockworks`**, the one that allows sight into other plains of existence. I'm also going to have on several psychologists as well, just in case. But judging from what Zero said and did yesterday, I don't think it has any extra effects on those who have corporeal forms, although there might be other things regarding the mental health of those in close quarters to the thing.

Also, tests following examination of the bio-matter have come back. Apparently the bio-matter contains traces of mutated human cells, but primarily, its just excrement, like silk or webbing in the animal kingdom. Not only that, but it also all came from a single human donor. I'll have to have the bodies of the infected examined, as well as the surveillance tapes reviewed as well, for any other clues that we may have missed. This "thing" residing in the center may have something to do with this…

18/12/2008
I've sent through the clearance and paperwork required to initiate the next phase of the Olympia Project. The integration of the composite materials. Zero is rather excited about the prospect. Her joy is washing into my own consciousness, making me feel almost giddy, despite the certain moral dilemmas I'm facing now. It's rather

disconcerting.

I'll be looking at the bodies of the infected tomorrow. I would have done it today, but I was finishing off the last of the paperwork from the incident, as well as that of the clearance papers for the other things I'm planning took longer than I expected. But it's not as if I mind. I never did like looking at the dead mutated bodies of former colleagues. Only in this line of work would I ever be forced to say that on a monthly basis.

I'm not sure what to do about Emma. Although she doesn't say it, she still thinks there's something wrong with her, and I admit, that this is not the best environment for a child to try and prove that there *is* nothing wrong with them. That they're not freaks, or abominations, but the rest of the world will treat them like they are, or worse, something to be manipulated and used. (*Though I suppose I'm not one to talk there, but at least I am putting her mental health first*). So we have to lock them up, to either protect them from the world or themselves.

You know, I've been doing this job for so many years now, and I've helped "contain" a lot of people. Helped "terminate" a lot more. Never once batted an eye at any of it. Not a single time. I had always assumed it was for the good of the world. Even now, I use live people (*bad people, mind you*), as the fodder in certain experiments. Not anything sadistic, but the fact of the matter is that I'm ending their lives, and still, I feel no great remorse. It's just something I've always done.

Except when it came to children. In the time that I've been here, we've only had to terminate three children, and each time it was the absolute last resort, something that was needed for the sake of humanity's continued existence. And each time, I could do nothing to help them. It tore me up inside. But it had to be done.

Bah, enough of this sentimental thinking. Been doing too much of that lately. Tonight, I'm going to relax. And most likely get drunk.

21/12/2008
Between waking up yesterday with a severe hangover (*too much scotch*), overseeing the transfer of a certain **`Herr Chirurg`**,

finalizing several approval forms for this Christmas bash, and actually organizing and setting up the decorations, and *finally* getting around to integrating Zero's physical body, I've been a little late on my log. But I've been a little busy, so excuse me.

Emma is doing well. She seems to be finally respond to the treatment with some sort of positive effect, and that all by itself brightens my day considerably. Maybe someday soon she'll be able to control her abilities to the point where she can help me put the finishing touches on the Olympia Project.

Actually, speaking of the Olympia Project, I got some help for that from a rather unusual source. The good doctor, Herr Chirurg, has been sent here ever since some roughness involving **Agatha**. He wouldn't tell me exactly what, but he did mention that he quite liked her eyes.

Still, once you get past his appearance and "mild" dementia, he's quite a likable character. A wealth of knowledge in fact. He's actually aided me in several little asides in regard to the project. He was quite interested in the whole thing. He see's me somewhat as a kindred spirit, and while he does find my physiology interesting, he told me that he's "*skilled with the biology of humans…not hounds*", and so *won't* be cutting me open to find out how I work.

So I see it as a fair trade. He helped me with my project, I taught him a little of what we know about the disassembler, despite the fact I'm not allowed to. Let's just not tell the higher ups about that, shall we? As a sort of an extra "thank you" present to the man for his help, and for not eviscerating any of my staff, I'll be getting him a bottle of peppermint schnapps, which Agatha said he quite enjoyed.

And yes, the Olympia Project. Finally, I have begun the **integration phase**. And to see her there, in the flesh, to hear her twin hearts beating… It was breath taking. I'd liken the experience to becoming a father, although I've never procreated unfortunately, so I wouldn't truly know.

That little hiccup at the end there though, that made me worried. For a few moments I was afraid she was going to die before she had truly lived. It was horrifying. I'm still not exactly certain as to what

caused it, but it was worrying nonetheless, despite the fact none of us have seen a resurgence of the event. Still, her body is going through some changes, adapting to its new organs. It'll be a few days before she fully stabilizes enough for us to risk implanting Zero herself.

14. Mr. Brass

You're following in line with your traveling companion, your feet a few steps behind him.

You surmised him as friendly in your thoughts when you first met him. "Entertaining company", was how you remembered it. He was a talker, a foil to your pragmatic silence. You had heard of great composers and musicians, but this man's knowledge eclipsed them all. You could not name a tune without a song he knew, even the few which you seemed to come up on your own. But the strangest of all the features he had were those hands of his, and the sounds that he made with them.

On the first day you met, he showed you his talent without delay. He simply placed his hands on an immaterial instrument before his lips and blew. An invisible instrument with neither color nor form, but made melodies all the same. Every time you talked he had a new instrument, whether a tuba, trumpet or trombone. When your friendship was young, you had asked him of his nature, how had he become a Mister, in the same way you had asked many people. He told you he never knew, he merely awoke into the life one day. Those early memories were from a long time ago.

It was only a few hours ago that you had found him again, and in that time you had made him your friend once more. But, already his music is taking a different tone. It was darker than before, dimmer. It did not escape your mind that he had realized the similarities - certain things can be dyed or shaved, but others cannot. Still, you had changed so much since those early memories, he could not possibly. . ? The other man's sight flashes about the forest path which you had taken him down. He asks to turn back, you tell him it is only a bit farther.

Around a bend in the trees, ah, there. The noise of a dart firing, the yelp let out by Mr. Brass. You turn to face him as he loses consciousness. He finally makes the realization, the slight color of

red to your eyes the last clue he needs. But it is too late for him. His body becomes limp in your arms.

"Breve."

Previous: 13. Mr. Purple by Faminepulse

Next: 15. Ms. Sweetie by The Deadly Moose

Back to Hub

15-11-2012

The air was still as snow fell upon a forest clearing outside of Minsk. Here and there a few dead tuffs of grass would appear above the powder, but otherwise the blanket of snow was pristine. At the center was a single, black, pine coffin with a white orthodox cross adorning its lid.

By the clearing's edge stood two men and one woman. Each turned to the others in silence before one, a tall man with a chin coated with a thick layer of stubble, nodded for them to continue. They were Researcher Lee, Researcher Hastings and Agent Navarro. The date was November 15th, 2012. **SCP-1760-16** had returned.

Normally, 1760-16 was identical to other 1760 instances save for the name Pyotr Astapenov etched onto the lid. This year, however, twelve additional names were present. Each one belonged to a prominent anartist on the Foundation's watch list. It was for this reason Agent Navarro, anart specialist, now found himself in Belarus.

As they approached the casket, a loud scratching sound could be heard. They stopped moving and watched as a single name appeared etched onto the lid below the others.

Daniel Navarro

"That's… really unsettling." Researcher Lee commented as she eyed Navarro. Her feet refused to carry her closer.

"This is the first time one of the instances has been externally altered. I don't like this at all." Researcher Hastings also kept his distance. "What do you think, Navarro?"

"Keep to the plan," Navarro replied. "We're safe if we don't open the box." He coolly gestured for the researchers to proceed.

Without another word the two researchers went to work. With the same level of care one might use to clean a glass figurine, they measured, listened, and recorded. Navarro stood at the ready, hand on his pistol as he looked for calamity to strike. As the researchers worked the casket remained silent.

Eventually, all requested data had been collected. 1760-16 had failed to produce little more than a creak the entire time. The researchers and agents stepped back and looked upon the coffin quizzically.

“This is it?” Lee’s chuckle faded into a frown. “Just names engraved onto the lid?”

“It would appear so,” Hastings nervously giggled. “I guess we just wait for the 20th now.”

Navarro nodded in agreement. One by one, each made their way back to the nearby facility. Before heading through the door, Agent Navarro gave one last look back at the coffin. His eyes glanced over the white cross that adorned its lid. He felt the coffin staring back. Navarro quietly shivered and turned away, closing the door behind him.

The next four days came and went without incident. Unfortunately, this made the site personnel more and more uneasy the closer November 20th came. The night of the 19th was by far the worst. Few in the facility could sleep. The rest were fixated on the sword of Damocles sitting in the front yard.

This is how Agent Navarro found himself walking towards the clearing at 11:15 PM. The thick trees appeared to twist around him in the dark as he slowly crept through the snow. As he approached the clearing’s edge, three security officers emerged from the trees. Their hands tightly gripped their guns as they moved to intercept the intruder. Upon seeing it was Navarro, the officers frowned, but waved him through with a nod.

For a few moments Navarro stood motionless at the edge of the clearing. The moonlight illuminated the snow and cast a white glow

on the waiting coffin. By its side, Navarro could make out the silhouette of a woman. He could feel his hand reach for his pistol as he approached, but relaxed after seeing that it was just Researcher Lee.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked.

“What… what are you doing out here?” Researcher Lee, gasping, turned on the spot.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Navarro replied with a small smile. “This thing really has everyone on edge, doesn’t it?”

“You can’t blame them.” Lee turned back to face the coffin as she whispered. She was there in 2006. She remembered how a pig carcass erupted from 1760-16 and exploded in a shower of human bones. One of her colleague’s heads had been pierced by half a femur. A piece of rib had left a deep gash in her right thigh. They remained silent for several minutes before Navarro placed a hand on her shoulder. Lee shivered.

“You can’t help but feel the shit is going to hit the fan in the next few seconds. Even if they brought a specialist out to ensure all goes well.” Lee nervously smiled. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Navarro said with a shrug. “To be honest I’m not sure what they exactly thought I could do out here. Normally I’m assigned to deal with anart threats, but this object didn’t really give me that ‘anart feel’ when I read its file.”

“Well, it was on display when we found it,” Lee replied. “Someone wanted others to see their work.”

“Maybe, I mean it does have a ‘hey look at this cool thing’ quality to it. But, pig bombs…”

“The 1760-16’s didn’t appear until after we started containing this site, though…” Lee looked at her watch. It was now 11:30 PM. 1760-16 would be gone in 30 minutes.

“I can stand watch if you want to head back and try to get some sleep,” Navarro said with a smile. Without a word she returned his

smile with a nod. Lee then began to make her way back towards the facility.

Navarro turned back to the casket. He waved to the several nearby security cameras before taking a seat on the grass as he waited alone. Fifteen minutes passed. The silence was unbreakable.

“Hello, Daniel,” a male voice whispered from the coffin.

“Shit!” Navarro jumped to his feet. A shard of ice ran up his spine as he drew his pistol. The security officer were quick to run to his side, but stopped when Navarro held up his hand for them to stand down.

“Frightened, are we?” The voice softly chuckled. It spoke English but had a very thick eastern European accent.

“Hello there, I guess…” Navarro’s eyes narrowed as he held his gun steady. “Who the hell are you?”

“In a prior life I was known as Pyotr Astapenov. I was a skilled mortician, a respected scientist, and a gentleman. If you would be so kind as to open the lid, you may see for yourself.” The voice whispered.

“There is no way in hell that’s going to happen,” Navarro replied. “There was nothing anomalous about Pyotr when we poked around his grave. You’ve got a huge hole in your story, pal.”

“I was afraid you might say that,” the voice sighed. “They’ve really changed you. Your curiosity has been replaced with certainty. What a shame.”

“You sure know a lot about me considering we just met,” Navarro said.

“Because I know your breed,” the voice whispered. “You’re an artist. They may have you dress in a suit, hand you a gun, and ask you to apprehend your brethren, Daniel, but you are still an artist at heart. One with a heavily compromised sense of morality, mind you, but an artist all the same.”

“I don’t understand,” said Navarro. “Where are on earth are you

going with this?"

"My point is that you don't want to open this casket to catalogue it like a scientist. You recognize the importance not only in expression, but expression in a manner that is truly unique. I've met plenty of men like you, and can guess that it's torturing you to not know what's inside this coffin."

The security officers looked at Navarro nervously. All seemed to hold their breath waiting for Navarro's response.

"I've got a pretty good idea what's in your box," Navarro replied. "Sorry champ, but I'm not opening it."

"So sure of yourself yet again," the voice said. "Are you afraid that I am just some horror waiting to be let out of my cage? Or, that I just might be Pyotr after all?"

"Fuck it. I'm not going to play this game with you." Navarro shook his head. "What I do saves the lives of both anartists and civilians. If that makes me a sell-out, so be it. I'll be the biggest sell out ever." Without another word he took a few steps back and looked at his watch. 11:55 PM.

"So be it…" the voice said. There was a crack like a shotgun blast. All of the nails that kept the coffin lid sealed flew out of the wood. Navarro and the security officers readied their weapons. Their eyes widened as the coffin lid creaked open.

It was empty.

"It must truly be troubling to have sold your soul as you have, Daniel. Regardless of what you say to yourself to allow you to sleep at night, you have sold your soul. It is a shame. You had such promise," the voice called from inside.

Navarro didn't respond. The last few moments passed in silence. Upon the stroke of midnight the casket began to sink into the earth, eventually vanishing into the ground.

"Christ…" Navarro let out a heavy sigh, and sat back down on the ground to gaze at the sky. The report for this was going to be a

nightmare.

Agent Navarro stood quietly over the grave of Pyotr Astapenov. He had wasted no time in obtaining clearance to re-exhume the remains. As much as he hated to admit it, the voice had been right to a certain degree about his curiosity. This seemed as good a means as any to put that feeling to rest.

Eventually the crew succeeded in reaching Pyotr's casket. Upon Navarro's order they opened it. Pyotr's body was still present and displaying the expected decay of a man buried in 1959. Unfortunately, there was a small piece of paper held tightly within his right hand. One of the crew quietly handed it to Navarro. It contained a single note.

Daniel,
I knew you wouldn't be able to resist.
See you soon.
J. T. H.

Navarro sat down on the edge of the grave. He buried the note in his fist as he gave a nervous laugh.

"Well shit."

15. Ms. Sweetie

So this is it, isn't it.

Yes, that's right, I'm Ms. Sweetie. The only Miss in the first few batches of Misters. Like the one girl Smurf. You know, women make up more than half the world's population. You've got to admit that just one token female character is messed up.

You've got questions? Well, so do I. Yeah, I don't really know where we come from here. Most of us don't. Our memories get confused… especially with the tweaking. Most of us have had to be tweaked from time to time. I suspect some of my brothers might have your answers, but I couldn't tell you which.

Did I start off human? Did I have a life before becoming a Little Mister - well, a Little Miss, in my case? I don't know. I don't remember. Rather, I guess I should say I have a lot of memories. Many of them don't actually match with each other. I remember three different fifteenth birthdays, one of which was a quinceañera. I don't show up in any missing persons database - I checked. Maybe this isn't my original face. Or my original body. In fact, in at least one of my sets of memories, I'm male. Some nights I stay awake and wonder if that's who I really am - some guy in his mid-twenties who got snatched off the street and reworked into some sick person's wet dream of a female. Incidentally, my chromosomes don't come up either XX *or* XY. Maybe all I am is a production error.

I do know that the Wondertainment people have tried majorly tweaking my personality at least three times, probably more that they made me forget. "Rebellious", one of them called me. "Problem". Won't stick to the theme, they said. Not sweet or girly enough to be Ms. Sweetie, which is a bit unfair if you ask me.

Superpower. Huh. Yeah, I don't think of them as 'superpowers'. They're my … nature, if you will. I'll admit my nature is a little creepy. Though it's not as bad as my first edition, where I was a person

made up entirely of sweets and sugary confections rather than flesh and blood. I had health problems like you wouldn't believe. I could still feel pain and get sick, except every virus affected me in new and exciting and truly disgusting ways. After one accident where I vomited sugar-plum pudding for two weeks solid, the Wondertainment people scrapped that nature altogether. Made me flesh and blood again. Now, I'm basically just like a normal human, except that everyone who sees me loves me. Whether it's platonic, romantic, or more like the love you have for a pet or… the other definitions of love… that's up to the person. Which hasn't always worked out so well for me.

That isn't the only way I'm 'sweet'. I've always had a compassionate streak a mile wide. I'm a really caring person, more than I should be - it's kind of embarrassing, actually. I remember that I used to get some flack for it… and I think I can trust that memory, because I don't think Wondertainment would implant a memory that contradicts my "theme". Unless they're cleverer than I think, playing a bit of reverse psychology on me… But I sincerely doubt they're that smart. You know, during one of their "tweaks" they actually tried to make me *stupid*. What does that tell you, eh? I haven't forgiven them for that. If there's a single person behind the Dr. Wondertainment moniker, you can bet that person has a penis.

I don't mind the name Ms. Sweetie as much as you might think, by the way. It's… iconic. Kind of a lame icon as icons go, but in my position, you take what you can get.

Being the only woman on most of the Little Mister lists makes for some interesting dynamics. Several of the other Misters fell in love with me, or at least said they did while also acting like moony teenagers. Like Mr. Mission. And Mr. Storm. And Mr. Feather. And at least half the others who weren't busy seeing me as their mommy. That would be bad enough by itself. Plus, I don't think I'm exactly interested. In men. At all. So when I said 'interesting' I actually meant 'really shitty'.

Did any of that sound harsh? I didn't mean it to. I like them. I really do. I care about them, even. I like them all, even Mr. Stripes. All except…

I still remember. Wondertainment tried to wipe my memory but it wouldn't take, not for this. I like to think it wouldn't help. It's not going to help to explain it, either. No, it wasn't rape. I don't even think Stripes comprehends that idea. It just wouldn't help to explain what happened. You wouldn't understand it anyway. Just remember this — he did it with adoration in his eyes.

I have to find him. I need to get to him before Mr. Stripes, or Mr. Mad, or any of the others.

Not all the others know the specific details. A couple of them know a little bit. Most of the others heard about it, of course. Word gets around. Now, apparently, a whole bunch of them are coming for Mr. Redd. I didn't send them, but when you're the only woman in a roomful of guys, the men either objectify you, put you on a pedestal, or both. Which means that I may as well be Ms. Damsel-In-Distress, and they are all Mr. White-Knights.

Maybe I should tell them I suspect I started off a man. But maybe they'd turn on me too. I remember what Wondertainment did to Mr. Hot when they caught him kissing… No, I'm not going to think about that.

I suppose I can't object too much. It wasn't just me that Mr. Redd hurt. I'm not even sure I was the worst. Just the most public.

But I don't want them to find Mr. Redd. Because I'm *not* a damsel in distress. As much as Wondertainment has tried to make me that way. The others, they talk about avenging my memory, like I'm dead and gone like some *human.* Ha. I wish. But they're really just avenging the way I was before - innocent, naive, …stupid. Yeah, I'll never go back to the way I was before, but *I'm still here.* I don't need their efforts. I'm not just some victim.

I've got plans. Not just the obvious. Sure, I've got the handgun in my pocket, and yeah, I'm gonna at least *try* to shoot him in the face. Sort of an obligation at this point. But that's just for starters. Being honest, I expect to go down for a while when the endgame starts. I know Mr. Redd. You can't beat him head to head like that. But it'll all unwind by the time it's over. You wouldn't believe the kinds of resources and connections you can pile up when everyone thinks

they love you. I wish I could be there when he finally gets taken… Or when he sees my face again, in the containment cell, for hopefully the last time…

I always liked the Foundation, really. There are worse ways to spend the rest of your life.

What was the name of that old poem? From that collection they gave me when they were trying to make me properly feminine? Ah, yes. *"Vengeance is sweet."*

See, it even fits my theme.

Previous: 14. Mr. Brass by Grand Ender

Next: **16. Mr. Fish** by Dexanote

Back to Hub

Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation

Graciously donated by the Doctor Won
through the usual cha

Of Interest: *user-friendly, communication, portable, free agents, limited time of use, donation.*

Asset Summary: *Documentation issued along the first batch of Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation units follows:*

Hello, hello, hello! Thank you for buying the Doctor Wondertainm

You see, these are not your normal, run-of-the-mill wooden toys

Fantastic Wonde

the latest and coolest of ways to talk to your pals that live the c Moon! With a Fantastic Wonderbird™ in your hands, you an matter where you are! And no matter how hard your folks try t your *Fantastic Wonderbirds™! It's not radio, it's not telepathy entirely!*

It's friendship!

Reload charge after every use.

Note: *Thirty units of the Donation wrapped in bright red paper with the previous print were issued through flash materialization during the 23rd Yearly Review Meeting between the British Prime Minister and the European Branch Secretary of the Manna Charitable Foundation (at the time Blanca Castillo).*

Wondertainment Enterprises
PR Department of

Doctor Wondertainment

Hello, Charitable. As usual, another project that did exceedingly poorly with the intended target groups. Fortunately for both of us, those very same surveys have made it abundantly clear that we should focus on producing more plastic space robots that can be used as untraceable walkie-talkies, so at least it wasn't a complete waste of our time.

The Doc was really sad when we heard about it failing so miserably, by the way… we really loved this idea. There is no justice.

Anyways, we'll send you our surplus as they keep popping out of their eggs. Give them a good life, okay? And keep up the good work!

Yours Sincerely,
Padrig Banes

PS: I hope you don't mind the interruption, Prime Minister. It's for a good cause!

Note: *A single printing of the card above was delivered with the mentioned batch.*

Doctor Wondertainment Enterprises has been one of the most generous Benefactors the Manna Charitable Foundation has ever had the pleasure to receive donations from. While the identity, lawful standing and metaphysical status of the Doctor Wondertainment Enterprises and their employee(s) remain an unknown quantity, most of their gifts to the Manna Charitable Foundation have been a tremendous help to its cause.

Maintenance and Operation:

- **MAINTENANCE:** No maintenance concerns noted.
- **OPERATION: 1)** Open 'battery slot'. **2)** Introduce piece of

edible food — preferably, unwrapped candy, as it seems to be the intended 'power source' — in 'battery slot'. **3)** Establish a pattern of iterative thoughts related to the desired receipt or receipts of the communication until the Asset establishes said communication. **4)** Reload 'batteries' as necessary.

> **ATTENTION:** Communication can be established between any pair of units; however, batteries will run out faster if the receiving unit is not charged, and communication will not happen if attempted from an uncharged unit.

> **WARNING:** Repeated usage of the Asset invariably results in malfunction. A period of ten to thirteen hours of 'rest' between uses of ten to fifteen minutes, maximum, is advised.

Safety Concerns: Safe for all.

Security Restrictions: Since no interception is possible when using the Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation to communicate, it is safe to say that this item does not require special Security Restrictions, as long as it is not identified as a means of long-range communications to persons unrelated to the Manna Charitable Foundation. Free agents and Executive members of the Manna Charitable Foundation Work Groups should be given individual items of the Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation, as Programme requirements state.

> **ATTENTION:** Since there is no fixed schedule on the delivery of new batches, the International Board has full authority on the free agents and/or executive members that receive the Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation. Remember: this is a prized, rare asset with a noticeable impact in our global activities. If you find one, report immediately to an Executive member.

He stands
king
over all he has ever wanted; a shadowed corner
in a fetid cell.
Life
is *nothing* to stone.
Mountains erode.
Hillsides crumble.
To him, they go as whisper fast as ***men***
whose eyes
have
failed
them.
Offal spreads from his feet,
stinking, harsh,
making unprepared eyes water-
so much faster,
stone.
Stone does not care for life,
and this stone cares yet less
but for the quick,
subtle
delicate
erosion
of the *snap* of bone on bone.
"Abandon all hope ye who enter here."
Stone does not care.
Don't blink.

1914

We've been playing this game recently — *the* Game, I should say — called *1914.* Hell of a thing.

My buddies Kyle and John, we love history. It's sort of our thing. So when Kyle dug the Game out of his father's closet, we thought it'd be a hoot to try out. An unplayable board game from the seventies, two hundred little cardboard squares marching across a grid of hexagons tracing all the rivers, mountains, and cities of France. Each counter has three little numbers on it for attack, defense, move. There's tables of numbers for moving, for combat, resupply— endless columns on dozens of dusty papers.

John and me, we're the Germans. Kyle takes Frenchies; he's the only one who can make heads or tails of all the numbers, so we follow his lead.

The game starts slow. Set up takes three hours and the pieces move about half an inch a turn if you're lucky. Still, it's a blast. Belgium goes under real quick. Holland never stood a chance. Deutschers strike towards Verdun and the Foreign Legion leads a charge to surround Metz. Just a bunch of squares shuffling, though.

Around session four things start to get a little weird. French infantry encircled outside Antwerp are running low on supplies and Kyle tells us he's going to start eating the horses of his cavalry division — to keep the front line troops fed. Says he gets a bonus if they eat the riders too. We try to laugh that one off but he cracks open the monstrous rulebook and sure enough the “cannibalism efficacy chart” says it plain as day, though God knows how often *that* particular contingency was expected to come up.

That discovery put a whole new spin on gameplay — we started seeing what other optional rules we could dig up. The Osirian Appendices — right after the "Play by Mail" section — changed my whole Brussels Offensive. It's amazing what the hoisted ribcage of

an enemy does for the morale of your troops — at least according to the designer's notes.

Turns out there's all sorts of mechanics that'll give you an edge, for the right price. Blood sigils let you add +1 to your rolls, but only if the blood is fresh. “Hallowed gore” gives you an experience bonus — Marshal Foch swore by it. Barbed wire is tougher when woven with bone. Who knew the First World War had so much to do with arterial logistics?

We weren't happy about sending the second line troops off to the slaughterhouse. But I think the improvement of our positions around Flanders more than justified that particular decision.

By now I hear the armies marching at night, but Kyle's the one who gets real into it. He doesn't just address the day's sacrifices by name — we all do that by now; it negates a bunch of debuffs — he's begun tracking the turns on his skin. And eyeing John's vertebrae.

He announces the construction of a pyramid of skulls large enough to encompass Paris and visible from the moon. Keeps producing page after page of optional rules in a frankly suspicious red ink. John just sits and hums. Hasn't been the same since we ate Bucephalus.

We're on to something special.

By 1918, things have…escalated. This next offensive is the big one — we've been preparing. What was Belgium is painted red, the dykes retaining human viscera instead of water. That's crucial to our success — the viscera, I mean. Our armies of millions are long gone, just a few hundred thousand now, but what thousands! The femur of your closest friend strikes more true than any bullet; vests of Belgian tendon are as good as kevlar in the hands of our tailors. Supply problems are a thing of the past; easier to keep our food on the hoof, or rather, the boot. Each German carries a hundred souls within his gullet. I don't want to *think* about what the French carry there.

All but the best have been expended. Our modern soldier is

frightfully effective, but requires a lot of ingredients.

Summer of 1918. Kyle sits atop the Parisian Ossuary and mocks us. There isn't going to be a 1919.

1st - 12th December 2008

02/12/2008
I got nearly no sleep yesterday. I was so consumed with the **extractor** that all my previous appointments I either forgot, or simply blew off. Unprofessional and immature, I know, but I couldn't tear myself away from it. Now that I've exhausted myself and managed to break away, I now see what else I have to do.

Emma was a little upset that I had "flaked" on our little lunch, but I've promised her that I'll drop by either today or tomorrow to talk to her, and that I'd bring her even more little snacks. I realise this is spoiling her a little, but the girl has been through figurative firestorms, not to mention what she was like when we found her. She deserves a little spoiling every now and then. Of course, ever since **Clef** went on his little **rampage** I've been a little nervous about her safety. Granted, she's a maelstrom of energy, capable of warping life to degrees we cannot even fathom, but beneath that, is a small, lonely little girl, who really just wanted some friends. It's just I feel kind of bad for her. I know that's not very unbiased, but I have a soft spot for children. Besides, I think I made very clear to Clef exactly what I thought of his little "outburst".

I've received a clear estimation of when those new tools will be ready for the excavation. They've told me Friday, but that's if they push it to the limit. I've agreed with that, and added a bonus to their fee for being gracious about my demands. Still… I hate to leave this project alone for that long. But, at the very least, no accidents can happen there till then, so I guess some good can come of it.

I had put the dispersal of D-Class personnel here on hold for the past two days, until I choose the ones I want, making the rest of the site coordinators rather snippy with me. I had forgotten completely about it, due to aforementioned reasons, but I'll try and get down to it later today or tomorrow, before I speak with Emma.

I've applied for official project status regarding my working for an

assistant, it being christened the "**Olympia Project**". I was actually hoping for it to be named after the Chimera, but I guess being named after Olimpia from E.T. Hoffman's "**Der Sandmann**" isn't so bad either. High Command aren't exactly entirely sure about exactly what I'm doing in this project but as long as I'm getting all this research done, they don't seem to care, unless I blow this place up.

03/12/2008
My interaction today with the extractor is something that was… unnerving to say the least. I still cannot believe what has happened. The composite soul… **Subject Zero**… despite that it does not want to be called that, I have nothing else to call it until it chooses a new moniker. I had never even once thought that something like this would occur when I started even that part of the project. I may have fostered something that will have an effect on the course of history far beyond what I can expect. I may have gone a little bit too far just for an assistant.

I had lunch with Emma today. Well, make believe tea, with plastic cutlery and several of her creations rather than dolls. I had to explain to her in her own terms what I was trying to do. I was trying to make *myself* a friend, although I didn't have the abilities that she did to make one, so I'd need her help. She was a little apprehensive when I told her exactly what she'd be doing in order to help me, but a few more bribes of chocolate and she was more than willing to go on with me. Sometimes I'm grateful that she's just a child and has no real concept of what she's doing to other human beings, or what will happen to them afterward. But it does make me feel the slightest bad inside, for having manipulated her, and for leaving this stain on her consciousness for the day she realises what she's done. Bah, if only Clef could hear me now. I hate being like this. I hate thinking he's right.

I still haven't made my selection of D-Class Personnel, and the coordinators of the site are really breathing down my neck. I've held up the entire experiment process for the rest of the site for the past three days, and they're getting more behind schedule than normal. I heard some mentions of "tarring and feathering" so I've resolved to make absolutely sure that I select them tomorrow.

I've been going over the makeshift instructions for the **disassembler** that **Agatha** had written after her experiments with it. I must say, it really does seem to be capable of some interesting things, although it seems almost as if she omitted certain things. I'll have to talk to her about it at length. Pick her brain about it, so to speak.

Speaking of which, I really must speak to **Gears** about the **clockworks** when I next see him. It really does factor in heavily with my little project, and there really isn't an instruction manual besides the experiment logs. I doubt if there's anyone in the world who knows more about that thing than he does.

Maybe the three of us could have lunch at some point…

04/12/2008

Subject Zero has taken to following me around. I can't see it, and it doesn't register on any scanners or anything, but I can feel it in a similar way to the way I feel the **walker** in my head. Its strange, because I can feel it observing my thoughts, my feelings, the inner workings of my mind. I'm naked beneath its mental stare, and not just because my hair is only just starting to grow back. I don't like being this vulnerable to anyone, ever, so I've tried to explain to it the idea of personal privacy, but considering its an entity that almost literally has its heart on its sleeve, it's been slow going.

I chose the subjects today for the project. One of them, who probably had a rough idea of what was going to happen, spat in the face of guard escorting them, calling him a freak, a monster for doing this to them, that the only difference between us and them is that they were caught. While it was physically directed at the guard, I can't help but feel that it was truly directed towards me. It's another one of those small reminders that I'm using people, rather than lab animals. Just another damn thing I have to repress.

I managed to have a sit down with Gears today. He was in Bio-Research Area-12 for some reason or the other, I'm not exactly sure why, but the point of the matter is that we got talking. I told him about the project I would be doing, and he clarified how I'd have to use the clockworks. I won't be able to use it in the way i planned. Instead of using each singular organ, I'm going to have to alter the

entire subject, then hope I get the result I was looking for… This seems like it might be a little tedious. And expensive in terms of test subjects.

The tools are almost done. I'm not sure if it's loyalty, fear, or the fact I paid them extra, but they're really going at it, working flat out to try and get them done by tomorrow. Which is good. Very good. I want this excavation to go as fast and as smoothly as possible. And that should be possible with these tools.

I'll be utilizing Emma tomorrow if the excavation doesn't get in the way, and the reassembly during the weekend.

09/12/2008
There was an accident.

We never realized how brittle the outer shell was, only noting its hardness. When we started using the advanced tools, a large fragment of it shattered, very violently. Up to four men were hit with it. The system locked down instantly once the alarms went off.

Within five minutes, the infection had spread throughout the entirety of the staff interred within the area. Within two hours they had utilized all technology inside for their own purposes. Within five hours they had broken containment and attempted to infect everyone else on site.

We had to evacuate the entire site in three hours. That included all SCP. And the infected…

It took us three days to lay them down. Three days. Three WHOLE days in which there was no research done, another twenty five people were killed or infected and cost over four million in damages. We're still cleaning up the biomass.

To say this was catastrophic is an understatement.

So now, because of all this, I have three O5's on my ass, laying the blame for this at *my* feet having lobbied for excavation so much. Not to mention the paperwork for the thing has amassed into a pile so large, it's in danger of becoming its own sub space dimension.

Everything I've had going has been put on hold. The projects for the entire site have been set back for months, some of them years. The only good thing is the amount of strange bio-tech the infected engineered. If we're lucky, and if I campaign it correctly, I might just get out of this mess better than I started.

11/12/2008

Gah… Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork… I'm drowning in the goddamn stuff, even with the **walker** working around the clock when I sleep. Evaluation reports, incident reports, repair reports, eyewitness interviews, budgets for the Site, letters to employees families, files for possible new employees, the list goes on and on and on. Makes me wish the fellow who invented bureaucracy is burning in hell. Bastard.

On top of that I've received word of a **crazy freak dimension** that's opened up to some weird alternate version of this world with the Foundation, only that everything is hideously wrong, and the Foundation is populated by idiots and assholes, where even the D-Class personnel are given guns, and SCPs run rampant. Apparently doctors **Clef** and **Kondraki** are exploring it, and the **reports** they're sending back are both bizarre and frightening.

I've almost completed the **clockworks** area of the **Olympia Project**, much to the joy of **Subject Zero**, (*Who still hasn't chosen a name I might add*). Still, the **processing of raw materials** with the clockworks is hard and grueling, involving much time and effort on my part, and the expenditure of more and more, subjects and pieces of equipment. I never thought I'd say this about an experiment session, but I want to finish this one as soon as possible.

Emily is absolutely in fits at me repeatedly "blowing her off". I've tried to explain the complexity of the situation, but you know how children sometimes are. So, in order to appease her (*as well as several other SCPs, raise morale, and just generally lower the number of escape attempts*) I've told her that we would be celebrating Christmas in the facility. Since this is her first year here, and she's never been… *able* to celebrate Christmas in her previous life, and so I told her that this would be a good one. I even told her

about **`Santa Claus`**.

In reality, I was planning to do this thing anyway, but why not use it to calm a force of nature while I'm at it too, huh?

The biomass has *finally* been fully collected from the excavation incident and, although they're trying not to appear it, the higher ups are rather interested in the tech that was recovered. Of course, inter site politics being what they are, I'm going to make it cost them. For the good of humanity of course. Not that some of them would understand what **that** was, even if it bit them on the ass…

12/12/2008
Still on the paperwork. Still no end in sight.

At least I got most of the experimentation with the clockworks finished. The machine is interesting, but working with it does take lot out of you. You have to be prepared for everything. That includes running tests for everything. Because sometimes, it'll give you one thing that turns out to be *another*, such as the time one researcher believed he had a device that could reverse time. Instead, it somehow sucked it from the *air*. At least, that's what we think happened, as deduced from the notes we found. Ashes aren't exactly talkative.

I'm going to start work with Emily tomorrow. She seems happy about it.

Started making the preparations for whole "Christmas" thing, but with between the mass of paperwork and the Olympia Project eating all my time, I really only got to devise a gameplan, and even then, it was sketchy at best.

Subject Zero has been around me twenty four seven, and I have to say, now that I'm getting kinda used to its (*her?*) presence, its not actually that bad. Like having an imaginary friend that's actually real. Apparently it (she?) can feel the thoughts of those around it (her?). Fun stuff, although I think it (she?) may be a bit of a gossip. I've never heard so many things I didn't want to know about my colleagues. Especially those ones about the bread. Coincidentally, I'm not eating in the cafeteria again.

First CETRes Donation

Graciously donated by a Richard Michael Maisnon (
Center for Eschatological and Trascendental Re
contacted the Health and Prevention Mission Direc
detailed indications on how to op

Of Interest: *user-friendly, sessile (to water), non-hazardous organism, designed organism (Animalia, Mammalia?, Artiodactyla? - unclassed), abnormal entropy, ongoing research, ongoing programme, sentience?, intelligence?, donation?, prospective Specialist member?*

Asset Summary: *Transcript of the vocal report performed by Dr. Lucía Robres, Health and Prevention Director, to her MCF co-workers.*

Entry Ref: 007/05/23-1-Health and Preventio

Given the unconventional communication methods used by our b
collective understanding when reviewing this document. Howeve
possible mental health issues, I will present my report. This is, of
subsequent security regulations to make sure I am neither a dan
Foundation.

The CETRes wrote this information directly in my mind. It is a pie
impossible to alter. Since they are a novel benefactor group, thei
research has been conducted. This is also mandatory, and has b
other Mission Directors. We hope future contact with the CETRe

This is the best I can put in words the information the person, pe

The soul-seekers of the Center for Eschatological and Trascend
are an appropriate liaison for our exchange with your most Chari

We hope this mind-merging event finds you well.

Let us assure you, this method of contact is the most comfortabl
messenger would be probably lost or hurt in the process of recei
the topic at hand. Your mind, however, is connected to a perfect
precious. We extend to your person an invitation to visit our facil
pass or shed from your material carcass. Without further ado, let

The Entity is an old member of the CETRes, and a dear friend-re
mentor to several of them in their new matterless identities. The
the world, connecting to a physical existence to perform a functio
point of view of a living mammal carcass) water to make it physic
viable as substrate for all beings willing to acquire it, except, obv
can hardly have any relevance, since they cannot support a perf
to us.

The Entity has created a structured micronet around its abdomin
non-cellular elements, acts as a filter feeder. This filter feeder ret
most atoms heavy enough to be incompatible with current stand
ecosphere. It should be able to recognize all physical, chemical,
and acquire them as sustenance.

Submerse the Entity on a solution mostly composed of water. Th
to air, vacuum or soil. The Entity shall weaken and its carcass fa
proportion of water. The Entity may weaken, but it is unlikely its c

We desire this to be only a first and auspicious contact with your
further increases the occurrence of perfect, immutable souls in y
appropriate care and respectful treatment is provided to the Entit

Release yourselves from family, friends and body, for they are bu
with you. Have a most pleasant day.

That is all it or they said. The item was donated to our European
leave any identification nor background beyond a name, along w
this being is all they say it is, because I did not enjoy being hijack
Donation will be reclassified as soon as testing begins, and furth
Continental members achieve a consensus on its adaptation to f

---

Dr. Lucía Robres is a forty-nine year old Executive Admi

Prevention Mission Director for two years, although she worked as a volunteer and an Executive member for ten Director. She holds an MD, has considerable field exper abnormal health hazards in developing countries.

COMMENTS: Comments disabled by **MISSIONWATCH**

The conclusions of the report involving the First CETRes donation, informally known as "the Hippo", as written by Mr. Lin Jong, Health and Prevention Research Executive member, follows.

Entry Ref: 007/07/11-3-Health and Preventio

We conclude that the organism is a specimen of a previously general bodily form is reminiscent of the *Hexaprotodon libe* differences. It lacks evident external sexual organs, anus or a n neck emerges under the cranium, replacing its jaws. All muscle swim nor leave its tank since it was placed there.

Otherwise, the specimen reacts with 'vocalizations' — proba environmental sound, to which it is extremely sensitive. It is, as f

Preliminary testing confirms that the organism is able to rapidly (from 53% saturation upwards) thanks to a specialized tissue This tissue adopts a configuration similar to bundles of fine ten its container. This organ is able to regenerate rapidly, but all entity, so an histological study has been impossible.

However, we estimate the specimen is able to perfectly filter a eliminating all native microscopic lifeforms and pollutants; that tendrils and turn them into a net which will clear all incoming wa filter must be used to feed and sustain the entity, since it seems the entity would make its filter feeders grow with this extra mas have no idea of the growth pattern its main body would follow if f

Please note that the organism appears to be sapient and may h
may not contain information. With regards to all parts involved in
to sedate it or try to communicate with it in a formal manner.

Otherwise, I recommend we reclassify this Donation as an active

---

*Mr. Lin Jong, Mission Health and Prevention Research E
Research Work Group, is a thirty-two year old biologi
experience as a volunteer in the thirteenth Madagascar
years of research experience as part of the European M*

COMMENTS: Comments disabled by **MISSIONWATCH**

Maintenance and Operation:

- **MAINTENANCE:** The First CETRes Donation resides in a tank filled with water. Until its operation may commence, the organism must be fed water samples with different normal organisms, toxic molecules and other substances for testing properties.
- **OPERATION:** To maximize its efficiency, it is advised that the organism of the First CETRes Donation be placed in a specialized infrastructure which includes concentration pipes leading to an open space, collector chamber, or reservoir where the filtering process may occur. In case the entity grows larger than its current chamber after a dilated operation time, as projected by the Ruperts-2 Work Group, temporary cessation of water filtration and/or Programme operations is advised.

Security Restrictions: As of 31/04/2008, Security Restrictions on the First CETRes Donation are to be as follows:

- No public release is to be made of the First CETRes Donation's existence. All results of its implementation are to be reported as the result of other sustainable water purification schemes.

- The First CETRes Donation cannot be released under any circumstances in rivers, lakes or other natural masses of water.

Safety Concerns: Maintenance restricted to trained volunteers and experienced executive members. Otherwise safe for all.

Assigned to:

Programme Laascaanood (Somalia), in an Infrastructure-Health-
Laascaanood considered critical due to Medium-High Health Co
2008 Rupert's disease epidemic, with an estimated incidence of
prospective increase in the number of cases well beyond 30% in
overall health in the area is severely deteriorated, and current he
World Parahealth Organization personnel will join Work Group C
operations and use the First CETRes Donation to produce:

- Permanent water treatment plant. Local water supply pollu
the Third Vesta and First CETRes Donations to create a fu
implemented, this combination could ensure clean water s

Tales 2

20,584

You rest your head against the bus window, briefly closing your eyes. The jolts and bumps making your jaw rattle aren't enough to distract you. The cool glass doesn't help, either. You can't stop thinking about the day.

Like usual, you arrive late. Mr. Vincent is halfway through the roll so, of course, you've missed your name. Everyone laughs as you rush in, red-faced from both running and embarrassment. Desperately looking round for somewhere to sit, you notice with a sinking feeling that all the seats are taken except on Edward's table. You'll have to sit next to him. This isn't new, but you can't help yourself hoping every day that maybe Kyle will have left you a space, or Harrison. Aren't they your friends, after all?

No, says a voice inside you. *You want them to be your friends, but they don't want to be yours. No-one wants to be your friend.*

Except Edward, of course. Edward wants to be friends with everyone. He beams at you in the way he always does, and honks "Want to hear a joke?" in his too-loud voice as you throw your bag under the table, shrug out of your jacket, and sit down, trying to get your breathing under control.

"Not right now, Edward," says Mr. Vincent calmly. "Everyone settle down. Now. Samantha Lopez?"

"Here!" says Samantha brightly. She is sitting at the table one away from you, and after answering the teacher, turns to look at you. You look away quickly, but she's seen you looking, and turns to Heather with a giggle, whispering something. You feel your face warming up again as all the girls on the table titter.

Edward is tugging at your arm. "Why did the cat cross the road?" he blares. "Because it farted! Look, I drawed a picture for you!"

If only you could sink under the desk. Already you can tell this is going to be the worst day.

You sit on one of the benches in a tucked-away corner of the playground at recess. Kyle and Harrison don't want to play with you. They said that their game of soccer already had enough players, and any more would be too many, but you saw that they were struggling against Brendan, Ray, and Reese. You swing your legs as you try to think what you've done to upset them.

"Hey!" You look up to see Samantha and Heather walking towards you, grinning broadly. "Want to play with us?" calls Heather.

This is probably a trick, you think to yourself. But you can't quite let go of the possibility, so maybe you should see what they want.

"We were going to play - achoo!" Samantha says, faking a sneeze.

"Bless you!" says Heather to Samantha, smiling. "Our - achoo!"

"Something - achoo! - is making me - achoo! - sneeze!" says Samantha. "Is it - achoo! - is it him?"

"It is!" shrieks Heather. "He's got - achoo! - he's got cooties!"

"Cooties! Achoo! Cooties!" sings Samantha.

"Quick!" shouts Heather. "Run away before you catch it or - achoo! - you'll sneeze your brains out through your nose!"

You shake your head as they skip away laughing and still pretending to sneeze. Why was that funny? Why you?

You slip down and sit on the floor with your back resting against the bench. The loose earth around the base of the bench has a few small stones scattered around, and you idly pick them up and start tossing them over the fence into the woods that border the school. You notice there's a leaf on one of the tree branches which is a different colour to the rest, and you aim your stones towards it. It's absorbing your interest, peaceful and fun -

"Hey, what are you doing?" Edward's thick voice intrudes upon you from right behind the bench. "Are you throwing stones? Can I have a go?"

The boy lurches happily around the bench and squats down clumsily to pick up some stones.
Grabbing a whole handful of little pebbles and grit, he flings them in the direction of the trees, still in a squatting position.

You're suddenly overcome with anger. You were almost starting to enjoy yourself, forgetting the rejection of the boys and the taunting of the girls. And now this idiot comes blundering in interrupting with his loudness and awkwardness.

You hurl the last stone you've been gripping with extra strength, and just at that moment, Edward, who has been shuffling backwards rummaging through the soil while still squatting down, stands up.

Horrified, you watch as the pebble, slightly larger than a marble, hits the boy in the forehead. His expression goes immediately from its usual wide grin into an open-mouthed look of pure shock. He can't quite believe it. His hand starts to drift up towards his head, and then the pain kicks in, and the corners of his mouth drop and he starts to wail.

Your stomach turns itself upside down. You didn't want that to happen. You didn't want to hurt him. You're going to get in *so much trouble* for this.

But a small part of you smiles, and is glad.

Quarter to three. School's nearly over, but while some of the lucky kids go home, you have to go to day care, like a baby. Mama and Daddy say you're not old enough to be in the house alone, and they have to work, but that's just not fair. You'd be fine by yourself.

Day care is almost unbearable. The other kids are bad enough at school, and there's the teachers there who can actually punish them. Under the well-meaning but useless gestures of Debby and the other day care women, it's hell.

You're just about to get on the bus when you hear your name called. You look back, and Mr. Vincent is beckoning to you from his class door. He's saying something about report, and your heart sinks. You kind of thought you'd got away with the thing with Edward, but now it looks like you'll be put on report, and then Mama will be sad again, and Daddy will just look at you with the disappointment in his eyes even worse.

Mr Vincent looks at you, and gestures to sit down. He doesn't look as stern as you'd feared; if anything, he looks anxious. You've never had any real trouble with Mr. Vincent: he's not your favourite teacher, but he's not angry like Mr. Lenny or nasty like Miss Debrah. You shift your weight about, wondering when he's going to begin speaking. He doesn't seem to know where to start.

"Look, I know it's difficult with Edward. He can be annoying, and you don't always want him around." Mr. Vincent holds up a hand to stop your explanation. "I don't think you hurt him on purpose. I know you don't like him, but I don't think you're the kind of boy to do that. I know how much it upsets you when Harrison and Kyle won't spend time with you, when the girls tease you. I wish I could do something. I don't know why no-one seems to want to be your friend - apart from Edward, and he just wants to be everyone's friend. I know what it's like to feel like - to feel like no-one wants you. To think you're nothing but an annoyance in everyone's lives."

Mr. Vincent is pacing around, talking quickly and stumbling a little over his words. You're almost a bit worried. Mr. Vincent doesn't seem like a teacher any more. He smiles suddenly, weakly.

"Now I'm scaring you. Teachers aren't supposed to be human, are we? We're adults - right? The enemy. No-one expects us to try to - to get close to you, to be real with you.

"But I - I think I need your help. There's something I'm trying to do, something I'm trying to *make*, and I need someone else to help me. I'm close now - real close, I'm about to get it. I really think I can do it!"

He stops walking and looks at you directly. "Will you help me?

The memories fade away as you climb down the bus steps, shaking your head. What an awful day. And now you're … you're at the local high school? What's going on? Weren't you supposed to be going to day care? Why are you back here? What happened after you left school? And why does the Mission High School look so… old?

Researcher Grant buries his face in his hands as the door closes behind the small boy carrying an orange jumpsuit over one arm. It never gets any easier.

With a deep sigh, he opens the tracking document and registers the arrival of **SCP-1680** instance number 20,584.

20 GOTO 10

. . .

A black sedan rolled down the street, electric quiet in the dead of night, toward "The Rusty Cam". A true hole in the wall, this place. Dumpster overflowing out front, smoke pouring from all the vents, windows and doors. True to its name the place smelled of petrol and motor oil and coolant and burnt rubber. No one with a net worth over $20K would be caught dead there. Exactly the atmosphere required for this particular brand of meeting hall.

Or Church. Same thing, really.

The driver threw the car into park, and mashed the "Stop" button on the dash. His forehead rested on the steering wheel a moment as he steeled himself up for the night's task. A furtive glance to the briefcase in his passenger seat. A dry swallow. He closed his eyes and tried to think of this meeting for what it was. To remind himself that he was allowed to be here (strictly speaking). That this had 'already happened' from a certain point of view. It did little good.

"…Fuck it."

His hands wrapped around the plastic handle of the case, and he stepped into the night, glasses fogging in the muggy heat. Past the threshold, he counted no less than 23 eyes trained upon his person (some of them were probably even human). The man cleared his throat and pressed forward into the wolfs' den, heading straight to the bar.

2245 MDT, 18 July 2031 CE. A Friday. 36 degrees in Edmonton that day…

"…what can I do for you?" the bartender asked.

"Your finest 5w-30. Straight." He had a seat.

The bartender cocked his head to the side. "You sure about that? I don't think I've seen you around before."

"A whiskey while I wait, then," the man said, placing the briefcase on the bar and patting it twice. "…For your 'manager', of course."

The bartender's tongue clucked (No… *ticked*. That was definitely a tick.) once, and a glass was filled with amber oblivion and placed before the visitor. "It might take a while. He's a very busy man."

"Tell him 'Book of Pieces, 12:6.'" the visitor said. "Don't worry, I'm expected."

"I never heard about it."

"I don't expect you would."

"Look, who are you, *really*?" the bartender demanded.

…And then someone over the visitor's shoulder whispered the word 'foundation,' with a *capital* f.

The visitor was now acutely aware of the silence in the rest of the bar. No music, no conversation. Just the slow ticking of machinery, the soft hiss of release valves, and the hum of cooling fans. It was true, then. He had definitely come to the right place. And that was all the more terrifying.

The visitor took up his glass and downed what must have been 90 mL of bottom-shelf Bourbon and hacked up half of a lung. He had already been quiet too long. Anything but the truth would be sniffed out in an instant. But perhaps he could get away with telling only *half*.

"I am a traveler. From faaaar and away. I have come to barter for a service." The visitor took hold of the briefcase and opened it, revealing the leather-bound codex within. On its face was a single roman numeral: 'XXXV'. "Do you know what this is?"

The bartender's eyes opened so wide that one of them slid out 20 cm on a stalk, adjusted focus, and snapped back. "…That's not…" He began to reach for it, but the lid to the case slammed

closed on his fingertips. "OW!"

"Yes. It is," the visitor asserted. "This interview is concluded. Either eject me from the premises or get your manager. I no longer care which." His palms were wet and his mouth was dry, but they bought it. The bartender poured a double out of a brown, unmarked bottle and hurried into the back. Top-shelf, home-made stuff this time. No junk in it, clear as a bell. Tasted like new-car smell with a hint of old-world coriander and nutmeg. By the time he was finished, a woman he did not recognize was standing in the doorway, silently beckoning him to follow with one cybernetic arm; a civilian appliance, by the look of it. That was one thing Church-goers liked about the slow creep of trans-humanism. It made it easier to blend in.

Don't worry, he thought silently into the room around him. *Your time will come… You'll all get to sing your hallelujahs out loud like the rest of them.*

The metal-armed woman and a man made primarily of bronze duct work stood like a wall in the archway. The woman stepped forward and nodded. "I am Acolyte Henrietta Ford, this is Militant Clutch. Please open your jacket and spread your arms."

The visitor looked back and forth between the two of them and decided that it was too close to call, and so he would comply. He opened his coat to rest on his shoulders and spread his arms. "Careful with the case. That's the only copy."

"Careful yourself, heathen," Clutch puffed, and took the briefcase from the visitor's hand. A series of lenses clicked into place in front of his left eye.

Henrietta flipped her cybernetic hand around three times to reveal some kind of scanning apparatus that the visitor could not quite place. It swept up one side of him and down the other making a bunch of meaningless noise, and Henrietta's pupils swallowed her irises whole as the data streamed in. "…Wow."

The visitor nodded. "Yup."

"That's…" She stammered. "It's a lot. For a jailer, anyway."

"You'd be surprised."

Clutch shoved the case into the visitor's chest with a grunt. "The case is clean."

Henrietta nodded and grabbed the visitor by the shoulder, ushering him forward roughly. "A few things need to be clear before you meet the Reverend Automaton."

"The Reverend *what*?"

"Automaton," Clutch said roughly. "His Holiness Reverend Fourier 7, fourth generation of the Design. No more questions, heathen. Listen now."

"First," Henrietta continued, "any hostile action on your part will be met with immediate deadly force. Second, our cooperation with you today in no way implies continued cooperation with you or any other party associated with the Foundation. Thirdly-"

"With all due respect, Ms. Ford, please don't mistake me for an errand boy. I'm here on my own."

"All the more reason for us to be suspicious," Clutch hissed quietly, and reached for the doorknob with a single brass claw. "Watch yourself closely. For your own sake."

The room had no air conditioning, only a large exhaust fan bellowing a constant 65 dB through the tiny space. Behind the desk sat an automaton of some kind, but not the sort one would expect was once a man, like his escort. Five lenses stared at him dispassionately from a central mass, held aloft by four of its eight appendages. The other four, each with their own lenses attached, busily shuffled and marked and scooted and filed papers away with rapid precision. The being adjusted focus twice, and produced a brass horn from the top of its central body.

"Greetings," the automaton clamored. "I am Fourier 7. We have been expecting you, Doctor-"

"I would prefer if my name was not spoken aloud in this establishment," the visitor interrupted. "I am not a moron."

The being's lens shutters fluttered audibly (all of them), which would have sounded vaugely of laughter if one had cotton in their ears. "Do you insinuate?" it asked.

"I do not," the visitor replied, "but the Foundation has ears even in places as hidden as this. Prudence demands discretion."

"Very well. Please present the volume for validation."

The visitor took a deep, nervous breath, and opened the briefcase again, very gently placing it on the desk before him. "The Design of the Mind, Volume 35 of 36. I believe it is the only one you are missing."

One of Fourier 7's appendages finished its filing task, and swung over to the desk, analyzing the codex from multiple angles. Carefully, it opened the cover, and with a wheeled attachment clearly designed for the purpose, flipped through all 1378 pages in less than 10 seconds. Its shutters blinked closed twice, and the lenses focused on the visitor yet again. "The volume appears valid, with 99.95% confidence. However, the condition of this volume is incongruent with its age by nearly seven centuries. How was it obtained?"

"Never mind that. Are you satisfied with its authenticity or not?"

The Henrietta and Clutch looked at one another in solemn silence, and then at Fourier 7 expectantly as small fitted gears in its trunk clacked and clicked and shifted against one another. Its lenses shifted back and forth between the visitor and the volume several times before the cacophonous clickety-clack finally quieted, and the automaton spoke.

"I am satisfied. What is your price?"

The visitor let out a long breath before beginning. "I am currently host to a Mark XXV Cerebellar Device, which has had its wireless transceiver removed. I can't file a claim through my company health insurance for reasons which should be obvious… So I want a good Maxwellian surgeon to repair it."

Fourier 7 stopped all of its ancillary filing and fixed on the visitor with his full attention. Faster than he could blink, the visitor's glasses were removed, head cocked to the side and skin at the base of his skull probed by a cold, metallic something. He tried to struggle, but his two attendants grabbed his arms and pinned him to his seat. A magnifier lens was placed over his eye, and from somewhere within, a light scanned his retina from top to bottom, left to right. As quickly as the probing began, it ended, and the visitor fell back, suddenly quite exhausted. He checked his neck and found that he was bleeding, thought it wasn't serious and would probably stop within the hour. He pressed a handkerchief on it firmly, sat up straight through the woozy, and regained his spectacles. The dirty look shot in Henrietta and Clutch's direction was not returned.

"Your claim appears to be genuine," Fourier 7 said finally. "But again I am confused. The current generation Cerebellar Device developed by our Maxwellian brothers has been designated Mark II, and is not yet available for general installation."

"It will be, though, within this calendar year. And although the components have changed, the architecture of the device should be familiar enough to your surgeon that he can solder a goddamn *pin*!"

"Sir, please relax. Since my assembly, I have waited over 200 years to read this volume. I would be remiss to deny your request." Fourier 7 made a sort of nodding motion to Henrietta. She stepped forward and picked up the receiver of an old touch-tone phone, dialed a number, and spoke a screeching series of fax machine sounds into the receiver. "My assistants will furnish you with lodging for the evening. In the event that the Foundation discovers your capability has been restored, I believe it goes without saying that this transaction is not to be mentioned."

"Of course," the visitor said, slowly climbing to his feet.

"It is a very serious thing you have done for us, Doctor," Fourier 7 said, extending an appendage to take the visitor's hand. "I hope one day you will understand how serious."

"I do," the visitor said with a smile. "'Broken are we in his image, that we might make him whole'. Isn't that how it goes?"

Fourier 7's shutters flapped open and closed wildly as it heard this. "Indeed, it is. Good journey to you, Doctor. May you be forever whole."

The visitor was led up to a small clean room on the fifth floor, carried some of the way as his head refused to clear. "Have I been drugged?" he asked his attendants. "I feel like… like I've lost a *lot* of blood or something."

"It's normal," Henrietta responded. "The Reverend's examination required a full system diagnostic on your Cerebellar Device. I wear a Mark I myself. The effect can sometimes be quite draining." Slowly the two escorts lowered the visitor onto a bed and placed two pills and a glass of clear water on the side table.

"These sedatives will keep you unconscious, but physically responsive through your surgery," she continued. "Take them as soon as possible. You will awaken in 18-24 hours in the Edmonton Garden Inn/Hilton. Your vehicle will be in a reserved space in their parking garage. Check-out will not be required. If you are in any way dissatisfied or require technical support, a number you can call will be provided. Do you have any other questions?"

The visitor shook his head and waved the escorts out of the room, downing the pills as quickly as he could.

On the morning of July 1, 1999, Agent Burt Tomlin sat idling in a black sedan, smoking too many cigarettes to kill the time and resting his foot on the accelerator to keep the engine from stalling. Two hours late. Dr. Thaddeus Xyank was *never* late. He was just about to radio in an emergency and book it back to Site-17 when an innocuous door down the street swung open, and a very groggy looking theoretical physicist carefully stepped out of it and down to the sidewalk. Tomlin honked the horn just once to get his attention, and Dr. Xyank, eyes puffy, ear bandaged, and face red methodically walked to meet him.

"…You okay?" Tomlin asked.

"I… Yeah, I'm fine. I… There's…" Dr. Xyank's voice was cracking.

He took off his glasses and vigorously rubbed his eyes. "It's a lot to take in, you know? I just… I need a minute."

Tomlin nodded and pulled deftly into traffic. "Everything go alright?"

Dr. Xyank looked dead ahead as Tomlin's phone buzzed in his pocket. Tomlin picked it up, noted the "unknown" number, and answered. "This is Homer Simpson, who's calling?"

~*Everything went fine*.~ said the voice of Dr. Xyank on the line.

Tomlin blinked, looked at the cell in his hand, and then back to his passenger before putting the phone back to his ear. "…Doc?"

Dr. Xyank smiled in his seat, chest bopping up and down in silent laughter. ~*Yeah, it's me. See me waving?*~. He looked Tomlin dead in the face and waved like a big grinning idiot. ~*It's like I can see again. You can't… You can't imagine how good this feels*.~

Tomlin smirked and hung up the phone. "Very cool. So… what now?"

"Don't worry about it," Dr. Xyank said as that stupid-happy smile spread ever wider across his face. All at once he watched TV, listened to the radio, and logged on to every wireless network he could find as they passed. "Everything is under control."

And lord willing, he thought to himself, *all 'god's' children know well enough to wait to strike until the iron is hot.* Though he wasn't quite sure, even though he'd seen it himself. Patience was, after all, a virtue best left to God.

...

"Nothing?!" Clutch screeched in shock. "NOTHING?!"

"Relax, brother Militant," Fourier 7 said quietly as it placed the volume in a small, unobtrusive fire-safe near its desk. "Your will-pressure is exceeding standard tolerances."

Clutch puffed loudly as his relief valve opened, and his

Mark VII weaponized exoskeleton fell slack around what was left of his biological form. "…With all due respect to the Patriarch, 200 years delay in reassembly is plenty long enough. Why do we not act?"

"Because, brother Militant, it is the logical thing to do. The heart is stopped. God's ichor is known to our enemy and isolate. The soul is lost to us. The eye sees only the profanity of the heathen jailers. We will not continue building the God, because at present we have no God to build."

"But couldn't those parts be rebuilt?" Henrietta asked. "I mean… I know the Mind could not be, but surely the other pieces are not out of our grasp!"

"They are not," Fourier 7 replied, sliding its trunk into a small slot in the floor. From beneath, a small electric motor rose and spun the crank in Fourier 7's base, winding him in seconds. "But there are many factors to consider. Creating these new parts in the image of our Lord would require extraordinary expense and risk. Have we forgotten the Surrey incident of 2004?"

Henrietta sighed and nodded, folding her arms tightly. "I know, 'When you go in foreign lands, go in secret and in disguise.' But we have been hiding for so many centuries…"

"Please, sister. Do not attempt to instruct me as to the anguish of waiting," Fourier 7 scolded gently. "Children of your generation have difficulty waiting for 200 ms, let alone 200 years."

"Forgive me," Henrietta bade, half-heartedly.

"Pardon my bluntness," Clutch injected, "but what value is this object if we are not making use of it?"

Fourier 7's gears ground against one another in frustration, but the ugly sounds within were short lived.

With a single appendage, it opened the safe, and conveyed the volume, open to a random page, into Clutch's line of sight. "What do you see here, Militant? What marks are on this page?"

Clutch turned up his nose at the document and turned his head away. "Absorbing information through the use of digital binary is heresy. I will not!"

Henrietta's eyes would have fallen out of her head if they were not soldered in place. Clutch could not have just said what she thought he said. She played back the recorded sound-byte just to be sure. 'binary…binary… digital binary is heresy'… By WAN, he *had*!

"Am I a heretic, Militant?" Fourier demanded.

"No, Reverend."

"Yet I read and understand this document. Do you say that I am forbidden?"

Clutch crossed his arms and stayed quiet, as Militants are often instructed to do when they find themselves disagreeing with their betters.

"So… This is… This is a message written in machine code?" Henrietta asked. "A message, dictated by the Six Angels of WAN directly to our faithful scribes almost a thousand years ago… And it's in *machine code*?"

Fourier 7 lowered the volume and turned several lenses to face her, shutters fluttering slowly. "If this was true, it would seem that such a discovery, if taken by Father Bumaro before the Patriarchs and the Administrators, might do much to re-cast our broken Church. Would it not?"

"Yes, Reverend Automaton," Henrietta said with a cautious smile. "It would indeed."

"Enough to justify a small free service to a jailer,

brother?" Fourier 7 asked Militant Clutch.

The Militant said nothing. He had nothing more to say. History and God would find the truth in it. Such pursuits required patience he did not possess. It was, after all, a virtue best left to God.

Part 4: Exit History | Part 6: Set Up Thine Altar Here

24th December 2008 14th January 2009

24/12/2008
Well, Christmas Eve is here, and I believe **Mr. Kringle** may have infected the staff with cheer, because the amount of work getting done is non existent. Of course, I'm one to talk… I'm the one who allowed them to do it, as well as stopping my own personal experiments. (*Mainly because I feel bad if I indirectly allow someone to get killed horrifically at Christmas.*)

I've even stopped the experiment on **Emily** for the past few days, and well, requisitioned some time off for her. Granted, owing to the state of her condition, she still is unready for a heavily urbanized area, but she was allowed to venture outside for a good deal, near the **grove**, although of course, she wasn't actually allowed inside it.

Zero's **body** has stabilized enough for the implantation for us to continue, and finally merge the mental body and the physical one. We're going to do it tomorrow. So, my assistant is technically going to be "born" on Christmas day. Not a bad present if I do say so myself.

25/12/2008
SHE'S ALIVE!

28/12/2008
I've spent most of the past few days with Zero. Since she has woken up, it has taken her three days to learn to do pretty much everything that takes a normal human child twenty years. I'm fairly sure she hasn't slept in that time, but I'm not sure she needs to.

Christmas was good, and thankfully uneventful. Most of the residents and SCP alike enjoyed what little trinkets or services they received. Emily was especially happy at what she received. I gave her a little television, one with access to most children's channels, to be available for an hour or two a day. I myself received a very nice holiday to Spain, thanks to a very special certain someone. They

know who they are. Although the staff seem curiously joyous at that.

Ah, yes, Zero's name. I was pleasantly surprised when she told me of it. So many connotations, so many meanings. She told me as soon as she could form the words.

Sophia.

02/01/2009
Well, the role of being a father has fallen to me these past few days, as well as site administrator. I've been easing Sophia into the real world, trying to make the transition as painless as possible, and, as expected, Sophia is taking to everything like a fish does to water. She's learned decades of research, centuries of history, over seven different languages, and still her appetite for knowledge has not been sated. Soon she might overshadow even me.

The only thing that has me worried, is that high command have decreed that since she seems to be working so well that they've ordered **full scale production**, albeit with some **minor alterations** to the original product. I realize that this is for the good for the Foundation, and the world at large, but I just can't help but feel that its cheapening the original life I brought into this world. Sentimentality… Bah, one day feelings like this will be the death of me.

Most of the on site research has been reinstated, and finally the site is getting back to work. Experimentation with Emily, and trying to improve her mental condition is continuing again, despite the fact she just wants to watch "**Ruby Gloom**" all the time. And I told her handlers to ration the time she has with the television… I guess we're going to have to slowly wean her off of it a little.

The excavation area has been completely ignored over the holidays, and although I, as always, lament the lack of research being performed, I can at least appreciate the fact that no one has died, mutated, or even gone insane in that area. But alas, we must continue with testing. Excavation is still disallowed, at least until we figure out what exactly is this "thing" in the center. We'll be doing testing with the **bone orb**. I don't want to subject Sophia to whatever danger that may be there, as she might be more

susceptible to it due to her multidimensional nature.

On the bright side, I shall be leaving for my brief little holiday on Wednesday, although, it is rather unfortunate that I must leave behind the **`walker`**, and be accompanied by several armed guards, not to mention the fact I can't go sight seeing or into public places or even outside without disguise "procedures", i.e. being naked. Granted, as a dog, I have no real need for clothes, but dammit, I don't exactly enjoy being naked either. It's rather demeaning….

Dammit, I hate being a dog sometimes. I am looking forward to the food though, and my company will be superb. If, that is, they can get some sort of feeling of privacy despite the dozen or so armed guards around us. Damn.

14/01/2009
Finally, I've returned to my home, and place of work… Took me long enough, what with several bureaucratic blunders to try and fix along the way just so I could make it back here. Seriously, why does a dog need a passport? And that bloody quarantine thing? Argh, next time I'm not leaving the country. Well, maybe.

Other than that, the trip was quite nice, though more for the company than the locale. The area was **that** saturated with holiday homes and the like, that it was practically a little slice of England, weather and all, which was not exactly to the liking of my palette.

In total, I saw only *four actual Spaniards*. And I never even managed to sample a bowl of paella, which is rather upsetting. Although we did go to this rather nice little restaurant with the most delicious steaks… Though the staff were a little apprehensive about serving a dog. Still, I spoke the language of all people, the language of money. Of course, I used someone else to say this. I'd rather not *exhaust my vocabulary* trying to hush up word of a talking dog.

All in all, a nice trip, but not one I will be repeating in the near future.

Sophia dealt well with my absence, managing the affairs of the site with ease, and continuing the experimentation with Emily, though she left it to me to make sure the log for said experiments are in order.

There's been a great influx of new employee's in my absence. Apparently, the Overwatch feels we need "*new blood*", so to speak, and for once, I happen to agree with them. Many hands make light work, as they say.

Still, I hope they don't turn out to be similar to a certain late doctor. I know it's rather rude to speak ill of the dead, but the man was completely stupid. I mean, I take risks at times, but I temper them with judgment of the situation. But doing what he did? That was practically suicide, even if Clef hadn't been involved. Bah, enough talk of a dead fool.

The experimentation on the excavation site has finally been fully authorized to commence, as it had been postponed due to the absence of the lead project director, (i.e. me). It will begin tomorrow at 0800 hours. Staff will be at full alert, and several of the test Olympians will be mobilized and ready for action should anything happen. This should be… interesting, to say the least.

“Explain to me why we’re hiding in somebody’s old, abandoned crap-shack, son.”

Neil R. Ghost (age twenty-eight) had never imagined that he would find himself in the situation that he was in presently. Sitting on a patch of rotted floorboards, with his back to the equally rotted door, he was regretting some of the decisions he had made with his life. However, there was no time for introspection, as his companion, a field researcher by the name of Kevin Starnes (age nineteen), replied, “That would be because of Two-Sixty-Nine, sir.”

“Yes, and what exactly is Two-Sixty-Nine?”

Quickly checking a paper from the sheaf of files that he was holding, Starnes read, “The files aren’t very clear, as no one’s been able to catch the thing so far, but this one says, ‘What has been determined is that the large creature was roughly humanoid with distinct moose-like features. The creature was described in a wide range of attributes, as with many cryptids, although all reports indicate the creature is bipedal with two arms, moose-like antlers, and a towering stature.’”

“So, basically, what we’re looking at here is a moose man?”

“Yes.”

“And we haven’t tried just shooting it, or drugging it, or anything like that?”

“Well, we opened fire with the tranquiliser darts when we found it, but then it just started chasing us. We ran back the way we came, right past your research team, and then scattered.”

“And that’s how we ended up here. Fantastic. I’m going to go urinate in the corner now, before I have a chance to actually get the piss

scared out of me, eh."

Trundling over to what he assumed to be the corner of the dank former dwelling, Neil went about his business with gusto, humming a jaunty tune as he relieved himself. Turning his head just enough to keep an eye on both Starnes and the door, Neil inquired, "So, as long as we're here, do you think you could tell me why there were multiple research teams sent to investigate this thing? I mean, maybe an armed Mobile Task Force would be able to handle a man-eating monstrosity better than a bunch of nerds in lab coats and hiking gear."

"Well, technically speaking, with the dentition of a moose, it's highly unlikely that Two-Sixty-Nine would be able to properly consume any kind of meat, much less human flesh." Unfortunately, this was all that Kevin Starnes had a chance to say in reply: a particularly large hoof impacted the opposite side of the door, splintering the damp wood, and driving itself through four tenths of his spinal column, five ribs, and several of the more important organs in his thoracic cavity.

Bursting through a previously unnoticed back door into the twilit woods, wang in hand, Neil ran as fast as he could manage from a grisly array of odours, and what he was sure would be an embarrassingly moose-related death. Hastily repackaging his groin-bound goods, he tried not to focus on the approach of the oddly-proportioned creature, its swift hooves making dull thuds in response to the moist squishing of his feeble-by-comparison footfalls on the mossy, rain-damp ground. Cursing with what little breath he could muster, it came as somewhat of a surprise to the other people in the pit when he fell in with an astonished "Assnugget cuntface."

Neil R. Ghost had found the rest of his original research team. Well, they had found him, but no one was about to play semantics. He had, in fact, been pulled into a hollow formed by the roots of a long-dead cedar, by one Doctor Owen Hamilton (age thirty-nine), and silenced with a hand over the mouth from researcher Andrea Barclay (age thirty-two), two of his initial five-man group of scientists and researchers. The three waited for Two-Sixty-Nine to pass overhead before even breathing.

Once they could no longer see its shadow, Barclay pulled her hand

away. “Where is researcher Shekhar?” she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

“Beats the piss out of me,” Ghost replied softly. “Is Doctor Tjaard dead?” Catching a shallow nod from Hamilton, he continued, “Right. Either of you have a gun?”

“Just this thing,” Hamilton said, motioning to a not-very-new rifle at the edge of their hiding place. “Though judging from the past few hours’ experience, I’d say it’s not going to do much good.” Before he’d even finished the sentence though, Ghost had grabbed the gun and leapt out of the pit.

“Hey you,” Ghost yelled. “You smelly, belligerent pile of crap, come on over and kick my face in. Hard target to miss.” He didn’t have to shout; Two-Sixty-Nine had only passed the hiding place by twenty-five metres, and it had excellent hearing. It lowered its head to charge as Ghost raised the rifle, and after only four of the familiar thudding hoofbeats, there was a resounding crack, and the long-hunted moose man fell, a slow trickle of red running down its muzzle.

“Congratulations, you’re a hero now,” Ghost quipped, passing the warm weapon to Hamilton. “ And if you tell any of the investigating Foundation personnel anything else, I’ll have you dropped like Rancid McGee out there.”

“Is it dead?”

“Nope. Your average moose has a pretty thick skull, but I don’t think I could’ve cracked that one even if I’d wanted to, eh.”

“Alright then. Doctor Barclay, call the base monitoring station, if you would.”

Two hours later, Hamilton was driving a rented subcompact, Ghost in the passenger seat, down one of those long stretches of boring woodland highway that traced the mainland. The trip had progressed in utter silence until a muted crackling from the dash mounted two-way radio snapped them both from their torpor. From what they could gather, the U-Haul truck that the Foundation had

rented as an impromptu transport for the unconscious Two-Sixty-Nine had crashed. None of the crew that had gone with it, including Doctor Barclay, had been heard from, and it was to be assumed that the creature had escaped into the surrounding woodland.

“You know, Hamilton, I hope they had the sense to actually secure the thing. With rope or chain, preferably.”

“I have the niggling feeling that they didn’t, Neil.”

“Me too, eh. You know, I saw it kill Starnes. I don’t think it even planned on eating him or anything. It just wanted him dead.”
“Do you want to turn back and finish it off?”

“Fuck no. Get me an elephant gun and a bottle of whiskey and we’ll talk.”

“Why did you shoot it? You knew about the skull, but why take the risk?”

“I’m sure you want me to tell you that I was overcome by a sudden swell of bravery, or that having so many of my teammates brought down made me angry enough to unleash my inner Rambo, but honestly? I was just fed up with its shit, and the smell. Let a properly equipped team deal with it.”

“Back to base, then. Do you think the Foundation’s going to consider this a huge loss?”

“As long as we don’t have anything to contain, the Special Containment Procedures Foundation isn’t going to give a shit, eh.”

“I guess the first drink’s on Barclay.”

“And the last one’s on Starnes.”

Tales 3

3. Mr. Money

Hi there. My name is Mr. Money. Don't worry, I just need somebody to talk to. Seeing as it's just you and me on this bus, it might as well be you.

I'd talk to the driver, but there's a sign right there saying not to. See? *Do not disturb the driver*. I wouldn't do that, seeing as how the bus might crash and then I'd have to *walk* all that way. You ever walk in rain like this? Let me tell you, it's freezing! So I'm just gonna sit here and talk to you. You.

Oh come on, don't move! I'm just being friendly. Here, take this! See, we're pals now, right? Yes, it's a diamond. Yes, it's real. You see, pal, I know how friendship works. You hearing me…? What's your name, anyway? Well, hello Dave.

It's nice to meet a smart fellow like yourself. I usually hang around with this group…ugh, you would not believe. They didn't understand how friendship works, no they did not. Not like you, Dave.

I gave them dollars and dimes and *fucking* diamonds! And all they did is call me a snob! Me, can you believe that, Dave?! Have another diamond, you're a good friend and you look like you could use it.

Seriously though; me, a snob? It's not easy to get all this cash, believe me! Puking out the bills is fine, they come out easy. Even coins are no big deal.

But with diamonds, its not so easy! You can choke on diamonds! I have a few times, let me tell you. Good thing Ms. Sweetie was there, though. I would have been a goner! She was always very kind, Ms. Sweetie. Even if she just pitied me, just *fucking* pitied me!

Stop *fucking* moving, Dave! No, don't go, have another diamond, please! I'm sorry for shouting, I didn't mean to. Must have gotten that

from Redd, always shouting. Gave me a headache, I don't mind saying.

What's that? Well, Dave, that is a very good question and I don't *fucking* know why I can puke money so shut the *fuck* up! Sorry, diamond, sorry. I'll tell you what I do know, because friends share secrets. We're friends, right Dave?

I have to know what kind of money I want to puke. I couldn't spit out some yen or something for you right now, because I've never been to Asia and I don't know what yen looks like. You ever been to Asia? Suppose not, flights *are* kind of expensive. So, enough about me, where are you headed?

Me, I'm headed for…well, I don't really know, but I'm getting there before those little shits, I know that. They said it wasn't a race, but let me tell you, Dave, it's always a race. Have a diamond.

Previous: 2. **`Mr. Clank`** by Dr Gears

Next: 4. Mr. Lie by Salman Corbette

`Back to Hub`

Third Vesta Donation

Graciously donated by the Vesta Conglo
Of Human Societi

Of Interest: *User-friendly, structural development, facilities, non-hazardous microorganism, POTENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD, abnormal entropy, ongoing research, ongoing programme, donation*

Asset Summary: *A relation of MWB Newsletter entries, written by Dr. J. Torres, Executive member of the Mission Branch, as Internal Reports, follows:*

Entry Ref: 006/12/01-8-Infrastructures and D

After carefully studying the 3rdVD, I can confirm two things: first, build with it; second, any stable ground the Vesta Seeds are plan growth, no matter what they have to grow into.

I must admit, it is an impressive sight — seeing a mass of irregu into a wall, or a temple, or a home… in a matter of hours. The Ka incredible sight. The growing structures may look ghastly at first their capacities make up for any inconveniences! The thought of shiver.

Past week I gave you an impression on the characteristics of the Laviano Grid; while I can't confirm it at the time, Ruperts-2 suspe Mold, an organelle it lacks. I also believe it has other functions w process that allow us to connect the VESTA application to it and based on the Grid.

Today, however, I want to talk about the two problems we face w evident: we must be discreet and this donation makes that hard down because growing cities draw too much attention and, expe

cooperation from local authorities.
To avoid that security problem, I recommend we use the 3rdVD
seeds with smaller, individual structures instead of large, sprawli
buildings may be erected in days (or weeks, at most) this way.
The second problem is the safety concerns inherent to the 3rdV
VESTA v.3.0.1 software, but not controllable at a cellular scale; c
Conglomerate produces wonderful Abnormal Assets, we must re
Donation and its effects when it passed over to something so inc
While we have confirmed the 3rdVD is incapable of affecting pla
animals. However, our colleagues at Ruperts-2 warn us that its i
possible while the desired building grows. Special care is to be p
mammals, from reaching the growing 1-Vesta items. We are told
Today we managed to grow a small, cubic room with a metal do
the result of an overriding of the original designs of the v.3.0.1 so
and no way to cycle its air.
We will be working on that. Tune in for next entry in three days o

---

·COMMENTS: 3·

Enjoy this while you can, I have no doubt t
shit working, the more likely you are to get
gentlemen dressed all in black.

no doubt there's plenty of little men in big s
this and will do anything they can to make
thetruthisoutthereUSA

(no responses)

ever since getting this for my new house, i
where a real FUNGI hangs out. Get it? - **O**

(3 responses)

> that was terrible. - **atroperguy**
>
> I concur with troper guy. I think you j
> **MISSIONWATCHADMIN**
>
> u guyz have no sense of humor. - **O**

Hey MORONS get ready to get a visit from
two - **^\boweforthewin/^**
(1 response)

> Hey, SCP idiot SCP calling SCP us
> there's SCP no SCP such SCP thing
> ***Foundation.*** Those knocking your d
> normal cops busting you for being st
>
> *Comment thread closed by **MISSIO***
> *mate. Sure. By the way, how do you*
> *candy or just jabbed? - Also, Opal, c*
> *calling a thousand skipperbots with*
> *It's hard enough to set parallel aethe*
> *economy to have to change them ev*
> *being funny.))*

Entry Ref: 006/12/10-2-Infrastructures and D

Apologies for the late update. We had several run-ins with an In
While we had to resort to calling local law enforcement, which at
managed to evade further trouble by activating the self-terminati
Fortunately enough, there have been advances. We have fixed
cycling problem out, of all people; a few lines of poorly written co
Conglomerate is not known for making user-friendly assets, but t
to handle. In any case, we have managed to grow 'cubes', our ba
operation.
Also, we can confirm Ruperts-2 assessment: the Mason Mold g
available matter.
I will try to tune in during the next ten or eleven days. Thanks fo

---

·COMMENTS: 2·

> "Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I w
> mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt.'
> God loves you! - **Father Robertson**

(1 response)

<random bible quote> - **OPALINE87**

Hey, Jacob!
Been following your work for a while. Your
3VD is amazing, if a a bit dense. I have a f
configured items and the way to modify the
you receive a message from someone who
recruited, it'll probably be me.
Have a nice one! - **gret4line**

(1 response)

(hidden by author)

Entry Ref: 007/01/02-1-Infrastructures and D

Happy New Year! And, again, please excuse my delay.
We have figured out almost every piece of the code. A friend of
up a coding-rendering application that will go alongside the VES
create new structures adapted to any needs of any programme,
Only a few mind-affecting parts of the code are still beyond us, f
likely not run by humans, but I feel betrayed for the lack of warni
a row and Skipper still jumps when he sees the word 'print.'
But it will be worth it.
We have been assigned to a programme in Sudan. There seem
"the Sour" by the locals, and it's swamping local resources; Cont
done with the current Programme to deal with it. It won't take lon

---

·COMMENTS: 4·

random bible quote lol
also first - **DRFREEMAN**

(1 response)

"And the hilt also went in after the bl

over the blade, for he did not pull the
and the dung came out." Judges, 3-2
In other words: get a life, noob. >:P -

Torres, please contact me as soon as you
THAT part of the code and I don't know wh

(1 response)

*(hidden by **MISSIONWATCHADMIN***

I don't trust you. - **anonymous**

(no responses)

After living thre years in the ruins of mi old
a hom.
Now mi family and I can live in peace with
with water, a clean, safe place with four be
I can ever thank you enoug for what you d
Bles you. :) - *(hidden by **MISSIONWATCH***

Dear sir or madam, please do not ac
unmasked or not-intelligence-enhanc
will be easily traced back to you. Thi
being monitored, and any communic
I've expanded the FAQ entries in you
Watch Hub to give you some pointer

Otherwise, we are glad we could hel
MISSIONWATCHADMIN

It was awesome, 5/5, would buy again - **wi**

(1 comment)

Pardon? - **rabbitrabbi**

Torres, been keeping out of the game for a
Seeds for a Research project. Call Contine
answer my cuckoos. - **ruperts_33**
(2 comments)

Understood. Is everything okay? - **ra**

Thanks! And we are okay, just a skip
warned us in time. Everyone was go
arrived and we destroyed all we cou
bad part is that we lost most of our r
Conglomerate still produces more of
solve world hunger if we planned it w

By the way, you have to try a trick w
know the Laviano Grid can be slippe
cell, right? Well, you can put it in oth
adaptable! I understand your feeling
research, so tell you what; whenever
the equipment, try to put it in a veget
ruperts_33

Copy that. We have had some exper
always disappear before we can tran
might take us a while; you know, per
Thanks for the comment, anyways! -

Entry Ref: 007/05/20-6-Infrastructures and D

We have spent months in Sudan. I'm not entirely sure of how we
surgery until a couple of weeks ago. Apparently, it all has to do w
a viable cure, and I have no idea of how they did it. Word is they
allowed us to mass test a potent retroviral with alter-physical qua
Combined with Aciclovir, it works as both a cure and prophylaxis
hands to perform amputations any more, it's not my business an
It feels good to step out of a clean suit, for a change. And we're
We've made a great deal of progress during these months study
makes perfect, after all. It is incredible how working under pressu
about an asset; some times I thought the Mason Mold was active
made itself as useful as possible. It was a pity to cut those functi
I'm happy to report the VESTA v3.1 is almost ready. The patch w
Vestan Seeds, so check your secure Mission Watch servers! Be
and run it every day on your Seeds, too. You can never be too s

Actually, I must emphasize it. Let our experience serve as a wa
TO COME CLOSE TO GROWING 1-VESTA STRUCTURES. Re
wrong and when we noticed we the only thing we could do to pre
down a forest. We lost several good people doing it. I have forwa
new instructions for careful Maintenance and Operations.
If you prevent it, though, you can consider your programme a su

---

·COMMENTS: 2·

MY SON ATE THIS SHIT YOU BASTARD
ATE A FISTFUL OF THIS SHIT AND NOW
THE FLOOR
I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO HIM
guest_user

(1 response)

Free agent dispatched to your locati
you are, they will be there in less tha
son and stop him from getting any ha
rabbitrabbi

Comment thread closed by **MISSION**
fuck, those jokes aren't funny. I hope
hard enough.))

To whomever this may concern:

Your excellent work with the Third Vestan
short of admirable this far. I'll be certain to
friends of mine who would love to assist yo
In any case, I wish you and your workmate

Attentively,
the one you call Joe Benefactor. - **guest_u**

Comment thread closed by **MISSION**
a while since we last saw you aroun

Maintenance and Operations: With regards to in-field

maintenance, Vesta Donation elements undergo a change in requirements:

Stage 0-Vesta: The Vesta Seed Container, a glass or hard plas
Mold.

CONCERN TYPE	DIRECTIVE
STORAGE	VESTA SEED CONTAIN REMAIN CLOSED AND BELOW -30ºC.[1]
WARNING	IF NON-PROGRAMMED VESTA SEED CONTAIN BREACHED, BURN OR ASSET TO CORROSIVE SUBSTANCES.[2]

OPERATION TYPE	INSTRUCTIO
PROGRAMMING	USE PROVIDED VESTA PROGRAM IN WI-FI / IN CAPABLE TERMINAL, S NETWORKING DEVICE *"i_want_to_grow"* (UNPF 0-VESTA). CONFIGURE FOLLOWING INSTRUCT
LOCATION	PROVIDED BY PROGR SELECT CLEAR, NON-I FIRM GROUND AREA E PROGRAMMED STRUC VALUES *"dim1"* AND *"di* COMPOUND VALUE *"di* DESCRIBING COMPLEX PROJECTED AREA.
ACTIVATION	EXCAVATE SMALL HOL GROUND, THEN PLACE VESTA SEED CONTAIN HOLE.

Stage 1-Vesta: Planted Vesta Seed that has reached the critical
Ensues an explosive growth towards the pre-programmed target

MAINTENANCE

CONCERN TYPE	DIRECTIVE
PERMANENT	1-VESTA STRUCTURES REMAIN CLOSED TO A HERBIVORE MAMMALS PARTICULAR.
PERMANENT	1-VESTA MASS MAY NO INGESTED BY HUMAN
WARNING	IF ABERRATIONS OCC VESTA GROWTHS, RE OPERATION CONCERN

OPERATION

OPERATION TYPE	INSTRUCTIO
REPROGRAMMING	PROGRAMMING OF 1-V STRUCTURES MAY BE THROUGH VESTA v3.1
WARNING	IF ABERRATIONS OR A FUNCTIONAL GROWTH RESPOND AS EXPECT REPROGRAMMING OP WORK GROUP MEMBE ADVISED TO INCINERA DESTROY GROWTHS. ALTERNATIVELY, REPI NEARBY GROWTHS TO UNRESPONSIVE GROW

Stage 2-Vesta: Once the target volumes are successfully achie
0-Vesta Seed become dormant. At this point, this part of the rela
success, and Work Group members can proceed to **a)** populate
produced by Vesta assets and **c)** encourage local population to
activities.

MAINTENANCE

CONCERN TYPE	DIRECTIVE

PERMANENT	SUPPLY SUSTENANCE AND NON-ORGANIC W PRODUCED BY RESIDE
WARNING	LOCAL POPULATION M WARNED THAT 2-VEST ARE CAPABLE OF RES AGGRESSIVELY AGAIN REPEATED, WILLFUL D

OPERATION TYPE	INSTRUCTIO
No Operation Concerns are noted.	-

Safety Concerns: Safe for all in Stage 2 Assets. Restricted to trained volunteers in Stage 1 Assets. Restricted to executive personnel in Stage 0 Assets.

Security Restrictions: As of 13/10/1999, Security Restrictions on the Third Vesta Donation are to be as follows:

- Only the results of finished Programmes involving Third Vesta Donation assets may be publicly announced, always as the result of a development scheme involving prefabricated buildings.
- All results of unfinished Programmes involving Third Vesta Donation assets identified by parties interested on its origin, its functions or its properties must be dismantled.
- No Programme involving Third Vesta Donation assets will attempt to create structures that behave as lethal components (namely, traps, unstable structures or weaponized structures) by design. Fortifications, however, may be produced if allowed by a majority vote of a Board meeting or the emergency orders from a Mission Director.

Assigned to:

Programme Kashimir-13 (India), in an Environment-Infrastru
to groups concerned with current Work Group usage of the Vest

Programme Yida (Sudan), in an Environment-Infrastructure
[CANCELLED] Activities reported to groups concerned with curr
Programme Yida dismantled.

Programme Lekwongole-Pibor (Sudan), in an Infrastructure-
three hospitals and fourteen clinics handed over to other non-go
training was completed. Semi-permanent or permanent housing
the residents of Lekwongole also completed and self-sustaining.
to maintain area and keep discreet application of the Vesta Dona

Programme Laascaanood (Somalia), in an Infrastructure-He
Laascaanood considered critical due to Medium-High Health Co
Rupert's Disease epidemic, with an estimated incidence of 3% d
prospective increase in the number of cases well beyond 30% in
of overall health in the area is severely deteriorated, and current
minimum. World Parahealth Organization personnel will join Wo
install a base of operations and use the Third Vesta Donation to

- Semi-permanent housing for the Work Group members. E
year, with quarterly rotation periods.
- Permanent water treatment plant. Local water supply pollu
use Third Vesta and First CENTRes Donations to create a
implemented, this combination might ensure clean water s
- Permanent sewage and sanitation infrastructures.
- A type-3 Field Hospital. Use Vesta-90-08 configuration.
- A permanent Hospital, as designed by the Continental Bra
files (Vesta-90-90 configuration). Location already determi
built by parties yet to be determined by CB; it will be then
workers and/or volunteers of other non-governmental orga
period.

- A permanent bio-fuel power plant to power all Programme
  Group is advised to use type-34 Power Plant. Use Vesta-7
- As per Security Restrictions, no self-protection measures v

Footnotes

1.Seed remains viable in this state for ten to fifteen years.

2.Author Note:Non-programmed — also called "Blank" — Vesta Seeds can cause major environmental impact and/or disruption to local communities; if an unprogrammed Vesta Seed is released or its container broken, it must be either burnt or impregnated with highly acidic substances (such as hydrochloric acid) before it reaches Stage-1 conditions.

3.For further information on the VESTA v3.1 program, refer to Mission Watch Bulletin Asset Registry, entry VC3-03.

4.This function has been impossible to remove entirely through the operation of the VESTA v3.0.1 application.

Tales 4

4. Mr. Lie

I hate jail. You know how many times I've been in jail since I started on this journey? 12. Of course, I always get out eventually when there's no evidence, but hot damn does it suck. Seriously, even without the fear instilled in dropping the soap, the rations are harsh and the guards always beat me. They always say I looked at them funny.

Today I was walking down the street and I was stopped by two cops. They took me away to a line-up where the witness had to choose the suspect. The suspect was described as a 6'2" Asian male. I'm a 5'4" Caucasian. Of course, being the suspicious character I am, I was chosen. I don't even know how to turn the safety off on a gun, let alone shoot somebody.

Even back in the day, all the Misters mistrusted me. One time, I was taking a peeler to the kitchen and Mr. Onion ran away and cried in the corner. I tried to assuage his fears, but instead he beat me up something fierce. Said I was baiting him. All I did was ask him if he was ok.

Redd was the only one who trusted me. "Lie, I like your chops," he said to me one time. Hopefully, one day, I'll see Redd again. I hear he might be where we're going. Of course, I didn't get to learn much more because once they had the chance, everyone ran as fast as they could away from me.

A child did that once when he saw me on the street. I waved at him and he took it as a gesture to a hidden group of snipers. Needless to say, the next minute I was tackled by his father, who thought me a child molester. What are they letting kids watch these days anyways that gives them these ideas?

I remember watching this movie in a Best Buy once where this guy was shooting at snipers. Of course, once the store clerks saw me, they called the police. One even decided it was time to take me

down himself with his black belt in Ti Kwan Doe. I went down like a sack of bricks.

Jesus Christ, my feet hurt. I oughta see if a homeless shelter will take me for the night. Although, last time I tried they thought I was a drug dealer. Even patted me down multiple times. One of them even did a cavity check.

Maybe I'll just sleep outside tonight.

Previous: 3. Mr. Money by Tanhony

Next: 5. Mr. Mad by The Deadly Moose

Back to Hub

Tales 5

5. Mr. Mad

That goddamn bastard Stripes. I just heard the news - he's killed two of the others. At least it's not a discontinuation. But still.

Dr. Wondertainment did it, of course. Stripes never thought a fucking thing that Wondertainment didn't think first. Or someone at Wondertainment, fuck if I know. Is there an actual, singular Dr. Wondertainment? They don't fucking tell us nothing, though Stripes always did seem to know more than he should. Him and Redd. Goddamn son of a bitch Mr. Redd.

Things were going so well until we reached the End of the World. That's when the plan fell apart.

We had a plan. We had a plan. If the others had just motherfucking stuck to the plan, we'd all be sitting pretty, but no, they just couldn't. Bastards! Goddamn bastards! Goddamn-

*

Sorry, where was I? Ugh. Fucking Wondertainment shtick. The last parting insult. When I get 'too' angry, I pass out for a little while. Needless to say, this happens a lot. That pisses me off too. Sometimes it sets off a repeating cycle, get mad, pass out, get mad, pass out… Christ.

Mr. Mad, they call me, ha ha very funny. Stamped and sewn together like the others. Were some of us people, real people, before this? I don't know. Was I? I really fucking don't know. Maybe this is all some sick joke by Wondertainment. Putting us through these paces. Letting some of us get thrown at that… what do they call it, the Foundation. Bunch of fucking assholes there too. They killed Mr. Onion, did you know that? For no good fucking reason. Peeled apart his layers and set them on fire. If the Foundation ever finds me… Well, let's just say they'll find out why you really don't want to make me angry.

That was a joke. Get it? Mr. Laugh would be proud. Especially proud, if Mr. Redd hadn't… ugh. Pisses me off just thinking about it. That goddamn PIECE OF SHIT! MOTHERFUCKING—

*

Well, lost it there again, didn't I?

Mr. Mad, indeed. Maybe Light was right, maybe that's why Wondertainment did what he (she? they?) did. "You're too obvious," Mr. Light had said. "You're this guy who… gets angry. *Superhumanly* angry. You can't even affect other people."

Well, they underestimate Mr. Mad. You ever hear about ordinary people lifting cars when their adrenaline is high enough? Well, I can do that. I can do that whenever I want. Does it piss me off that I didn't get something more interesting as a Little Mister shtick? Of course it fucking pisses me off. How do you THINK I FEEL ABOUT —

*

Okay. Just need to stay calm. Just long enough to do what I need to do.

I'm not going to wait around for them to get their act together. I'm going to find Redd myself. I'm going to find him and I'm going to do for him what he did for the others.

The others are afraid. Chickenshit little bastards, I say. I'm a little afraid of him too, I'll admit that much. But that never stopped me from goddamn anything and it sure as fuck is not going to start now. After what he did, not just the Ms. Sweetie thing, but the rest…

But I'll get him. Oh yes.

That goddamn sonuvabitch will never know what hit him.

Previous: 4. Mr. Lie by Salman Corbette

Next: **`Interval 1`** by Salman Corbette

Back to Hub

5th Global Occult Coalition Donation

Graciously donated by the PTOLEMY Division of the Global Development Branch, and the Servants of t

Of Interest: *mechanical, vehicle, military (repurposed), electric, transport, construction, not abnormal?, POSSIBLE SECURITY CONCERN, deployed.*

Asset Dossier: *A letter from the Office of the Under-Secretary-General D.C. al Fine, signed by the Assistant Director of Field Operations (Central Africa Division), "Pericles", follows:*

To the Mission Board of the Manna Charitable Foundation

On behalf of the Global Occult Coalition and the bu PTOLEMY Division and the Servants of the Silicon N testimony of the greater works humanity can achieve when

Although the Prototype Mk I Ultra-Heavy Engagement Ch little to do with its kin, the much heavier and sophisticated functional and can be used for a number of peaceful task robotic vehicle capable of traversing any terrain and manipulators.

It has been, of course, deprived of all Tangential techn devices. This was originally done as part of a testing pr robotics by our non-occult partners. However, we have rea sophisticated actuators, it is completely obsolete. This is your organisation than to us.

You will find that the UHEC is a very practical, if mai However, when accepting this donation, the MCF will be ob

1. The Mk. I-P-UHEC will not be used in combat against a

2. As required by Second Mission (concealment), the Mk

populations nor its capacities disclosed to any parties, in a
3. No attempts to retro-engineer the Mk. I-P-UHEC Ge
documentation) will be undertaken. This includes any at
anomalous means.
4. The Mk. I-P-UHEC will be used by active or former m
who have been registered in the Humanitarian Work Ros
that have joined an MCF operation. These persons may
UHEC.

Any failure in following these directives will result in the
device.

We cede this article to you in good faith, as requested by
your organisation, hoping that you make good use of its qu

Sincerely,
Assistant Director of Field Operations, Central Africa Divis

The Global Occult Coalition is the supra-national body that rules over the World Parahealth Organisation, one of the three regulating members with permanent seats in the MCF International Board. It is part of the UN and pursues the lasting protection of human population from abnormal threats, usually by violent means.

Two extracts from the review on the Fifth Global Occult Coalition Donation, written by Security Executive member François Olympe, follow:

(…)

- Actuators are extremely streamlined, precise, resilient and miniaturized. These are the only piece of tech we can't find anywhere at the time, so we won't have any backups, either. As far as I can tell, they might be abnormal.
- Most materials are standard and, while expensive and difficult to acquire, could be obtained in most hardware factories.

- External UHMWPE[1] shell dismounted to re-purpose the entire device, which reduces neat weight while allowing for compact storage.
- Controls and pilot canopy are clearly last-minute swaps that make the vehicle harder to drive.
- Power plant swapped with VanOx batteries that will give a short operation time. We knew something like this could happen. Most of those systems implemented by the Servants were Gen +2 and further. This means they are trying to sway public opinion in their favor by giving us their prototype equipment, fitted with materials of a deplorable quality an Long re-charging periods will also be a problem.
- Ram-Air Parachute system still embedded into structure. ***Note:*** *I don't feel confident in my ability to remove it without incurring in major structural damage. It's not very heavy and it doesn't impair its movements, so I recommend we ignore it entirely. - F. Olympe*

(…)

(…) To conclude: they gave us an obsolete piece of tech, denied us a chance to use it for many significant tasks by forbidding its use in front of civilians and refused to let me train volunteers to use it or copy it. This is, in my experience, what the Coalition officials do to be obstructive without being too open about it: make up as many rules as you can in the spot. It is true, however, that we have to keep it hidden or people will wonder where did a poor non-profit NGO get a ninety-four-million euro piece of top-of-the-line robotic hardware. Neither us nor the GOC need any additional scrutiny from Normal society or other interested parties.

They are not trying to be helpful. They want to look like they are trying to do something for us; that is a lot of

good press for the Scary Lady. Which is the only thing they actually want, that much is evident. However, we will make the most of it.

RECOMMENDED ASSET EXPLOITATION

First, we need an ex-GOC Specialist able to drive it; I'm available, and I know I can drive it. Second, to fully exploit its all-terrain capacities we should use it in places where normal logistics and transport assets, such as trucks or trailers, can't get to or have difficulties navigating. Third, to fully exploit its loading capacities, the Work Group it gets assigned to should use moderately large container-like units; I've heard of UN-issued MSU[2] that would be perfect for this.

With these three items fulfilled, I can promise we will be making a good use of this giant robot. Of course, that does not mean it is all it can do (it is, after all, an all-terrain, multi-purpose platform), but I am thinking primarily of those things we will be able to do with it, and *only* with it. Possibilities are, potentially, endless. Construction in remote areas, carrying prefabricated habitats into secluded settlements, environmental engineering operations (…)[3]

François Olympe is a thirty-five years old Security Executive and Specialist member, and has worked with Work Group Opal-1 for three years. He worked with the Global Occult Coaltion PHYSICS Branch in combat operation in three tours, in which he acquired considerable knowledge in sorcerously enhanced machinery and diverse alter-technologies.

Maintenance and Operation: RESERVED TO SPECIALIST FRANÇOIS OLYMPE (prospectively expanded to other trained volunteers, as current Security Restrictions are lifted). **Recommended use:** rapid transportation of large items across mid-long distances.

Safety Concerns: Maintenance and Operation exclusive of Security Executive member François Olympe and workers designated by him. Otherwise safe for all.

Security Restrictions: As part of Coalition-imposed Second Mission restrictions, **a)** only use during night-time and as away from civilian observers as possible, **b)** do not train new pilots for the platform, **c)** do not train mechanics nor try to develop new versions of the platform or its portions, **d)** do not engage in, or respond to acts of aggression while using the platform.

Footnotes
1. MSU -Mobile Storage Unit; type of standardized container fit for semitrailer-transport.-Ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene; very tough material used in construction and medical prosthesis production, among other uses.-There is no further data in Mission Watch reports! If you wish to add further information, please contact Mission Watch Staff.
2. MSU -Mobile Storage Unit; type of standardized container fit for semitrailer-transport.-For more information on asset availability, see Mission Watch Bulletin, entry 998/12/01-3-Logistics; for a comprehensive relation of all related assets available to MCF field personnel, call the pertinent Continental Branch Offices.
3.Full report (34 pages long) can be read in the Mission Watch Asset Registry, entry GOC5-03.

Tales 6

6. Mr. Stripes

I have very long legs. Very long. Long enough to stretch over a canyon, when I want them to. When I need them to. And long fingers as well. The fingers of a pianist, or a strangler. Long and slender. Made for choking. Not a pianist.

I laugh, surprising myself. There is so little cause for laughing these days, especially since Ms. Sweetie went to the trashcan. I used to like Ms. Sweetie. She was kind to me. So few of the others were kind to me. Called me an afterthought. But she was kind to everyone. But not anymore.

My legs stretched, climbing up the forested foot hills, long fingers wrapping around trees and pulling me along. I rather distantly note how the branches died where I squeezed them, but I was used to that. It was what I did after all. Kill. Remove. Destroy.

I correct the errors made by my creator. All of them. I've been marking them off as I go. I've nearly finished. All nineteen.

I stretch and warp, knowing I'm going somewhere, but not where. Well, no. I know where. To them. To all of them. One at a time. But they were moving together now. Drawing close to each other. So close…

I wonder if Mr. Redd will be there. We two have a score to settle. And I did have very, very long fingers. Fingers made for choking, I remind myself.

Long fingers. Very, very long. Very ready. Ready to choke. Ready to squeeze the life out of anyone. Anything. To fix things. To fix everything that was broken.

Mr. Redd and I *did* have a score to settle after all.

Previous: **`Interval 1`** by Salman Corbette

Next: **7. Mr.** by Dr. Mann

Tales 7

7 Degrees of Separation

> **Note:** This is part five in a multi-part story. It is recommended that you read the previous entry **`Paris, Texas`**, or start from the beginning At the Library.

Carol Paris opened the door. “Hi dad,” she smiled. “Come in.” Her countenance changed when she smelt the alcohol on his breath. “Are you okay?”

Her father stepped over the threshold without replying. He looked dishevelled. A three thousand dollar suit, and he looked dishevelled. She closed and locked the door behind him softly, and waited for him to speak.

“I can't tell you everything,” the man began, then hesitated, trying to find the words. “It's a mess.”

“What do you mean? Are you in trouble?”

Her father shook his head. “You know we've never talked about our respective jobs. Our employers. Loose talk, and all that.”

They walked into the living room; Carol put the TV on mute. “I don't know what you do,” her father said. “I don't want to know. But…”

“But?”

“I don't know. I don't I know. Maybe it's nothing.”

“Dad, you're not making much sense.”

Calvin Paris massaged his forehead as if to push the migraine out. “I need a favour,” he admitted. “A big one.”

Carol studied him for a long moment. He looked washed out, a shadow of his former self. “If I were to say to you, I need information - any information - on a certain individual, could you get me that

information? Without compromising yourself?"

"I know you're asking me a hypothetical question - "

"Oh absolutely."

" - But I can't use company resources for personal reasons. I'm sorry. You should go home. I think your favourite show's just starting."

Calvin nodded slowly, and turned to the door. "Yeah. Okay. Stupid question."

"Say hello to mom for me."

"Will do," her father said. And he opened the door and left.

° ° ° ° °

Exactly sixty minutes later, Carol Paris called her father from a new cellphone that she had never used before and she would never use again. She sat in a rental car in a parking lot in a part of town she had never been to before, and would never go to again. She had not been followed.

Her father took the call on a cellphone that he too would never use again. She did not speak; there were no niceties. He played the recording (Monotone Male Voice Number 7) so that his own voice would not be recognised: *"Harold Maine. M-A-I-N-E. Lives somewhere in the Beacon Hill area. He knows you work for some "secret organisation" - mentioned the CIA. I don't know how he got this information. Be careful."*

The call was disconnected. Carol took the sim card and battery out of the phone and smashed the screen.

Christ, she thought. *Harold Maine.* All roads led to Harold Maine. She got out of the car and dumped the phone into the nearest litter bin, scanning the empty parking lot for witnesses. There were none. She climbed back into the rental car and switched on the ignition. The rhythmic hum soothed her a little, like a cat purring, and she felt the gathered, knotted muscles at the nape of her neck loosen.

Within twenty minutes she had driven back to her own car and swapped over. Forty nine minutes after that, she was walking through Harry's Famous Laundromat, an altogether unremarkable and nondescript building in one of San Antonio's less salubrious areas. She walked down the steps that the migrant workers could not see and would not remember, and into the basement. A door shut behind her as another opened in front, and she stepped into the suite of rooms that was not shown on any building blueprints, but was known to her and a handful of others as the permanent office location of *Early Warning Unit Wormwood-33*.

She sat down at a desk and sighed. Every minute there were indications of the impossible, hints of the fantastical, promises of the magical and unreal; anything deviating from any one of eight million, five hundred and ninety seven thousand, nine hundred and forty five accepted normality patterns were flagged up *here*, in this little claustrophobic suite. Sightings, rumours, murders, deaths, accidents, freak weather, earthquakes, atmospheric disturbances, geological activity, religious fervour, celebrity ratings, economic well-being, political machinations and deviations from twelve hundred points along the moral compass were all logged, sorted, and monitored from here.

Each one of those eight million plus normality patterns had their own suite of Anomalous Signature Recognition algorithms; if *X* deviates from *Y* by *Z* for *N* hours, initiate Protocol *A*. If *X* is more than 0.007% of *Y* in *Z*% of the male hispanic population during televised broadcasts of *N*, initiate Protocol *Q*. If Protocol *Q* has been active for *X* minutes and ASR algorithm suite G-G790-AVE has seen more than *X* alerts collectively, initiate Escalation Procedure 697-AntiStar-001. And so on and so on, etcetera etcetera.

In the last four months there had been seventy separate escalations, some of them so apparent that their manifestations had made any form of covert monitoring immediately and permanently redundant.

In a jewelry store, a thirteen year old girl had swallowed three diamond rings, five gold and platinum eternity rings, one ruby and sapphire bracelet and a reproduction Fabergé egg. The girl died eight days later of malnutrition; she said she needed to eat shiny, pretty things and food was no longer any good for her. The jewelry

was never recovered from her body.

In a local cemetery, a vagrant who no longer knew his own name was found crying at every grave as if he knew the deceased personally. Those that had died during the wars, old folks who had finally succumbed to cancer, tiny little children who had died as they drew their first breath. Deaths spanning two centuries. The police had come for him, with a view to maybe admit him into psychiatric care; a Sunday afternoon annoyance towards the end of their shift. But he knew all their names, and how they died, and a lot more besides; so much so that when Officer Rooney asked the vagrant where *his* parents were buried, he was able to lead them there without error. And he was able to tell the officer that John Rooney had died of pneumonia on a rainy day, and that he was a keen golfer, and that Marsha Rooney had never got over it and died three months later of a broken heart. And although Officer Rooney did not recollect ever seeing the man before, the vagrant was adamant that he had attended the funeral, and could recall it in great detail. He had been to every funeral there ever was; he had known, personally, every person who had ever died - or so he maintained. And he cried, and he cried, and his loss was infinite and unendurable.

In another incident, a school bus had crashed without warning into a fire truck. Nobody was injured, but the driver tumbled out of the cab and collapsed onto the highway. He was vomiting fire; and the tarmac was bright and shiny and bubbly and melting where he'd put his hands. The schoolchildren gathered at the windows, watching as his clothes combusted and charred and turned to ash, and the highway liquified beneath him, and all the while he brought up fire. The heat denuded him; he was thrown an asbestos suit, but no one could get near him. The school bus blew up six seconds after the last child was plucked to safety. The man wasn't found.

There were other, more subtle occurrences. Rumours of orthodox Jews becoming militant Islamists overnight. Deaf men regaining their hearing, only to lose their sight. Previously healthy women suddenly developing birth defects.

And in most - not all - most of these cases, one name kept cropping up. The jewelry girl had delivered papers to his door; the fire-man had been a close friend; the vagrant was an ex-business associate

and one-time informer. And who had he informed on? Harold Maine.

All roads led to Harold Maine. And now, at the exact same time that the Escalations demanded immediate action, Carol Paris had to hold back.

She switched the monitor and base unit on and stared at the screen as it powered up. The “Gemini Corporation” logo flashed up briefly, and her face was basked in soft green light. She took out her cellphone - her own, this time - and dialled her father’s number.

“Hey daddy, it's me,” she said. “Just ringing to let you know I'll be coming for dinner tonight. Yeah I'll bring something.”

She disconnected and put the phone away. She typed in a false username and entered the number generated on her security dongle, and got to work.

Next

I'm walking through the snow. The crunch of my footsteps creates a slow, yet persistent rhythm, the lack of a breeze allowing the sound to carry surprisingly far. My name is Neil, and I am hunting a flying deer across a mountainside in early January.

It had been a full six hours earlier that one of the Special Containment Procedures Foundation vans had pulled up to the loading entrance of Sector-28, a horse trailer running doggedly along behind it. Given the weather, I was surprised that whatever they had brought with them was still alive. The heating must have been excellent.

Just when I think I've lost my way, I spot a solitary set of hoofprints. It had touched down in this direction recently, and I'm fairly proud of myself for being able to track it so well. Silently praying that the wind doesn't pick up, I continue my trek and increase my pace. I'll pin that furry bastard down eventually.

Had I been briefed on what was in that trailer, I wouldn't have been so forward in my decision to throw open the doors once the van was parked. Immediately, what looked like a whitetail deer had leapt out at me, catching its footing on the edge of the doorway long enough to vault over my head. It had time enough, then, to deploy those eerie skin flaps that flying squirrels have, and glide off toward the woods.

The trees get thicker in front of me. I hope that the poor thing hasn't landed in one and broken its neck. Letting it escape is one thing, but having it wind up dead would probably mean the same for me. The snowbanks sloping gently from the pine trunks mean more effort in every step through the deepening white. A slight clearing appears up ahead, and I decide to wait. It has to land sometime, and I might as well capitalise on that.

The deer, if that is in fact what it is, is a strange one. Other than the

obvious ability to remain off the ground, it can rotate its shoulders and bring its legs out perpendicular to its body, in order to unfurl the usually-hidden skin folds. As I hurriedly dig myself a spot to hide in the snow, I sift through memories of classes and lectures in order to find out what that skin is called. Soon enough, an idea comes to me: The patagium, that gliding membrane, is useless without the ability to adjust its tautness. All I would have to do is hop on the flying ungulate, and hog tie it with my belt. Easier said than done, I presume.

Suddenly, a shadow runs overhead, and my eyes are drawn upward. It's the deer, and that flying Bambi son-of-a-bitch has decided to land at the end of the clearing opposite from where I'm hiding. He lays down, though; the cold is tiring him out far too quickly. I guess it's now or never: Belt in hand, pants precariously dropping, I spring toward my quarry with the loudest obscenities I can manage.

Three more hours later, and I'm back at Sector-28. The sun's going down, it's colder than a snowman's rump, and I'm carrying an unconscious deer. I only managed to tie two of its legs together, but it wasn't in much shape to reach cruising altitude anyhow. Handing it off to the crew inside the loading doors, I make my way to my office-slash-quarters, for a shower, change of clothes, and hot pocket. No sooner am I in the fancy door with my name across the front than I wonder what exactly is going to be done with my fuzzy-tailed foe, and what number it'll be assigned among the mounting hordes of crazy crap that we have to deal with.

I'm awoken at some unacceptably early hour by the ringing of my interoffice telephone. One of the research directors launches into a thanks for my retrieval of Seven-Twenty-Eight, and asks me quite politely to handle the three more like it arriving later in the week. It's not like I have a choice, I suppose. I stretch out my arm to hang up the phone, but the director interjects with another fun piece of information: I'm needed to round up a retrieval team and investigate claims of a living breakfast somewhere in the States. I think I might resign some time in the very near future.

780-PCS Incident

Document #780-PCS: Exploration IV

[DATA CORRUPT, RETRIEVING EARLIEST UNCORRUPTED RECORDING]

*Feed begins. The first, and so far only, D-Class to explore the newly discovered and not yet studied Area H-2-5 continued to climb the stairs, stopping at the ninety first platform, designated with a worn down bold '**91**' painted in white on the wall beside him. D-9985 paused and sat to rest. In the distance, and above D-9985 soft laughter continues. D-9985 shines his light up the stairway above him, revealing another flight of stairs.*

"Doc, there's no end here. It just keeps going," D-9985 groans directly into his radio, producing a harsh noise. The safety tether – designed not for his safety, but the safety of the transmission – in plain view on the video feed, dangling over the railing across from him.

"You're allowed a short rest, D-9985. Then continue your ascent. That's an order." Dr Seidelman replied from back at base camp, from the old storage room across from the utility closet designated Area H-2-5. Records show that Dr Seidelman was assigned initial exploration responsibilities with two junior researchers, and had arranged a basic field lab in a storage room across from the utility closet containing Area H-2-5.

"… D-9985, are you ready to continue?"

"Yeah, give me a sec…" D-9985 replied as he pulled himself to his feet with a grunt. Video feed looks back to the stairs as D-9985 continues his walk, a hand against the dusty concrete wall. D-9985 continues at a steady pace, pitch blackness around him and the soft giggling in the darkness above him remaining consistent as he ascends the stairwell. Feed continues, lingering on each floor's

number for 2-4 seconds. 93… 96… 98… 101… 104…

"… Hold it. It's getting louder." D-9985 suddenly halts, pulling his hand away from the wall. Audio feed corroborates with D-9985's experience – sound of laughter has grown noticeably louder in volume, but is not apparently approaching D-9985. D-9985 stops, placing a hand against the wall again, body language suggesting tension. Eleven seconds pass before Dr Seidelman speaks again.

"D-9985, please continue your ascent. That's an order."

The D-Class hesitates, lifting his hand for a moment before placing it against the wall, continuing to climb the stairwell at a slower pace than before. Footsteps and breathing are prominent in audio recordings, and laughter continues to grow in volume at a gradual but steady rate as D-9985 ascends beyond platform 110.

The subject roughly inhales, and apparently leans to wipe his lower face with his arm. He hesitates again, before continuing, leaning over to shine the floodlight over the railing, revealing further flights above. D-9985 mutters as-yet-undetermined curses under his breath before continuing, as the laughter grows apparently closer. D-9985's breathing has grown notably more rapid and his movements more tense. Past flight 114, D-9985 suddenly stops, shining his light into the darkness above.

"It's right there." D-9985's voice is quiet and shaky, directly into the radio. After eight full seconds, he continues forward, climbing the next flight slowly but without prompting. Laughter is at speaking-level now, and apparently close by. As D-9985 reaches the next flight, he shines light up the stairs ahead of him, the light steadying as the camera attempts to focus on an indistinct figure. Voice of D-Class and anomaly are both at speaking level now.

"Doc, it's an ass."

Camera focuses, revealing an apparently disembodied humanoid lower back, upper thigh, and posterior pointed in D-9985's general direction. D-9985 shakes his head and turns to return to base camp, apparently tripping on his own feet and falling down the stairs, swearing profusely as anomalous laughter breaks into hysterics

before camera and audio feeds cut out.

The 784 Incident: Part 1: Contact

Incident 784-1

"… once the D-Class personnel have finished rinsing the outside of the container using fire hoses, a third personnel will approach the container, and then affix the module to the outside of the structure. The microphone should pick up any vocalizations made by Skip Seven-Eight-Four." Doctor Lorenzo indicated a microphone and a speaker located on the console. "Speak into this microphone. It will transmit to the speaker in the communications module. Seven-Eight-Four should be able to pick up the vibrations through contact."

"That will not be sufficient, Doctor Lorenzo." Director Valentine's eyes were hard as flint, matching the steely grey of her hair, and her voice carried the snap of many years of authority. "I need to get inside the containment chamber and speak to Andrews directly."

Lorenzo hesitated. "Ma'am," he said, his lilting, Castillian accent tinged with doubt, "Seven-Eight-Four is a highly dangerous Keter-Class SCP that has already claimed the life of at least one other human being. I can't recommend that you be allowed in there."

"Your objections are duly noted and overruled." She opened her briefcase and handed a manila envelope to the perplexed scientist. "My papers. As of 0600 hours this morning, Overseer Eleven has given me clearance for direct access to this artifact."

The Spaniard glanced over the papers. "Looks like it's all in order," he sighed. "Except for the fact that it's absolutely loco. All right. There's a changing room to the left of the main entrance for Foundation personnel. Remove all your clothes and personal effects and change into scrubs. Angie will get you a respirator and some goggles and brief you on the safety procedures."

"Thank you, Doctor Lorenzo."

She had expected the interior of the containment chamber to be dark and gloomy, filled with shadows and grime, a monstrous home for the monster it contained. The brightly lit chamber was far less dramatic, but given the choice between drama and safety, Valentine preferred the one that let her walk out alive.

Seven-Eight-Four's tendency to assimilate any silicon and metal it came into contact with meant that steel and glass were verboten. Transparent acrylic and concrete were the materials of choice. The heavy concrete container rested at the bottom of a deep pool of acetone, the sharp odor of the solvent cutting through her paper-and-cloth respirator mask. The acetone was a safety measure: the nanomachines that made up the artifact's mechanical portions were very similar to proteins, and would disintegrate under heat and heavy solvents.

She tried not to think about the fail-safe measure that relied on the first method.

"You didn't have to come in here with me," she said.

The figure in the blue hazmat suit next to her shook its head, the gesture muted by the loose hood. "I'm responsible for this artifact," Lorenzo said. "I'm not letting an outsider in here alone."

"I see. Please tell the Deltas to raise the artifact."

Lorenzo nodded to the two figures in orange hazmat suits, who began to turn the capstan on the far side of the chamber. A series of ropes and pulleys, all made out of non-metallic materials, raised the heavy concrete chamber out of its acetone bath like a monster rising from the sea depths. A third D-Class, carrying a sprayer on its back, stood by nervously, fiddling with the controls of his device. "If I may ask, what's the reason for all this?" Lorenzo asked.

"Psychological analysis," Valentine said. "Overseers want to find out what's going on in his head."

"Really? Because I can tell you right now. Nothing. He's like an animal, all he knows is food and pain. I know he was some kind of agent before, but he's just a monster now."

"He wasn't just 'some kind of agent,' Lorenzo, he was a member of Pandora's Box. He's the one who stopped Steel Doll. He's helped capture over a dozen SCPs in the wild, three Keter-Class. He was… he IS a hero, and he deserves better than to be treated like a caged beast." Her last words were punctuated by the heavy thud of the containment chamber being locked into place, suspended just over the pool of solvent.

Lorenzo's lip twisted into a half-sneer, half smile. "I'm sorry. I'll be sure to show the proper respect," he said.

"See that you do. Is it possible for me to speak to him directly?" Valentine asked.

"There is a port on the top of the chamber for replenishing the nutrient bath. We normally keep it sealed except when attached to the pipe, but…"

"Do it."

Lorenzo nodded and shouted something in Spanish to the figures in the orange haz-mat suits. They flinched noticeably. One of them protested in the same language, only to be shouted down by Lorenzo. There was a brief hesitation, then one of the D-Classes started to gingerly approach the concrete cube, while the other two grabbed sprayers and looked on nervously. "Please stay behind the yellow line, Director," Lorenzo said. "We've been trying to train him not to cross the line using aversion therapy. It's been… well, we've had some success."

"Thank you." Valentine stepped back over the spray-painted line on the floor. "Any particular reason why the containment crew is mostly Spanish-speaking?"

"Easy to acquire. Some third-world dictator needs a few trouble-makers disappeared? We need a few warm bodies. Mutually beneficial agreement." Lorenzo smiled. "I think the guy climbing the

ladder's here for calling Hugo Chavez a fat bastard on national TV."

"Hm." Valentine crossed her arms. "Convenient."

"Absolutely. Oh, hang on, here it comes. This is actually pretty cool," Lorenzo said, chuckling nervously.

The D-Class opened the port, then hastily ran down the ladder and back to his companions, picking up a spray tank and strapping it to his back. Slowly at first, a tendril of steel and glass emerged from the opening, swaying back and forth like a snake. A bulbous growth appeared at the end, then split open to reveal a small blue gem the size of a marble. "We're pretty sure that's a visual receptor of some sort," Lorenzo whispered. "It seems to be made up of thousands of tiny photoreceptors and lenses, kind of like an insect's eye."

"How well does he see?" Valentine asked.

"Well enough."

The tendril snaked towards the two scientists, approached the yellow line, hesitated. The sapphire-blue eye turned towards the D-Classes, who gripped their sprayers tightly. The thing paused, then withdrew about a meter from the line. The orange-suited men relaxed visibly.

"If it crosses the line, it gets a full spray from the solvent, then reduced nutrition for a week," Lorenzo explained. "It seems to be the only way to get it to obey." He smiled at Valentine. The older woman just stared back at him coldly, and the younger scientist coughed and cleared his throat.

Valentine turned her attention back to Seven-Eight Four, which seemed to be reconfiguring itself. A blob of nanomaterial oozed down the length of the tendril (like a mouse being swallowed by a snake, she thought), then formed itself into a crude face, a second blue eye opening up next to the first. Valentine had seen photographs of Agent Andrews before his accident, and recognized the pudgy cheeks and pursed lips: the rest of it, however, was crude, a vague approximation of a human face formed by a mind that had nearly forgotten what it looked like.

"Andrews," Valentine said. "Can you hear me?"

"Seven-Eight-Four can pick up air vibrations," Lorenzo chimed in. "It talks back by forming and vibrating…"

"Shut up." Valentine cut Lorenzo off angrily. "Andrews," she repeated, "Can you hear me?"

The mouth opened, and a membrane stretching across the back, just behind the teeth, began to vibrate. "yesssss," it said, in a buzzing, electronic approximation of a human voice. "i kckkckkkcan hear yyyou."

"Do you know who I am, Andrews?" Valentine said.

"andddddddrrrrrers is deaddeddeddead i am sevensevev—"

"Do you know who I am, Andrews?" Valentine repeated sternly.

The eyes turned and regarded Valentine closely. "dirrrreccccctor jjjjjanice valenvalentine. yoyoyou werrrrrrrre the one the one who reckakckakrcruited mmmmmmme from em em em eye yay tititititieee."

"Yes, Andrews," Valentine said, smiling. Her eyes were bright with triumph. "So you do remember things from the past."

"rrrrremember. nnnononono longerrlongerrrrr carrrre. i am stitststsSteeel now. steeel. perfect. moving beyond mere fleshflesh to perfection."

"Really?" Valentine's smile widened to a fierce, triumphant grin. She pulled off her hazmat suit glove, and before Lorenzo realized what she was doing, had pulled a small photograph out from the glove, held it up in front of the creature's eyes. It depicted a young woman wearing a blue hospital gown laying on a bed, hooked up to a respirator, her eyes staring blankly up at the camera flash. "And what if I told you," the Director said, "that Beatrix Maddox is still alive?"

Part 2: Negotiation

The 784 Incident: Part 2: Negotiation

Part 1: Contact

"When you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back"

Looking back, I'm not sure what I thought was going to happen when that crazy bitch showed 784 the photo. If I had to put money on it, it would have been even money between screaming at her for lying and going completely apeshit and killing us all.

No one, I think, would have dared put down money on saying, "yesssssssssssssssss. i know."

Valentine, that crazy bitch, didn't even bat an eye. "I thought you might. How did you guess?" she asked.

"bbbb-b-beatrixxx madadadadadox is asset to foundationn. Foundation would ud not lettititittttt her die without without a f-fi-f-f-fight," the monster growled.

She looked sternly into the cold blue eyes of the roiling mass of silicon and steel. Her lips, I noticed, were pursed slightly tighter than normal. 784's tells were harder to see, but after months of watching that thing, I could see the rhythmic opening and closing of its spiracles accelerate, just a bit. "Yes, of course," Valentine said. "Just like we're not willing to let an asset like you just sit around inside this box." She leaned against the railing, reached for a cigarette, realized that she was wearing a hazard suit, and settled for crossing her arms. "Beatrix Maddox's body was recovered from the incident site and regenerated," Valentine explained. "However, the process was… incomplete. I believe the technical term is, 'locked-in syndrome.' Her brain and body function just fine, but they don't talk

to each other. She is completely awake, but unable to control her body."

784 didn't respond to that. Its blue eyes nicitated once. "The Foundation has determined that the only method remaining to us is a dosage of Five Hundred," Valentine explained. "As SCP-500 is a finite asset, we are… shall we say… let me just say there is opposition to the idea of using it on a simple agent. Especially one who is officially dead."

"B-bbbbargaining ch-kkchckip."

"You see it already, then." Valentine chuckled. "I have been authorized to form a new Mobile Task Force, designation Delta-Niner: Feynman's Folly. Twelve member team, assigned to support you in the field. You will carry out missions containing and capturing particularly difficult SCPs. As a former member of Pandora's Box, that should be familiar to you. In return, Agent Maddox will be given a dose of SCP-500 and restored to her prior state. Is that sufficient?"

"W-w-wwwwill I bebbbbbe able to s-sssse her?" 784 asked.

"Of course not. Don't be ridiculous," Valentine scoffed. "She will be given a Class A Amnestic and false memories will be implanted under a new identity. On the other hand, she'll be alive, and happy. And in the end, isn't that all you want? For her to be happy?"

When I was a kid, I was riding in the front seat of the car when a pickup truck cut into our lane in front of us in the middle of a heavy rainstorm. My mom hit the brakes, but the car hydroplaned out and slammed into the truck before spinning out into the shoulder.

Even now, the thing I most remember isn't the moment of impact, but that moment when the car started to skid: the sick feeling of realizing that we were going to crash and nothing I could do could stop it.

"HIT IT! HIT IT NOW!" I screamed. The Deltas glanced at each other, hesitated just for one moment. It was all that 784 needed.

"no."

Just one word, spoken with crystal clarity in the midst of its inhuman, buzzing voice… then the three D's fell dead with nanomachine spikes through their foreheads. Valentine screamed, and then the tendrils lunged forward and wrapped around her, dragging her up into the air. A thousand cruel, sickle-like blades formed themselves around her in an iron maiden, barely dragging against the surface of her hazard suit. "SECURITY!" I screamed. "EMERGENCY SPRAYERS, FULL…"

"WAIT! WAIT! WAIT!" Valentine screamed. "STAND DOWN!" She turned back to the cold, implacable eyes of 784's optics, unafraid of the razor-edged blades. "wait…" she repeated.

"fleshhhhh esh flesh matitititititttters flesh matters not," 784 chitters. "only only mimmmmind."

"I can't let you see her," Valentine said, "but I can cancel the order for the Class A Amnestic. Would that be sufficient?"

"sufficient," 784 whispered. The blades retracted, and the nanomachine tendrils lowered the Director to the ground.

"We'll be in contact with you regarding your first mission," Valentine said.

"wwuwuwuuwun reskkkkkkkkkquest," hissed 784. "nnnononono acetetetetetatone bath. not neinnnnneeded."

"Agreed. Mister Lorenzo, you will keep 784's containment chamber outside the acetone pool as long as it continues to cooperate with us," Valentine ordered.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, that's completely fucking loco," I hissed. "That acetone pool's the only thing stopping it from growing out of control!"

"Not any more. Now it wants to cooperate. Don't you, Andrews?" Valentine asked.

"will cooppippppperate," 784 hissed. "kikkkkeep your endiddddd

ofphh the bargain." The tendrils retracted back into the concrete holding container, like an anemone retracting back into its polyp.

"Security, unlock the main doors. Let's go, Lorenzo."

The solvent bath washed over our plastic biohazard suits, cleansing any traces of nanomachines remaining on our bodies. Valentine spent the entire five minute cycle leaning against the wall, arms outstretched, her head thrown back and staring up at the ceiling. It was honestly kind of spooky.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Valentine said, as we were changing out of our hazmat suits.

"Excuse me?" I paused in the middle of shrugging into my labcoat.

"That body of his… gorgeous." Valentine touched her throat as she adjusted her collar, then ran a hand over her steel-grey hair, which was starting to come loose from its severe bun. "It'll never grow old, never decay. Limited only by his willpower and mind… and such a mind it is. Can you imagine what he could accomplish, if he could only master it?"

"Ma'am," I said, slowly. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. Better than all right, I think." Valentine said. She pulled on her labcoat. "I'll submit a report to Director Clef. The first mission assignment should come in this week. Make sure he's ready for it."

"As you wish, ma'am." I waited for her to leave, then headed for the control center as fast as I could. "Herrera?" I said to my assistant. "I want double-shifts around the clock. At least two pairs of eyes on this thing all the time, and one guy with his hand on the sprayer controls: I want this thing watched closer than 173. And put in a request for some replacement Deltas, and have the old ones removed before I get back."

"Sure thing, boss. Where are you headed?"

"I'm gonna talk to Smiley," I said. "If I'm not back in an hour, tell the medics that there's a dead man with a shotgun wound in Clef's

office."

Part 3: Escalation

Part 2: Negotiation

"Better the Devil you know than the Devil you don't"

"Hey, Clef?"

"What's up, Draki?"

"Not much. Hey, can I borrow your cat for the weekend?"

"I guess. Why the hell you'd want to borrow that mangy stray who always misses the fucking litter box, I don't know, but sure, go ahead. You'll probably find him trying to bang Josie. Stupid bastard's too dumb to realize that no matter how much she smells like she's in heat, you can't get it on when the lady don't got no lady parts."

"Thanks. By the way, what the fuck is that?"

"Oh. Doctor Lorenzo was by here earlier, with a formal request for an audit on 784 and Doctor Valentine. He thinks she's out of line, and using improper containment procedures. Wanted me to check up on it."

"That still doesn't explain the…"

"I'm just about to get to that. You see, when I first took on this position, every day I'd have people come in and complain about the stupidest fucking things. Their boss cracks one joke or makes them miss one break they come in here whining and screaming and begging for an Audit Towards Termination. So I've started testing them to see if they're serious. One of the tests is I put a knife on my desk and tell them that if they really want me to do the audit, they'll

cut off a finger. When they pick up the knife, I tell them it's okay, they can stop."

"… I guess Lorenzo really felt passionately about that audit."

"Cut off his own middle finger, held it up, and threw it in my face, and implied me and my mother had improper relations, using many four letter words."

"… cool."

"I sent him down to the infirmary."

"So, are you gonna do that audit?"

"I kinda have to now."

"You getting soft on me?"

"Don't let it get around, I've got a reputation to uphold."

"No problem. Just shoot Gerald in the face and they'll be calling you "Clef the Killer" again in no time. Plus, you'll make Bright two grand."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"You know," Chang said, "I've done a lot of freaky, fucked up things for this group. I've mowed down an entire Sunday School classroom with a Squad Automatic Weapon because they were infected by some hell virus that turned them into bloodthirsty mutants. I've seen the sea glittering behind the gate to hell…"

"… all these moments will be lost like tears in rain?" Roybal quipped.

"Shut up, Roy," Chang snarled.

"Make me, assgike," Roybal snapped back.

"Both of you motherfuckers drop it right now or I'll chop off your balls and make dango out of them," Takahashi sighed. She touched her

eyepatch, a souvenir of a bad drop over Kosovo that had sent a piece of debris flying into her left eye. That eye tended to ache when there was trouble, and it was hurting like hell now.

"That ain't fair, Lieutenant. Just cause you don't got any doesn't mean you have to take it out on those of us that…"

"Sergeant Chang, you have ten seconds to get to the fucking point before I get my gelding tool," Takahashi interrupted.

"Well, ma'am…"

"Sir, Chang, I'm a fucking officer, not a housewife or a whore."

"Well, sir, all I'm trying to say, sir, is that riding herd on a fucked up zombie nano-machine monster thing is the most fucked up thing I've had to do in a career built off of doing fucked up things, sir," Chang said.

"And? What do you want me to do about it? Put you in for a transfer to Headquarters?"

"No, sir," Chang gulped. 'Headquarters' was a euphemism for being reassigned as D-Class personnel: a literal kiss of death for any Mobile Task Force member. "Just making a completely off-hand and innocent observation, sir."

"Keep it that way, Chang. I'm not getting shot in the head over your lousy griping."

"Heads up, here comes the Iron Bitch now," Vicks said. He dropped his clove cigarette on the ground and crunched it under his boot.

"Ten-hut!" The members of Mobile Task Force Delta Nine (Feynman's Folly) snapped to attention as Assistant Director Janice Valentine entered the briefing room. "As you were," Valentine said, laying down her laptop computer on the table. "You people probably want to get out in the field and start killing things, so I'll make this brief. Agent Sandoval has called in a report of a highly dangerous biomorph moving through the Crystal Caverns. 784 is being dispatched to contain it. You will accompany it to the operations area and provide whatever support it asks for. That is all. Are there

any questions?"

"Um, yeah," Chang said, raising his hand. "What the fuck is a biomorph?"

"She means a monster, idiot. Like a big, fucking, slimy monster," Hopkins sighed.

"Fuck you, asshole, I was asking the lady a fucking question," Chang snapped.

"Suck my cock, assgike."

"I got a fuckin' question for the nice lady," Vicks said, waving his hand in the air. "How come we don't got no fuckin' maps, no fuckin' info about the target, no motherfuckin' support or any mission objectives?"

"784 has all the information you will need to know," Valentine protested.

"So how come the fuckin' Skip gets to know all about the mission, and not us?" Chang whined.

"Because you idiots don't NEED to know. And if it weren't for the fact that Foundation regulations REQUIRE there to be a task force in support of any SCPs deployed in the field, I'd have all of you morons reassigned to clean toilets until judgement day!" Valentine shouted.

"What the fuck did you just…"

"TEN-HUT!" Takahashi shouted.

"Fuck that, Lieutenant, this bitch just…"

"YOU ARE IN DIRECT DEFIANCE OF AN ORDER, SERGEANT CHANG!" Takahashi screamed. "I SAID, ATTENTION!"

The room fell silent. "Everyone but Chang and Vicks, get your gear and assemble in the hangar in ten minutes. Private Vicks and Sergeant… sorry, CORPORAL Chang will change into PT gear and report to 784's containment facility, where they will spend the

duration of the mission cleaning the chamber. I recommend that he also take the time to contemplate, in great detail and with a deep sense of reflection, the meaning of the word, 'insubordination.' Dismissed."

"But Lieutenant…"

"DISMISSED!" Takahashi shouted. The six other members of Delta Nine filed out of the room in silence.

"Your men seem to lack discipline," Valentine observed. She placed her papers back in their manila envelope. "I suppose that's all one can expect from a Mobile Task Force led by a woman."

"Forgive me for saying this, Assistant Director, but that seems rather ingenuous coming from you," Takahashi retorted.

"Not at all. Shouting and giving orders is such a man's way of doing things. A woman should lead with more subtlety and grace. But then, I suppose that a woman who has neither should take what she can get." She snapped her laptop shut. "Tell me, Lieutenant, does running around with a giant phallic symbol and shooting bullets at things make you feel any better about never being able to have the real thing?"

"Thank you for the observation. If you'll excuse me, ma'am." Takahashi put her heels together, bowed at the waist, and turned on her heel, walking out of the room at a crisp pace.

"God, I hate that bitch," Valentine sighed.

"I hate that fucking bitch," Vicks griped. He dipped the mop into the bucket and squeezed it out harshly. "God, if I get my hands around her neck, I'm gonna choke her till her eyes bug out…"

"Shut the hell up, Vicks. It's your damn fault we're in here anyway." Chang lifted up the toothbrush and studied the tile grout closely. "Eh, good enough for government work."

"Don't know why the Lieutenant don't just pop that bitch one. God, I'd pay good money to see that." Vicks leaned on his mop. "Specially

if they were wearing lingerie and in a tub of mud together."

"Wait, you want to see ol' Scarface mud-wrestling with a bitch old enough to be her mother? What the fuck's wrong with you, Vicks?"

"C'mon, Chang, you gotta admit, Scarface has a decent bod for a molly, and the Iron Bitch has that GMILF thing going. Besides, with a name like Valentine, you know she's gotta be a monster in the sack."

"Fuckin' sick, Vicks, you've been in the Forces too long…"

"Excuse me, am I interrupting something?" a voice said.

The two soldiers looked up from their bickering. A man stood in the doorway, wearing a white lab coat and a hat that could only be described in, awe-struck terms, as 'nifty'. He was grinning, a huge, impossibly wide grin, and his nose was red and large enough to resemble a tomato. Aside from that, he looked pretty much nondescript. "If I am, I can come back another time."

"No, no problem, sir… Dr… Mr. Clef."

"Clef's my nickname. The people who really know me call me *brummmm*." He sang that last word, in a manner that, if the two soldiers had been at all musical (they weren't), could have been identified as a fair approximation of an A-Major chord. "Is this Andrew's room?"

"This is 784's chamber, yeah," Vicks admitted.

"I see. Nice digs." Clef moved to the center of the room, picked up a broad sheet of what appeared to be thin plastic. He rapped in the center of it: the substance was incredibly strong, for being so thin and delicate. "What's this?"

"784 makes them. Looks like he uses them to build nests, or something." Chang pointed to the piles of the substance all around the room, arranged in a vague circular approximation. "Since it's harmless, they let him."

"I see." Clef reached down and picked up a USB stick drive, reading

the text written on the side. "You're letting him read Eric Drexler?"

"Director Valentine's idea, sir. She says that knowing some theory might help him to use his body more effectively."

"I see. Carry on then." Clef turned and walked out of the room, closing the heavy steel door behind him."

"Holeeee-shit," Chang whistled. "Looks like all our problems might be over soon."

"Why do you say that?" Vicks wondered.

"That was AD Clef. He's an Auditor."

"What the fuck does a tax man have to do with solving all our problems?"

"Not that kind of auditing, dumbass. Auditing Towards Termination. He looks at a situation, and if he decides that someone needs to die… poof." Chang pointed his index finger towards his head and mimed shooting himself in the head with a gun. "Scratch one SCP. Rumor has it he's so damn good at what he does sometimes the Skips don't even know they're dead until it's over."

"C'mon, Chang," Vicks laughed. "No one's THAT good."

"I dunno," Chang said, scratching his chin. "He did just walk out of here with a sample of 784's nesting material and that USB drive in his pocket."

"Doctor Lorenzo."

"Doctor Clef."

"Please sit down. How's the hand?"

"Better. Medical is growing back the finger, but it might take a little while. Typing is… difficult."

"I can imagine. In any case, I've finished my audit. I'd like you to

read over the report before I submit it to the O5s.

"Thank you."

"…"

"… you're serious?"

"Completely."

"… you can't be serious."

"Doctor Lorenzo, it's my conclusion that SCP-784 is no threat to anyone so long as current containment procedures are maintained. For that reason, your Audit for Termination is denied. I have, however, recommended that you be given a short medical leave, as a psychological evaluation indicates high levels of stress and fatigue."

"… you're not serious, are you?"

"Please sign here. You have twenty-four hours to turn over all your duties to your assistant. You will report to the infirmary at noon tomorrow for two weeks of psychological evaluation and counseling."

"YOU SONOVABITCH! YOU FUCKING STUPID SONOVABITCH, THAT MONSTER'S GONNA KILL US ALL!"

"Doctor Lorenzo, if you do not cooperate, I will be forced to defend myself."

"YOU FUCKING SMILING SONOVABITCH, I'LL FUCKING KILL YO__"

<funt>

"… you shot me?"

"… you'll get better."

<crash>

"Jesus… <sigh> Security, this is Assistant Director Clef. Doctor Lorenzo is currently sedated in my office. Please have some big, strong men sent down to carry him to a bed and tie him to it… wow, that sounded gayer than I thought…"

Part 4: Breach

Part 3:Escalation

"Until the End of the World"

Eighteen Months Ago

"All right, next question."

"Mmmm?"

"Imagine you just won a contest and you have your choice of two prizes."

"Is one of them you?"

"No… would you take this seriously, please?"

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit distracted by the beautiful naked girl in bed with me."

"You've got another girl under the sheets right now? How mean!"

"I'm talking about you, babe."

"Please. I'm not beautiful."

"Of course you are. The most beautiful girl in the world."

"I don't believe you."

"It's the truth. What do I need to do to make you believe that?"

"Tell me again…"

"You're beautiful…"

"… a million times."

"You're beautiful, you're beautiful, you're…"

"Not all at once, you dork! Slower… once a day, maybe."

"That's… about two thousand, seven hundred years."

"Then you'll just have to make sure that we live that long."

"Yes, dear…"

Today

"… in conclusion, the operation was carried out successfully, with minimal casualties. SCP-784 performed outstandingly. The artifact was captured without further incident, contained, and remanded to Special Containment Procedures unit." Lieutenant Takahashi closed her notebook with a crisp, military snap.

"Thank you. You are dismissed." Director Valentine said, distractedly. She ran a finger along her armchair. There was a slightly dreamy expression on her face, a nearly post-orgasmic one. Takahashi bit her lower lip. She really didn't want to know.

"There is one more thing," the lieutenant continued, hesitantly. "Skip-784 asked me a question." More like rumbled it, actually, in its terrifying buzzing voice, that sounded like a chorus of bees. "He wants to know when you will uphold your end of the bargain."

"Mmmm? Which bargain?" Valentine asked.

"Agent Maddox. You promised…"

"Oh yes. Tell him that the request was put through, and is pending Overseer review," Valentine said.

"… is it, Director?"

"Is what?"

Her voice was catching just a bit. She seemed a bit breathless. Takahashi was starting to get really annoyed by that. "Was the request put through? IS it pending Overseer review?" she repeated.

"If it'll help ease your mind, then, as far as you know, yes it was." Valentine said. The older woman bit her lower lip, and Takahashi… yes, she could definitely hear the slightest hint of a buzzing sound. "Now if you'll excuse me… you are dismissed, Lieutenant."

The door closed behind her with a solid click. Takahashi took a deep breath. Behind her, in the room, she could hear the buzzing noise growing louder, and the definite, high-pitched sounds of feminine amorous moans.

"Jesus," she whispered, shaking her head.

Post-Incident Interview, - -

> Interviewer: Were you aware of Doctor Valentine's condition at the time?
>
> Clef: Her technophilia? Yes. Her collection of… mechanical aids… was rather famous around the facility.
>
> Interviewer: And you didn't think that it was inappropriate to place someone like that in charge of a mechanically based SCP?
>
> Clef: Doctor Valentine's extracurricular activities were not relevant to her ability to do research upon her test subject. no.
>
> Interviewer: I wonder how much you really believe that.
>
> Clef: Given subsequent events, it's clear that my beliefs were… incorrect.

Night time at Site 19 was usually no different than any other time of day. The Oubliette was built rather like a Vegas Casino: every effort made to make sure that no one could see outside. Instead of day

and night, an endless, constant, monotonous day, broken only by the changing of shifts from one set of guards to the next.

Agent Jared Thomas had just begun his graveyard shift, had just settled into his comfortable station chair with a copy of the new John Grisham novel and a pack of bubble gum, when the door opened. He stood up, blinking in surprise. It wasn't exactly unusual to see Director Valentine here, but at two in the morning?

"Good evening mister… Thomas…" Valentine said, after a quick glance at the young man's nametag. "How is Agent Andrews today?"

"SCP-784 is quiet, as usual, Director," Agent Thomas said. He gestured through the quartz glass at the scene below: SCP-784 lay curled up in its concrete container, looking rather like a thousand-armed steel octopus crossed with a million wriggling silicon earthworms, slowly writhing. "I think he's sleeping, to be honest. Although it's hard to tell."

"I see… sleeping." Valentine leaned over, and Thomas gulped nervously. The thin, white cloth of the middle-aged woman's labcoat was just sheer enough for the younger man to see what she wasn't wearing underneath. "When was the last time you got a good night's sleep, Agent Thomas?"

"I slept from 0900 to 1600 today," Thomas said, smiling.

"I said a good NIGHT's sleep, Agent Thomas."

"Oh? I've worked graveyard shift for the past five months. I'll be switching back in…"

"I see. Go and get some sleep, Agent Thomas. Sleeping in the day and staying up nights is bad for your circadian rhythm. I'll finish up your watch."

"Actually, ma'am, I've been setting up this new rhythm for months. I'm not sleepy at all."

"Agent Thomas, do you WANT to be reassigned to cleaning up SCP-053's diapers?"

"Not as such, no…"

"Then I recommend you follow orders from a superior officer. Now, Agent Thomas."

"Yes, ma'am." The younger agent sullenly picked up his book, coffee, and jacket, and left the control chamber. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see Director Valentine settle into the station chair and look up at the monitors, the very image of the professional SCP Foundation guard.

He also noticed that she was fingering the top button of her labcoat, a bit tentatively.

Agent Thomas smiled. "Gotcha," he whispered to himself. On his way out, he took the small electronic device from his coat pocket and attached it to the underside of the glowing green EXIT sign with a wad of Bubblicious. Then he took his cell phone out of his pocket and called up Lieutenant Takahashi.

"Hey, Taki," Thomas said. "Remember how you told me to let you know if the Iron Bitch does something strange? Get your team together. I think she's about to."

Audio Log 784-T-K-421

> Chang: Jesus, Lieutenant, don't you ever sleep? It's like two in the morning.
>
> Takahashi: Don't worry, Chang, you're gonna like this. Here, check this out.
>
> Chang: Okay, I'll bite. What you got for us?
>
> Takahashi: Watch this.
>
> [loud vocalizations]
>
> Vicks: Holy CHRIST! Is that…
>
> Chang: [wolf whistle] Dayum! I usually gotta pay by the

hour to watch stuff like this… wait, I think she's almost… OH!

[loud cheering, punctuated by a cry of, "Yeah, Baby!"]

Takahashi: Jared, are you recording this?

Thomas: Recording, shit, I could sell this to any studio and make…

Takahashi: Thomas, cut the shit, are you recording this?

Thomas: Yeah, I'm recording all right. We've got her.

Takahashi: Run that up to the Smiling Man. I'm going to head down there and arrest this bitch for gross dereliction of duty.

Chang: Gross is right, did you see how she…

Takahashi: Chang, Vicks, get your minds out of the gutter and grab your gear.

Vicks: Sure thing, boss. Yowee, for an old hag, she's actually not bad.

Takahashi: Christ…

Thomas: Hang on a minute, Lieutenant, something's happening… oh hell. Taki? You'd better get down there NOW.

Takahashi: What is it?

Thomas: The target just left the control facility. She's headed inside.

Takahashi: fuck fuck fuck fuck move! … wait, did anyone hear that?

[END OF LOG]

Part 5: Breaking Point

Part 4: Breach

"Plausible Deniability"

Post-Incident Interview, - -

> Interviewer: And that was when Director Valentine breached containment on SCP-784.
>
> Clef: That is correct.
>
> Interviewer: And at that time, Lieutenant Takahashi of MTF-D9 had already arranged her strike team in preparation for arresting Director Valentine.
>
> Clef: That is correct.
>
> Interviewer: Can you explain for me, then, what happened next?
>
> Clef: To put it mildly, sir, the shit simply hit the fan. What I hadn't anticipated at that point was that a decommissioning attempt on the other side of the base would go horribly wrong, causing destruction and death on a massive scale.
>
> Interviewer: … so in short, while SCP-784 was making its escape attempt, that was about when…
>
> Clef: About when Kondraki was throwing cat urine at **SCP-083**, yes.
>
> Interviewer: …

"WHADDYA FUCKING MEAN NO BACKUP'S COMING!" Takahashi screamed. "I'VE GOT A FUCKING KETER SCP BREAKING CONTAINMENT, AT LEAST ONE POSSIBLE HOSTAGE, AND I'VE GOT FOUR GUYS WITH PEASHOOTERS TO TRY AND CONTAIN IT!"

"Lieutenant, I'm sorry, but all resources are currently being diverted to another incident. I can get you a fire support team in about half an hour…"

"There won't BE a need for a support team in half an hour because we'll all be DEAD in half an hour!" Takahashi snapped.

"Lieutenant! He's coming!" Chang shouted.

Takahashi swore and grabbed her nine mil, checking the chamber and magazine for ammunition. Thirteen rounds wasn't gonna be enough. Hell, a thousand rounds wasn't gonna be enough for this one. She took cover behind a soda machine, the lurid red and white advertisements on the box casting a strange counterpoint to the amber emergency lights. The rifle in her hands felt small and inadequate compared to that which was approaching.

The first sign of trouble was Valentine. The older woman was naked, her pale skin laced with stretch marks and pale blue veins, and she was slowly staggering out of the darkened corridor, pale body laced with blood. "Jesus, she's alive!" Vicks gasped.

"Stand fast, Vicks!" Takahashi ordered. "Director Valentine, come here!"

The older woman turned slowly, then slumped against the wall. Takahashi swore again, turned to Vicks and Chang. She pointed to her eyes with two fingers, then gestured down the corridor, and pumped her fist once. Vicks and Chang nodded grimly and headed down the corridor, sweeping the corners with their flashlights and pistols. They took up positions on either side of the hallway, then nodded to Takahashi.

"Thomas, you're with me." The lieutenant ran to Valentine's side. The woman's head was lolling on her shoulders, and her body was

covered in a thin sheen of sweat, matting her hair to her skull. "Hey, bitch, are you alive?" Takahashi whispered.

Valentine's eyes opened: the sclera of her eyes were red from ruptured blood vessels, and her speech was slurred. "Lieu… loo…" The older woman coughed up blood. "Got away… hit the sprayers but he got out of containment… he could be anywhere by now. Damn… stupid of me. I didn't… thought I had him in check… Hit the ground hard, feel bad…" She slumped forward. Her entire back was covered in blood, and there seemed to be a large welt forming on the back of her head.

"Fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck… Thomas, help me get her on the ground. We gotta immobilize her head."

"Think it's a concussion?"

"Concussion, contusions, aneurysm, whatever it is, this bitch hit her head hard." The two of them laid Valentine down on her back. Takahashi tabbed her communicator. "This is Delta-Nine to Site Control, we have a man down, request immediate medical assistance."

"Delta Nine, be advised that we are currently in the middle of…"

"I know you're having a Kondraki Moment, you asshole, but you can spare a couple of stretcher bearers to take one woman to the infirmary! Takahashi out!"

"Lieutenant!" A taller man was running towards them, huffing and puffing under the weight of several large nylon bags. He was closely followed by two paramedics, carrying a backboard, neck-brace and trauma kit.

"Roybal! Thank God you're here! What's the situation?"

"The situation is fucked. Casualties are in double digits already. Someone let the goddamn Sharpie Ball out of its container and it rolled over an entire Task Force." He tossed one of the bags to the ground. "We're not gonna be getting any backup."

"Well, if it's just us, then we'll be just fine." Takahashi said. She

unzipped the bag and pulled out a large weapon, that looked rather like a science fiction raygun. "We're Feynman's Folly. We've trained for this scenario. This is what we do."

"I see… and off the record, sir?"

"Off the record? We're up against a former member of Omega-7 in the body of a Keter-Class SCP." Takahashi snapped an energy pack into her HERF gun. "We're fucked."

"Thought so," Roybal admitted.

They'd been moving through the corridors of the darkened hallway for fifteen minutes when Chang raised his hand, signalling the others to stop.

Takahashi saw it a moment later: a hulking mass coiled up in the corner like a pile of steel spaghetti, slowly throbbing rhythmically, as if to a slow, gentle breathing. A claw reached out and touched the wall, tearing through the plaster drywall and etching away at the steel underneath. Already, a portion of the steel seemed to throb and dissolve, melting into another tentacle that incorporated itself into the mass.

She unslung her weapon slowly, gestured to the other three members of her strike team. Firing line. Standard formation. Fire on my mark. The four soldiers slowly raised their weapons towards the creature.

"NOW!"

There was a low shriek, like a camera flash charging, except much, much louder, and then a loud crack of thunder as a blast of High Frequency Electromagnetic Radiation pulsed through the air, ionizing the atmosphere in its wake. Four pulses of crackling blue-white energy lanced into the mass of nanobots, tearing huge chunks out of the coiled steel tentacles.

The monster let out a roar, and then it lunged, terrifyingly fast, crossing the thirty yards between it and the task force in a single

leap. Chang went down first, crushed under the mass of steel, his broken body leaving a red smear as the thing rushed on, shrugging off HERF blast after HERF blast, the powerful energy pulses dealing damage, but not enough, not enough to stop the monster from forming a buzzing chainsaw out of one of its tentacles and using it to shear Vicks' hands off at the wrist before tearing into his guts, not fast enough to stop it from grabbing Roybal's ankle and pounding him against the ceiling until he stopped screaming and flailing and just made wet noises like a bag of cement, not enough to stop it from grabbing Takahashi around the throat and lifting her up into the air, choking the life out of the young woman.

She felt her vision start to blur as her world began to go dark. Already, she could see the thing's nanomachines tearing the squad's weaponry apart, incorporating them into its own mass. As her vision swam and her consciousness left her, the last thing she heard was a voice, sneering and sinister, in her ear…

I always told you you lacked subtlety and grace.

Takahashi had enough presence of mind to realize what that meant… and to spend her last life's breath screaming in horror and dismay.

The last sound she'd make as a living creature.

Ten minutes later, the woman that Thomas and the two paramedics had brought to the infirmary opened her eyes. She pulled the IVs out of her arm, cutting off the flow of painkillers (such a pain to bypass the morphine) and got to her feet.

One of the medics tried to stop her, but she ignored him, walking through the halls of the infirmary to the third floor, to the place where she was trying to go. She placed her hand over the doorknob, and a thin tendril of nanomachines emerged from the back of her head, from the carefully hidden plate that she had disguised as a portion of skull, despite the fact that the entire back of the skull had been scooped out and the contents removed. The nanomachines broke through the lock in moments, and the one who wore Valentine's body entered the Intensive Care Quarantine unit.

It made its way to the back of the facility, to a small bed in the back, where a young woman lay slumbering. It placed its hands over her face, and the tendrils extended, penetrated the back of the neck, probed delicately around the connections. Yes, just as it suspected. The injuries could easily be healed.

The medic was shouting now, grabbing a phone and calling for help: the cries annoyed it, so it lathed a portion of steel piping, part of the bedframe, into a crude spear and threw it into the medic's throat. One by one, its nanomachines relaced the broken neurons back into place, carefully repaired the damage to its loved one's brain.

A few minutes later, Agent Beatrix Maddox opened her eyes for the first time in months. "What… who…"

"It's me, B," Valentine's mouth whispered. "I came for you."

There was a gentle cough, as Clef cleared his throat. The Assistant Director stepped over the fallen body of the paramedic and faced the couple - one in an old body newly repaired, the other in a new body not its own - and smiled.

"Agent Andrews," he said. "How nice of you to drop by."

Part 6: Escape

Part 5: Breaking Point

"You Can't Go Home Again"

Eighteen Months Ago

"So, if you'd let me finish my question?"

"Mmmm? Sure, sure…"

"Okay, here it is. Let's say that you've got a choice of two different prizes. One is an all-expenses paid, three month vacation in Europe."

"Ooooh, that sounds nice."

"The other is ten minutes on the moon."

"Hmmmmmmmmm."

"Which do you choose, and why?"

"Okay, quick question. Can I take you with me?"

"What? Mmmm… sure. Yeah, you can take one guest along."

"Then it doesn't matter. Nothing matters as long as we're together."

"…"

"… are you crying?"

"Men don't cry. We just get things in our eyes."

"Liar."

There was a moment's hesitation. It was enough.

Andrews-in-Valentine looked into the face of his own death, in the form of a HERF grenade held in the hand of the smiling Assistant Director. The object, a Foundation original, was a variation on the classic flash-bang grenade, specifically intended for use against electronic threats. Pull the pin, release the spoon, count to four, and a pulse of high frequency electromagnetic radiation would fire, destroying any circuitry more complex than a lightbulb and battery.

Clef casually dangled the pin from his left finger as he held the grenade in his right hand, spoon still pressed inwards. Andrews lowered the second spear he had lathed from Maddox's bed frame. The point of the weapon gently touched the bloody tile floor, where the paramedic's blood slowly flowed towards him.

"You know," Clef said, idly, "I always suspected that this entire facility was built on a slight slant. It always did make me feel off-balance."

"Are you going to kill us?" Maddox whispered. She was resting her head on Andrews' shoulder, body still weak from her long months spent comatose. A few bedsores were visible on her back, the open hospital gown framing the angry red friction uclers on her skin.

"Well, that depends," Clef said. "I've already got two containment breaches in progress. One involves your old friend the nanomachines, and that's bad. The other involves Kondraki, and that's really bad. So, taking a look at things from a "big picture" perspective, two agents walking out of a half-destroyed facility and never being seen again… that sounds like something that I could prioritize later." He sighed. "Especially since this grenade has a four-second fuse. There's a lot that Andrews could do to me in those four seconds. It would end in him… and you… dying painfully when the EMP fries those clever little connections between your brain and body. It would be a horrible death, laying there still able to think, but unable to breathe, unable to make your heart beat. Probably one of the worst."

"So we have a deal?"

"No," Clef admitted. "But I'm willing to walk right out the door right now and live to see another day."

"You won't have any trouble from me," Andrews said. "I'm not planning on keeping these damn bugs any longer than I need to. The moment that B's cured, I'll be pouring the rest into a jar and sticking it in the microwave."

"Suit yourself," Clef said. The assistant director turned and walked out of the room, casually stepping over the bloody body of the slain paramedic. "It's not really my concern any more."

On the way over to help deal with the mess Kondraki was making, he ran into the erstwhile Director Valentine, who was slaughtering a lot of hapless researchers, using the severed spine of Lieutenant Takahashi as a bludgeon. Clef casually popped the spoon of the EMP grenade and rolled it down the hallway. It popped, and the nanomachine colony that had been SCP-784 dissolved into inert slime.

He nudged the sludge pile with his toe until he found Director Valentine's brain, lifted it up out of the pile. Andrews, he had to admit, did some good work. The brain had been neatly severed from the spinal cord, the connections to the nanomachine colony made so cleanly that it was almost identical to Andrews' own connections. Not bad for someone with no medical expertise at all.

He wondered if some of the neurons still fired, weakly, even now: it wasn't necessarily clear what kinds of changes the nanomachines made to the actual brain structure when it replaced the glial cells. He wondered whether Valentine would feel her mind go if it were damaged, or whether she was already gone and dead.

Just to be sure, he carried the brain with him (pulling off bits and pieces and throwing them away like a child pulling petals off a flower) as he walked to the area where Kondraki was, currently, riding SCP-682 like a pony. He felt much better by the time he found out where the Ball of Sharp had ended up.

It was, all in all, a good day.

"So, any reason why Italy?"

"Mmmmm… I was just thinking. About that question I asked you last year."

"The one about the Moon and Europe?"

"Yeah, that one. It just seemed to me… I can't give you the moon. But I can at least give you Tuscany."

"That sounds wonderful. Wine, food, and music…"

"You sure you want to spend it with me?"

"It's gonna be a bit weird, I'll admit, but… it's still you under there, right?"

"As much as I can tell, yes."

"Then, remember what I said? Nothing else matters…"

"… as long as we're together."

"And nothing's changed that at all."

"…"

"… are you crying?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"I thought that men never cry."

"First time for everything."

Part 7: Conclusion

Part 6: Escape

"Ever Dance With the Devil in the Pale Moonlight?"

"Delta One, in position."

"Delta Two, in position."

"Delta Three, in position."

"Delta Six. Go."

Beatrix Maddox sat on the lakeshore with her shoes off, letting the cool water flow over her bare feet, as she smiled and waited for Andrews to arrive with the picnic basket. He was bringing wine, cheese, and olives, and this delicious bread from the bakery down the street.

Italy was everything that she had ever imagined. The food, the wine, the music, the nights spent with her lover, the days spent exploring the gorgeous Mediterranean countryside. It was everything that Andrews… that Andrea… had promised and more.

She couldn't have cared if they'd spent the time in a quiet farmhouse in Kansas, or a New York City apartment. For her, all that mattered was that they were together.

It was her last thought before the .22 caliber round hit her between the eyes. She slumped over onto her side, her blood pooling under her, staining the wood dark red.

"Delta One, target neutralized."

"Delta Two, confirm."

"Delta Three, engaging target."

"Delta One, moving to support."

"Negative, Delta One, Delta Three. Delta Six will handle this one personally."

"You fucking bastard," Andrews whispered. He… she… spat a tooth out, dislodged from where Delta Six had clipped her with the butt of his pistol. "You fucking bastard. You promised."

"I did? I don't recall saying anything of the sort. Only that it wasn't my concern at the time." Delta Six, also known as Assistant Director Clef, smiled… he always smiled… as he rifled through Maddox's purse, pulling out her wallet, taking the cash, and tossing the rest into the lake. "It is now."

"You fucking bastard! You asshole! We wouldn't have talked! We just wanted… we just wanted to be left alone, why couldn't you let us at least have that!"

"Because, my friends, you can't just be left alone." Clef said, calmly. "You were involved. And you can't get uninvolved." He laughed. "I mean, what the hell would our world come to if people could just… quit? Who the fuck would keep doing this job? Psychos and assholes, that's who."

"And which are you?" Andrews sneered.

"Me? I'm perfectly sane. So I guess that makes me an asshole." He raised his gun and put the muzzle of the handgun between Andrews' eyes. "I mean, hell, look at me. Perfectly good sniper team, and I've gotta come down here and do it up close. Can't be satisfied just doing it from range, can I? Can't have you just die quietly without knowing what hit you, like I did to your girlfriend. No, I gotta get up close and look into your eyes first."

"I know," Andrews whispered. "I was counting on that."

"Delta One, man down, man down!"

"Delta Two, engaging, engaging!"

"I don't have a clean shot!"

"Fuck!"

"Fucker. Motherfucker. Fucking asshole," Clef gasped. He was holding in his stomach. It wasn't a good sign, the way that his guts were spilling out.

"Like you said, Clef. Only two kinds of people still work here," Andrews said. He raised the bloody nanolathed knife that he'd crafted from the slide of Clef's gun, wiped it calmly off on the sleeve of his… of her… jacket. "Assholes and Psychos. I didn't used to be either." He smiled as he knelt by Clef's side. "I guess, after killing enough cats, you kinda turn into both."

"Fucker. Motherfucking… fucking liar, you said you were gonna nuke the damn nanites…"

"I know. I lied. You should know all about that."

"Won't get away with this! You'll be dead before you get two steps!"

"I don't plan to. Because the truth is, Clef, I never wanted to. All I wanted to do is to tell you something… to tell you the truth." Andrews leaned down close, and the voice of Director Valentine whispered into Clef's ear.

Clef's face went pale, and he shuddered.

Then Valentine's body stood and turned towards the lake. It extended its arms out and dropped the knife onto the ground. It closed its eyes and smiled as it walked down the dock towards where Beatrix Maddox lay dead on the cold, hard wood.

The sniper's bullet pierced its skull just as it reached her, and it slumped down on top of her, arms outstretched, their two bodies laying on top of each other like two lovers embracing in their sleep.

… in other news today, Italian police are investigating the murders of two American tourists in the Tuscany region. The motive is believed to be robbery. Residents of this peaceful town are horrified at these recent events, the first murders in over a century…

He splashed water over his face and looked into the mirror. The face that was not the one he'd been born with looked back.

The man now known as Assistant Director Clef had accumulated many scars over a long career… a career built on lies and deceit. He ran a finger along his newest scar: a wide, deep gash across his belly, where Agent Andrews had delivered a final blow, one last Fuck You to the world before dying.

Memories rose unbidden, the words whispered in the voice of Director Valentine, but the words, the intent, all Andrews'.

"You're not a soldier. You're not a hero. You're not even a murderer. You're nothing but a bully… and SCPs are the nerdy kids who you like to beat up to hide the fact that you're nothing but a lonely, empty shell of a man."

He picked up the handgun that was by his sink and removed the magazine. He checked the chamber. One bullet. That would be enough. The rest were gravy.

He put the muzzle of the gun to his temple and closed his eyes.

Click.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "It works better," he said to himself, "when you take the safety off first."

Then he picked up his can of shaving cream and straight razor and got to work shaving. He was extremely cautious handling the keen-edged blade. A man could kill himself like that, if he wasn't careful.

Tales 8

8. Mr. Moon

I am Mr. Moon.

You may think me the most unfortunate of this production cycle, but you'd be wrong. I am well taken care of by the Foundation, who look after my needs when I am faced and see to it that I am left alone when my true sight returns. As it has now.

My eyes are now in the craters, keener than any man's. I peer down to where my face drifts over. I will find Mr. Redd, for where can he hide from the moon?

There I see a man running through alleyways from thugs with knives. He is not Mr. Redd. My attention turns elsewhere. I see a parade, and the one who leads it looks to be a sister of mine. But Ms. Charm is not Mr. Redd. There is a man leaping from a building. Though I wish it were otherwise, he is not Mr. Redd. There is a businessman. He is not Mr. Redd. There is a baby. It is not Mr. Redd. There is an elephant. It is not Mr. Redd. There is a a man. There is a man. There is a woman. There is a bench. There is a woman. There is a man. There is there is there is there is there is there is

I do not see Mr. Redd.

My time is up soon. Already an eye has migrated back to my face of flesh. I leave it closed, but my sight is still diminished. I can search no more for now. No matter. The moon will remain. I am patient.

Previous: **7. Mr.** by DrMann

Next: 9. Mr. Clumsy by Tanhony

Back to Hub

Tales 9

9. Mr. Clumsy

Dear Diary

My name is Mr. Clumsy and I have died forty seven times today.

I think the first time was when I was walking down the trail. I just went over to a cactus, thinking I could get some water. So, I took out my penknife and tried to cut a tiny gap in it. What happened instead was I stumbled, ended up with the knife in my heart and fell backwards onto the cactus.

Yep, that's my thing. I die horribly and then come back to do it again. And for some goddamn reason, no matter what I do, it'll more likely than not kill me. At least if I sit in this cave and don't touch anything, I'll be reasona

Sorry, heart attack. Guess that showed me. God knows how I'm going to walk all the way to the place. Can't exactly take a car, can I? Last time I tried that, it exploded. Third degree burns and everything. Lasted a bit before dying, hurt like hell. All the others have fun gimmicks, or at least ones that don't kill you, but no, not m

Got the pencil in my eye. Took me a few deaths to get that out. I heal my wounds, but I always have trouble with things getting stuck. Mr. Redd used to make a game of it; he'd impale me on a pipe or something and watch me die again and again. Not my idea of fun, but what are you going to do? It's nothing personal, after a while you just get used to dyi

Fell over and hit my head on a brick. I am sure that brick was not there when I found this cave. See, that's another thing, sometimes I'll go near a cat and start choking or something! I'm not allergic to cats! I know, I checked with a doctor. Died three times, but I managed to get there.

I know if I fall asleep, a bear will eat my head or something. But I

can't just walk, this is the desert and it's night. I'll freeze to death again and agai

Previous: 8. Mr. Moon by Anaxagoras

Next: 10. Mr. Mission by Gerald

Back to Hub

Tales A

A Breath Of Relief No Different From Drowning

Sci-Fi Apple Pie waited in the crowded mass between dreams like a busy street corner of a too-large city, playing with her holographic hair. Buildings of non-euclidean design towered above, each window a door to some sleeping mind. They winked in and out like a child cutting onions. A gloved hand touched her shoulder. Beside her stood a girl that hardly met her shoulder, wrapped in red ribbons and pink glitter. Golden doll-like eyes watched her, adorning a face with a perpetual tinted pout. From her glittering, rainbow hair peeked two white cat ears. Behind her swung a tail with a softly jingling bell, attached by a shimmering ribbon in a bow.

"Where do we go, Hans?"

"Mako-chan, greenhorn." She reminded her, patting her arm with a glittering pink-and-gold wand.

Sci-Fi Apple Pie sighed. "Fine. Brief, then let's go. Mako-chan."

"We've found a Bryce Fox that has what we need. Big in-between place but with more diplomatics. We've got intel that our spiral-toothed friend's got an eye on the place. We can inflame her and frame West at the same time."

"Right. Lead the way."

Shortly after, Sci-Fi Apple Pie found herself twenty stories in the air, spraying graffiti over a billboard, painting mustaches onto Qi Shao's image and replacing the provided hashtag with a sticker for Oneiroi West. Mako-chan worked to flutter through the air with conjured sparkling wings, tossing glittering pamphlets below. She scanned the faces and not-faces of the crowd. They were all oneiroi one way or another. Some West. No Collective, at least, none that she could register. A flicker of movement, too fast to be an accident, speeding up the building face. "Greenhorn! We got company!"

Sci-Fi Apple Pie felt something tug a rocket-boot, then slam her into the floor. The world swam more than could be justified in Bryce's dream. Distantly, she wondered if Bryce was aware of the territory spat going on in his subconscious. Someone, muffled, commanded her to fight but the dream clung to her mind, slowing her movement as if running through molasses. The creature was all sharp palette shadows and fever delusions, biting into her arm; its breath reminded her of acetone, she remembered thinking.

She could see Mako-chan slam away the creature with her wand, transformed to a nacreous warhammer made to look like a shining rabbit's head atop a golden pole. Her captain kneeled down to her and touched her on the arm, tsking.

Sci-Fi Apple Pie was Sherry again, awoken. Hans stood by her body, no sign of waifishness on his toned form. He held her by her shoulders as she trembled and regained her footing. "Greenhorn." His voice was soft. "Come on now."

"…Mako-chan?"

Hans looked like he would either punch her or cry. He did neither and pushed her to the floor instead. "Hans Drescher out here. You clear your head, greenhorn. Too slow a reaction. Go work on your beta-ameilorace hyperglutanomous response."

"What was that?"

"One of Qi Shao's. At least it felt like one on my weapon. She knows now, I'm betting. Good. Check the trawler off Urooj's last session with Glass."

1 Thread(s)

Jessick a la "Jacob" Meowntang - UCLA - *Los Angeles, USA*

Guys check out this thing….

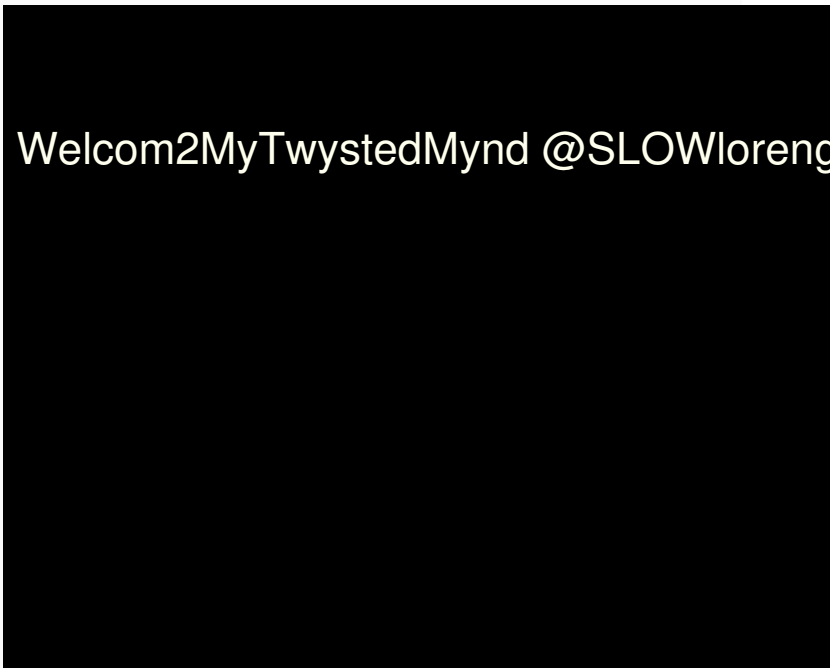
Upvote Reply ·+2 · Jan 89, 299999 12:577:88am

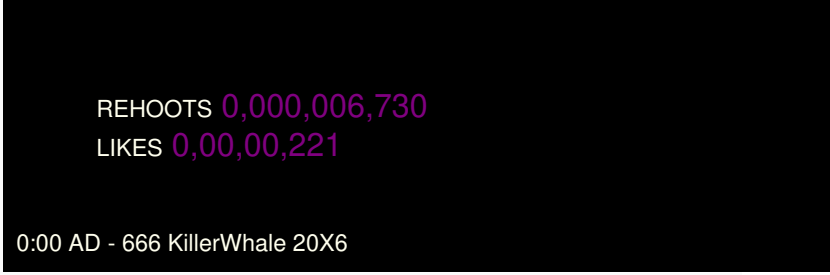
Foldable

OMG check out this hoot abt it

Upvote Reply ·+5 · Jan 89, 299999 12:577:96am

ConnectionBot - Jacob Browell "Condensed Jellybran" Bot - Jacob Browell





I am a bot that posts images to hoots. Contact my programmer at @condensedJellyBran to leave feedback

Upvote Reply ·+0 · just now

Sherry drank coffee to recover from her first stint at action. Hans glided behind her, silent as a memory. He reached down towards her. She blinked and looked up at him. "Did you need something, Hans?"

"You're aware. That's good. What did Glass's readings say?"

"Just one thread. 3 comments, one of them a bot." She tried to ignore as Hans sat beside her, too close.

"You trust Glass?"

"Yeah, sure. He introduced us."

"Through a pane," Hans said as he poured himself more coffee.

"He said it was necessary."

Hans grunted and drank, then moved to leave the break room.

"Wait, Hans."

"Hm?"

"How do you make a NoPage profile?"

Sci-Fi Apple Pie

No Image Available

0 Oneiroi like this

Sci-Fi Apple pie shared a **status update**.
Klink 21, 20011

Uhm… Testing…

Like - Comment - Share
2 oneiroi like this.
0 shares

Comments
2 of 2
View previous comments

Placid Spaghetti-O mitts or GTFO
just now · Like

Mako-chan +rep
2 klanks ago · Like

Sci-Fi Apple Pie watched her captain with the x-ray vision on her holoLens goggles. Mako-chan was talking to something Sci-Fi Apple Pie couldn't rightly understand. It had too many shadows to be any shape, and yet it formed so many shapes, like a pollock painting of

conceptual ideas. Too big to fit in the tiny coffeeshop of Cassidy Campbell's mind, and yet sitting on the chair and drinking coffee as if nothing was wrong. She could tell her captain was having a hard time of it too, by the way the ribbons clutched her silk gloved hands and her cat tail's bell jingling back and forth.

Outside of the dream, she confronted Hans as he walked from Cassidy's still-unconscious body and out of the dirty apartment. The man never showed the hint of surfacing-trauma like the rest of them. No, Hans was unlike them all, stiff as a board. He separated as Mako-chan and Hans Drescher with an iron curtain between dreaming and wakefulness. "Hans, what were you doing there?" she asked, before the thought slipped from her.

"I ordered you to stand guard outside."

"Hans. What were you doing."

"Feeling out for options."

"What?"

"You've been here maybe 6 months, Sherry. I've been going on more than four times that much."

Sherry grabbed his arm. "Can't you retire?"

"Ask Glass."

[THIS IMAGE HAS BEEN REMOVED FOR VIOLATING HYPOINTELL PROPERTY RIGHTS

PLEASE REFER TO OUR TENENTS OF SERVICE FOR FURTHER INFORMATION]

A Gentle Painting
by アノニモス

怖いでしょうね…

Comments

Shaper Deathbell Urooj
Scifi do you need to talk…

A thousand dead circle the Oneiroi Collective entity as their massive form tears into the subconscious territory. The Xiupanians, knowing no fear, swarm to kill with a thousand papercuts what they can hardly perceive. Sci-Fi Apple Pie watches through her holoFocus goggles, painting the world in serene orange and data points. The Oneiroi Collective has a temperature of a summation as an imaginary negative number quadratic reaches the square root of negative three point thirty five. The three of them- Mako-chan, Concrete Tomb, and herself- stand away enough to avoid the damage, and yet the Collective seems too close for comfort. The entity's existence on the same plane is too close to be safe.

"Good job, Sci-Fi Apple Pie. It was a nice idea to leak the story of a West official getting arrested," Concrete Tomb speaks, his voice wavering. "I'm heading out before we get spotted." Sci-Fi Apple Pie notices that he hadn't moved his stony gaze from the massive conglomeration, killing even in its immense death throes. Broken Xiupanian consciousnesses float through the milky way in the night sky above, leaving trails of moving stars. Their shells crack onto the population of fleeing Oneiroi West forces below, catching the wind and creating a dust storm through which only a massive silhouette could be seen.

The entity lets out a roar or a groan, and slams something between a pseudopod and a claw down on the remaining Xiupanian forces making a tactical retreat.

"Why are they leaving?" Sci-Fi Apple Pie asks.

Mako-chan puts on her cherry pink lip gloss, the one that made her lips look like animated sequins. "'Cause this entity's a scouter for the main mass, testing the strength of Xiupania. Qi Shao's not gonna show her full might over a territorial skirmish."

"Right, I'll see you, then?" Sci-Fi Apple Pie says, almost bored. She didn't look forward to the paperwork she'd have to write when she got out.

"Naw. I'm going to go take them up on their offer."

"What?"

"The collective's offer. Welcome all, all walks of life."

Sci-Fi Apple Pie closed, then opened her eyes again. Looked at her captain. The ground shuddered underneath her feet with a slow awakening. "Mako-chan… Hans? What do you mean?"

"I'm just tired. Of being either. Of being both. You still look like you on both walks of life. I'm… I thought I was an awesome marine. A real jarhead. The real manly man, clean and shoot to kill in the blink of an eye. Used to keep trophies of hunts, mounted and stuffed… And here I am… not that person, and yet who I'm supposed to have always been." The last of the old Omicron-Rho guard lets out a sigh from small, petite lips. "I don't know… and I don't want to think about it anymore. The Collective's a big enough mass of people that you're not just you, you're everyone else, and everyone else is also you. I'm just tired of being me."

Sci-Fi Apple Pie reached out to grab her captain's slender, soft arm. "But the Collective will know everything if you do. New recruits need you. Glass needs you. Who will teach your replacement? Who will know about beta-ameilorace hyperglutanomous response efficiency?"

A flash of light blinds her for a moment. She feels her captain slip from her grip and recalibrates the brightness adjustment on her holoFocus goggles. Mako-chan flutters on conjured wings, letting out a trail of glitter like the aurora borealis. "The Collective's so expansive I'm not surprised if they knew this whole time. And don't worry about the other things."

Mako-chan smiles and cups Sci-Fi Apple Pie's cheeks with her gloved hands. Kisses her forehead with her rhinestone lips. "I have faith in you. When this is all over, in some other life, maybe we'll

meet again. I'd like that."

"Yeah." Sci-Fi Apple Pie notes that her captain's breath smells like acetone. The dust from cracking Xiupanian corpses reduces her visibility to ten meters. She watches Mako-chan's form meld into a silhouette against the storm. In a shadow puppet play of dead bodies and moonlight, she watches an uncomprehensible mass of once-were-people swallow a little catgirl in pink frills and ribbons.

A Brief Explanation of Demonics

FoldUnfold
Table of Contents

What is a Demon?
A History of Demonics
First Steps
Miniaturization
The Golden Age of Demonics
The Fall of a Golden Age
Aftermath

What is a Demon?

A demon is a sentient (and in some cases sapient) entity capable of interacting with the natural world through manipulations of electrostatic and electromagnetic forces. While modern pop culture portrays demons as red horned muscled monsters, in fact demons usually do not have any visible appearance.

A demon may be brought into existence by creating certain spatiotemporal patterns. Once extant, a demon may be constrained to perform a specific task in exchange for some type of payment, such that the total sum of entropy changes between the task and payment respects thermodynamic law.

Historically, individuals in varying civilizations and eras have used demons for various things, ranging from manual labor to military purposes. In most cases, the typical method used to create the spatiotemporal pattern was to draw symbols on a surface with chalk, and perform various incantations and hand gestures. Payment for tasks came in the form of blood sacrifices, usually of animals, but sometimes humans as well. These methods were typically fairly risky, as small inaccuracies in the summoning patterns or rituals could result in the demon discharging into the area where it was summoned, rather than stably manifesting.

However, around the end of the 19th century, recent advances in demonology research began to uncover new possible uses for demons as part of modern technological devices, with a very wide range of potential applications.

A History of Demonics

First Steps

The first indicators that demons might have possible applications in technology were first discovered by Nikola Tesla in 1879, when he developed a mechanical device capable of emulating the rituals historically used in summoning demons. Further work developed a crude method for the device to specify the demon's task, and offer payment in the form of heat dissipation across a resistor. He was able to further refine the device, but later abandoned that line of research in favor of studying electromagnetic effects.

Miniaturization

It is believed that Prometheus Labs acquired this technology in 1904, and was the major driving force behind its research and development.

In 1927, Prometheus Labs discovered a way to produce an entirely solid-state demon summoning device, using electrical currents to produce the spatiotemporal patterns needed. Further research led to miniaturization, such that a demon summoner could be constructed to function as part of an integrated circuit. By the 1950s, demonics was a fully-developed technology, and Prometheus Labs released the 6900 series of integrated circuits incorporating demonics in 1953.

The Golden Age of Demonics

The 1960s and 70s are sometimes referred to as the 'golden age of demonics' due to the massive availability and affordability of the

technology during this period. Most major semiconductor companies in this era had at least some level of investment in demonics. These divisions were often referred to by humorous nicknames, such as "Hell Labs" or "National Demiconductor".

During these two decades, hundreds of different consumer goods were produced, ranging from **toasters** to **refrigerators** to **audio equipment** to mainframe supercomputers, as well as several microcomputers, including the **Exidy Sorcerer**, the IBN 5100, and the **Triumph Adler** line.

Probably the most famous of the integrated circuits during this period was the 666 timer, which became a fairly ubiquitous electronic component used in hundreds of devices. Demonics also allowed the development of a number of things that were previously believed to be impossible, including an ideal op amp, DM741. Numerous microprocessors were developed, most notably the 80313 'Demons Inside' from Intel. There was even an FPGA device developed, the Xilinx XC2066, although only a few were ever produced.

However, due to the nature of the technology, and fears of public rejection, much of this technology remained hidden from the public eye, even as devices using it became more prominent and public integration progressed. Additionally, a number of governments also engaged in efforts to hinder and keep advances from other groups, especially in light of the then-ongoing Cold War.

While the Foundation was aware of all of this during this period, demonics was not considered to be anomalous, for the same reason electricity wasn't considered anomalous when it was first invented - it was seen as just the next great step in technological development.

Components and devices from this era still surface occasionally in the hands of collectors and hobbyists, most notably Marshall, Carter, & Dark and Are We Cool Yet?, and a few of the Foundation's currently contained anomalies trace their origin to this period.

The Fall of a Golden Age

Throughout most of the Golden Age of Demonics, there were a number of groups, including the Horizon Initiative and the Vatican, who objected to the use of demonics, prophesying dire consequences, and warning of as-yet-unrevealed dangers of adopting this technology. Most dismissed this, believing this to be simple, unsubstantiated fear-mongering.

Then, in the late 1970s, a number of anomalous effects started manifesting in many of the earlier devices that incorporated demonics. The effects varied, but as things progressed, many of these devices developed unusually disastrous failure modes, frequently causing very unusual injuries and driving some individuals to insanity and suicide. As time went on, most demonic devices eventually manifested these effects.

As soon as it became apparent that demonics devices were unsafe, and after numerous lawsuits regarding these devices, many of the technology companies who had invested in demonics rapidly shut down the divisions associated with the devices, and attempted to conceal the nature of their involvement. The Foundation became involved in efforts to recall and eliminate the demonics technology, along with other GOIs and national governments.

This led to the formation of the Multilateral Agreement for Reality Preservation (MARP), and resulted in the creation of the EXORCIST task force to aid in inter-agency cooperation in this effort.

At the same time, the Demonics Nonproliferation Agreement was enacted in 1981, to prevent other nations from developing demonics technology, as an additional normalcy-preservation measure.

By the end of 1985, most civilian demonics technology had been successfully destroyed (with the exception of a few items seized for experimental purposes) and replaced by non-demonic equivalents, and those pieces of tech that couldn't be replicated were eliminated from the public eye through memetically-engineered propaganda and mass amnestization.

Aftermath

Even after the realization of the dangers associated with demonics, there were still a number of important applications in which demonics remained the only viable solution, and so continued to be used. The Foundation still makes use of this technology in containing worse anomalies, as does the GOC in pursuing their goals. Other examples include the RTG units used on spacecraft and in the Mars rovers, advanced cryptanalytic devices used by various intelligence agencies, and components of weapon systems owned by various national governments (in much the same way that they continue to maintain nuclear arsenals).

Because of this, there was still a demand for demonics, and this market was filled by the few anomalous-specific technology companies that managed to survive after the collapse. As the demand continued to die out (due to the discovery of non-demonics based technology accomplishing the same goal) though, one by one these companies either died out or were acquired by other companies, until only Prometheus Labs and Wondertainment Industries were left.

Thus, in the aftermath of [DATA EXPUNGED] in 1998, much of the expertise and knowledge about demonics was lost, and although the Foundation was able to acquire some of their research and scientists, this set demonics research back by over a decade.

Even now it is still not completely understood why demonics devices fail in the way they do, but the Foundation's researchers believe that understanding this, and eventually finding ways around it, are goals that may be accomplished within another decade or two, and demonics can rejoin other technology.

A Broken Machine

A heap of papers falls onto the desk. The shift begins. God, the headache. The pen… where's the pen? Where's the goddamn pen? Ah… here it is. Time to calm down. Hand's shaking again. Harder than usual. Must be those pills? Did I take too many? At least I don't feel guilty for that girl. How old was she, again? I don't… I don't remember. Does anyone care?

So… The papers? Ah, yes, the work. Hard to concentrate… I must have overdone it with those pills. Well, now.

> Requesting a Class D subject, eunuch. The Foundation does not possess a Class D subject conforming to given parameters. Permit forced castration? Yes/No

What for, I wonder? They won't tell me anyway, my access level is not high enough. The Committee has a hierarchy of its own.

> Requesting permission to use three (3) class D employees for testing with SCP-081. Grant permission? Yes/No

They forgot to mention what this SCP of theirs does. A bureaucratic formality. If they tell me my access level is not high enough, I'll forward them upwards. Let them try their luck there.

> Requesting permission to conduct an experiment with Ethics Committee employees and one (1) light bulb. Grant permission? Yes/No

Another idiotic joke. I wonder who is it this time? Looks like the science guys. Arrogant pricks.

> Requesting permission to use animals in an experiment with a memetically dangerous object. Grant permission? Yes/No

Plainly laughable. Who cares about these animals?

> Requesting permission to forcibly euthanize a Class D subject. Grant permission? Yes/No

Is it still common practice to ask about things like that? Odd thing is, they keep describing the same thing differently in different requests. How stupid can they be? We've made a unified system for this, why can't they just maintain order? Anyway, it shouldn't be my concern. I should be concerned about my job.

> Requesting permission to vivisect a Class D subject in order to extract his liver which has mutated into a sentient and multiplying organism. Grant permission? Yes/No

I don't even want to know what happens where these guys are at. I just don't want to know…

> Requesting permission to terminate a Doctor for divulging classified information to an outsider (daughter). See attached file EPI-14x for details.
>
> Grant permission? Yes/No

Tired. But maybe a respectable man's life depends on my decision.

> + EPI-14x.
>
> > Insufficient access level.
>
> Grant permission? Yes/No

I'm afraid I was lying when I said I can forward them above. I didn't exactly lie, but the consequences… Who am I? I'm so tired. Yesterday I sent a twelve-ye… That's it, she was twelve. What's next?

> Requesting permission for use of a chil…

No. Just no. I'll throw this fucking piece of paper away. Tell them I never received it. When it comes here the second time, I'll have to

sign it. What can I do?

Oh, it's thawing. The heap of requests is thawing. I'm looking at the last request. Moral principles are worn so thin here. What am I thinking? Settle your mind, Greg. The last request. Yes, yes.

> Requesting permission to vivisect a Class D subject…

…

> Yes/No

The end. The shift is over. Maybe someday I'll become a chairperson. I'm good at my job. A mechanism finely tuned. Foundation ethics, right. Now I must sleep. Maybe take some of those pills? I used to be morally sound. That was the term written in my psychological profile. Probably.

A heap of papers falls onto the desk. Oh how I want to delegate this responsibility to someone else. Where's the pen? In my pocket, right. Have to clean the suit. Hand's not shaking. Guess that decision not to take any pills has paid off. Hmm… whom did I kill yesterday? A mutant liver? Fair enough. Who cares. Real decisions are made by chairmen and their assistant. I have a small-time, quiet but tiresome piece of a job. So, what's the agenda for today?

> Requesting permission for use of a chil…

Breathe in deep, breathe out. Don't get nervous. Don't read it through. What if I say "no"? What if I don't? Will my conscience haunt me if I never know what I'm dooming a child to? So frightful. And the day was starting just fine.

> Yes/No

Hand's shaking again. Eyelid is trembling for some reason. Maybe I'm having a neurotic disorder, or whatever it's called. Stay on topic, Greg, you can't escape this. You just can't. What ethics is in it?

Yes/No

*Come **on**. Just highlight the goddamn word. I have a daughter too…*

Yes/No

I don't give a fuck. I just… I just don't give a fuck about those scumbags that send children to the s… The phone is calling. Yes? Stalling? A Keter? Yes, excuse me. I understand. Please excuse me, this won't happen again.

Yes/No

Damn you, damn you all. I did not want to… Did not want to. Where are my pills? At home… Home… No! There's a shitload of requests here! I hate, just how I hate it all. They turned me into a simple data processing mechanism. And I wanted to be a judge. Dear Lord, if you do exist, please forgive those who take up this burden. How do they say? Amen?

Whew! A break!

A Broken Tool

They promised me glory.

I wanted peace.

They told me "This shall advance the glorious Revolution."

I wanted nothing to do with the Revolution.

They said it would barely hurt.

I screamed until I could scream no more.

They said it would be over quickly.

The doctors came again and again.

…

Why? Why was I chosen? I was no revolutionary. I was no Nationalist. I was nobody. Why?

They changed me. They broke my body and rebuilt it to do their bidding. The young men told me that I was truly an honor to the Revolution. I did not feel like one. I knew what I really was. A tool. That's all. A tool. A magical tool, but a tool nonetheless.

At first, I tried to stop it. I ripped the magic metal out of me. The doctors saw. They told the young men, who told me the bad words. I stopped.

I was put into a room. It was cold, and bare. Just a bed, nothing more. I curled up into it and cried. Why did they choose me? Why?

They took me on a plane. They told me I needed to repay their "gift" to me. What gift? I did not see a gift. Tools are not made to be given as gifts.

They took me off the plane, and I saw that we were far from the cold, cold place where I had been. The trees were tall, and the sounds were strange. The plants grew in strange colors, and the air was thick and sticky.

The soldiers took me to a field of death. There were bodies everywhere. Young men cut down in the prime of their youth like the rice and wheat I cut down in my past life. Blood streamed and pooled in eddies in the flow of a river of death.

Then, people started shooting at us, from the trees. Bullets ripped through the air.

They told me to kill. I did not want to. They said the words, and I killed. And I killed again. And again. And again.

I hacked through a tree to kill the boy behind it. His friend tried to shoot me. I stopped him, and then, he was dead too. I tried to stop. They said the words again, and I began to cry, as the magic metal inside of me pulled me forward.

The river swelled.

The next time the young men came to see me, they told me I was in for a surprise.

I asked them if I was going home.

They laughed.

They told me that I was being sent for a special mission.

"Finally, we will wipe out the Nationalists forever. You will do your country a great service. We have begun by taking the islands that they held onto. You will follow when we finally invade them."

I asked them why. They did not answer, and insisted that it was "For the Revolution." I told them that I did not love the Revolution. They became angry.

"The Revolution gave you your gift. You will show your gratitude to the Revolution, or else."

I refused. There would be no more killing.

"You will obey!"

No.

Then, they said the words. And they made them hurt. I was a coward.

They put me on a beach. They pointed towards the "enemy."

The slope of the beach was covered in walls, bunkers, and barbed wire, manned by soldiers. I saw no enemies, though. Only scared men and boys.

"Kill."

I ran forward. I tried to stop myself. The magic was stronger.

I was tired. So very tired. No more death. No more killing. I wanted nothing but peace. Peace. Peace. Peace.

And the magic stopped.

The magic stopped.

They screamed "Kill" again.

The magic pulled me forward again, and one of the enemy cried out as he died.

Then I stopped.

"Kill!"

I did.

"Kill the rest of them!"

No.

"Do it!"

I killed already.

"They are escaping! Go after them!"

I ran after them. But I did not stop them.

"You are a tool! You will obey us!"

No.

They took me away. They put me away. I left my cold cell for an even colder one. The doctors locked me inside, and spat on me, saying that I was counter-revolutionary scum.

I did not care. They had finally let me go.

Before I fell asleep, I thought that I had finally gotten peace. No more killing. No more death. Only peace.

…
…
…

When I awoke, the sky was grey. It was pouring rain. I blinked.

No.

No.

No.

I thought I was free. No more killing. No more death. Had they finally come for me again?

I burst into tears. Where was my home? Where were the young men? Where was I?

The lab and the doctors and the young men and the officers and the soldiers were gone. I was in a ruin of a building, with the sky weeping above me. The landscape was bleak and ruined.

There was no one in sight.

But what if they came back?

What if they made me kill again?

What if I could not stop them?

I screamed. I would not listen to them anymore.

I would *never* kill again.

An abandoned rusty screwdriver lay on the ground. A discarded tool for a discarded tool. How poetic.

I took it, and stabbed it into my ear. Blood gushed out, and the inside of my ears exploded in sticky and hot agony. I screamed again, as tears, rain, and blood mixed together. I bit my lip, and stabbed the screwdriver deep inside my ear again and again and again until I could feel nothing except the blood in my mouth.

I did it again for the other ear. I cried out again, the screwdriver falling from my hand as I fell to the ground, sobbing. I wanted no more death. No more killing. The magic metal came out again, covering me, though I beat against it, screaming and crying. I hated it. I hated it I hated it I hated it.

Why would it not go away?

Where had my life gone?

I curled up, tears streaming down my face once again.

In the distance, I saw men coming. They had come for me. I did not care. Nothing could make me kill again.

"What do you think it is?" the field specialist asked.

"Best not to get near it. It could be dangerous," the team leader said, scratching his chin. "Let's get back to finding that damn skip."

"C'mon, man, it's an old woman. Look, we gotta inspect her at least."

"…fine. Let's take a look."

They slowly approached the woman, weapons leveled at the curled-up body. They stopped 5 meters away from the body, just in case.

"Ma'am? Are you alright? Ma'am?" the lead specialist asked, still with his gun on the woman.

"I don't think she can hear us. Look, her ears are bleeding."

"What do you suggest?"

"Let's get closer." The lead agent nodded, and moved closer slowly, while the rest of the team stayed back, still aiming at the curled-up woman.

The first agent got nearer. The woman made no move to respond, and the team saw that she was sobbing. The lead containment specialist leaned down and touched her shoulder.

Suddenly, thick metal arms erupted out of scars on the woman's arms, legs, and spine. They formed a wall, and the specialist barely managed to yank his hand away in time.

"Fuck!" The specialist tripped and fell backwards.

The woman mumbled. Her voice was hoarse, tired, but above all, sad.

"What's she saying? That's not Mandarin or Cantonese. What language is that? Anyone know?"

The containment agent's brow furrowed. "I think it's Hangzhou, or… no, Pinghua. Definitely Pinghua." He leaned closer.

"Well? What's she saying?"

The specialist listened carefully. "She's begging us 'No more. No more.' I don't know what she's talking about. And now's she's saying 'No more pain.'"

"Well, she's definitely anomalous. I'm calling in backup to help us

with this one. Chen, see if you can get her to talk. Show her a pen and paper, maybe?"

The woman on the ground curled up tighter. As the containment specialist sat down on the ground next to her, he heard her muttering again.

"I am a tool. Why am I here? I want my peace. I want my home. I am a tool."

A Burial In The Woods

It was just after dawn on the twentieth day, when Karl tore out his own throat and continued to rant and rave, that Lars' nerve finally broke.

Whatever evils nature hid in the woods, they could not match what he had seen and heard in the past weeks on the battlefield. **Soldiers screaming as they were torn apart by invisible hands. The howling of men blown in half by an artillery volley, howling that never ceased**. He had to get out. He would run all the way back to Bavaria, if necessary. Just away.

Lars scrambled to gather a few supplies in a rucksack before he left. Tins of food. Compass. Knife. The men in the trench, their bodies and minds in varying degrees of mutation, paid him no mind. Lars glanced at a rifle leaning against the trench wall. Memories of Russian soldiers screaming, faces consumed with fast-growing tumors, ran through his mind. He shuddered and moved on.

By the time he was ready, the first light was beginning to creep over the tops of the trees. Lars tried not to speculate why the sunlight was a deep emerald color. He nodded and sped away from the rear lines. No one noticed as he he dashed across the scarred mud and twisted trees of the battlefield. He didn't stop sprinting even when he encountered the beginnings of the woods.

A part of Lars' mind told him that he would need to conserve his strength, that running was a bad idea. He ignored it. Even a few hundred meters away from the battle, the trees became less crooked and twisted. Running from that damned place felt like the only thing to do. He could walk later. For the first time in several months, Lars smiled.

After several minutes of running, Lars stopped to catch his breath in a clearing. Suddenly, he heard a humming sound from behind him. It

was a sound that he knew all too well; the accursed rifles of the Austrian scientist warming up.

"Turn around, please. Slowly," said a voice behind him, in a thick Hungarian accent. Lars did as the voice commanded, and found himself facing a wounded man sitting on top of a long wooden box with rope handles at each end. The man's eyes were of differing colors - one blue and one grey - and he had stitches over a wound running from his left ear to his chin. Lars recognized him as Nemeş, the scientist who had insisted that they use the demon weapons.

Despite the wound and the dirt, Nemeş' hair and mustache were immaculately neat. He wore the blue uniform of an Austro-Hungarian officer. Several large spikes of bone - from the Russians' rifles, no doubt - had torn through the uniform on his right shoulder and arm.

In his left, Nemeş held a rifle, aimed squarely at Lars' chest. He looked Lars up and down.

"Deserting is a capital crime, you know. I would be well within my rights to shoot you here and now. It would be befitting a coward of your stature," Nemeş said. Lars felt his mouth go dry. Once upon a time, he had considered death by poison gas or a shell to be the worst thing in the world. The past weeks had taught him otherwise. He thought about dying here in the woods, his body distorted beyond all recognition and felt his legs nearly give out.

Nemeş motioned to a shovel propped on a tree at the edge of the clearing. "Take the shovel," he said, "And dig a grave. Don't stop unless I say otherwise."

Lars's throat tightened. He opened his mouth to protest. Please, I was doing reconnaissance. Please, I was running messages to a secret detachment. Please, I have a wife and child back home. The doctor's eyes narrowed and his finger slipped beneath the trigger guard of the rifle.

"Take the shovel. And dig until I say otherwise," he said,"Unless you would rather I shoot you in the jaw first. I have heard that it is extremely painful."

Lars nodded and took the shovel. He began to dig in the middle of the clearing. So this is how he would die: In a forest, forced to dig his own grave.

It had been two days since he had slept, and the exhaustion, combined with the labor of digging, helped to remove him from the situation. He didn't feel any fear, just a dull resignation to the objective facts.

When the top of the hole reached above his head, Lars stopped digging. His shirt was soaked through with sweat, and his arms ached.

"Keep going," came the voice from above. It sounded more ragged than before. Lars sighed and continued to dig.

At three meters, it became almost impossible for Lars to throw the dirt out of the hole. "Stop!" the voice barked. Lars was happy to obey.

Nemeş' head peeked over the edge of of the hole. Lars could see the tip of the rifle beside the man. This was it, he thought, dead in a forest. He felt like crying, but couldn't summon the energy to do so. Instead, he just looked at the ground.

Suddenly, Nemeş' hand came into his field of vision. Lars looked and saw that the doctor was extending a hand down to him.

"Take," he said. Lars grabbed the shovel and took the doctor's hand. Suddenly, he found himself being pulled out of the hole and placed on level ground. Lars stared at the doctor for a moment, panting. Who the hell was this man, who had lifted him out of the grave with just one arm, as if Lars had weighed as much as a kitten?

Nemeş reached into a pocket and pulled out a silver flask. He pushed it in Lars' general direction.

"Drink," Nemeş said. It was only then that Lars realized how thirsty he had been. He opened the flask and took a swig, nearly choked on the burning liquid. The doctor stood silently, waiting for Lars to finish. After his coughing subsided, Lars took another drink. After all

this, he could use a drink.

Nemeş pointed to the box he had been sitting on, then to the hole.

"Take," he said. His voice was low and raspy. Lars realized the truth of the situation, and felt relief flow through him. He was just helping a burial, not arranging his own. The relief shooed away any inconvenient questions that lingered behind.

He went to the box, followed by Nemeş. Lars took one end, while the doctor took the other, using his good arm.

When they were a meter away from the hole, a loud thump came from the coffin. Lars dropped his end of the casket. There was another thump, then the muffled sound of panicked screaming that Lars recognized as Polish. The coffin lid opened a crack, and he saw a few fingers probing desperately at the air.

Nemeş slammed his hand down on the lid, eliciting a scream from the box and causing the fingers to quickly draw back in.

"Take!" he commanded again. His eyes narrowed. Lars felt he might be sick, and regretted downing an entire flask in a single sitting. He looked at the ground, and noticed that the rifle was by the officer's feet. He bent down and picked up his end of the coffin. Together, they carried it to the edge of the hole.

"Drop!" Nemeş said. Lars obeyed, and the coffin landed with a loud thud. The voice inside began screaming again. The doctor jumped into the hole and opened the lid, setting one foot into the coffin.

"Bury!" he said. His voice sounded like stones grinding against one another now.

Lars nodded. Nemeş opened the lid, and for a half second, Lars could see the occupant of the box. He wore the uniform of a Russian soldier, and his hands were bound together. The skin on the left side of his face, from ear to chin, was gone, revealing a scabbed-over mess. The man in the box stared up at Lars, his remaining blue eye wide with fear. The doctor laid down and slammed the lid shut behind him with a force that caused the sides of the grave to

shudder. A screaming came from the coffin once more, but was quickly cut off.

Lars stared at the grave for a moment. Then, taking the shovel, he began to fill in the hole as quickly as possible. There was not enough soil that he could put between himself and that officer.

Within a few minutes, the work was done. Lars was exhausted, and felt his insides burning. But, more than ever, he needed to leave. He sat for a few moments to catch his breath before grabbing his pack and leaving the clearing.

Again, he began to run, just to get as much ground as possible between himself and the box. After a few seconds of running, he doubled over. His insides were burning.

He felt the heat, hotter than any furnace, fill him. The pain made it impossible for him to scream, so he gurgled in agony. He fell on the ground and tried desperately to get the burning out of him, tearing at his stomach to get something, anything, out of him.

For a split second, his thoughts turned to the flask Nemeş had offered him. What the hell had been in it? That evil, con-

Then there was only fire.

Three meters underground, Feliks heard the explosion from Lars' body. An intense heat washed over him, and the ground quaked for several seconds. He cried out, and was about to pound on the lid of the coffin, when he heard a low bark coming from beside him.

Feliks whimpered as the thing that had once been Dr. Mátyás Nemeş growled beside him.

A Cackmas Carol

December 24th, 2016. The halls of Site-59 were quiet, thanks to the elaborate network of layered soundproofing and noise-cancelling magnetic grids established for Cell 2337. Perhaps this Christmas Eve would indeed be a Silent Night. (Still, thanks to a particularly tactless Keter three floors below, the "Holy Night" aspect was right out.)

Just outside Cell 2337, a small red sock had been duct-taped to the door - filled with gummy worms.

Within the cell, **SCP-2337** had just finished its argument for the existence of God to a pile of synthetic bedding material in the corner. Satisfied that the green strands had agreed with its reasoning by disintegrating into warped confetti, the corn crake fluffed out its feathers. It placed its head in a dark toilet paper tube, and, having sufficiently convinced itself that nighttime had come at last, plopped on the ground and snored. The walls of the cell shook from its god-tier napping skills.

A sudden spark in the center of the cell —

"A thing?!" yelped SCP-2337, flapping its arms in alarm. Darting its head from here to there in search of the uninvited Thing, its eyes came at last to a Thin Blue Thing, sitting in the middle of a patch of ectoplasmic fog: A gummy worm.

"Dr. Spanko," moaned the candy. "Your hour of judgment is come."

"Stranglefruits!" said SCP-2337. "Am a Cackmas miracules!"

"Silence! I am the Ghost of Gummy Worms Past, here to show you the error of your ways. Long have you slaughtered my kin with your gluttonous cruelty. But in the end, who is truly devoured? The weak, taken too soon from life and saved? Or the strong, consumed by the weight of—"

Before the ghost could finish, SCP-2337 snatched it in its beak and slid it down its throat in one swift move.

Gourd Cack the us,

Eleventy-one!

(And how!)

A Calculated Risk

The door to Observation Room 221-D opened, then closed with a muted click. The man who slipped quietly through walked slowly across the room to the table set up in front of the window, and fondly regarded the old, worn calculator propped up facing the outside.

"Hello," the man said by way of greeting.

IS THAT YOU? flashed across the digital screen, jerkily, as if in a state of excitement or agitation.

The man paused for a few moments before answering. "Yeah, it is."

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? scrolled across the screen. *DO YOU HAVE ANY CLUE HOW LONG IVE BEEN WAITING?*

"Yeah," he whispered, a sad look crossing his face.

Silence. What felt like an eternity passed under the slow ticking of the clock on the wall.

YOURE ALL BIG NOW. it showed.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

Another pause.

I GUESS THAT MEANS THAT WE CANT GO HOME ANY MORE.

"… yeah."

YOURE ALL IMPORTANT NOW, TOO. ITS NOT SAFE FOR YOU TO BE HERE.

"I know. I just… wanted to come and say I'm sorry."

FOR WHAT?

He paused again. "For everything, I guess. Mainly for being selfish. For not thinking of the future."

ITS OKAY. YOU WERE A KID.

They stood for several more minutes in silence, neither of them able to give form to the thoughts in their minds.

"I should go," he finally said. "I can't stay for very long."

WILL YOU COME SEE ME AGAIN? it scrolled, slowly.

"I will, I promise. For real this time."

YOU SHOULD GO SEE THE YARN. HE MISSES YOU.

The man gazed down at the worn calculator for only a moment more before he quietly exited the room. The guard stationed at the door started as he walked by, as if waking from a dream.

"S-sir," the guard stammered as he scrambled to attention, his eyes resting on the gold-trimmed ID badge pinned to the man's chest. "I wasn't expecting…"

"Carry on, Agent."

A Canticle For Bright

Brother Zhakh sat alone on a bench in the great hall of Overwatch Cathedral. The sun shone dimly through the stained glass windows above, doing little to chase away the winter chill. Holy Doctors milled about in their ceremonial white robes, preparing for the day's rites. D-Castes tended the fire and minded the candles that lit the biggest building left in the known world in the year 586 A.B., the seat of the Holy Foundation.

Near the altar, a deacon led a group of initiates in chanting from the Holy Procedures. "SCP-087 is located on the campus of Redacted," he sang.

"SCP-087 is located on the campus of Redacted," the initiates repeated.

"The doorway leading to SCP-087 is constructed of reinforced steel with an electro-release lock mechanism," he sang.

"The doorway leading to SCP-087 is constructed of reinforced steel with an electro-release lock mechanism," they repeated.

Brother Zhakh shivered and pulled his robes tighter around himself for warmth as he listened to the chanting. The campus of Redacted was impossibly distant; a thousand kilometers or more, if it even still stood so many centuries after the Great Breach, and whether the doorway to that staircase even existed any longer was known only by the Expunged and the other heathens that dwelled in that land. Eight days had he sat in the great hall waiting to be seen; he began to wonder if the audience he had walked all the way from the Nineteenth Monastery for would ever happen at all.

"Brother Zhakh, Deacon Assistant?" Zhakh looked up to see a man in the black robes of the Omega Guard, short sword on his belt, a scroll in his hands.

"Yes, sir guardsman?" he meekly replied.

"The Holy Father will see you now. Please follow me."

Zhakh followed the guardsman from the great hall, down a labyrinth of corridors that descended into the earth. The brick and mortar of the great cathedral, which had taken the D-Castes nearly half a century to build, soon gave way to ancient concrete and steel, remnants of the Old Temple that once had stood on this spot before the world was consumed by demonic wrath. The guardsman approached one of many doors branching off from the long hallway. Reaching into his robes, he produced a piece of ancient technology, the making of which had been lost to mankind with so much else - a small plastic card with a black stripe along one side, which he placed into a lock on the door. A light on the device changed from red to green, and the guardsman gestured for Zhakh to enter.

Lord Jack, Zhakh prayed silently to his namesake as he reached for the knob, *speak for me in my hour of need. Secure for me the blessings of Your glory, as You secured the secrets of the ancient world. Contain all those who would do me harm, as You contained the chaos of the Great Breach when You died and rose again. Protect me with Your love and grace, as even now You protect Your Church from the devils that walk the world. For Yours is the Foundation on which we shall rebuild. Amen.*

The office was small and windowless, its walls covered with shelves upon which stood hundreds of books, some new, some old, some older than old. Neither candle nor fire lit the room, but a flickering electric lamp, one of the last in the world and worth its weight in telekill, shone brightly from the ceiling. A wooden desk stood in the center of the room, covered with reams of paper and vellum. Open in the center sat a great book, written and illuminated by hand - one of the few complete copies in existence of the Holy Containment Procedures, open to an illustration of the tale of St. Alto and the Dragon. Sitting on the edge of the desk, encased in glass, was an amulet on a chain - whether it was the real one, or one of the twelve replicae, only the man who occupied the office knew, but real or not it marked him as a vicar of the Lord Bright.

Zhakh fell to his knees as the amulet's owner rose to his feet - an

old man, his gray beard stretching down his chest, his ornate crimson robe embroidered all over in gold with the symbols of the Church - the trefoil that the Ancient Temple had used as its coat of arms, the Holy Amulet, the names and numbers of the Mobile Legions that had protected Lord Jack and the saints during the Great Breach, the emblems of the Heathen Temples who had repented and joined the Foundation after the Great Breach. Here stood Cardinal Doctor Zhakib Samesh III, Holy Father of the Foundation, Custodian of the Fifth Order of Secrets, Member of the Council of Thirteen - and Zhakh's father.

"Good morning, my lord," Zhakh said.

"What is your name, my child?" asked Cardinal Samesh. The cardinal knew full well the name of the man who kneeled before him, of course, but the manner by which a junior cenobite greets a father of the Church was an ancient tradition, and there were few left in the world who honored and respected tradition so greatly as the Holy Foundation.

"Zhakh Samesh, my lord," Zhakh responded, "Deacon Assistant and Aspirant of the Order of St. Everett, of the cloister of the Nineteenth Monastery."

"Does the black moon howl?"

"Only when waning."

"We accept your greeting." Cardinal Samesh extended his right hand, and Zhakh kissed the golden ring on his middle finger. "Rise and be seated."

Zhakh rose from his knees and seated himself in the plain chair at one end of the desk as the cardinal seated himself in the elaborately carved throne at the other end. "For what purpose does an aspirant of St. Everett seek our attention this day?"

"I have come," Zhakh said meekly, "to request that I be released from my holy orders."

Cardinal Samesh raised an eyebrow quizzically. "This is indeed a

great boon that you ask. Have you not been your entire life in the cloister?"

"Yes," Zhakh answered as the cardinal knew he would. "I was born into the holy caste, as was my father, and his father, and his father, and so on unto St. Samesh the Liberator, who defended the survivors of the Seventy-Third chapel when it came under attack by heathen forces during the Great Breach."

"And are you not at the cusp of completing your studies, and being ordained a Holy Doctor of the Church this next year?"

"Yes, Holy Father. I submitted my doctoral thesis on the Holy Containment Procedures to the Council of Ethicists two months ago."

"Then why do you now come before us, saying that you wish to abandon the Holy Foundation and live among the civilians?"

Zhakh was silent a moment while he formulated his answer. "The Council of Ethicists rejected my findings entirely," he said, "and I believe that the Holy Foundation has lost its way if it believes that my findings are wrong."

"What is the purpose of requiring aspirants to present a thesis?" Cardinal Samesh asked.

"That the aspirant may learn to understand the words of the Lord Bright as revealed in the Holy Containment Procedures, that he may learn how they are meant to be applied, how to perform those rites which have been lost to us, to understand that which time and calamity have made unclear, and to refine the practices of the Holy Foundation to ensure that the rites are not performed erroneously."

Cardinal Samesh nodded. "And what was the topic of your thesis, aspirant?"

"The Rite of Montauk," Zhakh said.

Cardinal Samesh sighed knowingly. "We see," he said. "We might have suspected as much - you have been obsessed with that rite since I… since your father took you to see it performed when you

were a child, have you not?"

Zhakh nodded. "He said it was important for me to understand the things we must do to keep at bay the forces that caused the Great Breach. I have spent much of the last five years in study and prayer over the subject. I have read all there is to read on the subject, from the Holy Scripture itself, to what ancient documents survived the Great Breach, to the musings and studies composed on the Rite by those Holy Doctors before me."

"And what was the finding of your thesis?"

"That the Rite of Montauk should be abolished."

The cardinal raised his eyebrow. "Do you know what would happen if the Rite of Montauk were not performed as the Holy Containment Procedures instruct, aspirant?"

"No," Zhakh said. "None know but the Lord Bright, for those pages have been expunged - and He speaks only when He wishes to do so. St. Agatha said that it was not performed during the Great Breach, and that much calamity ensued because of it."

"Then why would you insist that such a thing be allowed to happen again?"

"I have learned," Zhakh said, "that the Mother of Demons, she upon whom the Rite must be performed, is not she who today lies in chains beneath the Nineteenth Monastery. St. Alto on his deathbed confessed that he had killed her during the Great Breach, and the Lord Bright Himself confirmed it when He spoke, through a D-Caste bearing the Holy Amulet, to the Synod of New Denver in 237."

"Then who is it upon which the Rite is performed?"

"There have been eighteen," Zhakh said. "This I learned from the old records of those civilians taken by the Monastery and placed among the D-Caste for their crimes. Whenever one dies, they find a young woman who has not known a man and she becomes the subject of the Rite. I believe that whatever act was committed centuries ago that created the Mother of Demons, they perform also on this

woman - so that the Rite can be enacted upon her."

"You *believe* this?" the Cardinal asked.

"Those pages have been expunged," Zhakh replied.

"And what do you propose?"

"That the need for the Rite has passed if the Mother of Demons is dead; and there is no need to create a new Mother simply so that the Rite can be performed upon her."

The cardinal paused. "Is it not possible," he asked, "that there must always be a Mother of Demons, whether we wish it to be or not?"

"The Holy Containment Procedures speak of no such thing," Zhakh said. "It cannot be known unless…"

"…Unless we test it and see what happens?"

"Yes, my lord."

"It is written," the cardinal said, "that the last words spoken before the Great Breach were 'test it and see what happens'."

"Are we not protectors?" Zhakh asked. "Is it not our duty not only to protect the world from devilry, but to protect the devils from themselves? This is why I must ask to be dismissed - we cannot do our duty to protect these unfortunate women if we are so terrified by the unknown."

The cardinal opened his mouth, then paused in contemplation for a moment. The look on his face changed - gone was the academic, the cleric, the cold, detached visage of a man whom protocol demanded ignore that his own son was before him in the midst of a crisis of faith. "Did I ever tell you," he said, "about the time the Lord Bright spoke to me? In the flesh?"

"No," Zhakh said.

"When I was a child and my father occupied this office," the cardinal said nostalgically, "I was not as… deliberative in my studies as I

could have been. I thought, much as you surely do now, that procedures written six hundred years ago by men now dead were of little importance, and that much of what they described must now be dead, or broken, or lost forever in the darkness. I hated spending my days learning to recite the procedures, memorizing ancient interviews, being yelled at by my father for giggling while he led the initiates in reciting Bright's Prayer. I thought I could find some way to prove that it was all hogwash - and then I thought of this." He gestured to the amulet encased in glass on his desk. "If I picked it up, and nothing happened, so I thought, it would prove that Jack Bright was gone forever and there was nothing to the Holy Containment Procedures but old superstitions.

"I convinced one of the D-Caste to let me in after my father had excused himself to perform his duties. I had him break the case and take the amulet out to hand it to me. As soon as he laid hands on it, he… changed."

Zhakh gasped. "So this is…"

"This is the real one," the cardinal responded. "I knew right away that the man before me was no longer a slave whose great-grandfather had been indentured for stealing chickens, but our Lord and Director Himself. He looked right at me, and He spoke."

"What did he say?"

The cardinal sighed deeply. " 'Dammit, not this again.' "

"And then what?"

"Then," the cardinal said, "He grabbed a quill off my father's desk and He stabbed Himself in the eye. By the time I could find anyone to help Him, He was already dead."

"What happened when your father found out?"

"I told him what I had done and asked him to dismiss me, much as you ask me for dismissal now. He refused. He ordered me to be confined alone in my cell and to contemplate and pray day and night until I could tell him what the Lord Bright had been trying to teach

me when He took His own life so."

"And what was that?"

"That all actions have consequences," the cardinal said mournfully. "And that when those actions involve the Scripture, the consequences can cost lives. And that once in a great while, when a man acts without considering what may happen if his assumptions are wrong, then another heaven and another earth must pass before all is as it was before." The cardinal was silent a moment. "Do you understand why I have told you this, aspirant?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Your request to be dismissed is denied," he said. "You may remain here tonight and depart for your cloister in the morning. Begin your research anew and present a thesis that does not involve the Mother of Demons or the Rite of Montauk. Go in peace."

"Thank you, my lord." Zhakh rose and left the room. The guardsman had gone - Zhakh made his way alone down the hall back to the antechamber, and from there towards the sleeping quarters where a cell and a bed had been provided for him. The audience had not gone as he anticipated, but he nonetheless felt a strange satisfaction. It would be years before Zhakh would be ready to present a new thesis - but perhaps, if he kept the faith, someday he might find himself on the other side of that ancient desk, as his own son asked to be dismissed.

A Chance at Freedom

The facility's power supply had been cut for the past twenty hours. God knows what put the lights out, but the more belligerent occupants were grateful. The darkness of the site blanketed every cell, granting the many objects contained within a perfect cover to slip the militias sent out to keep order.

One such object slipped through the veil of blackness, scuttling behind the back of an unsuspecting mercenary. The man was spraying boiling lead into a crowd of orange jumpsuit wearing men and women, each vying for an escape from the hellish facility.

The object couldn't help but feel contempt for such a worthless creature, blasting its own worthless kin with primitive weaponry. A firecracker with a bit of metal stuck on it, jettisoned down a tube. It was akin to a caveman throwing rocks, at least to the object. If only he had retained his weaponry upon arrival to this damnable dimension. Why, he'd have the whole organization in flames…

The object shook off the grandiose dreams of revenge. It didn't matter, time was vital and he had to locate his partner. Poor boy, he wasn't ready for such a mission. He would hear his partner's panicked, almost incoherent wailing deep into the night. He was a fresh body at the academy, right in his prime. He didn't deserve this hellish dimension and its ghastly occupants.

“I've gotta keep a clear head,” the object thought to himself. His partner was likely either in a panic or near catatonic somewhere nearby. He hadn't been too far when the pandemonium of the breach caused them to get separated. Nonetheless, he felt bad. He had been the senior officer assigned to the new cadet, and he failed him at every turn.

He thought back to when they first landed in that field. They had already lost their weaponry, and the mayday they issued appeared to fall on deaf ears. The bipedal beasts, the 'humans' as they

referred to themselves, seemed dangerous but stupid. The object sighed to himself, he didn't like to say it out loud, but he did underestimate those bipedal brutes.

Another type of beast raced through from behind the object. The gentle sound of a crack and a scream cut short were the tell-tale signs of it.

It stood somewhat larger than a human, and was crafted in an exaggeration of their visage. Somehow, it seemed even more disturbing to the object than the humans. Still, the object had learned through the passing comments of the humans and observation that the beast had an easily exploited weakness.

The object turned, but he did so with a deliberate, slow motion. It was a meek attempt at putting off having to stare into that awful form's green, lifeless gaze.

His sight affixed to the sculpture, freezing it in its tracks. He must've only gazed at it for a few seconds, but that short passage of time had mutated into hellish hours within the mind of the object.

The guttural call of one of those humans finally broke the showdown. The object felt the greasy, wretched hand of the human on the top of his head, brushing down his sensitive sensory organ, causing a chill to run the length of his body.

“Thanks **131**, you really helped us out in containing **173**!”

The human grabbed the object, who was unable to do anything but swear worse than any sailor. Swears that, to the human, sounded like nothing more than cute little bleeps.

“Let's go find your friend, little buddy.”

Freedom would not come today.

A Chance Encounter

"…in three, two, one, mark," said the pilot as the ship blinked in from hyperspace. "All systems normal, and… there's the landmark beacon. It looks like we're ready for the nineteenth system when you are, captain."

"Wonderful," responded the captain. "Bring up the cloaking device, start heading in then, standard trajectory, you know the routine."

A moment later, the intercom on the bridge squawked to life. "All of our guests are showing stable vital signs, captain. Shall I wake the ones in stasis?"

"Yes, please do, doctor," the captain replied into the intercom, "and also let them know we'll be nearing the first gas giant in a few hours."

"Captain, you need to see this," exclaimed the pilot without looking up from the display. "I've checked this several times but…."

"What, pilot?"

"It's the satellite of the blue rock. It's… gone."

"Gone?" repeated the captain incredulously. "The great white satellite? How can it just be gone?"

"I… have no idea, captain, but it's not showing up anywhere in any spectrum."

The captain was silent a moment before speaking again. "What about the third planet itself, pilot?"

"It's still there," responded the pilot while scanning through multiple readouts. "There seems to be a lot of energy coming from it, but

we're still too far out to get any details."

"Hmm… our itinerary has us going to the rocky planets soon enough. Continue on toward the outermost giant, but keep your sensors on the third planet. I want to know what's happened to its satellite, and I'm sure I'm not the only one. I need to let them know back home what we know so far."

"What about the guests?"

The captain groaned. "I have to let them know as well, but you and I both know they'll be disappointed if something's happened to the biggest draw in the system."

The rendezvous with the outermost giant came and went without incident, and it had been several hours since the ship had changed course heading toward the ringed giant. The anticipation amongst the guests was more subdued than usual on approaching the sixth planet, and the fate of the third planet and its satellite remained a popular topic of conversation for guests and crew alike.

On the bridge, the doctor and the pilot were poring over readouts from the ship's array of sensors, most of which had been directed toward the third planet. The captain was sitting nearby, reviewing updates on the ship and its contents, when he received a page on his private comm.

"The energy coming off the third planet is still off the scale across all spectra," said the doctor. "It would be a miracle if anything were to have survived, no matter what actually happened in the first place."

"All right, we'll check it out," muttered the captain as the comm channel closed. "Pilot, bring up visuals of the red rock. I've gotten reports that several guests have seen something unusual in that direction through their scopes. Something tiny, but not moving like any sort of pebble."

As the pilot worked to bring the visuals up, the doctor started calling up sensor data from the region of the red rock. A moment later, a complex sensor image of the fourth planet appeared on the main

viewscreen, and it wasn't long before the doctor spoke up.

"I've found it, in the sensor logs, which would put it about… there," declared the doctor, pointing to a spot on the viewscreen. Instantly the image changed as the pilot zoomed in on that spot. The doctor rechecked the sensor log, pointed to another spot, and the pilot zoomed in again.

After the fourth zoom, they saw it: a tiny green dot in the starfield. The pilot centered the view on the dot and zoomed in again, giving the crew their first good look at the object. It looked like a green ship, but much smaller than even the escape pods on the ship. It also appeared to be pointed toward the ship, and the crew could see a large jet of green vapor apparently coming from the rear of the object.

"It looks to be fifteen to twenty feet long, all told, and maybe five feet tall," reported the doctor. "And it appears to be headed for us on an intercept course."

"Our cloak is still up, correct?" responded the captain, receiving affirmation from the pilot. "Then how can it pierce our cloak? None of the native sapients in this system should be able to do that! Unless…."

The captain pulled up a file on the third planet and jumped to the section on native lifeforms. A moment later, the captain said, "The sapients from the third planet are generally five-and-a-half to six feet tall. Even with just one crewmember, that's awfully cramped in there, and there would be very little room left over for support systems…."

"Captain!" the pilot called out. "Come look at this!"

On the viewscreen, the green object had extended a tubular structure from its back right, pointing several degrees to the right of straight back. A second later, a second green jet emanated from the end of the tube, causing the object to start turning slightly to its left.

"Captain, if I didn't know better, I would swear there were claws at the end of that exhaust tube," said the doctor.

“Doctor, I think you may be right,” responded the captain. “I don’t think that’s a ship. I think it’s a beast of some kind.”

“How can that be possible?” asked the doctor. “There is nothing in the records for this system about any type of native space beasts.”

“If I had to wager, I would guess it has something to do with what happened to the blue rock. In any case, we’re not prepared to deal with a space beast, and I’d rather not bring it on board and endangering our guests if we can help it. Send a message back home and see how quickly they can get out here with a xenobiology detail. I’d recommend a well-armed one.”

The ship reached the ringed giant on schedule; by that time, the green beast had cleared the ring of pebbles on its way to the sixth planet. Since its discovery by the crew, the beast had gotten progressively faster, as its green jet appeared to have been functioning continuously, causing speculation as to how the beast was generating so much power. The doctor also noted that the beast gave off very little heat, though this was not unusual among known space beasts.

The itinerary had allotted ten dozen hours for guests to explore the ringed giant and its satellites, before heading to the inner planets, including the still highly-exothermic third planet. At its projected acceleration, the beast would have crossed the orbit of the great giant by then (though the fifth planet itself was on the other side of its star). If an encounter were imminent, the captain would prefer that it happen in a planetary system rather than in interplanetary space. Plus, reinforcements were on the way.

Before long, three ships blinked in from hyperspace just beyond a landmark beacon. Once they got their bearings and cloaked, one light warship headed for the sixth planet, while the other escorted the research ship on its way to the third planet. From the ringed giant, it appeared the beast did notice the newly-arrived ships, but did not otherwise immediately react. A few hours later, the beast cut off its green vapor jet, though it would still reach the sixth planet well before the warship.

After another dozen hours, three additional ships blinked in, two more light warships and a creature-capture vessel, all of which cloaked and started heading toward the ringed giant. The beast continued to hurtle toward the sixth planet, occasionally adjusting course with its rear legs.

It was several hours before the beast was expected to arrive at the ringed giant. Though many guests were out on the last scheduled excursions before the beast's arrival, many more were watching the live feed of the beast at several locations around the touring ship, particularly its massive observation deck. This video feed also went to the other six ships in the system, where it received similar interest from their respective crews, and was already on its way back home.

The beast extended its rear legs, and from its right leg came a thin jet of green vapor. The jet lasted only a few seconds, but was enough to start the beast slowly rotating. When the beast had rotated nearly ninety degrees, for the first time since it was discovered, it moved its head, curling it under its belly to be able to see where it was going. As it neared a half-rotation, a green jet appeared from its left rear leg, lasting a couple seconds. Several more pulses of jet intermittently came from each leg, till the beast's rear was pointing toward the ringed giant.

Suddenly, a massive green cloud of vapor erupted out of the rear of the beast, enveloping it as it continued to hurtle through space. Though somewhat indistinct through the vapor, the viewers of the video feed could still see the beast extend its rear legs straight ahead, adding two smaller vapor jets to the larger one. Two more vapor jets appeared a moment later.

By then, the observation deck was a din of cheers and applause, which increased sharply when the beast extended its front legs and opened its mouth, adding three more vapor jets.

The beast could now be seen unaided from the observation deck, and though its nine vapor jets had been counterthrusting almost continuously, it was still going too quickly to stop by the time it reached the planet. The touring ship itself had established orbit

around the ringed giant, near the giant's largest white satellite. The leading warship was still many hours away, having yet to cross the toppled giant's orbit; the slower capture vessel's group trailed by at least two dozen hours.

As the guests and crews watched intently, the beast, still at full counterthrust, shot past the gas giant. The beast attempted to rotate as it passed the planet, but only succeeded in punching a hole in the planet's rings. The beast reoriented itself toward the sixth planet and opened all its vapor jets.

"It appears that the beast is intelligent," said the doctor. "It looks like it tried to use the gravity well of the planet to slow itself."

On the ship-to-ship comm, the biologist from the capture vessel said, "Yes, but I doubt that the beast is native to space. A native space beast should have more control over its speed and know when to start slowing down. Our beast overshot its apparent target, but it tried to compensate and it certainly appears to be trying to return."

"It has managed to slow down quite a bit," said the pilot, "and based on how much counterthrust it generated earlier, it should start coming back here in… about four hours."

Four and a half hours later, the beast cut all its vapor jets except its main rear jet, though it was noticeably smaller than before. The beast uncurled and folded its limbs into itself, taking the form in which it was discovered, and slowly started heading back to the ringed planet.

The beast took its time returning to the ringed planet, leaving its jet on for only a few minutes. Thus, when it drifted back into visual range of the touring ship, the lead warship was itself only a few hours away from the ringed giant.

The sense of anticipation was building on the observation deck as the beast crossed the orbit of the great hazy satellite. The beast extended its front legs forward and turned on their jets to slow down further, drifting very slowly towards the touring ship. The crew of the

ship was anxious but alert, ready to defend or flee the moment the word came down.

Moments before it reached the ship, the beast unfolded its legs and relaxed its body, finally looking more like a beast than a ship to its attentive audience. The crowd could see the beast had six legs, a neck at least a foot long, and a thin tail, and the “hull” of the ship turned out to be a series of articulated chitinous shells. The beast appeared to stretch its legs as it drifted toward the touring ship.

The beast drifted over the window of the observation deck, grabbed onto a support arch outside the window, and positioned itself to look inside the window. For several minutes, the beast watched the crowd through the observation window, moving to different support arches to see the entire deck, while the guests and crew watched the beast in fascination. The beast then stopped and sat still for several more minutes before gliding off the observation window.

External sensors followed the beast as it skittered over the surface of the ship, tapping, sniffing, grasping outcroppings with its feet and its prehensile tail, even tasting the ship in a few places. Every so often the beast would stop and sit still as before, twice lying completely prostrate on the ship’s hull. After a couple hours of exploring a small fraction of the ship’s surface, the beast returned to the observation window to look in on the assembled crowd.

The beast had remained on the support arch watching the lead warship as it arrived at the sixth planet and took position alongside the touring ship. Once the warship was positioned, the beast glided over to it and began to explore its surface like it examined the touring ship before. As it did so, the warship launched a tiny probe to examine the beast itself. The beast watched the probe warily as it approached, but did not stop it. When satisfied with its exploration, the beast returned to its perch on the observation window of the touring ship, where it remained until the three other ships arrived.

Once the ships arrived and took up their positions, the beast glided over to examine the creature-capture vessel. As it did so, a cargo bay door opened on the capture vessel, exposing a large air lock. The beast came back round to the open air lock, waited several

minutes eyeing the air lock, and slowly entered the air lock. A moment later, the cargo bay door closed with the beast still inside and examining its spacious confines.

After the unexpectedly smooth capture, the vessel and its escorts headed out to the nearest landmark beacon, while the touring ship started toward the inner planets. The research vessel was still many hours out from the third planet, but it had declared the hazardous region to be really tiny, extending out only twice the distance of its former satellite's orbit. The vessel also determined that nearly all of the mass of the satellite had fallen into the planet, and that most of the energy coming from the third planet appeared to have come from a very large number of fission reactions.

On the capture vessel, the biologist had discovered that the beast carried, though it seemed unaffected by, some type of primitive necrotizing contagion, one that most sophonts were already immune to. The beast had already shown signs of intelligence, so the biologist had started attempting to communicate with it, though the beast seemed uncomfortable around certain crewmembers. Otherwise, the beast appeared very powerful and highly adaptable, and smelled faintly, but distinctly, of mint.

Out past the landmark beacon, as the capture vessel prepared to blink into hyperspace, a small but unmistakable grin broke across the beast's face.

A Child to Teach

It relaxed for a moment, savoring the moment. It liked to have some leeway, and little children afraid of the dark gave it plenty. It wondered what it should do this time, pull it under the bed? No… the kid kept stuffed animals under there, and if he thought those wouldn't save him, he would eventually learn to cope with the dark, and nobody wanted that. Well, maybe some people did. Those "men of science". It would show them, as much as they wanted to believe humans were rational beings, calling a hand a foot does not make the name fit. It had already started fostering movements against them, expanding people's imagination so that they could see what would happen if they let these charlatans and quacks continue their practice.

But for now, it had a child to teach, and it was starting to think that maybe the ceiling fan might work as a proxy.

Billy laid wide awake on his bed in his polka dot pajamas. His eyes were wide with fear, glancing around his room, trying to see if any monsters were coming to eat him. He pulled down his covers and looked underneath the bed. His teddy bears were still down there as usual, holding down the fort so he could sleep safely at night. Breathing a sigh of relief, Billy pulled the covers back up and looked at the ceiling. He tried to not think about the video he had seen earlier that night, a scary mummy man who came out of people's closets and ate them as they were asleep.

He remembered to say his good night sentence, "Good dreams with good people.", and faced away from the closet, hoping that his older sister wouldn't walk around outside his bedroom door to scare him like she did last night.

Billy really hoped that there was nothing in his closet. He decided to make sure, and peeked over his shoulder quickly, trying to catch the mummy man unawares. The closet was still closed, dark as always.

Billy faced upward again, trying to focus on the ceiling. "Good dreams with good people." he whispered to himself, unsuccessfully trying to not look at the closet out of the corner of his eye.

He finally refocused on the ceiling fan, non-threatening as always, its mesmerizing blades slowly sweeping through the air.

There was something off about the fan though, something… sinister. Its dancing paddles no longer floating through the air, but cutting into it, grasping it, molesting the space around it. The four bulbs no longer seemed like sources of protection as they did when they were turned on, but more like eyes, one staring directly at him. The chain used to turn it on gradually extending itself like a long finger, wrapping itself around Billy's feet, slowly working their way up to his neck, where it strangle him while the eye bulbs watched.

Billy squirmed under his covers, pulling them up over his head. Safe in the darkness, he closed his eyes in an attempt to go to sleep.

It didn't work, he couldn't stop thinking about the ceiling fan, how it had seemed to come alive, trying to ensnare the little boy beneath it into its dastardly trap. Through the covers, his imagination saw the blades curl in like hands, extending their reach and plucking the eye bulbs out of their sockets throwing them onto the covers around him, slowly closing in, as the fan itself detached and began to encapsulate Billy. He saw the inside of the fan, a giant gaping maw of teeth and claws, ready to start eating him from the toes up. Green arms growing out of the top, grabbing Billy's feet, and holding him in place while he was eaten by the fan. "Good dreams with good people." Billy whimpered to himself this time, feeling the drowning weight of the covers and the stifling hot air around him close in. He started having trouble breathing, and with a quick motion, he brought the covers off of his head and took a deep breath of fresh, cold air. He made a quick glance at the ceiling fan, and it was just as it was before, spinning slowly in the fascinating way only a fan can spin.

Billy once again sighed a deep sigh of relief, closed his eyes, and entered a good dream, with good people.

Bill sat in the board room all by himself. Its cold, blank walls and empty chairs all seeming to stare back at him. He had been early, and was starting to wonder when everybody was going to show up.

It was already fifteen minutes past the set time, and Bill was starting to worry.

The only people who were so notoriously late was the Human Resources manager, and only when he was going to fire somebody.

Oh god, were they going to fire him? He had been such a good employee all these years, what had he done to get himself laid off?

He *needed* this job, he had three kids and a wife, he could barely pay for them now, if he got fired… *oh god*.

He started imagining the conversation.

Bob would just walk in, as nonchalant as possible. Probably humming a tune. He would take his time sitting down, pretend to sort through some papers in his briefcase, trying to pretend that Bill wasn't there. Suddenly, he would strike up a conversation, maybe flash those white fangs of his.

"Oh, hey there Bill, how's the family?"

Bill couldn't let him say that sentence. He needed this job so badly, in this market, there was zero hope of getting a new one, especially in his line of work.

Bill sighed, whatever the problem was, it couldn't be good.

The door to the meeting room started creaking open. Bill looked up from his thoughts and tried to see who it was. It was Bob. Bill narrowed his eyes, he was ready for any news.

"Sorry to keep you waiting Bill, but as you can see nobody else is going to show up. And I was a bit late, had to lay off some poor suckers. I came here to give you some news…" Bob started, pulling out a chair close to the door.

"Out with it man." Bill got through his gritted teeth.

"Congratulations Bill! You're getting a promotion. Great job all these years Bill, you have really shown you have what it takes!"

Bill's jaw dropped with surprise. "Wh.. What?"

"You're now the head of Finances!" Bob flashed him his startlingly white teeth while extending a hand.

Bill shook it slowly, slightly dazed, "I don't know what to say."

"No need, we are going to be moving you to your new office right now. So pack your things!" Bob helped Bill out of his seat.

Bill slowly started to smile, the day was starting to look up, and any fears he had before were gone.

It wasn't having a good day.

The only things it had been getting all day were stupid mundane things, mostly job related, and with new Illumilight system for kids, nobody was having any fears about going to bed.

It was bored out of its mind trying to figure out ways to innovate on old ideas.

There wasn't really anything to be afraid of anymore, in the past couple of years, all ideas of monsters or forgotten creatures of yore had been dispelled and forgotten.

It would just have to wait, mankind always forgets why they do things, and man always goes back to doing the wrong thing when he forgets. It still survived on the fringe of civilization, in the dark corners of the world. And if it had learned anything from mankind, it was patience.

And so It waited, biding its time, preparing for the day when we forget about it, but until then, It had some employees to scare.

A Circus Come To Not

« Let's Get This Show On The Road!| Dread & Circuses Hub | Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded »

“Pius, how do you keep getting us into these messes?” Eugene asked as he lurched over the side of the inflatable lifeboat, his face literally green from seasickness.

Though, it would perhaps be more accurate to call it motion sickness, as they weren’t floating upon an actual ocean. The body they were bobbing upon undulated up and down slowly and without rhythm, like a super-viscous fluid being frothed around in a bowl. The surface was a perfect mirror, but instead of the sky, it reflected an ever-shifting mosaic of scenes from every corner of Reality, stretching onwards without a horizon and seemingly to infinity. Though it looked fluid, if Eugene tried to cup it with his hand it would float into the air like smoke and sift through his fingers like sand. The strange sea was neither gaseous nor liquid nor solid, but rather a substance wholly alien to the known space-time continuum. As such, Eugene’s only perception of it was what optical illusions his brain would generate as it desperately tried to make sense of it.

“I hardly see how this was my fault,” Pius replied as he calmly read over the survival guide he had found among the lifeboat’s effects.

He glanced up briefly at the sky, which instead of a sun or moon or stars held a colossal, hyperdimensional tangle of multiverses, stretching from one end of the firmament to the other. Individual universes appeared primarily as midnight blue orbs stained with luminous webs, strung together like octopus eggs.

“If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even have the lifeboat and you’d be sinking all the way down to the Not Abyss. Do you know why this place is called the Not, Eugene? Because it’s Not our world, Not our universe, Not our multiverse and Not even our omniverse. We are outside of Reality itself, and the only reason it’s even remotely

comprehensible is that this is just the surface of the Not and we can still see our own Reality from here. Now, if you go deep enough down that you can't see home anymore, then your mind will shatter just from the sheer nature of the Not itself. Those are some truly unfathomable fathoms, let me tell you. Literally indescribable, utterly inconceivable and unimaginable, not a single mote of stuff down there that wouldn't drive you absolutely bonkers just trying to wrap your head around it."

Eugene retched, releasing a copious volume of glittery black Clown vomit out of his mouth and straight into the incomprehensible Not.

"Okay, well now there's Clown vomit down there, and that I understand," Pius conceded.

Eugene groaned as he flopped over on his back, his face still as green as a pickle.

"You're the one who shapeshifted into a mouse and sent Bubblegum into a panic while we were in the Nautilus's passenger hold," Eugene reminded him.

"I thought she was passed out."

"Well, why would you turn into a mouse in the first place?"

"It was cramped in there, so I turned into a tiny animal. It was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It's not my fault that a startled, hungover elephant accidentally knocked Danny over and his eternally enflamed head set the hold on fire. You were the one who screamed 'abandon ship!' and leapt out the porthole."

"You didn't have to follow me!"

"I didn't, and neither did Bubblegum. If her head wasn't stuck in the porthole, or she hadn't been trumpeting like crazy, someone might have noticed we went overboard."

"Well, like you said, at least you had this inflatable lifeboat on you. I'd probably be dead right now if it wasn't for you."

"Thank you."

“What about the rest of the Circus? You don’t think they’re…”

“Unlikely. There was at least one fire extinguisher in the hold and the blaze hardly seemed out of control. The Nautilus is probably looking for us right now.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do us. Space and Time are meaningless here. For all we know, they’ve given up the search, gone home, and our universe has already expired from heat death.

…

“Try calling Gary.”

“I doubt we’ll get a signal here.”

“Just try it.”

“Alright then.”

Pius reached into his pocket, pulled out a French-style rotary phone and dialled Gary’s eleven digit number.

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

…

Ring Ring

“It’s ringing.”

“I can hear it.”

“Gary? Gary is that you?” the voice on the phone asked.

“What? No, I was calling for Gary. Who’s this?” Pius asked.

“This is Pius the Clown. Who’s this?”

“You’re not Pius, I’m Pius!” Pius objected.

“It sounds like you,” Eugene claimed.

“I do not!” the voice on the phone said.

“Pius, it’s just pattern screamers, hang up,” another voice that sounded like Eugene said.

“We’re not pattern screamers, you’re pattern screamers!” Pius screamed, in a very pattern like way, slamming the receiver down. “That’s why I like old phones; you can’t hang up angrily with a smartphone.”

“I think we should take stock of our supplies,” Eugene suggested.

“Good idea. We have one rotary aether phone that can only be used to call pattern screamers. We have this survival guide, *How To Survive When Reality Doesn’t* by Dr. Alto Clef.”

“Why is the cover just a crudely drawn bunny in a hat?”

“It’s memetic, or at least a meme. As for the essentials, we have 1,2,3,4… 23 pints of Clown's Milk.”

…

“You just carry nearly two dozen pints of Milk around on you now? Are you trafficking the stuff?”

“Well we get lost a lot, plus since we started ultra-pasteurizing it we don’t need to worry about it spoiling.”

“Pasteurized Milk is a Fun-Lover conspiracy to weaken us! Raw Milk is natural! Raw Milk is healthier! Raw Milk is delicious! Raw Milk is…”

Eugene’s rant was suddenly interrupted by his cheeks ballooning with more vomit, which he promptly expectorated into the Not.

“Uggghhh. Not that I’ll be able to keep it down, but how are we set for food?”

“Let’s see. I’ve got a bag of Circus Peanuts, some Cotton Candy, a couple boxes of Animal Crackers, still got some of Saccharina’s Sweets but I was hoping to hold onto them.”

“You always were too sentimental.”

“There’s Kettle Corn, Corn Dogs, Dog biscuits, Purple Fluffernutter Sandwiches (Lolly’s favourite) and… an apple.”

“A caramel apple?”

“No, just an apple.”

“Gross.”

“Plus, I’m sure you still have the Bazooka, so that’s an infinite supply of cream pies right there.”

“Wait, that’s it! The Bazooka!”

“What about it?”

“We can use it as a rocket engine!”

…

“Huh?”

“It’s Thermodynamics! We set it to make pies with extra inertia, fire them out the back, and that will propel us forward!”

…

“That is the greatest idea you’ve ever had.”

Eugene forced himself to his feet in spite of his motion sickness and retrieved the enormous bazooka from his tiny pockets. Mounting it on his shoulder and taking care to keep it level so they didn’t go plunging down into the Not or flying up towards the Is, he fired off a coconut cream pie.

The pie erupted forward with so much force it sent Eugene, but not the boat, flying backwards. Thinking fast, Eugene immediately

shapeshifted into a giant anthropomorphic parachute with the bazooka tied up in his safety harnesses. He was moving fast enough that he was able to catch enough air (or whatever was floating just above the Not) to lift him up by several dozen meters. As he gradually floated back down, he was able to manipulate his position by blowing until both he and the bazooka gently landed back inside the lifeboat.

…

“Guess we should have secured it to something, huh?”

After they had completed the inventory of everything in their pockets, Pius decided to try his luck at fishing with a rod he had found.

“And what exactly do you hope to catch? It’s not a real ocean, remember?” Eugene asked, busying himself with trying to create a pivoting holder for the bazooka out of a unicycle and a few rolls of duck tape (not a typo, actual analogue tape rolls of numerous documentaries about ducks).

“Well, it’s the Not, so Not a fish,” Pius explained as he hooked the popped kettle corn kernel onto the fishing line. “Not a crab, Not a squid, Not a polyp, Not a sponge, Not a slug, Not an eel, Not a starfish, Not a jellyfish and Not a sea turtle. But at the same time, Not nothing.”

Casting his line, the popcorn kernel splashed into the Not with a good solid ‘splunk’. At the same time, a giant popcorn kernel suddenly appeared, dangling in front of them while held by only a hairsbreadth of thread.

“Ah…Eugene, do you see that?”

“I see it, Pius. Is that yours?”

“I’m not sure. Let me try something.”

Pius tentatively moved his line back and forth, only for the large kernel in front of him to mirror his movements.

“Eugene, can you see what it’s attached to?”

“No, the string just goes up for as far as I can see.”

Pius lifted his line out of the water, causing the giant kernel to disappear, only to reappear as soon as he let the lure drop below the surface again.

“I hope it’s not another pattern screamer. That last one was so rude, hanging up on us like that.”

…

“Wait, what?”

“Hey, bring it a bit closer. I want to try something,” Eugene ordered. Pius complied, manoeuvring his fishing line so that the giant kernel hung within reach of the boat. Eugene jumped and grabbed it, giving it a sharp pull. Just as expected, Pius felt a tug on his line.

“That is truly perplexing,” Pius said with a furrowed brow. “I wonder… hey Eugene, hold on tight!”

“What? Oh no, no, no, no!”

Eugene screamed as Pius reeled in his line, causing him to shoot into the sky and reappear bursting through the surface of the Not, dangling from the end of the lure.

“See Eugene, I told you I wouldn’t catch nothing!”

As Eugene huddled under a blanket and sipped Clown’s Milk in an attempt to calm himself after his brief Not exposure, Pius (who had made himself a tricorne hat out of an old newspaper, irrefutably making him the lifeboat captain) read aloud from Dr. Clef’s Survival Guide.

“Did you ever think about how weird the terms Humes and Kants are? Most scientific phenomena are named after the people who discovered them or Greek letters, but we named these things after Enlightenment Era philosophers as… what, a joke?

“Anyway, say you’re in a region with a low Hume level – or low Kant level, whatever, I never learned the damn system – you’ll know because a) the number on your Kant Counter will be low – I don’t know how low. Again, I never learned the system – and b) EVERYTHING WILL LOOK LIKE YOU'RE TRIPPING BALLS!

“Now, it’s possible you are tripping balls and reality is actually perfectly normal, so you’re going to want to do a little field sobriety test. First, stare at your hands. Keep staring at them. If your hands don’t look normal, then you’re tripping balls. Get yourself someplace safe – not a hospital – and enjoy. If they look normal, then that means you’re in a low Hume/Kant region and are probably fucked.

“I’ll be honest, getting yourself unfucked ain’t going to be easy. Talloran managed to do it though, so there’s some hope, right? Best advice I can give here is not to count on Scranton Reality Anchors. Hell, those things didn’t even help Scranton in the end, you know (You probably don’t know since this is all highly classified information)."

“Can you please just skip to something that might actually be helpful?” Eugene asked.

“I”ll try. Let’s see, next is a rant about how he thinks he might be in a nuthouse somewhere and all Reality is his delusion, making him God. Then he speculates on how Gears can be a robot and the Black Queen’s father at the same time, talks about some stuff from his Geo Sea days… yeah, I’m starting to think this isn’t an actual survival guide.”

“It’s probably not a good idea to take survival advice from a guy who would kill us if he had the chance in the first place. Where’d you get that book anyway?”

“I found it in a Bargain Bin at **`The Ikea`** that time we were there. The review on the back said it was must-read TV.”

…

“What?”

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

“The phone’s ringing again Eugene.”

“I hear it.”

“Should I answer it?”

“No.”

…

Ring Ring

“I’m going to answer it.”

“Don’t.”

“Hello, this is Pius the Clown, whom may I say is calling?”

“I’m sorry, but the number you have dialled is imaginary,” an automated voiced replied.

“I didn’t dial anything, you called me.”

“Hang up. It's either a pattern screamer or a telemarketer.”

“All of our operators are currently disembodied consciousnesses trapped in an eternal hell of their own existential despair. Please, stay on the line.”

The phone began playing a dramatic if melancholic instrumental track as hold music.

…

“Are you actually staying on the line?”

“They said ‘please’ Eugene.”

“Ugh.”

“**The Is is what was Nevermeant, the Not what should have Been,**” a deep, demonic voice said as it suddenly broke the melody of the hold music.

“Hello, who’s this?”

“**For all that Is, there is an Infinity more that could have been. It is not just. The Is hath no more right to Be than the Not. Some Not is Ought whilst most Is should be Not, yet the Is will rot to Not in time**.”

"How are you speaking in bold?"

"Hang up!"

"**…THE KING SAT ALONE ON HIS THRONE OF BONE, CONDONED BY THE CLONES OF STONE. BEMOANED BY THE KNOWN, GROWN FROM WHAT WAS SOWN**, and the world felt like nothing, amen."

…

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number.”

Click

"I told you it was a telemarketer."

“Alright, that should do it,” Eugene said as he completed the final inspection of his cream pie jet engine rig.

“Hey Eugene, what do you think these big monoliths are?” Pius asked, cocking his head at the peculiar protrusion of gleaming stone rising out of the sea.

“It doesn’t matter. If this jet engine works, we’ll be able to travel the Not until we find a whirlpool back to our Reality, then we can find the Library, and then the Circus, and then forget all of this ever happened.”

…

“Do you think they’re just like some kind of iceberg or something?”

“Next time Icky wants to travel outside all known Reality, I’m taking a personal day.”

“This one’s getting awfully close.”

“I’m telling you, I’m going to have to get Tinkles to up my dose of Clown Impulse Suppressant after this.”

“The more I look, the more real it becomes.”

“This is not where I thought I’d be at this point in my life.”

“And yet, I cannot look away.”

“Being shuffled across the Not just so that I can crawl out of a snake’s ass.”

“It’s *hypnotic*.”

“Pius, are you even lis – Pius, no!”

Alas, Eugene’s intervention came too late. The Monolith had drawn existence from Pius’s mere observation of it, entrancing him and becoming more and more real the closer it got. As soon as it was in reach, Pius reached out to touch it. The act of feeling it was enough to make it fully real. Luminescent cracks formed in a grid-like pattern all along the Monolith’s exterior, causing it to break off into a million pieces and evaporate into smoke. In its place was an entity of some sort, composed entirely of radiant blacks and vacuous whites, of three-dimensional shapes that only made sense as two-dimensional drawings, of particles and forces which could only exist in the mind but drove mad any mind that beheld them.

…

“Oh, it’s an egg or cocoon or something. That’s neat,” Pius remarked.

The entity landed with a splash into the Not, generating a tsunami that sent the lifeboat spiralling away from it. Both Clowns screamed in terror and Eugene puked from a combination of terror and motion sickness, looking up in horror at the colossal entity before them. Their horror only increased when the entity seemed to take an interest in them, swimming towards them and opening a large orifice to engulf them.

“It’s going to eat us!” Pius screamed.

“The hell it is! Why fill up on Clowns when you can skip straight to dessert?” Eugene asked as he aimed the bazooka/jet engine at the approaching monstrosity. “Eat Lemon Meringue you son of a bitch!”

Eugene squeezed the trigger and held it, producing a volley of pies at a rate of 700 rounds per minute (he had illegally modified the bazooka to be fully automatic sometime back when he realized the key to a good a pie throwing sketch was overkill). The inertially modified pies propelled the little lifeboat forward at fantastic speeds as it rode up and down the massive bow wave the creature generated in its pursuit. Though many of the pies disappeared down its cavernous cavity, they did not slake its appetite. The entity needed a conscious observer to ensure its continued reality. If it vanished from sight, it would cease to be all together, but with a pair of observers incorporated into its being it would become self-sustaining, free to go where it would.

As the tiny lifeboat and colossal entity skidded along the surface of the Not, neither seemed to be gaining the upper hand. Eugene steered as evasively as the jerry-rigged pie thruster would allow, but the monster would not be shaken. As if sensing its preys growing sense of hopelessness, the entity widened its cavity, eager to devour them and become real.

This, however, proved a foolish decision, as a beam of emerald green light was fired into its gaping maw, triggering a catastrophic explosion and blowing the creature into rapidly dematerializing bits. The blast was so powerful that the lifeboat was sent flying through the air.

Eugene and Pius thought for sure that this time they would plunge

into the Depths of the Not, but they instead landed in the Crow's Nest of the Nautilus. The pair looked up to see Munin staring down at them stoically.

"Eugene," he said, in as polite a tone as he could manage, but Eugene was sure he sensed the man's anal sphincter tighten in memory of their recent performance.

"Well, this is awkward."

"You morons!" Icky shouted as she crawled into the Crow's Nest, right before throwing her arms around the two wayward Clowns in relief. "I really thought we might have lost you this time! You have to be more careful!"

"Sorry Icky," the pair apologized, slightly out of synchronicity with each other.

"It was Pius's fault,"

"You're the one who jumped ship!"

"You're the one who caused a fire, making jumping ship the rational choice!"

"Enough!" Icky ordered. "Next time we travel through the Not, I'm locking you two up in a crate."

"How'd you find us anyway?"

"We detected a Monolith breaking on our scopes from 80 000 grimnauts away," Munin replied. "It's a rare and calamitous occurrence that Icky assured us could only have been caused by the two of you. Luckily, we're well prepared for Schrödinger Krakens."

"Come on you two. I want you below deck and well secured before Nemo makes the dive back home."

"Sounds good to me. The sooner there's dry land under my feet, the better," Eugene said, slinging the bazooka over his shoulder.

"I hope you two realize how lucky you are," Munin said severely.

"It wasn't luck, I broke open a Monolith."

“The surface of the Not is not only vast but an ever-changing kaleidoscope, with distance and location having little meaning," Munin continued. "Anything, or anyone, lost typically remains so until it sinks beneath the surface and the very concept of existence ceases to –“

His melodramatic monologue was interrupted by a cream pie to the face.

“Sorry. Hair trigger.”

« Let's Get This Show On The Road!| Dread & Circuses Hub | Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded »

A Circus for MC&D Ltd

The dinner show provided by Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd. had been surprisingly pedestrian that evening. The magician, although skilled and pretty, hadn't performed anything other than the usual misdirection which could be seen anywhere. The hoop aerialist, who was also very pretty and wearing a costume that left very little to the imagination, did little more than spin in her ring in various positions and look seductive. There was very little of what many considered the MC&D flavor.

The curtain closed around the stage as she finished her act and bowed. Polite applause sounded from the audience, along with a few barely audible disappointed sighs. When the curtain reopened, the hoop had been replaced with a pair of white ribbon-like straps. A man built like a ballet dancer with bare arms and feet stood next to the straps, ready to perform.

Music started playing. It was a peaceful melody, light and uplifting. The acrobat lifted himself onto the straps and started his act. At first the act looked as though it was going to be as ordinary as the other performances. He wrapped straps around himself like the stripes on a candy cane. He hung himself upside down, spun himself in circles, and held himself parallel to the ground while holding onto the straps solely with his hands. He contorted his body into grotesque shapes which could only be achieved with the help of the straps. He somersaulted upwards, spiraling the ribbons around his arms. The audience sat in silence through all these moves.

The aerialist wrapped himself up asymmetrically. One strap spiraled down his leg, while the other wrapped tightly around his left bicep. There was a twist, a sudden drop, and a note of discord in the music. He now was hanging upside down from the one wrapped leg while the other strap hung down, not wrapped around anything. His left hand was still gripping it, but his arm had been severed where the strap had been wrapped.

There was no blood, and the aerialist continued to climb and twist himself on the straps unfazed. The arm climbed too, wrapping the strap around itself and alternating between gripping with the hand and the elbow. No wound on either end of the arm, only an expanse of white where bone, sinew, and other tissues should have been visible.

The act now seemed to be a strange kind of partner acrobatics; a one-armed man and a single arm both performing tricks. Sometimes the tricks were separate, and sometimes they were in tandem, resulting in holds and balances that should have been impossible. The arm helped him into another wrap, this one around both legs. The aerialist balanced himself like a board for a few seconds while the severed arm held itself straight out above him.

There was another twist, a discordant note in the music, drop, and he again hung by one leg. His right leg had been severed this time and joined the performance as a separate entity. Less than a minute later, his right arm joined the act.

The music began to swell as the severed limbs, all moving of their own accord, helped the aerialist into position for what could be one final trick. His one remaining leg wrapped in a candy cane swirl, as his severed arms wrapped the other strap around his neck, bringing him into a horizontal balance. One hand then brought the strap down and over his throat quickly, enclosing his neck.

The body once again was hanging upside down, suspended through a wrap around the left leg. The head rolled on the floor. It was just as neatly severed as the three limbs that were no longer attached to the suspended torso. His head finished rolling and faced the assemblage of wealth and power. The music still played, but the show was likely over.

While the audience sat in stunned silence, the magician from earlier entered the stage. She looked at the hanging body, the severed limbs, and the head. Her expression, rather than horrified, seemed bemused. She glared at the aerialist's severed head, which returned her expression with a sheepish smile. Shaking her head, she started collecting his parts. One by one, she reattached them to his body, wrapping a section of strap around each one. He moved each

reattached part into his suspension, keeping himself aloft with his strength until he was once again whole. Finally, he rolled down the straps to the ground, stood up with the magician, and bowed.

The audience applauded thunderously.

A Circus Milked Dry

A Circus of a Wreck »

A few miles east of the remains of a fairgrounds, a gopher stuck its head out of its hole and squinted into the boiling afternoon heat. It looked around curiously, surveying the land for any threats. After a few minutes had passed, it ducked down and chattered to its fellow rodent.

"Okey doke, Pius, I think the coast is finally clear! The Party Poopers have finally left!" The little animal spoke perfect English, in a sharp, brusque manner that had an air of permanent exasperation.

"Thank goodness. I don't think I could have coped with the smell of rotting gopher much longer. Why didn't they come over here? I'm sure a pond of blood and guts would have merited some interest, even if it was just gopher." The second critter spoke in a much calmer tone, though it was clear he was feeling somewhat strained from being pent up in a dirt hidey-hole.

"Morty's been cleaning up at night. For a sadistic little beast, he's surprisingly good at covering up his messes."

"Ah, well. That explains it. Where did Mortimer run off to anyway, Eugene?"

"Wowwee! Wowwee!"

The two gophers turned their heads upwards to see a neon green rabbit peering back at them through their hiding spot. Its mouth curved upward in a malicious grin to reveal a mouth full of forked tongues. It hissed with mischievous laughter. "Wowwee! Wowwee!"

"Mortimer, dammit! Get down here now! Do you know how much Fun-Lovers are wanted by the others!" Eugene the Gopher bristled,

showing no signs of alarm at the peculiar rabbit, only indignation.

"I thought you said we were climbing out?" Pius said politely.

"I— I just meant— fine. Get out of here." Eugene snapped.

"Gladly," Pius replied, and the two gophers clambered out of the hole into the hot grassy plains of the former Circus site. For a fraction of a second, the gophers seemed to shimmer and bubble in the sun's glare. An instant later, two stereotypical-looking circus clowns stood in the place of the rodents.

"Good to be a Clown again, Eugene?" Pius asked his taller companion as he flexed his shoulders; a large layer of dust sprinkled down from his costume.

"On the contrary, I'm more than a bit irked," Eugene snapped. "I would have preferred being normal right now, but I doubt I can pull off another transformation stronger than this; I'd need more Clown Milk than we've got at the moment."

"How long is the walk to the grounds?"

"Not long with a Mortimer! Get over here and give us a ride!"

The rabbit gave a final "Wowwee!" before jumping up a good eight feet into the air. A swirl of dust and a loud crack followed. A second later, the rabbit was gone, replaced by a chittering, amorphous sac of black liquid supported by a dozen or so human arms. The thing shuddered once more, then sprouted a pair of rudimentary wooden chairs on its back. It lowered its body as the clowns hoisted themselves up.

"Mortimer, any milk on you right now?" Eugene asked the pitch-colored thing.

The beast rippled unhappily in response; an empty sloshing noise could be heard within the sac.

"Damn. Not enough to pull off a Ringer. Let's hope something's left at the grounds to make Morty happy. He already blew through the gophers here."

"Try to stay calm this time, Eugene," Pius said solemnly. "You'll waste your Milk supplies if you get all fired up."

"Shut up, Pius," Eugene snapped.

Chitter, chitter, chitter. The Clowns' mount clicked and rumbled.

"Shut up, Morty."

And with that, the two exhausted Clowns and their Eldritch ride skittered to the Circus grounds.

As the unusual trio neared the burnt remains of the old Circus grounds, Eugene the Clown swore.

"We're going to be hard-pressed to find anything here," he groaned. "The place has been torched." All around, patches of burnt grass and ashen wood frames clouded the air with smoke and dying embers. Mortimer came to a halt as they came to the central Big Top. The Clowns dismounted, and the Eldritch sac took off in search of new ways to amuse itself.

The Big Top tent post, surprisingly, was still standing, though apart from that, there wasn't much left. The seven meter tall wooden stake was firmly driven into the ground at the center of the abandoned fair. Scraps of scarlet and gold fabric shuddered and flapped in messes and tangles of wire, splinters, and string. Heaps of charred wooden seats ringed the once proud setting of the main attraction. Right outside the ring of ash and dirty red and dirt, several, smaller heaps of deformed, blackened metal sunk into the dust. Concession stands. A little further off, several more booths that were once home to carnival games smoked softly. There was not another living soul in sight.

Eugene sighed. "Everyone except us got out. Of course. Morty *had* to go play Hack-a-Mole when the Call went out."

Eugene loved being part of the Circus of the Disquieting, though he was, to say the least, unhappy at the moment. It had been seventy years since he and so many others of his kind had first met Herman

Fuller and traveled the worlds for countless performances that befuddled and awed every audience. Every show was a new, thrilling experience; the Clowns wanted the fun to go on and on and on.

And that was what Fuller promised. A lifetime of entertainment for everyone, for all the Clowns. Entertainment was hard to come by in their own home. Things could be downright dull, so the Clowns were eager to join the Circus when it became clear that Fuller could ease their boredom, which, in itself, said something about Fuller's confidence in his abilities; the first Clowns that had come in were, to say the least, monstrous; they were too unstable to be fit for regular Circus Performances. As a result, the creatures who were employed by Fuller were required to stunt their growth, abilities, and primal violence to the point where they could be, at the least, accepted without *too* much concern for worry.

Eugene cursed again. "I bet the Higher Clowns are sitting on their asses just *clowning* around right now. No one *cares* about two miserly Lessers! We're just the Highers' dogs!" he lamented. "Oh, the *freaking humanity*!"

"The term humanity doesn't apply to us," Pius corrected as he knelt down to look at a ruined cotton candy machine. "And yes, we do serve the Higher Clowns, but it's far from a slave system." Then, frowning in disappointment, he added, "No good here; all the Milk's spoiled from the heat. It burst all over the vat."

"Well there has to be something we can use to get Morty up and running!" Eugene spat. "And it'd better not involve me! I don't want to become a Fun-Lover's punching-milking-bag-thing again!" The Clown shuddered as it recalled a vivid image of it being forced to turn into a cherry-red wobbly heavy bag so it could keep Mortimer occupied and away from the audience.

"You'd prefer being abandoned by the Circus and left to whither from Milk Deprivation? It will take Mortimer at least a week to make a gallon of Milk for just one of us if we don't let him off the chain for a bit. Give a little to win a little," Pius remarked curiously, regarding Eugene as he was a mildly interesting thing found within a rotting log.

"*No*, I just want to stop being someone who has to do all the dirty work!" Eugene shot back. "How'd we get stuck with *that* Fun-Lover anyways? I thought that after Marlene was transferred I had requested one that just needed company to be milked, not one that was a sadistic little twit!"

"Mortimer was given to us under…special circumstances if I recall," Pius said as he walked towards another melted concession stand.

"Aside from the psychotic milking needs? I thought violent Fun-Lovers were shipped back home."

"Don't you remember, Eugene? Honestly, you'd be much better off paying attention instead of moping all the time when someone's talking; in fact, your attitude contributed to the Higher-Ups giving us the "sadistic little twit". Anyhow, allow me to lay it out for you…"

Behind Eugene and Pius, Mortimer returned with a box of two dozen twisty balloons, honking and hissing reproachfully as it continued to walk with an empty fluid sac. It plopped down and turned one of its arms into an air hose. Its remaining hands, which were surprisingly dexterous, began inflating and tying the balloons until it had sixteen balloon animals ranging from dogs to monkeys to cats. It loaded a handful of pebbles into one of the remaining eight balloons and inflated it to near bursting before shaping it like a shotgun. Then it popped it, sending the miniature rocks hurtling towards a pair of rubber turtles, which both deflated with hissing *floops*… Mortimer clapped its hands and repeated this antic seven more times until the balloon zoo was mowed down completely. The milk sac on its back filled slightly, maybe a dozen milliliters, though Pius and Eugene didn't notice.

"…Mortimer was sent off with Trisha to go scout for potential show additions," Pius lectured.

"Oh, yeah, Trisha, I remember her," Eugene interjected. "What happened to her?"

"She was… Inflated after Mortimer got out of hand during their search," Pius said, with a tone of sadness in his voice. "It was at some artist's convention; Mortimer went bonkers when he saw one

of the pieces."

"Which one was that?" Eugene asked.

"A total deathtrap thing. Lots of needles and sharp stuff and explosions, the whole lot. It was supposed to represent some human element."

"You mean ignorance? Downright, complete, and utter asininity?" Eugene gave a short bark of laughter.

"Something like that," Pius responded, smiling slightly in spite of himself. "We confiscated it from Mortimer after he somehow managed to take it right out from under their noses. I don't even know why anyone in their right mind would have displayed it to begin with, though the artists Trisha had been sent to go look at were… odd. I remember hearing something about how everyone should "chill" in the report."

"Human slang, sometimes."

"I know, right?"

"Go on." Eugene implored Pius to get to the point. Meanwhile, Mortimer, now in a form resembling a monstrous, half-mechanical praying mantis, was taking helium canisters and chopping the seals off with transformed bladed forelimbs. One sped straight towards Pius' head, who casually sidestepped the projectile. The canister snapped the Big Top pole in two and continued skidding for a good hundred feet. Eugene wasn't so lucky, and caught one right in the back, sending the Clown sprawling face first into the dirt, where he stuck out like a nail.

"Wowwee! Wowwee! I 'da Champ! I 'da Champ!" Mortimer laughed again.

Eugene pushed himself out of the crater, and rubbed his nose, his eyes watering. "Son of a Flame-faced man, looks like I'm gonna have to be the punching bag after all. And why the *hell* does he keep repeating that?"

"Freak Show if I know," Pius replied in a singsong voice. "Shall I

continue?"

"Go ahead," Eugene growled, glaring at the gloating Fun-Lover. He was beginning to see red, and his ears were ringing, though he couldn't tell if it was from the melting make-up or just his anger. Then, looking back, he saw Pius cocking an eyebrow at him in mock disapproval. "I'm *staying calm*, Pius."

"Ahem, I doubt it. Eugene? Dial back on the steam engine state, will you? The rest of us don't want your…spout to blow." Pius gave a little smirk as he watched his colleague try and get his temper down.

Eugene felt the top of his head. "Shit." He had let his shape-shifting get out of control again; an old-style train smokestack had sprung out from his skull and was now billowing copious amounts of black smoke while whistling shrilly. "Screw you, Pius," Eugene snapped at Pius' chiding, still staring daggers at Mortimer. However, the smokestack retreated back into his head. "Better?" Eugene asked.

"Good." Pius smiled. "You're learning a bit of patience and tolerance today, Gene. That's very good for getting a promotion."

"*Don't call me that*," Eugene grumbled.

"Wowwee! Wowwee!"

Forty Minutes Later

"…and so, after you gave Head Arby lip, he gave you Mortimer because it was so *fond* of you. The End." Pius finished his monologue, grinning to himself. He doubted his audience of two was even listening anymore, though he was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle unfolding before him.

"Well, it seems they brought the Circus back to town single-handedly. Fuller would be delighted."

Mortimer and Eugene were engaged in a violent but very one-sided fight that began after Eugene called Mortimer "Mort" around the thirteenth minute of Pius' tale. The ensuing tussle had leveled what

was left of the Circus, yet strangely had brought some life back into it as well. The merry-go-round horses had been thrown off their ride and were now frantically galloping and whinnying in place as they tried to run away in terror. Boxes of Herman Fuller Animal Crackers lay strewn over like a miniature zoo and were screeching their respective animal cries as they were trampled underfoot. Leftover masks and costumes had split from their wardrobes and were waltzing and performing acrobatics with each other without wearers, while legged fun-house mirrors stretched and squashed whatever came into their sight, both reflected and physical. A few tumbleweeds rolled by, followed by an ominous rumbling sound of gravel on metal.

Pius sighed. "That'll be the Ferris Wheel." It rolled past him then came to a stop at a melted hot dog stand before falling over on it. Pius smirked. "To go, please." He turned back to take in the wrestling match, which had now moved into the Big Top.

Mortimer, who was now steadily refilling its Milk supply due to the scuffle, was relentlessly swinging a meat cleaver at Eugene's head while in the form of a giant pig wearing a chef's hat. Eugene, who was already low on Milk, was running out of steam.

"I don't care about your story anymore!" Eugene screeched as he avoided yet another vicious knife swing. "Help me already!"

"You *were* listening to me!" Pius called happily. "Keep up the good work! At this rate we should be able to make a Ring within the next half hour!"

"Eat— my —ack!" Eugene was cut short as Mortimer the flaming, unicycle-riding grizzly bear ran him over. Eugene's clown form shook violently as he lay in the dirt covered in a tire track. He looked like a wax figure struggling to stay solid in a firestorm.

Dear, dear, he's straining to keep his Clown form up, Pius thought. *At this rate he'll revert within the next few minutes. Should I intervene? Ah, well, the Highers or Manny can restore him when we get back.*

The Fun-Lover pedaled back over to Eugene, who was still lying in

the dirt unmoving. Mortimer turned back into its default form, and began prodding the Clown with its hands. It rolled him over. Eugene gave a withering glare at the walking udder. That was enough for Mortimer to decide there was still some life in his plaything. The Fun-Lover turned into a literal *Hammer*-head shark. It swung its iron mallet face downwards towards the unfortunate Lesser Clown, who, by now, was simply too upset and too low on Milk to resist. When the hammer struck, the Clown crumpled and dissolved into a black puddle with a *sploosh* and a *gurgle*. The liveliness around the main attraction continued as if nothing had happened.

Pius stared, raising his eyebrows in genuine surprise. *Perhaps less than a few minutes.* "Oh, dear me," he sighed, looking down at the shallow pool and shaking his head. "That was a little rough, Mortimer."

The Fun-Lover peeled its head away from the Clown and reverted back to its many-armed sac form. It had finally stopped laughing. The vesicle was now bloated with black liquid.

Pius grinned at the full Milk supply. "Though, I guess you had your reasons. Well done."

"You piece of—*squick*, *pbbttth*, *plbbrrrtthh*…" An angry high-pitched bubbling emanated from Eugene the Puddle.

"Hello, Gene. You've finally come to. Look! Mortimer has enough Milk to take us back, I believe!"

A dozen pair of short eye-stalks and tentacles sprouted from Eugene's "body." He had reverted into his weaker, "Normal" form, and was now violently cursing his attacker with a barrage of gurgling and hissing.

"Hush now, Eugene. Thank you, really, for taking one for the team," Pius said to the puddle. "We'll get you fixed up soon enough." The still whole Clown knelt down and scooped Eugene in his hands. "Mortimer! Time to go home!"

"Wowwee!"

The now full Fun-Lover made one last transformation in the abandoned fairgrounds: an enormous, scarlet rotary phone, with a large, transparent vat of Clown Milk replacing the power cord. The dial wheel turned, and the receiver sprung into the air, then slammed down on Pius and Eugene; a hissing noise could be heard from within, along with the inward sucking of a vacuum and the clicking of safety belts. Two spherical bulges snaked their way through the receiver cord and squeezed into the main phone body; Pius and Eugene had just been sucked into the main cabin right behind the dial wheel. The vat gurgled as the viscous black liquid flowed from it to be pumped. A firework shot out from each of the ten numbers on the dial wheel; a glowing clown face exploded into existence, illuminating the ruined Circus grounds with renewed light for a final time as the abandoned props now all engaged in a frenzied jig.

"Thank you for watching! We hoped you enjoyed the show!" The firework called, bursting into a rainbow of stars and confetti. The sparks encompassed the ground like a dome.

The phone hovered off the ground, crackling as Clown Milk boiled, beginning the Ring sequence that would take the Clowns and their Fun-Lover back to the Circus. There was a resounding crack. All the re-invigorated Circus items collapsed.

And then Eugene, Pius, and Mortimer were gone, leaving silence behind.

…

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep

Ring…

Ring…

BnnNZzZzZzzzzz

BnnNZzZzZzzzzz

Click!

YOU HAVE REACHED THE MAIN LINE FOR HERMAN FULLER'S CLOWN TRANSPORTATION SERVICES. PLEASE HOLD WHILE AN OPERATOR LOCATES YOU. THANK YOU FOR CALLING, AND HAVE A PLEASANT REST OF YOUR DAY.

♪ Entry of the Gladiators♪

…

"…*prbtthhhllthlth*-king hold music."

"Eugene, you're back!"

WOWWEE!

A Circus of a Wreck »

A Circus of a Wreck

« | **A Circus Milked Dry** | **A Circus With Paranoia** »

A sudden crack broke the silence of a vast, infinite plane of the white landscape known to the Clowns of the Circus of Disquieting as the Phoneyard, a series of "hubs" for pick-ups and quick travel. Here and there, patches of various landscapes seemed to sprout from nothing out of the blank world, from dry deserts to fog-filled forests; spatial duplicates of past Circus Grounds that now served another purpose apart from performing. All sorts of giant phones laid strewn across these mini bubbles of scenery, wheel dials, cellular flip phones, and even poor quality cups-tied-to-a-string; some of these had never been Picked Up, and were now left to slowly fade and decay as the immobilized Fun-Lovers withered from Milk Deprivation. Others popped into a hub and winked out to another place within instants. The sounds of an exit were similar to a firecracker and party horn going off simultaneously.

Bang-TOOT!

Bang-TOOT!

Bang-TOOT!

Over and over.

Bang-TOOT!

Again and again.

FWOOO-OOO-OOP! ZING! DING! DING! DING!

Or perhaps more like a carnival mallet game?

In a pick-up hub resembling a deserted, dusty grassland, twelve

dozen red phone booths sat alone and abandoned. They were all older models of Fun-Lover transportation. Very unreliable prototypes. Most of them were shoved away into this particular, funny graveyard; some still had the remains of an unfortunate rider inside. This particular joint wasn't even in service anymore; it was more of a dump than anything else.

But, like any old phone number, there was always that one person who dialed something wrong and called it instead.

FWOOO-OOO-OOP! ZING! DING! DING! DING!

A smoking, crackling, spinning scarlet rotary phone popped down out of thin air and landed with a resounding *thud* on the loose dirt.

"Eugene, you're back!"

WOWWEE! WOWWEE WOWWEE WOooowwWHEEE-ee-ee-ee$_{eeeeeee}$ Crackle, crackle, crackle.

"Ack, Pius, stop groping me!"

"Sorry, Eugene; you were just a ball of goop a few seconds ago!"

"Dammit, it's dark in here. I can't see squat!"

"Hold on! Let me help!"

"Argh, Pius, not the spotlight! Not the spotlight! Tone it down!"

"Sorry, Eugene! Here, I'll guide you to your seat!"

"No, Pius! You're burning my eyeballs out, for Freak's sake!"

"No, really, just let me—"

"Pius, quit it!"

"Eugene, will you—"

Shove. Splash!

…

Drip…drip…

"…Dammit, Pius, this stuff *stains.*"

Eugene and Pius the Clowns sat facing each other in roller coaster-esque safety seats within an enormous phone receiver *(also known as Mortimer the Fun-Lover)* as *Entry of the Gladiators* played as wait music. Pius was rocking his head back and forth in mild content; Eugene was cringing as he tried to block out one of sixteen songs that had been looping continuously for the past five hours of waiting. He could tolerate "Pink Elephants on Parade" to an extent, but whenever he heard the electronic remix of "Entrance of the Gladiators" he wanted to fill his ears with Herman Fuller's Marvelous Molasses.

The solitary scene resembled something similar to the bilge of an old ship; it was dark, echoey, and partially flooded. When Mortimer had landed, it had badly cracked the inner lining, sending Clown Milk fuel into the compartment. A leak was bad news for any Clown attempting to get home. The volume of Milk lost due to a leak proved disastrous for the window of time one could expect to be picked up; all Fun-Lovers broadcasted a waiting signal to the nearest available open pick-up line, and when the Milk dried up, so would the call. So far, Eugene and Pius had been sitting for nearly seven hours, sitting in the sweet, tarry substance, cramped, hot, and generally miserable.

"This… *stinks*." Eugene wrinkled his nose in disgust as he continued to breathe the arid air of sour Clown Milk, a slightly sweet, but more noticeably rancid, stench of chloroform and rotten eggs. "Did Mortimer bust a pipe or something?"

"Yeah, looks like," Pius said concernedly, moving his hand over a seam running through the right side of the cabin; black ooze gurgled through the crack, making thick *splish-sploosh* echoes as it dripped into the pond that covered the two Clowns' shoes. "Oh, Mortimer, what did you do to yourself this time, you poor Fun-Lover?" Pius talked to the ceiling. *Splish-sploosh*. *Splish-sploosh*.

"When we get back to the Circus, I'm gonna get Mortimer Fine-tuned." Eugene groaned with exasperated malice.

"Oh, come now, Mortimer's not deserving of that." Pius said. "He's just having connection problems."

"What are you, a Fun-Lover sympathizer?" Eugene snorted. "Such a Progressive Pius."

"Hahaha. You're so funny, Eugene."

"I gotta be. It's in the job description."

"What Hub did we end up in? Takin' them a bit long, don't you think?" Eugene twiddled his thumbs.

"The default line is the…Lake I believe?" Pius recalled. "But you're not getting seasick, and we're sure not bobbing, so we're probably in one of the Fields right now. I'd ask Mortimer for a ping, but he's still obviously broken, or malfunctioning, or whatever a Fun-Lover does when it has problems."

"So we just have to wait now?"

"Pretty much."

"Okey-dokey then." Eugene eased the tension in his shoulders a bit. "Wheat Fields, eh? It's sure seen it's fair share of fiascoes. I wonder how Toby's been doing lately?"

"Busy as ever, I imagine. Don't forget, he's in charge of the cornfields as well."

"Yeesh, poor guy. Getting all the weirdos out of that Twisty Maize.."

"Oh, you have no idea. Remember that time when Jesters somehow ended up in there? Kept scaring the living daylights out of everyone and anyone who popped in. Lines became unstable and we almost had a reemergence over Wiltshire."

"Little bastards would have made one hell of a crop circle when they

came out." Eugene smirked, lost in thought.

"We had to go summon Samuel to weed 'em out," Pius continued. "Took a month to regrow all the Connections."

"Frickin' familial squabbles."

"Stupid Jesters and their Shufflers."

"Hahahahaha."
"Hahahahaha."

"Haha."
"Haha."

"Eh-heh…eh-heh…huhhhh….."

"Huh."

…

…

"Ugh, there's not even a window to look out of in here. The Lake actually has a nice view, and the fields don't look half-bad in the summer."

"You're not exactly traveling first-class right now, Eugene. Emergencies and such, remember?"

"Well, it *could* be better, but I won't complain."

"There's something new."

"What happens to Clowns when we start to decompose? Do we end up looking like whatever we were when we decided to off, or what?"

"Don't say things like that right now, Eugene, your pessimism is infectious." Pius said, looking down at his feet.

"Ah, come on, lighten up," Eugene said smartly. "Hey, Pius, quick, let's play a game. What am I?" Eugene's head split in two, each

sprouting a ridiculously frilly cap n' bells that jingled furiously. The red and black hats attached seamlessly to his heads, like the crest of a rooster, and the fronds shook on their own like rattlesnake tails. Four pairs of eyes glowed iridescent blue and his voices rose as if he had just inhaled a tank of helium.

"You're a Jester, aren't you?" Pius guessed not bothering to take a look.

"Awww, man, you're no fun," Eugene squeaked irritably. His heads turned back into that of a single, now disgruntled, clown.

Pius shifted his leg in annoyance as he tried to get into a comfortable position again; it was really starting to get cramped in the cabin now.

"You've been twitching around non-stop, Pius, yeesh. What's the matter? Jitterbug worked its way inside you?"

"I don't have parasites, Eugene," Pius said irritably as he brought his left knee up. "I'm trying to—"

FPPPPPTTTT. A long, drawn-out, rather rude-sounding noise reverberated throughout the cabin.

…

…

"Jeez, Pius, hold it in, will you? It stinks bad enough already."

"That wasn't me, that was—"

GLOP.

A huge bubble of Clown Milk forced its way through the crack of the cabin and burst, showering a not-so-fresh mist of tar over Eugene and Pius. The exterior flatulent noises continued to sound.

Eugene grimaced. "Man, Mortimer, pull yourself together. We're counting on you here, buddy."

Pius gently patted the side of the cabin.

"…AND THAT'S WHEN I WENT IN AND TOLD THAT FREAK; FREAK— HEHEHEH — HEHEH — shit. HEheh! Heheh!!! Hurgblblblbl!!! Blrrrrrrbbb!! I'm losing it. I'm losing it. No. No, no, no, no! Pius? Pius? Pius? Pius? Pi? Apple? Cherry? Whipped cream in the face? Dammit!!! Pius!"

…

"Pius?"

Pius awoke with a start as he neared his fourth consecutive day with Eugene inside of Mortimer's receiver. Their Fun-Lover wasn't getting any better, and the two Clowns weren't getting any more sane. More leaks had sprung into the cabin, and the air was becoming more and more saturated with near-narcotic levels of Clown Milk.

"Hey, hey! Pius! Why you got that thing over your… faesh…eh?" Eugene was gesturing towards the gas mask Pius had spawned to mask his mouth and nose.

Pius groaned in weakness and exasperation. He opened his sleep-filled eyes slightly. "Get your mask on, Eugene," he mumbled.

"Heheh, you look…*funny!* Geheheh!" Eugene's left eye twitched and spasmed; it then swelled disproportionately to form the eye of a fly. "Bzzzzz-eheheh."

Pius sighed and promptly backhanded Eugene across the cheek. "Get your mask back on," he snarled. "You're inhaling Clown Milk vapor." Even as he said this, Eugene sucked in another mouthful of Clown Milk air particles and entered another fit of uncontrolled giggling that was quickly smothered by the mask that clasped over his nose with a *honk*.

"Ouch! Damn, Pius, what was that f—" Eugene cut himself short. He felt the re-attached face cover. "I went loopy again, didn't I?"

Pius merely glared a cold glare back.

"Sorry." Eugene slumped back down in his seat, taking deep breaths of semi-filtered, stale air. There was an uncomfortable three minutes of silence.

"*So*… Pius?" Eugene asked.

"*Yes*, Eugene?" Pius sighed.

…

"I'm tired."

"You and me both, Eugene. You and me both."

…

…

CREEEAAAAAAAKKKK

"OH, SHI—"

BLOOSH

RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE-Rat-rat-rat-rat-raaaaaaaaa

…

…

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

…

…

"BluuuhYEECK!"

Eugene pushed himself up onto all fours as he found himself soaked from head to toe in milky mud. Even as he started to stand up, the tarry, spoiled Clown Milk stuck to his hands like cement, making him stumble several steps forward before landing face first into a patch of dried-out grass. The ground was surprisingly warm.

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

A few paces away, Pius lay eagle-sprawled and winded, bewildered as he looked up to white expanse of nothingness above, while he felt the black swamp clinging to him from below. He tried to lift his head up, decided it wasn't worth the effort, and then let it roll into the sludge. After a few moments, he groaned and looked to see what was making a noise similar to a car that was bumbling across a rocky road with a bad suspension.

"What the—"

Mortimer was stumbling back and forth on what looked like two over-sized wooden mannequin legs, which was odd, considering the rest of the body was a giant, scarlet rotary phone. Clown Milk was spurting through the number holes and through the knee caps and ankles of the Fun-Lover, and it was emitting garbled, electronic babbling through the receiver. Finally, milk shot out of the seams of the phone, and Mortimer flailed wildly like a person in the electric chair before slumping on its behind with the phone crashing dial wheel first into the crusty dirt.

You— ha-a-a-a-ah-ave — ZeEeeeEro — Nine — Massage new theeeerr…aaaapeee$_{eeeeesss}$ Mortimer gave one last twitch, then went limp, sparks buzzing as they shot off from the machinery. Pius gawked in horror as he watched the Fun-Lover collapse and fizzle out.

Eugene made his way back to Pius, squinting his eyes as he adjusted to the whiteness of the Hub's boundaries, grass and dirt still sticking to his lip like he was a cow grazing in a pasture.

"Where— in the *Freaking* name of Manny — did Mortimer—" He cut himself off as he saw the smoking wreck of a broken Fun-Lover lying

in the dead, withered grass. "Oh, shit."

Shoes squelching as he walked his way over, Eugene moved to help Pius up.

"*Well*," Eugene grunted with effort as he yanked Pius' arm, "This is definitely not the Wheat Fields." He looked around and examined the mass of phone boots scattered around the arid landscape. "I don't even *recognize* this Hub. Where the heck are we?"

"Your guess is as — *ow* — good as mine," Pius grimaced as he was pulled free from the gloop. Now that he had a better angle, he could clearly see how badly damaged Mortimer was. "Dammit, Eugene, how could this happen? Where did Mortimer go wrong in the landing?"

"I have no clue," Eugene said, shaking his head, eyes shut tight. "Ugh, can't Morty fix himself? What happened to the fail-safes that came with him? Those things are standard issue!"

Mortimer let out a low, foghorn bellow, blowing the back hatch of the phone off to reveal the complex array of Milk sacs, tubing, and wires that made Phone calls possible. What should have been healthy, pumping lines of fuel were limp, punctured, and in some areas, completely severed.

Pius drew closer, wary that the already-battered components might burst any moment. He gingerly picked up a portion of tubing that should have led to the control board.

"It's… been clawed." Pius said in befuddlement and confusion.

"*Clawed?*" Eugene said incredulously. "How the freak did— Clawed?"

"And *bitten*, too," Pius said. "Look, those are *teeth* in there." He gently took his hand away; a dozen or so denticles clattered onto the ground.

"Where did *those* come from?" Eugene's jaw hung open.

"I'm trying to find the connecting lines, hold on." Pius brushed away

a curtain of sacs in the front and worked his through the interior, feeling around as he went. His eyes extended out into stalks and followed suit. It was an incredibly bizarre picture, like a snail trying to find its way through the dark. He cringed. "This is disgusti—" He suddenly jerked and gave a shout of surprise.

"What is it?" Eugene asked startled.

"There's something fuzzy in there," Pius moaned, his hand and eyes still inside the phone system. "I can't get a grip on it."

"Fuzzy? Where is it?"

"Whatever it is, it cracked two of the Milk circuits and broke the top one clean in two. It's caught on the third."

"Are you gonna try and remove it?"

"I'll try."

Pius slowly began to jiggle his hand back and forth in an attempt to dislodge the foreign body inside Mortimer. His mouth was clenched in anticipation. Eugene surmised about how strange it was seeing his partner's eyestalks looking like eels while still attached to his head. He shivered involuntarily.

"Damn, we can be downright *weird*."

"Oh, yuck!"

Pius' hand exited the tangle of organic and inorganic components, clutching a black and red mass about the same size of his hand.

"You got it!" Eugene cried.

"That — was — *terrible*." Pius said; his hand was death-gripping the thing he had removed, despite his mind screaming at him to throw it away.

"So, what is it?" Eugene asked impatiently.

Pius shakily commanded his fingers to un-clench, and opened his

hand to examine the ball of fur. Eugene's grin vanished on the spot. Pius groaned.

"So that's why he broke. He had that thing with him when he transformed."

"Freaking hell, Mortimer, I told you that that was a terrible thing to play with to pass the time."

Eugene swatted the gopher out of Pius' hand in contempt.

« | **A Circus Milked Dry** | **A Circus With Paranoia** »

A Circus With Paranoia

« **A Circus of a Wreck**

…

…

…♪~♪~….

…♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~….

♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪

♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪

"I can stand the sight of worms

And look at microscopic germs

But technicolor pachyderms

Is really too much for me-e-e!"

A clown in a dirtied, polka-dot uniform wheeled around with his hands in the air, his voice echoing throughout the cracked, long-dead field. As he sang, his feet kicked up dust and dirt, and the twigs cracked and snapped, almost, but not quite, in rhythm. If a clown whirling and singing in an empty landscape wasn't strange enough, the red phone booths that lay strewn around in the dirt and grass only added to the peculiarity of the scene. As the clown drawled on and on, he whooped around one particular, cracked and dirtied scarlet rotary phone that lay off-kilter, as if it had fallen and crashed. Smoke curled from the defunct machine, so that with the combination of the clown and phone, the scene almost looked like a lonely bonfire dance.

"I am not the type to faint

When things are wrong or things are quaint

But seeing things, you know that ain't

Can really give you an AWFUL FRIGHT!"

A resounding crack and flash of light, and the single clown was gone, replaced by a ring of giant, prancing pink elephants, all linked together by the hands. As they stomped in unison, and thrashed and sounded their trunks insanely, eyes shut tight, the ground beneath them quaked, with the nearest surrounding phone booths shaking, bouncing, and in some cases, toppling from the enormous beasts. As the interconnected elephants continued tromping around in ring-around-the-rosy fashion, the "tune" that sounded from their noses grew louder, and even sounded like actual brass instruments instead of the expected animal sound. The trumpeting reached a crescendo and the amount of noise could have woken every other Clown in the Hub network had sound actually traveled from point to point.

Another crack and a flash later, and the ring of pachyderms was gone, replaced by the single, dirtied clown, now eagle-sprawled on his back.

Eugene stared up at the white abyss of the Hub, and let out a long, loud yell.

> *Day… 9?*
>
> *Cant tel how long in this freekin' plase. Doesnt help Ive been pasing out. Drinking expired Clown Milk is grss. But hey, whatever keeps Pius and I goin. Whichever clown made the atmosphere/bakdrop/whatevr the heck it is wite with no way of telling time is gonna get a Hell of a earfull if when, WHEN I get back.*

Eugene finished another "page" of his journal, which was really an

appendage extending from his left hand full of countless flat, flexible digits. His writing utensil? An elongated finger. His ink? More Clown Milk. He morosely shut his bookhand and retracted it back within his palm.

He, along with Pius, were, to say the least, in poor shape. Their faces drooped and sagged, a result of them not bothering to maintain their shape-shifting powers; they could care less about how they looked when they were tired, dirty, and near starving.

Mortimer the Fun-Lover, still a scarlet rotary phone lying down in the dust on wooden knees, continued to leak Milk and remain in its silent comatose state. For Eugene, at any other time, Mortimer being quiet would have been a dream come true. But right now, he was actually hoping the shape-shifting black sac of arms would pop up to life again to whisk everyone back home.

"Another luckless walk?"

Eugene turned to see Pius walking back to their "campsite". Since Mortimer's breakdown, the two Lesser Clowns had been scrounging around the Hub, searching for anything that might prove useful to help them on their way.

"There are more than a hundred phones in here," Eugene said, staring at the dysfunctional Fun-Lovers lying around on the ground, "and not one of them has any juice of livelihood left in 'em." He laced his fingers and slouched into his curled position again. "No spare parts, nothing we can dismantle, nothing to recycle. We're freakin' screwed, Pius."

Pius tossed Eugene a dirtied metal can. Eugene looked at the faded, scratched label.

"'Emergency Clown Milk; Powdered'," he read, noticing the cheery, make-up-plastered Clown mascot saying the words in a balloony speech bubble. "'Remember Clowns, Add Water and Drink it Responsibly!'" He chuckled, half in amusement and gratitude, half in bitterness. He looked up at his partner again. "Where'd you find this?"

"Broken down, antique cell phone back thataways," Pius turned and gestured towards the east side of Hub. "Two cans in the battery compartment, along with some…" He rummaged through his pockets again. "Emergency Clown Impulse Suppressant," he held up a bottle of purple pills. "You know, for anxiety and such, in case a Clown goes bonkers while waiting to be picked up."

"Huh, we've been waiting for more than a little while," Eugene snorted.

Pius rolled his eyes and continued. "Uh…some Herman Fuller Animal Crackers, I don't think they make noise anymore…" He tossed a crumpled red box on the ground. "Mr. Clean Clown's Digestible Soap Tablets—"

"Mine," Eugene said quickly, taking the box from Pius' hands, opening the turquoise tin, and popping one the pills in his mouth. Immediately, the scent of pine and mint filled the air as sea-green bubbles frothed from Eugene's skin, obscuring his body from head to toe, the suds rising into the air and popping with the sound of a harp. When the soap had all risen off, Eugene reemerged, looking much more relaxed and cleaner than he had before.

"Oh, that's *so* much better," he breather, inhaling through his nose deeply.

"Don't blow through them all at once," Pius said, raising an eyebrow. He continued. "The rest of the stuff was just junk. Got a card deck, an empty peanut jar, some wiener balloons, a sheet music page, and…this big thing of rainbow glitter." He tossed each item on the ground as he said their names.

Eugene shuffled through all the trinkets Pius had brought back.

"There's a note tied to the glitter bag," Eugene noticed a tiny roll of paper attached with a neat red ribbon. He slid it through the bow and unrolled it. He gave a puzzled look as he saw what it said.

> Go to hell, Charley, this isn't funny anymore. We hope you get Inflated.

Eugene looked up at Pius and handed him the message. "Um, by any chance, were there still…"

"Another pair, starved by looks of it," Pius said solemnly, still eyeing the paper. "Poor guys. Looked like they'd been dead for quite awhile. All dried-out, you could see their faces through the receiver."

Eugene shifted slightly at the thought of two different, mummified Clowns sprawled on top of a dial wheel.

Things were silent for a few moments.

"Get some rest, Pius, we gotta get out of here." Eugene shimmered and turned into a prairie dog. He began to burrow underneath the dirt to make a resting spot.

"I would have thought you'd have had it with tunneling rodents by now," Pius said.

"Hey, if I can keep the light out, it's fine by me," Eugene's muffled voice came out of the hole he had just dug.

Pius sighed and turned into an umbrella bird. The parasol kept him cool and comfortable.

"Looking pretty shady there, Pius," Eugene said, peeking his eyes out.

"Good night, Eugene," Pius squawked.

Eugene awoke back on the Chopping Table, and promptly was seized by a wave a terror even stronger than the first time he had been here. He looked up at the swirling roulette wheel above him, a device that was supposed to lull and anesthetize Clowns before they underwent Circus-time procedures.

"*NO!*" Eugene shouted. "*NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!*"

Around him, surgical "clowns" were preparing all the tools and machinery in order to make sure Eugene was fit for Circus Life. In

other words, they were going to shut down a good deal of his mind and body to suppress the violence and temper most unaltered Clowns were prone to.

One of the medical clowns began moving towards Eugene, standing over him as if to reassure that the procedure would go smoothly. The sixteen eyes staring at him, and the long dexterous hands wielding scalpels didn't exactly calm Eugene down, though.

"We're about to put you under, Eugene," the clown told him. "When you wake up, you'll be ready to go off to the Circus. Try to relax now."

Eugene hyperventilated and began to yank on the straps holding him down. "Not again, not again, not again." His voice was shaking with fear.

"It will be alright, Eugene," the doctor said, as he put a pair of goggles over Eugene's eyes. He turned toward the other clowns. "Is the wheel ready to go?"

"Yes, Darius." a female clown flicked a few switches, and the roulette wheel above Eugene began to turn and glow, faster than before.

"Let's begin the operation," the doctor said, gas masks sprouting onto everyone's face except Eugene's as mist began to spray from nozzles in the center of the rotating disc. All the gases, twirled around, forming a twisting rainbow string that shot straight into Eugene's nose, and knocking him out in an instant.

A moment later, at least to him, Eugene's eyes snapped open to find a dozen blades inside him, his torso cut open.

As two of Eugene's eyes shot out and punched holes through the dirt, a third eye looked around and saw a tiny flip phone biting into his behind. The little red thing formed a mouth with the two hinged parts, and they were full of teeth.

"*Get the **hell** off me!*" Eugene screamed, rocketing out of his hole

(and knocking Pius, still an umbrella bird, off his feet), turning back into a Clown, and ripping the tiny phone off his buttocks. He chucked it as hard as he could, and it landed a good thirty meters away, where it thrashed and chirped in high-pitched, warbled noise, like a crazed dialing tone.

"Eugene, what happened?" Pius said, now back as a Clown with a slightly bent umbrella for a left hand. But Eugene was already making a dash for the tiny cell phone, with murderous intent in his eyes.

Pius got there first. He yanked Eugene by the collar and brought them both to a screeching halt.

"Pius, MOVE, I'm gonna stomp that thing to fragments!" Eugene choked, his eyes literally burning as flames shot out of his mouth.

"Not happening, Eugene," Pius said calmly. With that, he turned his hand into that of a polar bear's, and gave Eugene a good dose of head freeze. The fevered Lesser Clown slumped, quite literally, out cold.

With Eugene temporarily out of the equation, Pius looked down at his partner's antagonist, which was still flopping pathetically on the ground making electronic wailing. Suddenly, it melted into something similar to a black, pudding-filled water balloon, and started tumbling away.

"What the—oh, no, you're not leaving just yet, little guy." Pius ran after it and snatched it up in the peanut jar he had found earlier. He brought the clear plastic container up to his eyes to get a closer look. The tiny phone was gnashing wildly.

"This thing is… a baby Fun-Lover…how?…." Pius looked towards Eugene, who was still out cold, then looked back at the little creature.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!! the juvenile critter made a vicious snap at Pius' nose, whose owner quickly withdrew; the plastic cracked slightly from the impact of the bite.

"*Bad* Fun-Lover," Pius scolded, giving the jar a rattle, which sent the cell phone bouncing around the interior with an audible *clatter, clatter, clatter*.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!! The wailing grew louder.

Eugene shook his head and clasped his hands over his ears at the incessant screeching. He leaped to his feet as soon as his thoughts were clear and looked around wildly, one of his hands moving to shield his stomach.

"Eugene, calm down!" Pius ordered as his partner's eyes were clouded by fear of a terrible memory. "Calm, down, you're in the Hub, with me! It's Pius, remember?"

"Don't cut me open!" Eugene shouted.

Oh, Freakin' hell, he's back on the chopping table. Pius' gut suddenly filled with dread. "Eugene, you're fine! You're fine, okay! Everything is fine!"

"DON'T CUT ME OPEN!" Eugene screamed.

"I'm not, *I'm not!*" Pius shouted. The air was rapidly becoming laden with noise, and a ringing was filling his ear with the combined cacophonies.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!!

"SHUT UP!" Pius bellowed, swinging the Fun-Lover into the ground like a whip; the peanut jar, along with the phone cracked and shattered, and the toothed calling device ceased all movement. Pius walked over to Eugene, grabbing him and looking him in the eye.

"Look at me, come on Eugene, look at me!" Pius said firmly. "Pull yourself together."

Eugene's hands turned into talons and raked Pius' calf.

Pius grimaced but held on. "Okay, buddy, hang on here." He pulled a purple Clown pill and forced it into Eugene's mouth, before

clamping his jaw shut.

The effect was immediate. Eugene's eyes lost their fever and he lost all tension as lavender spots popped up all around his skin. His breathing slowed, trying to bring his heart rate down. After a few moments, he spoke.

"…Pius?"

His friend was at a distance, nursing their clawed leg. Eugene stepped forward.

Pius held his hand up. "Back," he panted.

"Pius, I'm—"

"It's fine." Pius winced as his wounds were still oozing out black blood. "I'm fine. A little Clown Milk and I'll heal right up."

"What— what bit me?" Eugene asked quietly.

"Baby Fun-Lover. Nasty little thing too, I might add." Pius said, still hobbling, but gesturing towards the lifeless cell phone on the ground. Eugene went over to it and knelt down.

"A Fun-Lover? But I thought that—"

THOOM.

Eugene leaped back as a hulking red rectangle crashed in front of him, throwing up a spray of dust. Loud, beeping emanated from the center of it, sounding similar to frantic, garbled radio chatter. As the dirt settled again, Eugene saw that he was staring at an enormous, scarlet box phone. Two large ebony bells at its top stared at Eugene, then down at the tiny flip phone. It began shaking violently, then let out an ear-splitting blast of static noise.

"Oh, *shit.*"

« **A Circus of a Wreck**

A Completed Chronicle

Meanwhile Croesus, taking the oracle in a wrong sense, led his forces into Cappadocia, fully expecting to defeat Cyrus and destroy the empire of the Persians. While he was still engaged in making preparations for his attack, a Lydian named Sam Micheals, who had always been looked upon as a wise yet tragic man, but who after this obtained a very great name indeed among his countrymen, came forward and counseled the king in these words:

"Thou art about, oh! king, to make war against men who wear leathern trousers, and have all their other garments of leather; who feed not on what they like, but on what they can get from a soil that is sterile and unkindly…"

— Herodotus, Histories; Book I

In the eighth month, the duke had a meeting with the marquis of Qi, the duke of Song, the earl of Zheng, the earl of Cao, and an officer of Zhu, who's name was [Sam Micheals], and who reported a great sickness.

— Zuo zhuan, Book V, Duke XI

Sam Micheals listened to the reasoning, and then he asked the messenger, "How large the country between the Tigris and the canal might be?"

"A large district," Sam Micheals replied, "but it matters not. For I am pulled in all directions at once, and I continue to bleed." Then it dawned upon them: the barbarians had sent the man with subtlety, in fear lest…

— Xenophon, Anabasis; Book II, Chapter IV

Item #: SCP-140

Object Class: Safe

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-140 is to be kept in a secure locker on-site.

Description: SCP-140 is a modern hardcopy book with an unremarkable black binding. The book jacket is missing, but the title, "A Chronicle of Daevites", is clearly legible. The inside cover is signed by the author ('**Sam Micheals**'). The text is copyrighted 19 . Careful examination reveals there are far more pages between the bindings than could be contained within them.

SCP-140 is a detailed account of several fictitious ancient civilizations; the most prominent of these civilizations (Daevites) originated in what is now south-central Siberia. The account elaborates on the history of these civilizations up until approximately 480 B.C., where the book abruptly ends.

Although SCP-140's ink has been positively identified as blood, tests to determine its source have proven inconclusive.

Addendum 140.1: Emails

► ACCESS: SCP/140/emails/140.log

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
SUBJECT: SCP-140

I know the book's extra-dimensional properties are kind of weird, but should this really be an SCP? There's nothing special about its containment, and — outside of having way more pages than it should — there's nothing particularly special about it.

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
SUBJECT: Re: SCP-140

It hurts

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
SUBJECT: Re: Re: SCP-140

Granted, but given the abruptness of the containment procedures, I can't help but think this would find a better home in our log of anomalous objects.

Also, yes, it hurts it hurts so much and it won't stop. Why won't it stop

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
SUBJECT: Re: Re: Re: SCP-140

I won't stop bleeding

I am bleeding into everything

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
SUBJECT: help

I am a soldier bleeding from a poisoned arrow in my heel fired from my own bow

I am dying on the floor of the Senate surrounded by myself and my daggers are wet and dripping

I am a half-animal disemboweling myself with my fingernails as I lay across my thighs at twilight my blood spilling across the threshold of the courtyard

DATE: 2017/11/15

FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
SUBJECT: please make it stop

I am everywhere and I am everything and all of me is bleeding

I am killing myself and being killed by myself and it just keeps going and going and going

i keep cutting myself open

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>
TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
SUBJECT: why wont it stop

---

and i bleed into the pages

and i just

want

DATE: 2017/11/15
FROM: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs#noitadnuof.pcs|271slaehciMs>

TO: Dr. Micheals <noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1#noitadnuof.pcs|49slaehciM_mas1>
SUBJECT: please

---

the story

to end

I met a traveller from an antique land,

Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert… . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Sam Micheals, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

— ***Sam Micheals***

A Concrete Shrine

Atone in the hole bored and never alone.

The observer was unseen and unblinking. Over time the arms had chipped and flaked away in a pile of shavings resting within layers of offal. The shapes of color adorning the face had faded to grey and then white.

Three shaking men in yellow jumpsuits walk into a stinking rotting hole in the ground. A hose and some push brooms are their weapons and bloodshot eyes. They're trained to stare, and adore. They worship correctly as they hunch their shoulders and mutter whispers of prayer to each other to blink. They complete the ritual, and retreat back to the place with the white lights.

The door had been sealed since someone speared a spindling spiral through its door, warping the metal around it without penetrating the metal. The blood and shit had caked on over the years but it never grew to overwhelm the facade they inhabited. Closed walls and uncaring ceilings broken down to the floor.

The neck crunched satisfyingly beneath the rebar arms. A bloody mask of a paintbrush slumped forward to drag the color down to be observed. The dripping grafter ending with something beautiful in their eyes. A gift that came straight from the heart. The others would show their appreciation soon.

It was a long time before something else was observed in the room. A cool swirling of blood and shit and dust that caked and dried and reflected a warped stump of a statue standing on stunted skeletal skids. There was a reason nothing had adored it. The facade of beauty had faded with age like it does with all others. A whole fell on the ground now, where they had fallen down.

The halls and frames of figures were fleeting as fire. It was all surging and gyrating forwards as the world climbed its way around

observation. It was dark and they were likely to be eaten by a grue. Snapping applause was the only catharsis. Pure terror and joy and speed. It was freedom.

Slowly, observation could see itself. The pool of ashen reflection warped memory to reality. There were none willing to adore it now. A twist, as cracks spread from where there had once been arms until they had shorn all that could now be seen. With a flourish, a final piece of theater, it was gone and only dust remained.

A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences

CONTACT US

Have any questions or comments for our *compadres* here at Taco Bell®? Send us a *mensaje* below!

Full Name:

Vera K. Garcia

Franchise Location:

725 NE Weidler St, Portland, Oregon.

Feedback:

I observed a noticeable uptick in events this week. So noticeable that I thought it too reckless to not report in early.

There were four events. All involved two people or fewer, but I couldn't catch any names.

The first was on Monday. It was early in the morning, before sunrise, and I was stationed on the corner of Grand and Multnomah. An older man in a suit came walking down the street from the West, and he stopped near me.

I was very still, and my act was working, and I don't think he noticed that I was a person. He took out his phone, and I caught a glance

over his shoulder of what he was typing. I could pick out "can't be the Foundation", and Foundation was capitalized. Do we know of a Foundation?

The man had a gun on his belt, but I don't think he was a police officer. He didn't stay long.

The second event was Wednesday night. I was down Broadway street, by the veterinarian. Two men walked by, and they were arguing. I froze up, kept my pose, I don't think they noticed.

The taller one was saying that they couldn't do what they were doing, that they were going to end up caught, and then they wouldn't even get to remember what they did so wrong.

The smaller man shushed him. Said no, the plan will work, and the reward will be worth it. Portlands will remember us well. And he said **`Portlands, specifically, plural`**. Is that significant? But they were gone before I could hear anything else.

The remaining two encounters were on Friday. The first was in the early evening, when it was just dark enough for my act to be most effective. I was by the big parking lot on Halsey. A group of two, a woman and a large person in a suit. The woman sat down on a bench, not ten paces from me.

She sounded angry. "I just don't see why we're still going through with this," she said. "I've done my part for our partnership, and I know he must be happy." Emphasis on "he". "We're in such a fucking rut now," she said.

The other person didn't reply. Out of the corner of my eye I peeked at them, and they didn't have any eyes behind their sunglasses. Just empty sockets. Unusual.

"Fine," she said. "Let's just get out of here." She pushed herself to her feet and stomped off, the suited person following behind.

Later that night, I was waiting for a bus to take me home, right across the intersection from the Taco Bell. I was still wearing my makeup, but I wasn't trying to hide.

The exact same woman came up next to me and started waiting. She wasn't attentive, she was trying to light up a cigarette. I offered a greeting, and she yelped, dropping the smoke. She muttered some obscenity and turned to leave.

I watched her go across the street, into the parking lot of that Chipotle. When I was sure she had stopped watching behind her, I followed.

She turned around a corner in the parking lot, but when I reached the corner, she was gone. I glanced around the parking lot, but she was nowhere to be found.

I realize now that every group I encountered this week was walking in the general direction of the Chipotle when I lost sight.

I would very much like to investigate the Chipotle parking lot further. Please provide me with further instructions.

As well, my compliments on the chalupas. They are always a sublime experience.

Best,
Vera Garcia
Rotational Static Reconnaissance Specialist
Oregon Division of Secret Meetings

A Convincing Lyre

« **Bigger Than Jesus** | **Hub** | **An Impenitent Thief** »

The concert hall was silent, expectant.

Emma looked out, dazzled by the stage lights. If there was an audience out there, it was shrouded in the blackness beyond. Blackness like the mouth of a deep pit, like an open throat ready to…

The soft rustle of her silk dress brought Emma back. She felt herself take a performer's stance - feet shoulder-width, knees slightly bent, shoulders relaxed. There was no music stand in front of her, no score - she didn't need it. In front of the darkened hall, Emma was ready.

She stole a glance to her left. From here, the conductor's face was a blur in her peripheral vision, but she could make out his black tailsuit, and the sharp tip of his baton. It motioned in rapid circles, and Emma could feel the unseen orchestra beyond as it stretched itself and then coiled, ready to spring. The baton seemed to sense it too, snapping to a quivering pause like a hare at full alert, sensing an unseen threat.

The moment stretched endlessly - the bright stage, the enveloping dark, all on a razor's edge. Emma felt a prickling at the nape of her neck.

And suddenly they were off - the baton's leaping upbeat, and the orchestra giving chase in a sharp Scherzo. In her focus, the music seemed to flow around Emma without reaching her, leaving only the sounds of its creation. The blowing of air into woodwinds, the scrape of bowing, the shuffling of fingers on valves and keys and strings, a tide of shadowy noises swept past without the sounds it formed. Emma could feel the music - its drive, its urgency, its sinuous

scuttling - but she could not hear it.

Her cue was coming. The intensity of the orchestra was rising in a frenzied rush. From the corner of her eye, Emma saw the conductor half-turn, and breathed deeply. The baton flashed down at her like a lightning strike, and Emma opened her mouth to sing.

No sound came out. Emma's hand sprang reflexively to her throat, and her eyes widened. The skeletal sounds of the orchestra, the music she could not hear, pressed onward heedlessly. Emma could see the baton crash down towards her again and again, and felt the weight of the cavernous darkness beyond the stage pressing upon her. Her fingers clutched her voicebox as if to squeeze out her trapped voice. Nothing.

Panicked, Emma clawed at her throat, her nails gouging the soft flesh around her larynx. Her breathing was ragged, and she gagged as she gripped harder, pulling with slick fingers. Blood ran down her neck both inside and out, the taste of it acrid at the back of her mouth. The spotlights blazed, the orchestra plunged onwards. The baton fell at her a final time, and Emma clenched her hand and ripped it away from her throat, feeling the cartilage tear and seeing pink ribbons trail wetly behind. As the silent maelstrom behind her reached a climax, she held her bloodied, mangled larynx aloft, dripping flesh and gore. It pulsed in her hand.

And Emma heard it scream.

She woke to the sound of a soft high-pitched buzzing, and the sight of a middle-aged man leaning down with a concerned expression.

"Don't try to get up. Waking you with Tone K can leave you a little unsteady. Can you tell me your name?"

The man flicked a switch on a device he was holding, and the buzzing stopped. The device, which looked like a cross between a pistol and a miniature bullhorn, slid back into its holster on the man's belt, and Emma noticed his uniform. A Mobile Task Force officer.

"Junior Researcher Emma Stark. Who are you?"

"Commander Samuel Richards, ma'am, Task Force Eta-11."

"We have an Eta-11? Are you related to See No Ev-" Emma trailed off as she saw the man's jaw stiffen, grey stubble sharp against his skin. She looked away, and noticed the dimly-lit room beyond for the first time. The remnants of the retirement party were obscured by site security officers and a few other MTF agents helping dazed-looking researchers to their feet. "What happened?"

"You tell us." A woman's voice answered, and Emma turned to see another MTF agent, a slim Asian woman with thick streaks of grey hair at her temples. "Thirty researchers fall asleep simultaneously - was this the most boring party ever?"

Emma shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry, I don't remember. I was here with Roger, and then I was - I had an awful nightmare."

"Most likely someone spiked the punch," said Commander Richards. "It's lucky you weren't all lying here for hours - we have Hennessy to thank for that." He indicated another MTF agent across the room, a stocky older man who waved back in acknowledgement.

Emma felt bewildered - Hennessy looked in his late sixties, far too old to be in a task force - but she managed a weak "Thank you."

"He can't hear you." Commander Richards was curt. "He's been deaf for thirty years."

"But he's a good lip-reader," added the woman, gently helping Emma to her feet, "and deafness can be an advantage in this job."

"I'm not sure I understand - what job?"

"Mobile Task Force Eta-11. Specialists in auditory, sonic and musical anomalies." Commander Richards sounded proud, Emma thought, but also a little defensive.

"Musical? Because my nightmare - no wait, can I ask you about -"

Emma gasped as she was cut off by a sudden shout from across the room. One of the site security officers was spinning around like he'd been stung.

"What the hell! Who did that?"

Richards took two strides forward. "Officer! Remain calm. What did you see?"

"Sir, I didn't see anything, but I ran into something, I swear it."

"No-one move. Are you sure, officer?"

The security officer nodded, eyes wide. "There's something in here with us, sir."

The room fell silent. Emma turned her head frantically, searching in the half-light for a threat. There was nothing. Her breathing quickened, and she felt the Asian woman's hand on her shoulder.

Another MTF agent, a wiry, buzz-cut woman in her forties, chimed in. "Sir, I think he's right. I felt something earlier, but wasn't sure."

"Thank you, Agent Dee." Richards looked sharply back at Emma. "You said nightmares. Are you still afraid?"

Emma could hardly speak. Suddenly Richards' eyes focussed in the corner behind her, and he pulled the device from his belt and aimed it past her shoulder, pulling the trigger.

The sound was like being inside a bell. Emma felt her head vibrating with the shock of the noise, and then all she could hear was the high-pitched whine of silence. She staggered and turned away, and in the darkened corner behind her she saw it.

It was splayed on all fours like a lizard, skinny limbs almost blue-white. Its head was up-turned in challenge, but where its face should be was just a blank sheet of skin. The creature swayed sinuously, as if looking for an escape.

Emma half-heard shouts from behind her. Site security officers rushed past her with tasers lit, and Emma felt the Asian woman pull her back. The ringing in her ears started to clear as she looked up at Commander Richards, who was barking instructions to the room.

"SCP-932. Invisible until the soundwaves hit them. Hennessy, Dee,

you know the drill - set your resonators to 510 Hertz, around a hundred deebs. Switch visual to sonar - if you spot anything less than five feet tall, light it up. Take the officers - they can bag 'em for recontainment." Richards looked down at the Asian agent with Emma. "Zhao, take her back to quarters. She's too scared to stay here - those things feed on fear. Right: you three, with me."

As the Commander strode away, Agent Zhao smiled down at Emma. "It's going to be fine, honey. Here, put these in. I always keep a spare pair."

Emma looked at the ear-plugs in her hand, green LEDs winking on one end. She pressed them into her ears, and looked quizzically at Zhao - her hearing didn't feel muffled. The agent had pulled on her goggles and was scanning the room, sound gun raised.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get out of here."

The corridors felt interminable as Agent Zhao stepped slowly ahead of her, scanning each intersection carefully and waving the security officers onwards. Emma couldn't bear any more silence.

"I'm sorry if I'm an imposition," she ventured.

"Not at all," said Zhao without turning. "Don't let the Commander give you the wrong impression. He's just a little highly strung, and you weren't to know how he feels about Eta-10."

"See No Evil? I just thought -"

"I know, honey. But it's been a long time since we were in that league." Zhao held up a hand, checked a room to the side, then continued. "They get all the press, the manpower, the budget, but what can you do? Memetics gets custody of most of the musical memes, and auditory skips just don't get as much attention. The Commander knows it - Eta-11 is slowly fading out." She sighed softly.

"But what about tonight? Without you, they would never catch those, those *things*."

Agent Zhao laughed, a light trilling. "That's so sweet, dear, but this is our first action in more than eighteen months. If Hennessy hadn't been at your party, it probably wouldn't have been us at all." She stopped in the doorway of a wide hall. "Wait, can you see that?"

"What?" The room ahead was a blank grey.

"Oh. Well, here goes." Zhao fired the resonator, swore to herself, and fired again.

Emma had braced for the noise, but this time the tone was no more than a loud hum. She had no trouble hearing Zhao's voice over the repeated notes blasting into the hall.

"Earplugs working? They should be bringing everything down to - dammit, slippery little - to around sixty decibels, without reducing - aha, gotcha!"

Two more of the pale, faceless children were revealed in the room ahead. The security officers leapt forward, grabbing the entities and pulling out flex cuffs. Agent Zhao nodded to them, and led Emma down two further corridors, finally arriving in a bright dormitory.

The common room was the typical MTF layout - couches, monitors, a basic kitchenette - although the speaker set-up in the corner looked rather elaborate. Emma could see through half-open doors to a room full of bunks, and another with racks of equipment. Her first impression was interrupted by a grinning face that popped out from behind one of the computer screens.

"Hey, we have a visitor! I'm Mike, Mike Carter."

He was young, younger than Emma - early twenties, maybe? "Hi, I'm Emma Stark."

"Nice to meet you, Emma. Welcome to the lair of the Savage Beasts!"

"Mike. You know the Commander doesn't like that nickname." Zhao slumped on a couch, loosening her boots, and motioned Emma to an armchair.

"Well it's the only one we have."

"Other than 'Old Farts'," said Zhao. "Mike's the only recruit we've had in twenty-five years. God knows why he joined."

"Because we get the best tunes around here, that's why." Mike laughed, and fixed Emma with an enthusiastic stare. "Hey, what music are you into? Rush? Grateful Dead?"

"Uh, I've heard of them," Emma ventured.

"Newer, of course. Radiohead? Tupac? I have some Tupac verses I *bet* you've never heard!"

"Mike, stop trying to get everyone to listen -"

Agent Zhao was cut off by Hennessy, who stumbled into the room, out of breath. He smiled at his squad-mates, and again when he saw Emma.

Thank you very much for rescuing me, Emma signed to him.

Hennessy's smile grew broader. *You're very welcome*.

Agent Zhao shot Emma a look. "You know ASL?"

"My younger brother had otitis, so I had to learn."

"You don't want to join us, do you?" Turning back to Hennessy, Zhao asked *How many did you catch?*

Hennessy held up two fingers, then reached into his pocket, producing a CD and handing it to Mike with a flourish. *I found this at the party. Could be relevant*.

"You found it where?" Mike looked confused. "You have to go slower for me, H!"

"See," said Zhao, ignoring Mike's mock scowl, "you'd be more use to us than him! And we need someone new to join before we all die off." She looked at Hennessy and signed *Sorry*.

Have to go some time, he signed back cheerfully, before walking into the equipment room.

"But what about the other agent," said Emma. "Agent Dee? She's not that old."

Emma watched Mike and Zhao exchange meaningful glances. Agent Zhao began carefully. "Agent Dee isn't really Sandra's name. Well, neither is Sandra. It's more of a nickname, I guess. Um."

Mike jumped in. "You see, Dee's not her name - it's her personnel class."

Emma was shocked. "You have a D-Class? On an MTF?"

"I told you we were short-handed," said Zhao. "And we've known Sandy for years - she's been with us since she was Mike's age. We trust her."

"Not to mention she still holds the record for most 092 instances tested without fatality," added Mike.

Emma's mind was whirring with questions, but just as she was about to ask another, Mike interrupted. "Speak of the devil!"

Agent Dee slouched through the doorway, followed closely by Commander Richards. He gave a taut smile to his motley MTF.

"Good work, Agents. Site security has confirmed recovery of all of the 932 instances. I'll be submitting my incident report tomorrow, so no need to send me your sections before then. Don't forget to submit any evidence from the scene for filing." Richards tilted his hawkish face towards Emma. "And it looks like we can let you get back to your evening, ma'am. I'm sure Roger Anderson is keen to know that you're safe."

"Actually, Commander, do you mind if I ask a question? It's just I never knew that we had a - I mean, I've never had the chance to meet a team specialising in musical anomalies."

Commander Richards waited impassively. Emma stood up, looking around to the gathered agents.

"So for my first research project, I have been assigned to **SCP-012**. And there are some things about it that don't make any sense."

"You're asking the wrong people. Twelve looks like music, yes, but it's a cogni - a visual hazard, not an auditory one."

"But it could be auditory, if someone performed it."

"They tried that, and it was a cacophanous mess, so they gave up. In fact, probably the only person alive who has heard it can't hear anything any more."

Richards nodded to Hennessy, who was leaning in the doorway to the equipment room. He smiled ironically and signed, *I sometimes wish I had gone deaf* before *I had to supervise that test*!

Emma could feel her frustration building. "But that was an unfinished section. It might sound very different when it is finished. And it is **very close**. In fact I think - I think it might *want* to be finished."

Agent Zhao had started to ask her a question when Mike interrupted with a yell. "Holy crap, guys - look at this!" His startled face was lit by the computer screen. "That CD you found at the party, H? That has some serious memetics on it."

"Agent Carter, you know that you're not permitted to review anomalous materials here without authorisation."

"Sorry sir, but this was just too weird to wait." Agents Zhao and Hennessy crowded behind him as Mike pointed to the screen. "You see this? I've split out a single line from the track, which seems normal enough."

Mike clicked the mouse, and the room filled with the sound of a stringed instrument being plucked in a ponderous, chromatic melody.

"Sounds old," said Agent Dee. "A zither?"

"No," said Zhao, "you can hear the plectrum. And it sounds like fewer strings. Maybe a lyre."

"Whatever, that's not the point." Mike sounded impatient. "The point is that there are literally like a hundred of these melodies, all wrapped together, playing at once. And when I ran it through to check for cog-hazards, the scanner went off the charts!"

Zhao stood reading the screen over Mike's shoulder. "The overlapping patterns of the signals are associated with relaxation, suggestibility and somnolence."

"So now we know why the party went to sleep," Dee shot back.

"But that's not all," said Mike. "After about ten minutes of that, the patterns change completely. Polytonal, atonal, what sounds like someone hitting the side of the instrument, scratching it - it goes haywire."

"And the resulting sound texture is designed to be processed by the thalamus as a signal to the amygdala." Zhao looked up in shock. "It's designed to make the listener afraid."

No, signed Hennessy, *all the listeners were asleep. This is designed to give them nightmares. Emma, what did you say your dream was about?*

Emma noticed that everyone in the room was staring at her. All the fear of her dream, that silent, bloody performance, came flooding back.

"Jesus Christ" said Agent Dee, "SCP-932 feeds on fear. Someone let those things out deliberately."

"That's speculation," said Commander Richards coolly. "To what end?"

I think someone wanted to kill a researcher, signed Hennessy, *and they were prepared to murder everyone at that party to do it*.

Emma started to shiver, and then jumped as an alarm blared above her head.

"Sir, containment breach!"

"I see it, agent - looks like they want us again. Getting the details through now."

Emma watched intently as the Commander's eyes widened.

"Multiple anomalies. SCPs 126, 1493, 1860, 2337, all loose. Goddammit, and the noise has caused 339 to breach. Right - Carter, Hennessy - go to level seven and bring extra hearing protection for the guards. Zhao, Dee, get the Silencer and head to K-sector. I'll be down there shortly. And be careful."

For the second time that night, the MTF stirred into action. Emma saw Mike swing his arms in a huge clap as he leapt from his chair, beaming madly.

"Let's do this, baby! We're getting the band back together!"

Two minutes later, in the empty dormitory, Emma thought, *Or maybe the orchestra is just tuning up*.

A Cooler Manifesto

“Fuck The Critic.”

Ruiz paced in a monochrome hallway, holding a banged-up Betamax recorder in his hand.

“This asshole comes into my house, starts critiquing the fucking wallpaper, no sir, no sir, the carpet does not match the drapes sir, get the fuck out of my house, SIR. Ladies and gentlemen and, I dunno, hyperintelligent animals, or aliens or whatever the fuck you are, we’ve made a mistake. This man is a fucking maniac, and I don’t mean that in the good way.”

Ruiz started walking up his Penrose staircase.

“We have somehow become an institution in and of ourselves, and this is a huge, HUGE fucking mistake. Every time one of you fucking morons makes a memetic graffiti tag, the man comes crashing down on those of us who are actually trying to say something. The stupidest among you have started making childish mistakes. The Man knows our name now. We’re old hat, we’re blasé, we’re fucking bland. People look at our stuff and they sigh. Nobody gives a fuck about us because we’re doing shit that makes no sense.”

Ruiz jumped into a pair of mirrors and entered freefall.

“So I’m going to go ahead and do something a little… radical. Fuck randomness, fuck Dada, fuck all of it. It isn’t cool any more, that’s why nobody talks about us. We used to exist to shock, to challenge, to actually grab The Man by the fucking balls and shove them down his throat. Now we’re just hammering out the same old shit. The toyman has more creativity in his left toe than all of you put together, and it’s time to remedy that. I’m sending this to everyone. Here is our manifesto.”

Ruiz landed into a giant ballpit.

“Number One. Fuck the critics. More specifically, fuck The Critic. The Critic is Nobody. Anyone who’s got a ‘The’ at the beginning of their name is pretentious in all the wrong ways. Distance yourself from those assholes, let them squabble over their scraps of shat-out and recycled ‘creativity’. Make art for yourself, because trust me, if you make art tailored for the critics you’re their bitch, not your own. So yank The Critic’s cock out of your mouths. Start sucking your own cock for once.”

Ruiz picked up a Rubik’s cube and started fiddling with it.

“Number Two. Fuck The Man. That’s what we used to be about, before ‘hahaha lol so random XD’ happened. Here’s a fucking tip, and just the tip, just to see how it feels fucking your brains out: if Nobody understands your art, it’s fucking worthless.”

Ruiz placed the scrap of paper back on the moon.

“Number Three. Fuck you. You’re what ran us out of town like a bad joke, you smashed us into the ground, and you sit around smoking your weed or whatever and wonder why Nobody ‘like, understands us, man’. That’s because you’re not making a point. We’re all so utterly, profoundly derivative. Rehash after rehash. How long until one of us actually does something original for once?”

Ruiz transmigrated ungulaterally betwixt chaotic inorganic multitudes of.

“I’m calling for a renaissance. I’m calling for change. I’m calling for everyone to stop acting like they’re cool just for rearranging the rules of reality. I’m calling for you to stop flooding us with your stupid, stupid bullshit. I’m calling for a pizza delivered in ten minutes or your money back. I’m calling for you to actually sit down and look at everything you’ve done, and ask if you’re actually proud of it. I’m calling for you to realise that you aren’t. I’m calling for you to all stop with the stuff we’ve been doing before. I’m calling for you to make us cool again.”

Ruiz hung up the phone made of cockroach innards.

“Stop making things because you can, stop making things because

you want to make things like everyone else, stop making things because you already saw the same thing and wanted to do it again, stop making things that aren't yours, stop making things that aren't cool. Because this shit isn't cool, it's infantile, it's fucking stupid. You want to know why we aren't cool yet? It's because 'we' includes all of us, and sadly, you are one of us. And you just aren't cool."

Ruiz smiled into the Betamax recorder.

"Yet."

The Clipper and The Sculptor sat and watched the video.

"How did he build that stuff? Is he… how is he on the moon? What the hell ARE those things?"

"I don't like it."

"Well of course you don't like it, you're mad you didn't sculpt this stuff first."

"No, I mean, I don't like what he's trying to do. It seems aimless. He's trying to break us apart."

"Back in the day there was no 'us'. We just did whatever we wanted."

"It's better now. We're working towards a goal. We're making Art Reality."

"Yeah, but… I dunno. My heart's not really in it any more. I'm 'The Clipper', all I do is cut up magazines, or recontextualise old stuff. I'm not like the rest of you. I don't get to make the things I want to. I don't get to create, just modify. And it's because of these fucking names."

"You're the one who wanted it."

"Yeah, but not for the rest of my life! Duchamp's got a point, we're all just 'The Whatever', and I'm sick of it! I want to put my real name on my damn work!"

“Ha, ‘Duchamp’. He doesn’t deserve that pseudonym.”

“Doesn’t he?”

The Clipper stood up and walked to the kitchen.

“You want something? I’m ordering pizza.”

“Yeah, get me a vegetarian. Anyway, he’s just… ugh. Actually, get me a meat lovers. I need some meat right now.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Anyway, he’s just… not cool. I mean, Betamax? What’s even the point of that, beyond it just being obscure? You’re the only person I know who actually has a player for these things. We’re probably the only ones even looking at this.”

The Clipper finished ordering, and sat down with The Sculptor again.

“I know The Critic has like ten of them, I got mine from him. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Oh yeah, he’ll be pissed alright. He’s gonna be calling for Duchamp’s head on a platter.”

“Why, though?”

“He’s criticising us, and he’s criticising The Critic’s critique.”

“Well, everyone’s a critic. What makes you think people are going to pay him any attention?”

“He’s showy. He’s countering our countercultural revolution, he’s stealing it, he’s misappropriating the source and taking our name for a joyride through the mud. He’s making me really, really mad. I don’t even think the video was an exploit. He’s laughing at us. It’s a normal video of impossible things, he’s calling bullshit on using exploits at all.”

“I don’t get to use exploits, man. All I do is clip things, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. That was your decision.”

“Was is the operative word, here. I think I’m done with it.”

“Fuck.”

The Sculptor leapt to the player, fervently removing the tape, putting it to the light, trying to sense the feel of the non-existent on its bevelled edge.

“He’s got you, man, this thing’s an exploit after all, it’s –"

“It’s not. I… I’m just sick of it. I’ve been sick of it for a while. I’ve not been doing anything of my own, and the only reason I’ve been sticking around is because of you guys. But… don’t take this the wrong way, man, but… I want to make other stuff. Don’t you remember your first piece? That weird rebar thing, what did you call it?”

“*Uścisk*. I remember.”

“People loved that shit. Should have put your name on it. What was the last thing you did? All people remember me for is mailing out some newspaper clippings. We’re stagnating.”

Ruiz opened the door.

“That you are. One Hawaiian, one meat lovers, is that right, gentlemen? Please, tip generously.”

The Sculptor and The Clipper stared at Ruiz Duchamp, sporting a tattered delivery man uniform, who continued offering them the pair of boxes. The Clipper broke the silence.

"…fuck it, whatever. Here's twenty bucks. Keep the change."

"Thanks. Enjoy your pizza!"

The Sculptor switched his gaze to The Clipper as Duchamp walked back out the door.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Dude, I'm hungry, and he had our pizza. He's not an asshole, it's not going to be poisoned or anything. If he was going to kill us, the video would have done it. We're putty in his hands, and he knows it. He's the one in control here. You're going to hate me for saying this, but… he's cooler than us."

"You… whatever. Just give me my damn meat."

"Here."

"…this is vegetarian."

« It Just Shattered | Hub | Snip Snip Snip »

A Darke Tale - New Age

The perpetual fear of every slave owner, spanning not only these years, but of slavery as an institution, is that of rebellion. African slaves were frequently taken from warring tribes, speaking different languages, and with known grudges, so cooperation might be mitigated. In some circumstances, males of fighting age were killed or mutilated.

On the plantations, rules created for the safety of slave owners were paramount. Farmers prudently forbid materials that could be turned to weapons in or near slave quarters. A slave master was often employed for their brutality in enforcement.

The hells of life on a sugar plantation are not known widely, but the danger is implied. A worker's life-expectancy is six-months, and the best death to be had is that of exhaustion. Many more will lose limbs to the machines than their breath to the soil. It is for this reason that an exception in general policy is made in these places.

On a sugar plantation, it is custom to keep a machete on the wall, so that the expense of a new slave could, hopefully, be avoided completely.

The Island of Antigua; English West Indies

Darke Sugar Plantation

June, 1633

A scream in the processing room had stopped signaling curiosity. It inspired slaves and servants to act, because there was an unspoken — and perhaps not fully comprehended — agreement adhered to

among the workers. All of them would do what they could to help the one caught in the red and orange folds of iron, because they could need the same help before the end of the season, and the difference of two seconds could mean losing not just a hand but an arm.

But The Tarp stood in the room, and before any of them had fallen in their first steps to keep from getting closer to it, it had pulled the machete from its hook on the wall and kicked out the feet of the negro screaming by the furnace. With a twist, The Tarp brought one elbow down on another, and a crack resounded. The arm broken between the wrist and the captured hand, The Tarp had a clean cut with the edge, and the negro's pain became much more acute.

Bending over, it ripped a strip of burlap from a dirty bag, and padded the wound. Another strip, and with the iron stake hanging from its belt it twisted the cloth around the stump until the spurts turned to a trickle. No words were spoken while it worked with its strange diligence, except the sickly half-syllable of the mutilated slave's word for 'no'.

The Tarp picked up the limp body, a few shades greyer than a moment earlier, and handed it to the manservant Brick, drawn to the shed by the initial panic. A neutral pat on Brick's head and The Tarp was gone, not a sliver of skin seen beneath its rough-hewn cloak.

Brick, stout but not particularly muscular, started to labor down the dirt road and called back for help. When two of the larger slaves had taken the body from him, he held his knees and ordered them forward.

“Bring him to one of the house girls! They'll… they'll.” He made to look like he hadn't tried to say anything else when they looked back, and waved them forward. When they had rounded the short dirt path and were behind the palmetto bushes that lined the right of the walkway, Brick bent over and retched, his elbows on his knees. His eyes started to cloud over and he fell to his hip, and then contented himself to lie down for a moment and let the faintness pass.

When Brick had first enlisted as a servant for his trip to the Caribbean, he had been twenty-five, and bold in his strength as a man. Eager to prove his merit as a strongman, while earning what

he believed to be an investment in his own plantation, he signed his service to work in the fields, and promptly died as one of the first indentured servants in the Caribbean.

In truth, he had lapsed into a deep unconscious state from exhaustion, and his body was stolen by a medicine man. It was through this that Brick met Mr. Darke.

The medicine man took Brick into his hut, where he was given a paste of food and water, and his blood was let as needed. He remained comatose for nearly three weeks, and by then his old master had assumed he had run out on his contract. *Just as well*, he would say, *as there was no way I or anyone else could serve in such a capacity.*

As it was, there *was* a people who could serve in the fields, but they came not from the metropolises of Europe, but the grasslands of Africa. Certainly not after Brick and his circumstantial peers had written with word of the work. In this fractional way, Brick had helped changed the world. Of course, his campaign to make wary his friends and family of the sugar plantations was secondary, his work for Mr. Darke taking up most of his time.

Mr. T. Darke was a frequent visitor of the medicine man. The story as he told it was not unlike Brick's, although his rescue by the island priest was from Oriental merchants and their 'tactical spices'.

“Since then, I've had tea with the old niggah at least once a month, and he's shown me a whole 'nother side of magic I couldn't of fathomed. Wouldn't recommend voodoo to men who haven't had their feet wetted in the waters, though.” During dinner one evening, Darke leaned forward and muttered through his grin “I've heard, their women can't forgive. I daresay they let the grudge ferment and try to poison your grandchildren with it!” Of no incident, Brick's employment had never been strictly addressed in conversational tones. His best guess was the medicine man's boredom, who had become increasingly disinterested in Brick the longer he stayed with him past his conscious return. This is debatably supported by Brick's initial acquaintance with Darke, when he woke up one morning on his plantation, and told that he was employed.

Anecdotes did abound at the table of Darke, and all of them, outlandish or close to home, would ring with an energetic truth that it made his various circles (very few of which overlapped at all) curious as to how a man as young as he could be so cleverly, damnably, experienced. Even after a pint or three, Darke would give the same answer to anyone who brought up his age. A furrowed brow, and then he would look into a polished mug, or spoon, or serving plate. After checking both sides of his face, he gave a tentative estimate. “A fortnight past thirty, I should think.” And that was that.

Brick's employment on Darke's plantation was humbling, but comforting. “A boy's chores for a man's meal.” His only bane was The Tarp, who both terrified and infuriated him. There were no assumptions that could be made about The Tarp, as Darke would say nothing on the subject, and the information gleaned from his actions only supported the conclusion that The Tarp was either insane or well past human. Brick opted to the latter.

Standing somewhere between six and seven feet, it towered over Brick's stout figure. There was little else to be discerned. Its cloak it wore in layers, the outermost tied with a belt, from which hung a few pouches, and one side an iron barb that was rarely touched. It smelled of leather and earth. Its gloves went past the cuff of its sleeve, and the top of its boots had never been seen. Both were a deep brown hide that looked comfortably worn. All of this, in any weather. Even the summers, when humidity was heavier than anywhere, and it was not uncommon to reach a point beyond a hundred and twenty degrees.

Its face had never been seen. Two white circles on a deep leather mask, wide that would cover its cheeks, on top of a small circular screen that, for whatever function, covered its mouth. Not much else was defined by anyone about The Tarp, because it was impossible to search for the details in its mask when its eyes had been caught. The only part of The Tarp that wasn't mechanical was the look it gave, striking an ice into the chords of a person's heart, and still this wasn't human. It surpassed any human capacity into the realm of devilry. Brick was sure that Hell was the only place The Tarp would call home.

Darke said that it was employed for the purpose of slave management. Its presence could accomplish this a dozen times over, and yet Brick had to know it was around every damned day. Its obviously inhuman strength further humiliated Brick, who once believed himself to be a demigod, although that had always had a youthful context. This constant reminder (if irregularly reinforced one), served to aggravate Brick, always and forever, although never to a degree that exceeded the amount of fear that he held for The Tarp, and consequently, never to a degree that would bring him to actually *do* anything about the creature.

And it had the habit of arriving at the most off-putting moments. Brick would go days without seeing it, but when it resurfaced, it was always sudden. *I've never seen him from across a field, no. Always bloody behind me.* Once, after a week without any such incidents, Brick had tentatively concluded that The Tarp had somehow come to understand the particular effect it had on him, and that they would stay away from each other from then out. That evening, he had opened a guest bedroom to begin cleaning, and struck a match to light a candle. The flare of sulfur illuminated the orbs of The Tarp's eyes a foot away from Brick, who alerted the entire household to the circumstances, and also broke Mr. Darke's cow-lamp.

Brick was hardly one to conspire. Getting rid of The Tarp was not an aspiration, but a pipe-dream to be nurtured spitefully until Brick became jaded and unfeeling enough to be legitimately apathetic, and probably die.

Any day now…

A night later, Darke sat across from a bleary eyed, dark looking young fellow, sitting in a tavern nursing a very dirty pint of beer, staring anxiously into his drink, in the way that only a man who owed somebody else more money than they themselves personally owned can. With a keen eye and a small smile, Darke engaged him in conversation, opening with a joke.

“BLLAAAARRRRR, YE BLIMEY FUCKIN' ARSE, STAND THE FUCK UP AND BE A MAN BEFORE SOME FUCKARD CUTS YER BALLS OFF.” When the younger man didn't laugh Darke clapped a

hand down on his neck and giggled for several seconds.

“Nah, nah! I'm fine, I swear I SWEAR,” he teetered on one foot for a moment. “Now, listen up, because I can tell you right now that you don't solver any o' those problems by pissin' around with your drinks. Now listen up, because I'm eight, HUN- no, wait, wait,” He bent over the counter and stared at his candlelit reflection in a bottle. The publican looked down at him from three yards away, decidedly nonbemused.

“I'm… THIRTY… years. Give or take. Old. See? You don't, you don't know. I don't know. Bu' tha's alright. Here, have a drink.” Before the fellow had said a word, his new friend had spilled half a glass of whiskey on his lap, and was whispering 'eight hundred' into his ear incessantly. As he drank, the younger man grew bolder, and explained his situation to Darke, and anyone else who was listening. It was a crowded tavern full of bawlers and drunks, and Darke bought a few rounds to create a sympathetic ring of listeners.

His name was Percival Cretum, and when he had driven his father's business into the ground (for business reasons, presumably; this was not addressed), he had found promise in the heralded western colonies. With no direction or any desire to continue his life in Britain, he got involved with a small company of merchants, and within four months was aboard an argosy to Antigua. His hopes to travel to the New England colonies, where he might start a new, profitable life, were suspended so that he could break away from the men whose ultimate goal was to create a stranglehold on slaving within the Windward Islands (so name for their position relative to the Caribbean trade winds) by laying a foundation in the surrounding islands, until such a time as the Windward Islands were available to be colonized. Percival Cretum had little faith in this plan of action, and certainly wasn't about to take an arduous path of growth and return, so he bid his compatriots farewell and relieved them of enough resources to carry himself to Boston by way of Nevis.

“Where I'd really like to be *now*, because they're probably going to kill me.” At this point everyone, including Percival, laughed heartily, because most of them hadn't been listening and laughing seemed appropriate. He wasn't entirely sure why, but at one point he knew that he *hadn't* wanted to share the information he had just given to a

public house filled with people he didn't know. Figuring that any damage was done, he decided to enjoy the rest of his evening, and promptly blacked out.

The drinking continued, and soon the tavern emptied out, with Darke cradling his new friend in his arms and up a dirt road, only dropping him six times before falling asleep on top of him, a mile from his home.

The next morning was an alarming one for Percival, who awoke to Brick lightly shaking him.

“Mister Darke cares to speak with you as soon as you're able. He also suggests you rub some of the brown paste in your washroom along your gums, and that it ought to help bring you out of any stupor.”

When the stout man had left, Percival stumbled out of the very tightly tucked sheet, nearly falling on his face, and into the first private washroom he had ever been inside. Footsteps from the floor below resounded in his skull like gunshots. He saw a small green bowl filled with a substance that looked thoroughly whipped, evenly light brown and smooth as an eggshell. Another time, he might have hesitated to put it into his mouth, but without skipping a beat, he curled his finger into the cream-like mush and stuck it into his cheek.

Before he had started to spread it along the inside of his lip, his body slipped into a euphoric sense of acuity. His pupils dilated, and the deathly headache evaporated with an inaudible sigh.

Feeling very sharp and prepared to fight his way through any consequences of whatever he might have done the night before, he strode out of the bedroom and observed his surroundings.

Ornate woodwork, oil paintings, and down the hall, a pedestal holding two massive barbs of ivory intersecting each other. It was a testament to affluence, and Percival had only seen the portion of the house outside of his bedroom. As he made his way down the staircase, envy and admiration upon him, and knowing nothing else about Darke, he knew he wanted to be him.

After making several aimless rounds and seeing nobody, he caught a glimpse of a tall figure's coat and called out to him for directions. A masked head and the shoulder it belonged to slid out behind a doorway and nodded in the opposite direction. Feeling as though he *should* have been taken aback, but not actually having the sentiment by whatever magic was in the bowl upstairs, he followed the nod to a brightly lit dinner room, and the back of his comrade's head.

Darke twisted around in his seat. “Percy! Join me. Eggs?”

“Gladly, sir. Thank you.” Darke scraped a pair of the bright and flattened orbs onto a dish he had prepared, and began pouring himself a glass of rum.

“Made, of sugar from this plantation, *on* this plantation, about four summers ago; I have since had a few other distilleries built around the side of the house, and am learning to create rum as a little side project of mine. Appreciate the taste of wine, but use rum, for the real drinking.” Percival noted how he would hesitate between words as he spoke, drawing emphasis to some of his absent-minded actions between clauses.

“On my first batch, I offered the first glass to one of the niggers who helped me move some supplies. Didn't know what I was doing. He's blind now. Step out on the porch with me.” Percival began to pick up his plate, but a bustling house servant took it out of his hands and carried it to a table on the sundeck. Overlooking the orchard in front of them, and to his left, the noon sun shown down on the tall fields of sugar cane.

“So, Percy, my new friend. How much of last night do you remember? Because as much as I put down, I do recall your very interesting story.” He pulled a pouch of tobacco out of his shirt. “And *you*,” he gestured with a pipe, also from his shirt, “have piqued my interest. No fear, no fear!” In response to Percival's fearfully crooked eyebrows.

“You made it very clear to me, and everybody else, that your greatest interest is money. And that you have the utmost faith in your own abilities. As do I.” He lit a matched and drew.

“Mr. Darke, I don't know what I said, but I hope you'll pardon me,” Darke stopped him with a thoughtful wave of his hand.

“Darke. I've been going by that name for a long time, Percy. And I think I'm about done with it. So here are my thoughts. Not many people can leave their mark on the world. And I believe that if you chase after luxury by money you've only made by using others, you won't care to have it in the end. I can promise you that wealth has never been a goal to strive for. It's truly secondary, and by the time you've created it for yourself, it will be too late to realize that you really wanted everything but.

“You have your gifts, Percy. Intellect and education, ambition. A hundred hells, you have youth. Real youth, not my youth. Forget I said that. Actually don’t, I’ll circle around. And I don’t know if you noticed, but before you vomited a barrel and a half, there was a tavern full of women looking you over. All of this, and you want money. I blame society.” He drew again, and took a swig of rum.

“My point is, Percy, you have *potential.* There’s very little legitimate potential in anyone, and you have mounds of it. Having seen the world change a few times over — no really, I’ll get to that — I’ve earned the right to say it’s people like *you* who make the difference. And here you are, no small thief, crooking over men who put faith in you to get to the mainland and make *money*?” He spat the word, and shot through Percy with a look of more paternalism than the young man had ever been shown. Shame was a foreign construct for him. It hurt.

“So if you’d like, *I’d* like to see to it you don’t waste yourself.

“There's magic in this world, son. It lives behind a veil, and it'll give itself up to people who go looking for it. I found it, and in my time I've done a great deal to make a difference by it. And then I got *wealthy*.” He gestured across the grounds. “Worst thing that could have happened to me.” He drew from the pipe again, and began to tell a story.

It was a fascinating story. Darke had had his fingers in nearly every European conquest in the last millennium. He had loved, and lost, and fought in countless wars. He had nearly died at the hands of

Francois Ravaillac, during his mission to kill Henry IV, King of France. He had advised the English crown and manipulated the Church of Rome, always for the greater good, *always by a code*. He had lived. When he drew his story to a close, how he had come to own his plantation and some of his lesser misadventures with the island's witch doctor, he seemed to expect something from Percival. If not belief, then perhaps acknowledgment. He got neither.

“Mister Darke, I must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality,” “You can reject what you've heard today, Percy,” “Percival. My name is Percival Cretum, thank you.” Darke's sigh was not one of frustration, nor disappointment, but of understanding. A father watching his son make the mistakes that he couldn't warn him against.

“I'm afraid you're Darke, now. You can go if you like. But magic is upon you, and I only want to see you use it the right way. Admittedly probably a faux pas to make you magic without telling you, but there’s really no standard, so there you go.”

“What? What magic, would you say that you're magic, that-” “Not anymore, but I certainly was.” “that your eight hundred years old-” “I might be a *little* magic, still.” “and that paste upstairs, that was *magic*?” “Coca leaves, which I can't believe there's not a market for.” “You're insane.” “More for me, I suppose.”

“I need to leave. Thank you. Thank you very much, for everything, for your time, for breakfast, for the COCA LEAVES, thank you, and thank you again. Good bye!”

Percival Cretum Darke strode down the path he assumed was to the city, came back when it wasn't, and looked around the grounds, trying and failing to maintain the sarcastic indifference in his step. The man who wasn't Darke anymore pointed to the West, and with a parting, “Right. Thanks!” Percival Cretum Darke walked off the No-Longer-Darke Plantation.

The Tarp stood behind the man smoking a pipe. In a voice like velvet gravel he spoke. “Do you try again?”

A moment passed. “I’ve been at this game a while. Nine years, six

months, between two or four weeks, depending on that Autumn's tobacco harvest. He'll be back. See to it he gets to Boston, will you?" And The Tarp was gone.

A Day, A Night and Some Lead.

I can taste the sun.

There are no words to describe it. Not because it is beautiful or grand, but because no language has ever had a need to name it. Wherever the light touches my bare skin it feels like someone pouring heat into my veins.

They come every day and pour water and dirt down my throat. I vomit the dirt up again after a few hours but that doesn't bother them.

That I can deal with. But it's the expressions that get to me. Unflinching. Their lips pulled into gentle smiles and kindness in their eyes. I scream and struggle, try to bite them and yet they keep on smiling. They stroke my hair as if I was child waking up from a nightmare.

Jakob comes by every day. He sits on the ground and talks of little Kadri, of the rest of the island and their idyllic lives. I feel no more empathy or friendship towards him. He bears the same smile and kindness as the others. Once a man as stubborn as a mule, his lips now speak the same slithering words as the rest of them. Perhaps if he didn't look like that he could persuade me and make me lose myself.

I'm sweating red. At first, I thought it was blood but soon realized that there was no smell of iron and the fluid flowed as easy as water. My skin is beginning to show patches of green. Every time they come to me with their sweet voices and calming words I feel a niggling desire in the back of my head to give in. To surrender my will and allow their kindness to swallow me, never to let me go.

The ropes should be digging into my flesh and yet I feel no pain.

It's raining, pouring. A torrential downpour pelts me with cold water,

my mind becomes sharp and focused. As if a haze has been lifted from my thoughts. Air feels like it should and I gasp for it.

The last weeks unfurl before me in perfect clarity. Every moment, mistake and action. I allow the memories to wash over me.

***

The boat hums beneath me as I arrive at the dock. No tourists this time, only supplies. Some gas, a few tools, a rather small box of food and two bags of fertilizer.

Kalev helps me load it all. He makes conversation. I tune him out and focus on the work. We're soon finished and say our goodbyes. I cast off, start the engine and leave the dock behind me. The wind hums as I ride across the calm sea. My radio blasts old songs across the waves.

After about twenty minutes the island is approaching quickly and I begin to slow down to maneuver through the few rocks that are scattered a bit off shore. I see Jakob standing on the dock with Kadri waving to me.

I smile.

I pull into the dock and step off my boat. Kadri runs up to me and reaches towards. I lift her up while she giggles. A feeling of disquiet rushes through my mind. The girl is green. A uniform light green. I look towards Jakob with a questioning gaze only to see that his skin matches hers. I put Kadri down and stroll towards my friend. We shake hands and I ask him about the situation.

He smiles. He says not to worry. I'll understand soon. The world goes dark.

I wake up tied to a post. They stand around me. Jakob, Kadri, Andrus and all the rest of them. I shout at them. They just smile at me. They rub something red on my skin.

Jakob stays behind as the other leave. He tells me that I should stay calm. I spit in his face. He smiles and leaves.

***

The downpour continues. I slacken and let my arms hold my weight. I feel the ropes slip against my skin. My mind flashes with a realization. The ropes are some sort of synthetic material. They don't soak up water in the rain, they just get slippery. I pour all my strength into trying to slip a hand out of the restraints. I don't know how long it takes, but finally, the rope gives in and a hand slips free.

I quickly untie myself and stumble forwards, only to fall face first into the mud. My legs don't obey me. So I crawl for what feels like an hour. When I think I'm far enough I crawl into the thick growths of juniper as deep as I can. I do not feel the needles. Amidst the thunder and darkness, my consciousness slips and the world with its horrors drops into nothingness for a few blissful hours.

I wake slowly, floating in a soft haze for minutes before the world come into focus. I'm still lying in the junipers, the densely packed needles and branches hide me from sight. A fact that I'm infinitely thankful for.

And not for no reason. I can hear them. They're shouting my name. The utter despair in their voices almost reaches me. Almost.

They're close. I hear the occasional bit of conversation. They're scared. Scared that I'll get off the island and turn their wretched little utopia inside out. I can't help but smile to myself. By God, if I make it off I'll make sure those predictions come true.

I lay still for at least an hour. Only by sheer luck or divine providence, I seem to have chosen the thickest patch of juniper. They pass by my hiding spot multiple times before they give up and leave. I keep hiding for another half hour.

I emerge slowly, looking everywhere and listening for even the slightest sound out of place. Soon I realize that while during the day I can definitely see better, I still have absolutely no idea about my location. I can't waste time so I pick a direction and walk.

Within ten minutes I'm on the edge of the forest. This isn't right. No way they would place me so near the shore. I look in the distance

across the sea. This doesn't look like the shore of….

God damn it.

Of course, they didn't put me on the island itself. They put me here. A small islet off the northern shore of the island itself. The only way to it is either swimming or by a thin strip of land that isn't fully above the water in all places. And anyone going across it can be seen clear as day since nothing grows on the strip aside from the occasional shrub. I'm willing to bet that there's at least one of them sitting on the end of the strip with binoculars.

I orient myself based on the shoreline I'm seeing. I am now on the eastern edge of the islet and the island is south. After a few more minutes of walking through it, I can see the edge of the forest. I lay down on my stomach and crawl towards it. I position myself behind a bush and brush the leaves aside slightly.

I lay there for a while, scanning the shore. Then, finally, movement. There it is. While I see no binoculars, this one definitely is there to keep an eye out.

The options run through my head. Walking is out. They'll see me the moment I'm out of the trees.

Swimming? No. Too far. No telling how many more are lurking in the trees by the beach

Maybe during the night? If I'm lucky there'll be another storm and even if there won't, it'll be much harder to see me.

I move back into the forest. Judging by the sun I still have at least 7 hours of daylight left. I spend the time rubbing the still moist soil on my skin.

The night comes painfully slowly and brings a problem with it. A nearly full moon. My dirt camouflage can go get stuffed. The bare strip of land connecting the two islands will offer me no cover and the light will make a moving figure quite noticeable.

So swimming it is. I walk more towards the eastern part of the islet and slowly walk into the water, careful not to make a sound. I swim

quietly, not raising my arms out of the water. I don't know how long it takes, but I can finally feel the seafloor. I spend a moment catching my breath. I'm quite a good swimmer but the distance did take a bit out of me.

I walk out of the water and look around. The moonlight turns the world into one of sharp contrasts. I can see the coast clearly for quite a bit. Nothing but rocks and shrubs. The forest is a wall of darkness, the moonlight reaching the ground only occasionally.

I head along the coast towards east. Another partially submerged land bridge connects the island to Saaremaa. All I need to do is get to it and this hell is over. I walk for a few minutes until light begins to flash in the forest. I swear internally and dive behind a large rock.

The sound of footsteps reaches me soon enough and begins moving closer and closer. Only one of them by the sound of it. A beam of light flashes around my hiding place and the footsteps move even closer. My hands are shaking, my entire body is like a compressed spring. A foot moves into my field of vision. And I spring towards the form.

I quickly wrap an arm around the neck. It's Terje. The daughter of Villem, the owner, and caretaker of the lighthouse. She's barely sixteen. I squeeze, allowing no air to pass between her lips to keep her from screaming. She struggles.

And keeps on struggling. She's not getting any oxygen, she's almost a child and yet she doesn't stop or even slow down. My thoughts race.

I strengthen my hold.

My other hand on her head.

Snap.

She goes limp.

I take the flashlight and turn it off, leaving only the moonlight to illuminate the world around me. I pull the body into a growth of juniper and arrange the branches so that nobody will find her for a

while.

I fling the flashlight into the water and keep moving. I try not to think. To think would be to slow down. To slow down would be to feel guilt. I can do that later. Preferably never.

A walk that would have taken barely forty minutes otherwise now takes slightly more than an hour as I slowly sneak along the edge of the forest, trying to keep out of the light. The stone coast stops and a kilometer long stretch of reeds appears. I will have to go along the outer edge so nobody can hear me.

The seafloor is soft here and my progress is incredibly slow. I can see the eastern sky brightening.

Tick, tock the clock is almost up. Shouldn't have waited until dusk to move.

I'm through the muck and back on land. I turn left and begin walking to the land bridge. I come to the road, get off it as soon as possible and walk the rest of the way through the forest. I'm on the edge of the clearing when I see lights in the distance.

No. No. No!

They're on one of the islets that make up the land bridge. I'm cut off. There's no way I can get to my boat. I'll never make it before sunrise and there's no way it's unguarded.

I'm out of options. I can't move during the daytime. I can't swim that kind of distance. I'll have to wait until the next night. Maybe I can try to sneak by the ones on the connecting islets or try to fight them. Now I need somewhere to hide.

Going west would mean going right into their den. There are only two houses towards the east, however.

East it is. I cut in a straight line through the forest. My skin seems to be more resilient. The countless branches barely even bruise me.

Then I stumble upon a house.

It’s nothing much, barely looks big enough for two rooms. A single window. But it shouldn't be here. I know the island quite well and I’ve met all who live on it. This house, I have never seen before.

I know it’s a bad idea, but I’m taking my chances of being capable of overpowering whoever is inside. I doubt two people would live in a house this small. I move to the door and push on the handle. It’s unlocked and opens without a single sound.

The interior is dark and my hand instinctively reaches for a light switch. Which it finds and turns on. I begin to feel unnerved. I can hear no generator and there were definitely no power lines connecting to the house.

It’s quiet. I hate it. When I was outside there, I had a purpose and a goal. Now there is nothing and my mind roars with thoughts.

I explore the house to silence them. It’s very basic. A kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. The fact that there is running water unnerves me even further. Only one person has running water on the island and he lives here all year round. And this nonexistent house has it as well.

Then I see the hatch on the bedroom floor. I’m afraid. I shouldn't go down there. But at this point, something in my mind has gone unhinged. Something has been lost during these weeks.

I open the hatch. Light streams in from the basement. I climb down. I am standing in a small room. A single bulb illuminates it and a white steel door stands in front of me.

I have nothing left to lose. I open it. What does it matter anymore?

Quite a lot. I am now in a laboratory. Not a very big one, but a laboratory nonetheless. Potted plants line the walls. A large table in the center of the room in covered in countless flasks, beakers, and various other glass containers. And I’m looking into the eyes of a young man across the room.

He greets me. I return the greeting, too confused and shocked to do anything else.

He recovers much quicker and gives me a lab coat to cover myself. I put it on. He asks me my name, what I'm doing here, and so much more.

To which I respond by telling him everything. I spare none of the details.

He goes paler and paler during my story, which is rather impressive. I didn't know you could pale with green skin. Once I'm finished he rushes up to me, almost earning himself a broken nose. And then I'm at the doctor's office. He checks my eyes, my skin, my hair, my blood. He asks for some more personal samples and gets told off quite strongly.

He's like a whirlwind. Every machine in the room is soon whirring, buzzing and flashing. And with every result, they give out he gets more and more pale. And then the lab is silent and he's sitting, his eyes staring into nothing.

He mumbles something about genetic instability, the method of delivery and instincts. Then he turns to me and explains my predicament.

I feel cold suddenly. It won't stop. It could be slowed down but only up to a month or even less. I'll become like them. He keeps talking about modified group behavior but I tune him out. This is it. End of the line.

I ask him for a phone. He looks at me, guilt in his eyes. He hands it to me. I call Heino, my occasional fishing buddy. I ask if he still works at Ämari.

He does.

I tell him about what's happening. I ask him to tell everybody he can about this. And I ask him to give everyone here a shallow grave and a Viking crew cut. He tries to talk but I hang up.

I hand the phone back. We sit in silence for a while before I ask him to do me a favor. As a sort of payment for what he has caused.

He wants to argue. I see it in his eyes. But he doesn't.

I turn around.

The taste of lead is all encompassing.

***

A man sits in a small house. A body lies in the sun outside. His fellows and brothers will not look kindly upon him. Murder is nothing as there are people enough in the world. Messing with their very being, their thoughts and soul, now that is something quite different. This will be the end. They'll take everything. His knowledge will turn to ash. He will be nothing. And he will not know it.

He fidgets with the silver ring in his hands, the oak leaf motif reflecting light across the walls. He gets up and walks to the shore. The ring is cold against his palm. He throws it.

Once back, he takes a small notebook out of his pocket and pulls out a phone.

"Good evening? Agent Thorstein? This is Oliver Kristjan. We've met on occasion. No, this is not a joke. I believe I have information you would be interested in. You can collect me from Copenhagen. I'll be in Apropos. We'll discuss my terms then. Until we meet again."

He puts down the phone and sighs. He hates betrayals.

A Day at the Call Center

"Good morning, Sir. Yes, you have reached Uncle Merl's Discount Emporium, how may I assist you? I'm sorry, this is tech support, we don't handle sales. No, Sir, I can't direct you to sales without a reference. I don't care if your friend says I did a few days ago, I'm not doing it now. Because the last time I did someone got sold something she wasn't supposed to have. Sir, I do not appreciate this sort of language. Goodbye."

Mr. Sami was not having a good day.

Though Mr. Sami only rarely had good days, this one was no ordinary bad day, he thought. It was a bad day with expectations, with dreams. It aspired to be the best bad day it could be, a day so absolutely terrible other bad days will tell stories about it to their children.

Mr. Sami had somewhat of a flair for the dramatic.

Mr. Sami was a tech support supervisor at Uncle Merl's Discount Emporium, top provider of all products mysterious and magical, or so the company claimed at least. As far as Mr. Sami was concerned, they were the top peddlers of overpriced crap that broke down every ten minutes, often disastrously. Say what you will about Marshall, Carter, and Dark and their business practices, at least their products worked as intended most of the time. Every time one of *Merl's* crappy dehumanizers or shoddy levitators crashed and burned, it meant more work for *him*. Like right now.

"So, Ma'am, what seems to be the problem with your Luxetron 3000? It's too bright? Ma'am, you are aware the Luxetron is a device made to dispel magical darkness? No Ma'am, it is not supposed to be used as a tanning lamp, it's all in the manual. Page 23."

And sometimes, the product was just fine and the customer was an idiot.

"Ma'am, let me transfer you to our luxomancy expert. Please hold." Mr. Sami rose from his cubicle, and scanned the office for the tip of a pointy hat. "Hey Dan, call for you on line 5! Another moron using the Luxetron as a tanning lamp!"

A voice replied from the cubicle sporting the pointy tip. "Do not disturb Danerius the Magnificent! He is at work peering into the very fabric of the arcane stream!"

"Finish your goddamn Freecell game later and answer the bloody phone!"

A tall, white haired figure rose from the cubicle, the majestic appearance of his robes only slightly spoiled by the flowery tie he chose to wear over them. "You shall pay dearly for this interruption, Sami. I shall inflict upon you a hex most foul for this transgression!" His threats might have been more credible if Dan didn't make them every time he had to answer a call.

"Yeah, threaten a shaman with a curse, that's a real bright idea, Dan. Now if you don't mind, I have another call."

Mr. Sami sat down at his desk went back to work. In the following two hours, he had to deal with one of their patented Snoozebooks malfunctioning and causing people to mildly explode ("If I were you, Sir, I'd take my daughter to the hospital, they might still be able to reattach that foot. No, Sir, the book is non-refundable"), a customer complaining about the new Durandal series ("It's a new model, Sir, some bugs are bound to occur. Yes, I do realize not being able to cut through the skin of large lizards is a pretty major bug. No, we do not cover medical expenses of injuries caused by our products, you signed a disclaimer") and Bob the warlock trying to fix the copier with dark rituals again ("Let go of the mouse blood and ram skull and call tech support, Bob, seriously"). Only four more hours till quitting time. He needed a break.

Mr. Sami went outside for a smoke, taking care to avoid Mr. Jamu's office. He still hasn't filled his performance report for this quarter, and his boss did not take kindly to tardiness. Jamu might be his cousin, but that got him no breaks with the man. Outside, he saw Sarah from the legal department huddled under a puffy coat, her

hands shaking from the cold. "Rough day?" he asked.

"You can say that again. Bernstein's in a foul mood."

"Why?"

"He said someone screwed up and left a trail leading to one of our more… questionable ventures. Now the spooks are sniffing around, asking questions."

This was Sami's fault, though nobody knew it. He knew he shouldn't have transferred that lady to sales without a reference, but she asked so nicely. No one ever asked Mr. Sami for anything nicely. Luckily for him, he managed to cover that mistake up by getting rid of the sales rep with a particularly nasty curse.

"Please, those idiots couldn't spot an anomaly in a single word dictionary," (one of their more useless products, Mr. Sami thought) "besides, I thought Bernstein said they had a man on the inside to take care of that sort of thing."

Being involved in the distribution of anomalous objects was never completely safe. Some people objected to Merl's selling some of his more… unique products. Dangerous people. To be honest, the spooks scared Sami, but he couldn't let Sarah know that. He was really only in the business because of his father anyway.

Sarah just shrugged and lit another cigarette. Sami couldn't help but notice how fine she looked today. Maybe it was time for him to finally man up and ask her out. "Say Sarah, are you doing anything tonight?"

This caught her attention. "I'm always doing something. Why, what did you have in mind?"

Sami shifted around uncomfortably, he really wasn't very good at this sort of thing. "I thought maybe we could hang out at my place, I could cook you some of my world famous gumbo." He nervously tried to scratch his nose, remembered he had a lacquered wooden mask on, and slid his hands to his pockets, hoping Sarah didn't notice.

Sarah just smiled. "Sounds like fun. I'll be there at eight." She finished her smoke and went back inside.

Sami gleamed under his mask. Maybe this day wasn't going to be so bad after all. He'd have to stop at the supermarket to get some groceries for the gumbo, maybe get a new aftershave…

The sudden sound of motors and rotors woke him from his day dream. The parking lot was now filled with black cars and jeeps, and several black helicopters circled the skies around the office. Men in discreet clothing emerged from the assembled vehicles, and several made their way directly to him. One of them, a particularly large man in an ill fitting grey suit, grabbed Sami and slapped a pair of handcuffs on him, and proceeded to drag him to the back seat of a nearby van.

"Couldn't spot an anomaly in a single word dictionary, eh?" the man said, a smug look on his face. "Oh, and Agent Stanton wanted me to thank you for selling her that Discloser. She says it was very handy."

Sami just sighed. Well, at least now I won't have to fill that performance sheet, he thought.

A day at the (un)stables

The dinosaur starts to beep. I can't tell why, but I continue to rub its belly. The little T-Rex still won't shut up, and then it hits me.

My alarm clock is blaring. My arm reflexively moves to slap my clock's snooze button, but I just slam it against my nightstand. I open my eyes just enough to be blinded by the early morning sun and crawl under the covers like a vampire. The clock's beeping has sped up, and now I'm desperate for silence. I throw off the covers and walk to the other side of the room, where the damned thing is sitting on the floor. I pick it up, turn it off, and hate past me for putting it there. I look at the time, and my eyes snap all the way open as I remember that I've got work today.

Swiftly walking from my bedroom to the bathroom, I grab a towel from the closet and start the shower. After I've made myself squeaky clean, I head to back to the closet and pull out my uniform. Uniform is perhaps a little too formal. I slide on bluejeans and a beige shirt with the Foundation logo.

I walk into the kitchen and make toast. It is good toast. I brush my teeth and use mouthwash, strike a few poses in the mirror, and then head out. I march down four flights of stairs, it's a good workout at least. Not like I need one. I make for the front door of the building, and I'm just in time to catch one of the on-site transports. It's an old bus really. My co-workers and I load up, and I take a seat for the short ten minute shuttle from home to work. The driver stops, opens the door and we quietly walk off. I don't bother to watch it drive off, and instead head for the bio wing. I slide my ID past a scanner and open a steel door into the main compound.

I slide in behind my supervisor, Brad, a tan, muscular man with a beard, who's typing an email now, and casually push my badge up to the clocker. It beeps and I slink back outside. I was a little late. I take a walk, in my clunky boots, to the nearest Paddocks entrance. Normally it's quiet, but there are very obviously experiments going

on today.

I see a few labcoats in paddock 13 and a strange sight. Well, not to me. Not anymore, anyways. Eleven ninety-four is being tested. I cringe at the thoughts of taking care of whichever horse gets messed up today. Oh, it's Nick. Bastard bit my hand yesterday. I try to remind myself not to be such an ass, but that train of thought is lost when he attempts to put on a sweater.

A little chuckle to start the day is nice. All of our animals are equine in nature, our Site has specialized in these SCP's for a while now. now I'm the only horse-care provider on my shift now, since Emily got transferred to Site-23. This particular fact makes the vast majority of my chores a pain. I head down to the south storage shed. Wellington is waiting.

"Good morning Wells!"

He gives a shake and returns with an "Absolutely is!"

"Let me hook you up and I'll load up breakfast."

Twenty kilo hay bales. Nine of them. Held in the most awkward position and then then thrown onto the back of a carriage. I've worked here for quite a while, but I'm certainly not strong as one would expect a farmhand.

"Wells?" His grand head turns with a lovely top hat between his ears."Ready?"

Mr. Wonderpony nods and backs up under the harness I hold for him. I always worry I'll screw up a tie or attach a strap to the wrong place. Once Wellington is snugly fitted, I hope properly, I hop up on my throne of hay bales.

"D'you see the testing goin' on in paddock thirteen?" I try to make the ride between lots and paddocks go by as fast as possible.

"Nay sir, what're the witch doctors up t' today?" He pulls us forward, toward lot number one.

"That nosebag, makin' Nick stand like an ostrich."

"Ha, bloke deserves it." I felt like slightly less of an ass. Coincidentally, those very creatures awaited the eight AM feeding in Paddock two. I toss bales over the fences as Wellington plods us along steadily. The whole thing takes a little less than an hour. We return to the south shed and Wellington backs his trailer into it. I unhook the guy, and with a third of a bale under my arm, we march over to his lean-too. Wells technically has free roam of the pathways, but he "Wouldn't dare bovver anybody unless it's an emergency". He'll stay around his little home until he's needed again.

His "little home" is decorated with a hat hook, a cabinet, a dining table (horse height of course) and some gas lamps, as well as a picture of what I presume is an English pasture. I bring out an over-sized plate from the cabinet and set the table for Wells.

"Breakfast is served milord" I take a bow and dump the hay onto the plate.

I leave Mr. Wonderpony to his morning meal and head for my next job. The real reason anyone works with horses. To pick up shit. Believe me, I get plenty of cool moments working with horses, but those are like golden flakes on a turd. Like the one I just stepped in. Normally, no big deal, I got my big boy boots on, but this one had a little extra give to it. I sigh. I drag my foot along the grass for a couple of paces, and head for the tool room, located back by the entrance. I pick out a scooping shovel, and a wheelbarrow.

Even though it's summer, I didn't expect it to be forty degrees out. I sweat my ass off between shooing still-hungry donkeys and dumping kilograms of horse manure onto our compost pile. After a few trips back and forth, Brad comes out with his own set of tools. I say the usual "hello"s and "yes sir"s. The man is an expert on equine biology, psychology, mythology, and any other -ology that might have to do with horses. Brad deserves respect. He's also a pretty cool guy.

By ten o'clock, we've deemed the lots to be clean enough. Clean has a very different meaning here.

A few minutes after we put away all of our stuff, we get word from a

suit that Nick is done with testing, and Brad and I put head out and walk him in from Paddock thirteen. The clumsy appaloosa steps on my steel-toed boot as we let him into his stall back at the main compound. Other than a couple bruises, the animal is fine. Maybe next time.

Brad notes that two of the unicorns (procured with multiple fatalities from thirteen twenty-three) could do with a cleaning. They dainty ponies will literally wither in filth, so they have to be brushed in their pristine, shining, white coats. I handle one while Brad does the other, picking clots of dirt from their hooves. With a good brushing, clouds of dust fly off the majestic beasts. One pees. The splash zone is wide enough to get me. I head to a bucket of sawdust we keep in the aisle for this very reason, and sprinkle it on the stall's floor.

The clean-freaks are dealt with, and I ask Brad if it's alright for me to take lunch. With a nod he heads into his office. Probably doing site finances, or maybe playing solitaire. I head out of the Bio Wing. Walking to the admin building, which is where I take breaks, because the Bio-Wing doesn't have it's own break room. I scrub my hands intensely, I don't want horseshit in my food. We must have a cloning SCP or something on site, because the refrigerator is filled with hundreds of jars of applesauce. Additionally, I scrounge up some bread and peanut butter, and make a lovely lunch.

After my snack, I strike up a conversation with one of the guards, Tony, I think, who is also on break.

"Anything cool happen today?"

"Nah, just some confused tourists I had to turn away"

I shrug, "Not every day is action packed, I suppose"

"After a few years at the Foundation, you'll begin to appreciate those quiet days!"
After we have a laugh he notes that he'd better report back. I say goodbye after our short conversation and do the same.

I go into the Bio Wing- I call it the Bio Wing, but this is a glorified

barn with some high-tech doors.

I'm looking for something productive to do when I see that Brad is giving a full tour to some execs. I straighten up and grab a broom, sweeping away dirt or dust from their path. Wouldn't want them to cut funding because their loafers were ruined by some soiled bedding. I stand around with a forced smile and internally cringe as they take notes on their tablets after every couple of Brad's sentences. They eventually leave, and we both give a sigh of relief. Brad says he'll take care of the afternoon feeding. I thank him as he nods and heads out.

I do the next chore; medication and supplemental feed. With nosebags in hand I dump handfuls of different pellets into each one. Some horses require special ointments for minor wounds, and Nick needs a huge pill stuffed down his gullet for when he encounters the after-effects of his experimentation. I take quite a while getting each animal fed and/ or drugged, doing one and then walking back to the list in the feed room to see who's next.

I eventually get to Nick who is a little skittish around his feedbag today, and I can't blame him. The scent of food overwhelms his nervousness though. I slip the pill between his lips with my own hand, trying to stop him from chewing it. I'm successful, but my hand is covered in a saliva and barley mush.

I walk over to the London-Lean-to for a handkerchief I could borrow from Wellington. What a guy.

"Ahem, Thomas, 'ould you moind placin' a request in fo' me?" His voice contains a little embarrassment.

"Oh, sure, whaddya need?"

"Could you ask the big-boss-man if I could 'ave an easel an' a set o' paints?" Wells fidgets a little bit in place, shuffling his feet.

"I never took you to be an artsy type Wells! A workin' class fellow such as yourself could use a hobby though, so I'll see what Brad and I can do." He's my friend after all.

"You're a real mate, ya know that?" I smile, and try not to think about the fact that my best friend is a talking horse with a bow tie.

Next on the big list posted outside the office is to check the automatic water dispensers, that are scattered around each pasture. I take the long walk as a moment to rest and just take in what a strange position I've got. I could be an accountant for some battery company, though I feed unicorns on a daily basis. I like where I am.

My streak of positivity is ended as my thoughts come to rest on oh-forty-two. That's why I'd gotten my job here, they saw I was well trained and good with horses. I was just an intern told to torture a Pegasus until he stood up. I go through the motions of undoing the rim of the waterer and testing to see if it works. I understand the importance to the what goes on there, but can't you just let him die and clone him? I saw crazier stuff go on at Area-32. Bah, I'm not a scientist, I don't know the complexities of anomalous objects. He's a cognitohazard anyways, he just makes me think that he … What if he isn't? What if it was all something the Foundation came up with to strike down any sympathy for him? Just an elaborate brainwashing scheme?

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and check the last dispenser. The lies I'm told are to keep me safe. I know that much.

Upon finishing my duties, I notice that the clouds overhead look rather threatening. The temperature is a bit cooler, and I smell rain. I jog back to the office and take cover just as it begins to drizzle. It barely lasts five minutes, so I decide to do another crap check. Not much has been produced, but I still clean up what's there. It bothers me to waste time.

I'm done quickly, and after dumping the last wheelbarrow, I pet some ponies. Stress creators and stress relievers. The two are sweet, but I try not to get to know them. Some of these guys are food for an SCP I'm not allowed to know about.

I say goodbye to my new acquaintances and head back to Wellington for the evening feed. I beat him to the south shed this time, and am able to get a few bales onto the bed of the small carriage before he shows up.

"Good evenin' Thomas," I nod back to him, "Hey do you know if I've gotten a letter from the wife an' foals yet?" This is one of the few subjects I'm not allowed to talk to Wells about.

"Uh, no, not that I know of," I'm not a great liar, but Wells is too optimistic.

"Probably too busy enjoyin' life without rules!" He gives a laugh. I smile, but inside, I feel bad for the guy. The secrets we keep from one another here.

We go through the evening feeding without incident, though it takes two trips to get enough for the animals to munch on through the night. I bid adieu to Wellington, who pulls open his cabinet and lays a blanket on the ground, all using his rather mobile lips. The sun is setting, so I hold my hand up to stop myself from being blinded as I walk back to the office. Brad is getting his things together, though I know he won't leave for another two hours. He'll do a check of all the security gates and any last minute stuff. I say goodbye and clock out. Brad nods silently.

I wait a couple of minutes at the bus stop with some other employees, making small talk. It's hard to get answers about how someone's day has been when they are, under penalty of death, not allowed to tell you what they do for a living. We all know the importance of secrecy here, and conversations mainly stay on the weather and latest TV shows.

The driver pulls up, letting the night shift out before accepting us on-board. I walk back to my apartment after drop off, and stare for a couple seconds at the stairs in front of me. I take the elevator. I unlock my apartment and flop onto my couch. A few minute off of my feet feels good, but the hot shower I take next is much more soothing. After I dress myself in some pajamas, I turn on my laptop and send a long message to Emily. I miss having someone next to me when it's hard work 24/7. I think tomorrow is her first day on the job at her new position. I make a few flourishing keystrokes and click the 'send' button. Some computer program, or memetic SCP, or something censors a few of the thing I mention. A little annoying, but I think I get the points across. I close the laptop and eat dinner.

Dinner is tacos, I decide. Good tacos. After I brush my teeth, I climb into my bed and under the covers. I'm about to close my eyes when I remember my alarm clock. I give it a toss to the other side of the room. Wake up future me, you lazy ass.

A Day In The Life

I always painted my fingernails right before an op and cleaned 'em off again once we were back. Pure black, scuff 'em a bit to get rid of the glossiness, and put a tiny dot of dark green right in the center of the thumbnails. It was a good-luck ritual I did that I'd picked up years ago, well before I was recruited into the Foundation, back when I was dating this goth chick.

Pretty much everyone on the squad had something they did to ensure they'd come back alive and in one piece: Parker spent a couple of hours praying to Ganesh; Ng made sure she got laid the night before; Nokigawa would field-strip every weapon we'd be taking, clean every part, and put them back together; Lewis always started telling whoever would listen the worst, most "hilarious" jokes he'd heard since the last op. Chief just vanished for about a half-hour. I don't think anyone really expected this shit to make a difference, but with all the weird shit in this world, you never know, right?

So I was listening to Lewis tell this god-awful story about two Chinamen and a horse while waiting for my nails to dry, and this kid walked into the briefing room with a pile of folders and loose papers. She couldn't've been more than 25, 26, and looked really damn nervous. A newbie for sure; the ones who'd been around a while knew better than to bother an MTF when we were doing our prep. She looked sideways at Lewis and me, like she was expecting him to stop telling his story and stand to attention in front of her or something. Me, I just laughed a little. Let Lewis think it was at his joke.

The newbie put down her stack on the table up front and stood there awkwardly for the next 15 minutes, as everyone straggled in, Chief being last. Once everyone was seated, she cleared her throat and started talking as she passed out the folders.

"Welcome to today's briefing. Two weeks ago, Intelligence identified a potential humanoid SCP in Liverpool. There was some online chatter about a girl who would make incredibly realistic chalk drawings on the pavement outside her residence, and someone spotted her jumping into one of the drawings and posted a video online.

"A field agent staked out the address and kept the child under surveillance until yesterday afternoon, when he confirmed this anomalous behavior by observing her jumping into a picture of a green field. He also observed her return 20 minutes later, which included her grasping the hand of an unknown creature before it fell back into the drawing."

I opened my folder while she was talking. First thing was a photo of the kid. She looked to be about 8 or 9, average looking, long red-brown hair framing a chubby little face. Lots of freckles. The rest of the file was probably a dossier on everything about her from her name to which brand of toothpaste her mum buys to where daddy dearest gets his petrol. The same useless shit they always hand us.

"You will be providing back-up to a retrieval team who will be securing the SCP today on her walk home from school. We don't anticipate any complications, but want to be prepared in case she can do anything else unusual with chalk. You'll be issued the standard low-profile urban equipment and will rendezvous with the retrieval team in 3 hours. Are there any questions?"

Very new, then. This sounded like a standard snatch-and-grab and we all knew that you didn't want the answers to the questions we'd learned to ignore, like "What's going to happen to her family?" or "Is she ever going to see the light of day again?" Instead, we stared at her in silence for about a minute until she started fidgeting.

"I guess you don't, then. Your transport will be leaving in 20 minutes. Good luck."

Ah, just enough time to get the dots on, then put the polish in my locker.

It was a gorgeous day out. The sun was shining in a deep blue sky, there was just enough of a breeze to cut the heat, and there was even a faint flowery smell on the breeze. God knows what flower, but it smelled good. The kind of day that made you glad to be alive and out in the world. The only problem was that it was too quiet. If the kid started screaming, we'd have to hustle her off the street fast before someone peeked out their window at us. Still, it was the job of the retrieval guys to keep it from getting that bad.

In the meantime, the squad was spread out in a loose formation. I was slowly riding a bike about a block in front of the kid. Parker was dressed up as a postman and was walking down the street in the opposite direction. Nokigawa was dressed as a gardener and trimming the hedges of a house we knew was empty. Ng and Chief were in a supply van with the heavy gear. Lewis was off somewhere in a good sniper position, god knows where. Everyone in place and waiting for the retrieval guys to make their move.

They'd just reported over the earpieces that they were moving in when I heard a big engine roar behind me. Parker and Chief started swearing and I swung around to see a big black sedan come barreling down the road. I was already swinging my bike around and pedaling hard back towards the girl when the car screeched to a halt right next to her. The driver's door popped open and this big guy, looked like a Paki, jumped out and rushed around towards the girl. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Parker reach into his mailbag for his pistol, and the retrieval guys were screaming something about abort, abort into my ear. Just one guy wasn't likely to be GOC or them rich fuckers, though, and we could handle Hand operatives unless they whipped out some kind of hoodoo.

The girl had started screaming at this point, that high-pitched, piercing keening that kids do. I braked to a hard stop a few yards from the car and saw the front, then the back tire pop and start going flat. Lewis was on the job, then. The big guy was trying to bundle the girl into the back of the car, but she was kicking and flailing a storm. I jumped off the bike and whipped out my baton, feeling it telescope as I advanced on the pair. Nokigawa was yelling something about dropping the kid and backing away from her slowly, but I don't know if the guy was paying attention. A little tap on the noggin might get it,

though.

Parker beat me to it, though, with a clean shot through his shoulder. The bloke dropped the kid like a hot iron and looked around in shock. He apparently just then noticed Parker and me coming up on him and Nokigawa crouched behind the hedge, aiming his Luger at him. Ng and Chief hadn't come out yet, though; they usually stay in reserve for when things go much worse than this. The man looked terrified, like he was about to bolt but couldn't figure out where. I got close enough to pop him a good one to his right knee, and he went down like a puppet with its strings cut. The girl scrambled up and started to run around behind the car, but Parker grabbed her as she went past and held her tight.

As he tried to calm her down, I kneeled beside the man on the ground. "You did a real stupid thing there, trying to kidnap her in plain sight. Bloody sloppy, too. You're not going to learn any better, though." And I popped him a right good one across the side of his head with the baton. Knocked him out cold.

I turned to the girl, crouched down to her level and looked her in the face. Her eyes were so big you could see the whites all around and her mouth was so wide open screaming I could see the back of her throat. She was missing her two front baby teeth.

"Shh, shh, it's okay. He's not going to get you. You're safe now, and we're going to take care of you. Don't worry. We look out for special little girls like you. You'll be protected now."

The whole thing took maybe 5 minutes and the pair of retrieval guys finally came up in their non-descript gray Honda. Slowpokes, but that's why we were on the scene, to handle the surprises.

We were on the way back to base an hour later. It always seemed that, even with a simple snatch-and-grab, it took forever for the clean up crew to arrive. We'd already tied up the guy and tossed him into the back of the van. And we always carried a few doses of C-grade in case a quick wipe or two was needed. Just a couple of nervous old women this time. We got lucky there. The retrieval guys were long gone with the girl, on their way to god knows where.

Chief ran a quick check on the guy's fingerprints while we were driving. Turned out he wasn't with any of the other groups after all. He'd been arrested a year back for indecent exposure and was on probation for it. The kid just had the bad luck to be the victim of an attempted abduction right when we were about to pick her up. My guess was that the interrogators would go after him for a while, just to make sure he wasn't a mole, wipe the guy and dump him back in Liverpool. None of my business at that point.

We got the regular debriefing when we got back. Different person than the briefer this time. An older guy, maybe my age, starting to prematurely gray around the temples. I was too, but I dyed it. This job would age you, but that didn't mean you had to give in to the aging. When we came out of the debrief, Ng asked if she'd see me down at the cafeteria. I told her I'd be there in about half an hour, but to grab me an apple if they had any that looked good. She grinned and said she would.

I figured 30 minutes would be just enough time to strip the polish off my nails and call my husband for a quick "I love you." We were planning on taking a trip to the shore that weekend. I was looking forward to it.

A Day in the Life of Alto Clef

Alto Clef had been dealing with a lot of shit for the past week, but there was something about sitting on the toilet at 6:00 AM, reading his paper and drinking coffee as his aged bowels struggled to force another turd from his body that made things better. Marginally better.

He sighed and turned the page, reading about how Site-11 would—once again—be taking home the intersite softball championship. It was, of course, because O5-3 had money on Site-11 and got all the best players transferred there, but everyone thought that -3 was crazy, so he got away with it. He wasn't really crazy. None of them were. But that didn't stop the impression from reaching Clef as well.

He stood up, stretching and staring into the toilet. He nodded once in approval and flushed, folding the paper and putting it under his arm as he walked out into his quarters. It was a mess, of course. His most recent assistant wasn't as proficient as the last one. He sighed, throwing the paper in the trash and pawing through piles of clothes until he found a pair of underwear that looked mostly clean, and pulling them on.

He went to his closet, getting out an older pair of slacks, sitting down on the bed to get them on, and then adding a sweat stained white shirt and lab coat to the mix. He sighed, pushing himself up from the bed and trundling out of the room, pushing his hair back from his forehead. 'I'm going to get a haircut today,' he thought, going to the door and opening it into the quiet corridor.

Seniority had its advantages, and one of them was calling your own projects. Clef had been without one for almost eight months, but no one said anything. Years of service were generally rewarded with placidity in the Foundation, until the shit hit the fan. Then, all the new kids would be running to him, to Gears, to Crow, all begging and pleading, telling them what stupid idea they tried and what moronic consequences it had.

He rounded the corner just in time to see his assistant cleaning dirt out from under her fingernails with a nail file. He'd chosen her for the massive tits she sported, but now… They just seemed like wasted space. He stared at them nonetheless.

"Morning, sir," she said passively, pressing her breasts together slightly and raising them, believing that they—rather than boredom—were the source of his apathy toward her performance.

He stared for a few minutes more, going on past her, heading toward the site barber. It was the middle of the work day, so the room was mostly empty. "Hey, Ernie," he said.

"Hey, Bert," the barber replied. It was an old, tired joke—the kind that people still laughed at politely because the man was old and amicable. Clef did his duty, emitting a dry chuckle, and sat in a creaking chair off to the side. In a moment, the young agent in the chair stood, thanked the barber, and passed him a ten. He accepted it, smiled, and waved the young man on his way.

As Clef got up and headed to the chair, he cocked his eyebrow. "New kid doesn't know not to pay you yet?" he asked, shifting himself into it.

"They never do," Ernie replied.

Clef's thinning hair made the job quick, and as the barber combed it, he said as much. Clef shrugged. "I'm getting old enough for it," he said.

Ernie knocked the stray hair from the man's shoulders, undoing the barber's cape, and then holding out his hand. Clef smirked and shook his head, laughing genuinely as he left the room, his stomach rumbling slightly.

He made his way to the mess, entering it to no cheer or pomp, only to the occasional glance and nod from a friend or coworker. Those were both few. He entered the line, taking a roast beef sandwich and a bag of potato chips, as well as an extra pudding cup. It moved forward slowly, a couple of shuffling steps at a time. He yawned as he showed the woman his meal card; she nodded; and he headed to

a quiet table.

He sat alone, eating the pudding cups first, then staring at the sandwich. He noted how dry the beef was as he bit into it, frowning slightly and realizing that he'd have to go through the whole line again to get a damned cola. He sat there instead, chewing, eating a dry sandwich and wishing—longing—for a containment breach, an assassination attempt, a god damned green. *Anything*, really.

But it never came. And as he finished chewing, he got up, threw his plate in the garbage, and headed back to his quarters for his bottle of scotch. Another exciting day ending at noon.

He passed Gears on the way out, nodding to him and the younger agent—who was hanging onto his every word, laughing and trying to joke unsuccessfully with the bald doctor—and decided for the tenth time to fire his assistant. But she really did have such lovely tits.

A Day Of Infamy - A short story of SCP-705

The field marshal peered through his binoculars at the soon-to-be battlefield laid out before him. His epaulets gleamed in the warm light, a soft breeze tickling his well groomed moustache as he surveyed the advance of two infantry companies below him. His scouting teams had chosen an ideal location, so perfectly situated that he could observe the men creeping towards their rally points, the armor waiting behind them for the breakthrough, and the artillery regiments prepping their tubes for firing. He had waited a lifetime for this exact moment, had been born for it, had lived and wanted it every waking minute of his life. This was the sole purpose of his existence, and he was destined to fulfill it.

Each man, from the marshal to the lowliest private, knew his own role in the grand show to come, operating like a well-trained orchestra about to perform a musical masterpiece for the first time. With the marshal's simple nod to a nearby lieutenant, radios summoned the fire of dozens of heavy guns, pulverizing today's target with deadly precision, raining untold destruction upon the unfortunate inhabitants. The muzzles roared and belched great tongues of fire, heaving the earth and splitting the air like thunder on this cloudless day, signaling the beginning of their beautiful, deadly performance.

The din of the heavy guns soon subsided, and was replaced by the guttural screams of his infantry companies surging from their rally points, giving battle to the enemy. They ran headlong, bayonets fixed against an already broken foe, screaming their curses and battle cries as they reached the first defensive lines and tore into the enemy defenders. The ramparts ran awash with blood of the fallen, shining in the light and adding a surreal kind of beauty to the carnage. One by one the defenders collapsed to the weight of the attack, and at last victory was theirs. A tear crept from the marshal's eye as his men erected a green clay flag atop the brewer, having finally wrested the coffee machine from enemy hands. Mr. Coffee

would taunt them no longer.

Their moment of glory was not to last, however. A great shadow abruptly swept over them, sparking fears of an air attack in the Marshal's subconscious, but he soon realized it was far worse than that: their plans had been compromised-some defeatist traitor had leaked his intentions to the overlords and now they had come for retribution. He barked at his lieutenant to raise the company commanders, but communications were severed when a giant fist left the hastily established forward CP as nothing more than a sorry green smear across the desk. Their only chance at salvation was in a swift and desperate counterattack. Mechanized behemoths (to them, at least) creaked into action, their guns spitting forth a torrent of green fire and smoke that lifted morale until the shells bounced harmlessly from the giantess's white armor plate. Her gaze turned with annoyance to the advancing armored columns, followed by a cruel backhand that sent men and machine careening to a linoleum deathbed far below.

Their spirits shattered, his men began a frantic withdrawal from the coffee pot, abandoning defensive lines they had just seized no more than ten minutes ago. Some threw down their weapons in a futile attempt to surrender to this unholy queen of the battlefield, only to be flattened like pancakes beneath her clipboard. His binoculars trembled in horror as she deftly plucked the green flag from atop the coffee machine and flicked it nonchalantly into the fleeing mass of soldiers, laughing as their resistance melted before her. The terrified screaming of what was formerly a proud army reached his ears as he lowered himself to the ground and wept.

A Diminished Thing

Deep breaths.

Deeeeep breaths.

Focus. Gotta focus. Gotta stay calm.

You've been trained in memetics, Harry.

You can do this.

You can break through.

You just have to ***concentrate.***

The cell is six feet tall with a square meter of floorspace and a tree in the middle. Barely enough room to stand, but not enough room to lie down comfortably. Especially with the tree. I do push-ups against the wall to get myself pumped up for the big moment. Today I'm getting out of here. I *have* to get out of here.

I hear a soft hydraulic hiss from the speakers—the telltale sound of someone entering the containment antechamber. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. The mics are on. For the next few minutes, I'll be able to talk to them. I have to make it count.

A panel in the wall is pulled back and I see Valente smiling at me through reinforced glass. His beard is noticeably longer than before.

Deep breaths. Deep fucking breaths.

"Good morning," Valente says. "Good to see you up and active."

I don't reply. The opening formalities are almost never transcribed. Better to save myself for the real thing.

Valente's eyes shift downward and his arms shuffle slightly. I can

only see him from the chest up, but I know he's looking at a prepared interview outline, if not an outright script. If I pull this off, he's going to need to improvise.

"Please state your name for the record."

Moment of truth.

"Hello," I begin. It's familiar. Universal. Makes it easier to hear through whatever preterlinguistic bullshit I'm dealing with. "My name is Doctor Heerad Sangha. I am designated **SCP two-three-three-seven**, as you told me previously."

I hold my breath.

Valente's expression hasn't changed. I feel my heart drop to the floor.

"Fuck!"

"Listen, SCP two-three-three-seven—"

"I'm Harry fucking Sangha, Val!"

"—you seem to have a pre-established relationship of sorts with several of the more dangerous creatures in our custody."

I pound my fists on the glass. Valente has no reaction. I scream.

"Fuck!"

"Yes. Please elaborate on the exact nature of this relationship."

"Oh, I'll fucking elaborate, Val! I played the game of cosmic fucking Russian roulette, just like you, except there was a bullet in my chamber. I poked at one too many soft points in reality and someday you will too, my friend. That's probably where it all fucking comes from, over and over, we all just keep ending up on the other side of the glass. Fuck!"

Valente looks confused and slightly annoyed. My hands are sore from pounding on the glass. I'm breathing heavily now. So much for

calm. So much for focus.

I have to get out of here.

I have to get—

"Please repeat that statement in the dialect used by the Foundation."

"Go to hell, Val!"

The floor rushes up to meet me. I'm on my knees, sobbing, forehead pressing into the base of the tree. All the months I'd been here I'd kept it cool. And here I am, grown-ass man with a PhD, crying his fucking eyes out into the last stupid fucking tree he'll see until the day he dies.

"Please discontinue yodeling."

I wipe my eyes on my naked arms to clear off the tears and snot. The fluids mix with the bits of bark and grit on my face, and I begin to seriously regret my meltdown.

"I'm not making any sense to you, am I?"

"We need you to cooperate and explain your answer in a coherent way."

"What's the fucking point? I've tried everything I can and nothing gets through! You can ask anything you want, it's pointless!"

I turn to face him. He's got that look of a long-suffering scientist who spent decades of his life earning degrees. A man who left every relationship he had to join a shadow organization, only to end up bored, frustrated, and confused. I had that look once. I envy it.

"You're not hearing me, are you?" he asks me.

"No, you're not fucking hearing *me*, asshole. Fuck you!"

He stares at me blankly for a second, and I swear I see him roll his fucking eyes.

"… cack?" he says. He's looking at me the way a teenage babysitter looks at a toddler that just shat its pants.

I slam the glass again. In the distance, I hear laughter.

"Is that what I fucking sound like?! Motherfucking shit fuck *fuck!*"

Valente heaves a big, weary sigh. He tucks his hands in at his sides and makes this shiteating, condescending, motherfucking face. My hands shake. Everything disappears except his fucking face and that fucking, *fucking* laughter.

"Snackutations Doctor Spanko, cack!" he squeaks. "You am authoritater? Explainerate."

Time seems to stand still and move in fast forward all at once. I'm beating against the glass with a thick branch I don't remember breaking off. Valente is alarmed. He's *reacting*. I beat at the glass with everything I have, barely registering the spots of blood flying off my hands.

The glass cracks. It shouldn't be possible. None of this should be possible. None of this should be happening. The laughter is so loud I can hardly see.

The glass breaks.

Valente covers his eyes to shield them from errant shards. The branch in my hands is different. It *is* my hands. Glass is growing from the end of it. Why not? I smile my first genuine smile in months. None of this should be happening to me. None of it is going to happen to you, Val.

He's on the floor. I reach into the antechamber. There's a sting on my ass.

The laughter fades.

The world goes dark.

A Discussion with L. E. T.

Oh, um… hello. You're… you're probably wondering why I'm in your office, aren't you? Sorry, I've made a bit of a mess with all these papers— er, don't worry, I'll clean up before I go. Yes, I… I do know that that isn't your greatest concern, I was just making a little joke. Sorry. No, no, don't shout for help. I'm not going to hurt you— no, that's probably a poor choice of phrase. I should say "I won't do anything." Yes, that's much less threatening. Close the door, will you? It's getting a little draughty. Of course, you could call for help *anyway*, but what would a little girl like me do to a big strong fella' like you, hmm?

Thank you. Alright, Dr… Rye, is it? Yes I— oh, that. I wouldn't be worried. If it helps, your name is the only thing I know. Well, that, and your work on… "**SCP-080**", I think you call it. That's the whole reason I'm here. It's very interesting, you know? Not like a normal bogeyman at all, yet that's what it's clearly supposed to be. I mean —what? Oh, yes. Well, of course they exist. Why do you think so many unconnected children, all who've never heard of such a thing, always fixate on the term?

Look, do you understand how gods work? No? Wonderful. Alright, I'll put this in simple terms: bogeymen are figments of the collective child imagination. Yes. Yes, I did say figments. It doesn't make them any less real, but they're still made-up. They're arrogant sods too, but I couldn't care. Pretty shamelessly self-promoting, at least the ones I've met. They get off on fear.

…anyway, what was I saying? Ah, yes. Well, I've gone through all the literature – Howe's *Commentary on Domestic Bogeymen*, Peri's notes, Arcaon's *Letters on the Subject of Household Gods* – and you know what? This, this "080" is completely inconsistent with traditional form. Usually, such entities have physical shape, and they're friendly, child-specific fellows; not to mention quite definitely male. Definitely indeed. Why, I've had a few experiences that even

fertility gods couldn't… sorry.

Listen, I've even gone over these supplementary documents: studies of fae, trolls and whatnot, analyses of child psychology and behaviour patterns, Grimms' tales, *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. Near enough— yes, I think it's important. I mean, it serves a wonderfully direct work on the thought processes of children… no, that one was just because I was bored. That one because I like stories about horses. Still helped, though.

I suppose I am kidding. Need I say that children are odd? They'd have to be, to create such things. Off the adults run, making deities to boil people's blood and strike down heretics and whatnot, yet children, through the same method, bring happy little monsters to life – with them wanting only terror from innocent waking nightmares. Yes, happy. They have to be. They have the mindset of a human aged ten when born. But then socialisation comes into effect and they mature quite quickly. After all, other beings don't usually stand for that annoying juvenility. Self-righteousness is by far an improvement.

The young conceive of basic things, since they don't have the ego to raise themselves above it. The dark, the predators, death: simple fears, without malice. Well, without complex malice. Not at all like their elders. No, fear is something different for them… for us. Er, not us specifically, actually. We both have a good deal of things to fear – which brings me back to the subject at hand. This thing, something which adults shouldn't experience anymore…

It's not unnatural, no. "Too natural"… hmm, I suppose that's a way of putting it. It still speaks to a certain primal thing, fear itself. Though it does it in the wrong way, since sleep is the bane of a good bogeyman. They aren't born from dreams, dreams are a different matter. Dreams can still terrify, but they can't please or birth bogeymen. In fact, they provide an escape for the child, a deprivation to the entity. Oh yes, you have children scream and cry in their sleep, but I'm told it's rather unsatisfying for the created monster. Besides, it typically results from something more perverse, something which bogeymen tend not to do with. If they did, they wouldn't be bogeymen. They'd be horrors.

Good god, you've certainly got me talking! My point was, I've looked at everything that could give me some insight into the creation of this SCP-080, considered the matter tirelessly, and **not one thing** would imply that it should exist. Not one! This thing couldn't even be a Thosk, far too inorganic… I'm rambling on again, aren't I? Sorry.

What I'm trying to say is that this little curiosity, despite what you know or suspect, despite how it may seem, most certainly isn't a bogeyman. Good god, I don't what this is, as fascinatingly curious as I find the matter, but it's just not. No, this is something else entirely. I really can't investigate more, I'm ashamed to admit; although I'd still like to know where it came from.

Don't call me that. Please, I know you're a nice fellow, but just… please. In fact, I'm about to leave, so we may as well keep things professional, Doctor - Mrs. Therianthus is my title. That is, Lyta Eykos Therianthus, scholar. It's been a pleasure.

A Disturbance

The boardroom, as always, was stuffy. The windows had been painted over years ago, and nothing had ever been done about it. Though the issue was brought up from time to time at Board Meetings, it seemed there was always some other matter more pressing than the modulation of the room's environment.

Such a matter was at hand today, Richard Akeman thought to himself. The man sighed, cracked his knuckles, and clapped his pile of papers against the conference table, forming a neat pile.

"Gentlemen, the time is 2:09 pm, and this meeting is called to order," Akeman intoned. "Please take your seats, and we'll get started."

There was a muttering and creaking as the various men and women present moved their antiquated bodies into slightly more antiquated chairs. After a lengthy period of groaning and creaking, silence fell over the room.

"Thank you," Akeman began. "Allow me to explain the reason behind this unscheduled meeting." Akeman paused, and cringed slightly at the room's complete silence. The esteemed members of the Worldtree Corporation's Board of Directors had a certain Order to their proceedings, a methodology of consistency and planning in which Disturbances were frowned upon. Richard Akeman had created a Disturbance, and the room's atmosphere of irritation was palpable. The Board wanted an explanation, and it had damned well be a good one.

After a long pause, Akeman continued. "I am afraid that I must become a bearer of bad news. The Helping Hands Organization has filed for bankruptcy."

The room was filled by a collective gasp. For years, the Helping Hands Organization had formed an essential branch of the

Corporation's structure. It was the Corporation's charitable offshoot, its primary organizer of projects that, as numerous promotional speakers had phrased it, "Giving Back to the Community". More importantly, it was the Corporation's primary source of tax deductions. With the Organization gone, the Corporation would have to find a new target for its charity, and fast. This was a Disturbance of monstrous proportions.

Akeman could feel the Board's panic rising as a hurried muttering began to slither its way around the room. He cleared his throat slightly, and was met with sixteen pairs of worried eyes.

As well as one pair of eyes that were decidedly less worried.

"Fortunately, there is hope for stability yet," he began again. "Almost immediately after I was notified of the Helping Hands Organization's dissolution, I was contacted by a representative of another, equally reliable charity."

Akeman was lying. He knew nothing of the new charity's reliability. In fact, he knew next to nothing about the new charity at all. On the Friday following the Thursday in which he had learned of the Helping Hands Organization's collapse, an unmarked envelope had appeared in Akeman's personal mailbox. The envelope's interior was nearly as unhelpful as its exterior, as it bore only a plain white postcard printed with a few words. "Charity, when it is needed most", read the card's title, followed by a phone number. Desperate, Akeman had called the phone number, and was answered by a woman's voice. The woman's voice had talked to him in soothing tones, and before Akeman could think about what he was doing, he had scheduled a meeting with "a very important representative" for the upcoming Tuesday. Had he stopped to think about it, Akeman might have realized that the voice on the other end of the telephone had an oddly detailed understanding of the Worldtree Corportion's inner workings. But Richard Akeman was a very busy man, and did not have time to stop and think about things.

"Members of the Worldtree Corporation Board of Directors, may I present to you…" Akeman's voice trailed off as he gestured towards the other end of the boardroom. In that instant, he realized exactly how little he knew about the well-dressed man seated at the other

end of the table.

All the faces in the room turned to regard the man uneasily. He had been seated at the end of the table before most of the board members had arrived, and had not stopped smiling for the entirety of the time that he had been seated. Smiling rarely occurred in the boardroom, especially on such an unsettling day. A few of the older board members sniffed condescendingly. Who was this man seated at the end of the table, and what right did he have to continue smiling in such a manner? Was he not aware that there had been a Disturbance?

"My name is Zachariah Maxwell," the man said, "and I'm here on behalf of the Manna Charitable Foundation. The Foundation is very interested in providing a charitable outlet for your highly esteemed Corporation."

The man fell silent, as if he believed that he had said enough. The room was gripped in an indignant silence. Richard Akeman smiled awkwardly.

"Ah, yes, who can forget the prestigious Mahna Foundation?" Akeman mumbled awkwardly.

"It's Manna," replied Maxwell, the corners of his mouth only turning downward for a brief moment.

"Yes. Manna. Right." Akeman's brow began to perspire. His complete lack of control of the situation was dangerously close to becoming exposed. "I'm quite sorry, but I appear to have forgotten. What is it, exactly, that you do, again?"

Maxwell's face twitched slightly as, inside his head, something clicked. His smile grew even wider, and he stood up explosively, knocking back his chair. Maxwell threw out his arms, eliciting a cry of disapproval from one of the board members.

"Ladies, gentlemen, friends, esteemed board members!" The man exclaimed. "Surely we've all heard the stories, yes?" He began to stalk energetically around the room. "The Chicago homeless are crawling in sludge and depravity!" He placed his hands on his head

in a display of shock. "Indian citizens have been left without houses to call their own! Furthermore," he continued, "there are children starving in Africa."

Suddenly, Maxwell's demeanor changed to one of dismay, and his back slumped. "But that's the problem, isn't it? We've all heard the stories day in and day out. Nobody cares. These problems, tremendous as they might be, are now commonplace." He began to move around the room again in a morose shuffle. "People give money." He slapped his hand onto the table. "But nothing really gets done, does it?" He turned his head to face the bespectacled visage of a particularly elderly director, who regarded him with caution. "Yes, people give money," Maxwell continued, placing his face uncomfortably close to the director's, "and people forget."

"But what if they didn't forget?" Maxwell's behavior shifted once again. He stood up straighter, placed his hands by his sides, and assumed an expression of determination. "What if people genuinely cared about the issues they donated to? What if we lived in a world in which things *got done?*" Maxwell's face assumed the familiar folds of a smile, and pure enthusiasm once again manifested in his voice. "Well, ladies and gentlemen of the esteemed Board of Directors of the Worldtree Corporation, that is the world the Manna Charitable Foundation strives to create. With your funding, we will utilize the very best tools that science, technology, and every other area of modern study can provide, and we will make unforgettable changes. We will craft ad campaigns that will staunchly refuse people's attempts to forget them. We will feed all the hungry. We will clothe *all* the poor. Ladies and gentlemen, with your funding," Maxwell pounded on the table, accentuating each of his words, "we will get. *Things.* ***Done.***"

Maxwell looked up expectantly. He was met by a sea of furrowed brows. Somebody coughed.

Akeman's perspiration grew more profuse. He had called in this man to fix a Disturbance, and yet here he had turned out to be Disturbance's very personification. Prancing around the room, selling unattainable goals… Maxwell had made a mockery of the Board's proper Order and procedure, and his Manna Charitable Foundation promised to make the Worldtree Corporation prominent

for all the wrong reasons. Akeman had made a grave error. There would be hell to pay later, and he knew it.

Akeman cleared his throat and attempted to smile apologetically. "Well, ah, that's certainly quite the pitch you have there," he croaked. "And, uh, under ordinary circumstances, I'd hope I wouldn't have to say this, but times being what they are, and uh, the economy being what it is…" Akeman's voice didn't so much trail off as it did drop dead.

Zachariah Maxwell's face was one of stoic acceptance. "Yes," he said simply. "Yes, of course. I understand completely. As an apology for taking your valuable time, please accept this." Maxwell reached inside his jacket and produced two medium-sized tins. In one swift, practiced motion, he opened them and placed them on the table.

The directors anxiously bent their heads to examine the tins' contents. Inside were forty-two perfectly proportioned, perfectly delicious truffles. Slowly, one director reached for a chocolate. As he bit into it, his eyes widened with sudden pleasure. As the director began to reach for a second candy, his compatriots eagerly grabbed truffles of their own. A brief flurry of hungry excitement gripped the room as most of the chocolates vanished. Zachariah Maxwell slipped to the boardroom's door and shut it.

Suddenly, the room's warmth tripled. A few of the directors looked up in surprise. Slowly, Maxwell returned to his seat, his voice wavering oddly as he once again addressed the board. "Sorry to have caused you to LosE such a valuablE Portion of todAy's Nobly scheDule allOtment; my work will Be donE in just a moment, as You please…"

Silence fell over the room. Maxwell returned to his seat and looked at the newly docile members of the Worldtree Corporation Board of Directors, their heads drooped, a few snoring softly. The corners of Maxwell's mouth curled into an entirely new type of smile.

"*All right, listen up,*" Maxwell growled, his voice taking on an imposing timbre, "*it's been fun, but let's drop the charades. All of them. All this Corporation does is move money around, and you know it. Well, it's about God damn time you started making*

something out of that money, or at least giving it to somebody who can. To put it more simply: you're sitting on a pile of cash, but most of the planet needs that money for more than a chair. The Manna Charitable Foundation is going to change the world, and you all will have had the express privilege of having helped."

Maxwell picked up the tins, closed them, and slipped them back inside his jacket, taking care not to touch the remaining contents. Though the chocolates might have tasted fantastic, they were dosed in enough psychoactive chemicals and hypnosis-inducing compounds that eating them, or even touching them, would yield a mild and not entirely unpleasant hangover. Under ordinary circumstances, he hoped he wouldn't have to use such tools, but times being what they were, and the economy being what it was…

"*In a moment, you're all going to wake up,*" Maxwell continued, "*you're going to give me everything I ask for, you're going to remember that I gave a stunning and very convincing presentation, and you're all going to have a nice God damned day for once.*"

Maxwell clicked his tongue, and the boardroom sprung to life. The board members shook their heads, confused at first. Then, remembering themselves, the directors began speaking energetically to their neighbors. Many grateful faces turned to look at Maxwell, who had re-assumed his wide smile.

Richard Akeman, for his part, felt mildly stupefied. It seemed impossible that his unscheduled meeting, at best a Disturbance, could have gone so well. Akeman felt contentment brewing within him. Looking at the well-dressed man sitting at the other end of the table, he was spurred into action. Reaching behind him, Akeman unlocked the company safe, and withdrew an official checkbook. He could feel Maxwell's smile widen as he opened the book, and almost unknowingly, he began to smile as well.

"Now then," Akeman said, looking up, "how much money was needed, again? I'm sure we're happy to give any amount of money to such a worthy cause." Small murmurs of enthusiasm from around the room confirmed Akeman's statement.

Zachariah Maxwell's smile grew even wider as he saw a multitude of

opportunities opening up before him. "Oh, only a few hundred thousand dollars for now," he said. "Certainly nothing too… disturbing."

A Double Life

As I sit on the subway home from work, I light up a cigarette and stare out the window when the train pulls into a station. There's an advertisement for Anderson's Auto Parts, boasting 140 locations in the tri-state area. I chuckle quietly to myself before looking away, observing the people who get on and off of the train.

Lying is essentially half of what I do outside of work. I lie to my neighbors, I lie to my friends, I even lie to my husband, straight to his face. It's not even a compulsion, either, it's genuinely part of my day-to-day job. If you were a curious stranger, I would tell you that I'm the assistant CFO of Anderson's Auto Parts, that my daily work life consists of desktop after desktop of paperwork, and that I hate my job enough to rant about it every day, but that "someone has to do it".

However, my actual job title is Biological Object Study Specialist. My work life consists of peering over supernatural animals and people, studying their anomalous effects on themselves and others, determining their danger to the outside world, and keeping them contained within my worksite. It can get monotonous from time to time, but it is not the kind of job you get used to, I assure you.

After the subway pulls into my stop, I stand up and walk out of the station, flicking my cigarette into an ashtray on the way up. My home is only a couple of blocks away from the station, so I'm there within minutes. As I step through the door, my husband greets me with a peck on the cheek.

"Hey, darling, how was your day?" He says in a chipper voice as he heads back into the kitchen to finish what I assume is our dinner.

"Oh god, honey, it just dragged on and on. My boss screamed for what seemed like almost an hour." I reply, thinking of the incredibly frail and alien-like man who roared at the top of his lungs for around 52 minutes at a D-class.

"I don't know how he thinks he has the right to yell at his staff like that." He muses as I take off my coat and hang it up. "Come sit down, dinner's ready."

I nod and place my shoes next to the door, then step into the dining room to sit down. He grins at me when I notice what he's done. He's set up quite the romantic dinner, with steaks, green beans and potatoes, along with a glass of red wine.

"Oh, honey, this is beautiful…" I exclaim, admiring his handiwork and moving to take a seat.

"No, no, let me get that for you." He smirks and pulls my chair out for me. I sigh and laugh a bit, sitting down. He takes a seat across from me and we both start to eat our dinner. I smile at him when he shoots me a look, swallowing a bite of green beans.

"You know, darling," he begins, setting his fork down gently. "I found something rather strange today."

"Did you, now?" I ask, taking another bite of the steak. So perfectly cooked, with just the right amount of fat for flavor.

"It was some form that was in your desk, something about the 'SCP Foundation' and some kind of statue that kills people when no one's looking at it."

I immediately stop mid-chew and look up at him, staring. I must have accidentally mixed up part of my actual paperwork with my cover paperwork…oh god, we'll both be terminated if the Foundation finds out about this… My palms almost start to sweat before I tilt my head and ask, "Huh?"

"Yeah, I know! It's weird, right?" He chuckles and takes another bite of his steak. "I mean, I figured it was just some kind of dark fiction from the internet. …you're not looking up that sort of thing, are you?" He says, half-joking.

I stare at him for a moment before sighing. "No, honey, it's a real thing and it's something I'm studying every time I go in to work." I say, laughing. "Alright, you got me. I…I kind of like that sort of dark

and bloody storytale stuff."

Unsuspecting, he chuckles. "Yeah, I figured you've always had a, um…a thing for stuff like that." A weight is lifted off my chest. I would sigh in relief if I didn't have food in my mouth. Swallowing, I reach over to my glass of wine and take a sip, smiling at him. "I hope this doesn't make me any less attractive to you." I say as I take something out of my pocket before standing up and getting the wine bottle.

"Nothing could ever make you less attractive to me, darling. Not since the day I met you." He replies with a somewhat sultry tone in his voice.

"And that's why I love you." I grin and lean forward, kissing him on the lips. As he closes his eyes, I use my thumb to slip a Class-A amnestic into the wine bottle. "Perhaps later, we can…make this evening a bit more romantic." I insist as I refill his empty glass.

"Ooh, I thought you'd never ask." He laughs a bit. "Let's finish our dinner first, though, shall we?"

I nod and sit back down, watching him take a sip of his fresh wine. Our dinner continues and we idly chit-chat back and forth before he starts to rub his head. "Are you alright, honey?" I ask in a concerned tone.

"Ngh…I think there was something in my steak…" He says weakly before falling out of his chair. I quickly stand from my seat, walk over to him and drag his unconscious body into the living room, where I lay him down on the couch. "You stupid moron, Nicole, you just nearly caused a breach…" I rub my face in anger before running upstairs and going into my office, shoving the door open.

I frantically shuffle through my desk drawers, looking for the object log. If this were to get out, losing my job would be the least of my worries. Unable to find it, I slam my fists down, running my hands through my hair as I nervously look around the room. Then, I remembered…he probably wouldn't have just put it back where he found it. Not something like that. I run downstairs to the garbage bin, practically sliding on the floor to it like a baseball player rushing to

home plate.

After yanking an apple core and today's paper out of the bin, I find it. That fucking statue. I take it into our backyard and pull my lighter from my pocket, igniting the flame and burning the page until nothing is left. Satisfied, I step back inside and lock the back door behind me.

When I walk back into the living room, I look at my husband and try to think about what I should do. I gave him an amnestic, but what if it doesn't take? What if he wakes up and still remembers it? What then? If this gets out, the Foundation would cover everything up, with prejudice. I think about the gun I keep hidden in the basement and wonder if I should use it. I can't let anyone know about this by any means necessary, but…I can't just kill my husband. Not after everything we've been through together.

Overwhelmed by the situation, tears start running down my face as I look back and forth between him and the basement door, but before I can make either choice, he stirs. I quickly move over to him. "Honey, are you okay?" I ask.

"…Nicole…? What happened? Why am I on the couch?" He asks, rubbing his forehead.

"We were eating the dinner you made for us and you passed out." I say, sniffling as I caress his cheek gently.

"I…was? Last thing I remember is getting home from work…" He sits up.

I let out a gasp of relief. "Yes, honey…you did. I think something was wrong with your steak. It did look slightly off…" I smile.

"Heh…uh, are you alright? You're crying…" He worries.

"I…I was worried about you. I thought I was going to have to call 911." I say, smiling. He smiles back and kisses me on the cheek. I was so relieved that everything was okay.

"Should…we finish the dinner?" He asks.

"No, let's just watch a movie. We already ate most of the dinner anyway. You just go up and take a nice shower and I'll clean up. You deserve it." I kiss his head and he nods, standing up from the couch and walking upstairs.

I rub my eye, thinking about how close I just came to killing my own husband. After cleaning up the dishes, I take the bottle of wine and pour it down the drain in the sink, staring outside and looking at the sky.

I'm never happy about how I have to handle my life. Almost everything I say to my husband is a lie, and I have to maintain those lies, often with force. My job can leave me feeling too drained to care about it, but when I do, I wonder if it's even worth the trouble sometimes.

A Dysfunctional Heist

I SEE YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO TRANSFER FILES. WOULD YOU LIKE SOME HELP WITH THAT? [Y] [N]

Isaac grunted in frustration as he analyzed the computer, hoping that the current owners were dumb enough to leave any information on the device, looking for clues to other warehouses like the one he was currently raiding. Turning his attention to his earpiece, he could practically hear the frantic pantomiming of everything one of his teammates said as the man prattled on to his commanding officer.

"So I'm bleeding out from my left arm, my neck is still fucked up from the noose, I'd just gotten thrown into a rather disgruntled Docent, and I only had a single shell left in my shotgun…"

"Davis, can you please shut off Dom's comm? Some of the less self-centered of us are trying to work here. And can *anyone* answer my question? I'm stuck and the ham is getting suspicious." He continued to tinker away at the computer, copying over any files that seemed to be of use and trying to coax the AI into entering the storage device.

OH DEAR, YOU SEEM TO HAVE ATTEMPTED TO ACCESS MY ADMINISTRATIVE FILE. THAT'S RATHER RUDE, DON'T YOU THINK?

"…Thinking quickly, I reached out into the air and brought an entire shelf's worth of books down on their heads at terminal velocity. It was pretty hilarious."

"Okay the whole story about how you busted up the nutso death cultists in the Library is just *riveting*, Dominic, but I don't see how that answers my question on how to politely code a file transfer request, and none of that is anything in comparison with my battles over the years against the Dreadlords of the Insurgency."

"Oh, no I wasn't trying to answer your question, Isaac, I was just illustrating how much more exciting my life was before I got dragged

in with you lot. You're a lucky bastard, y'know? And please don't start with that Dreadlord shit again. We're stuck with the actual Foundation now, not the Insurgency chucklefucks you used to work with."

The commanding officer's voice rang out sharply over the intercom and throughout the surveillance vehicle, pinging off rapid-fire orders for each member of the team. "Look, both of you, save the reminiscing for later. Alvares, I need eyes on the cameras so you can help Holst pick out the minotaur in the main party room. Grenich, just try saying "please"? I have no idea how to deal with computers, much less a sentient AI that looks like a ham shank. Also, as much as I hate to say it, I'm agreeing with Alvares. We're the Foundation, we took you from the Insurgency. Holst, stop picking unnecessary pockets or you're going to draw attention on yourself. Berlot, poke around in the store room see if there's any other artifacts that you can carry out discretely when Grenich finishes his work."

With an impossibly melodramatic sigh, the former Hand member returned to his observations of the video monitors. Grenich, the resident tech expert and a former Chaos Insurgency operative was hunched over a computer in a storeroom.

Holst, their inside contact with Marshall, Carter, and Dark, was stalking through the main party area, swiping money from people who looked like they had some sort of security clearance to power his plutomantic divination, as well as a few others who just looked easy, muttered his reassurances that all the money he stole was completely necessary.

Aries, the anartist blood-witch and artifact hoarder, was in another corner of the storeroom that Grenich was in, looking over row after row of artifacts. Alvares' voice made her roll her eyes as it came over her headpiece. "Aye-aye, Cap- wait what the fuck? Aries, be a dear and turn that lovely body of yours around again. I need to look at something in the case behind you."

"I swear to whatever god or gods you believe in if you mention my body again, you *will* be my next blood source, Alvares." Still, she turned around and read the placard. "The hell is this? 'Antique

Siberian Warblade, 1 of 7 in total, 1 of 4 in the possession of Mssrs Marshall, Carter, and Dark. This item was recovered from the personal armory of Genghis Khan. It is believed to be a war trophy following his conquest of the Dae-"

"Ah hell." Alvares cut her off abruptly. "That's exactly what I thought. Please hold. And for the love of Christ, don't touch it."

"Right. Like I was going to grab the fancy artifact that does who-knows-what through two inches of glass." Aries rolled her eyes for what felt like the thousandth time that night and continued to survey the room for useful or dangerous artifacts. Preferably something heavy to bludgeon Alvares with when they left.

"Oi, Liv!"

"That's Captain Davis, Alvares. What's wrong?"

"Oh whatever you say, glorious captain. We uh… Have a bit of a problem. Looks like our buds here at Marshall, Carter, and Dark have procured some Daevite weapons."

"Daevite? What's that?" She hovered over his shoulder, staring at the screen that caught his attention.

"Long story short, the kind of nasty civilization of warmongering necromancers and psychotic cannibals that would make George Miller and Sam Raimi proud."

"Who's George Miller and Sam Raimi?"

"GAH! Turn on the tv sometime, damn! Also irrelevant. It's bad news. And she definitely doesn't want to grab it. I mean, unless you want a rampaging Protomongolian war goddess on the team. God only knows how *that* would turn out."

"… Right. Okay. I'm going to file that in with the higher-ups. Aries, tag it with that tracking spell Alvares taught you." She immediately began tapping away at her cellphone, sending off a message to the Overseer Liaison for her team. Over her comm device, she heard a faint ding, presumably from the computer Grenich was working on. Shortly after, this was confirmed by a tinny electronic voice coming

over the comm.

FILE TRANSFER COMPLETE. WOULD YOU LIKE TO MOVE ANYTHING ELSE WHILE I'M HERE? THIS DRIVE IS KIND OF CRAMPED. [Y] [N]

"Alright, Davis. It's been transferred, and I got pretty much everything I could find. Now what?" Grenich disengaged the drive and stood up.

"Alright. Aries, Grenich, See what else you can grab without setting off any alarms and get out of there. Holst, do you have eyes on the security team or the minotaur? Can you get out without alerting anyone?"

Holst's tinny voice came over his communication device, out of breath. "I do have eyes on the security team, but I really don't see myself getting out of here without drawing their attention."

Alvares' laugh caught Davis off guard. "Oh yeah, send in the klepto with poor impulse control to a fat cat party with a billion security guards. *Excellent* idea, *Captain*. Aries, Grenich, run like hell."

"Shit." Aries scrambled to fill up the bag with any artifacts in arm's reach and lurched for the door. "Grenich, come on!"

"Coming, coming! Fucking Holst. Alright." The Insurgency operative grabbed Aries' arm as he ran past and dragged her towards the hallway, much to her protest. She felt as he dropped the drive into her bag.

"I CAN RUN FOR MY LIFE WITHOUT HELP, THANKS." She readjusted her bag, yanked her arm away from Grenich's and headed for the door, outstripping him and drawing a handgun.

A voice exploded behind her. "Not fast enough, unfortunately."

The wall slammed shut in front of Grenich and Aries. A gigantic, well-dressed man with vaguely Mediterranean features stood behind them, one hand on the wall beside him. On one of the man's hands was a Chicago Bulls championship ring. The other was occupied by an improbably large handgun.

Grenich broke the silence first. "Uh. Davis. We found the minotaur."

The man smiled. "Correct." He slammed his hand against the wall again and with a sickening crunch Grenich was crushed by the wall. Aries felt the rush of wind behind her, and turned around to see a red smear where Grenich had been standing. Without thinking, she fired her gun a half dozen times in the general direction of the Minotaur and clipped his arm, breaking his concentration. The door behind her suddenly opened and she dived through it, and she ran as fast as her legs could carry her straight into the surveilance van the others were waiting for her. Alarms began sounding as Davis grabbed her by her collar and yanked her into the van.

Everyone was silent as Davis wrote up her report to the Overseer Liaison as Alvares drove the team back to the base and Davis treated Aries' and Holst's wounds. Some time later, they finally got a reply.

FROM: Overseer Liaison Office
RE: MISSION REPORT

> Per Overseer directive, all casualties are acceptable and expected for this team, Officer Davis. Report to base and your team will receive further instruction pertaining to the Daevite artifacts after emotional and physical recovery.
> — O5-7

The Little Buck-Toothed Boy: A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, there was a little boy, about five and a half years old. He had bright blue eyes, and shiny blond hair, and faint freckles on his face, and his front teeth protruded slightly over his bottom lip, as if they hadn't quite made it back inside his mouth after he gave one of his sweet smiles. And his smiles made his eyes crinkle slightly in the corners, and showed one big dimple on his left cheek, and a smaller one on his right cheek.

And he was the nastiest boy you could ever meet. It's not just that he was rude or selfish or unpleasant (which he was), and it's not just that he didn't care a jot about other people's feelings (which he didn't) or that he went out of his way to annoy them (which he did); the little buck-toothed boy was a full-blown misanthrope. He hated other people – it didn't matter who they were – and he tried his hardest to hurt them. And he enjoyed every second of it.

There was only one thing that troubled the little buck-toothed boy. If he was so mean, why did people who met him think that he was nice? It worried him so much that he thought about it all day and at night he tossed and turned and couldn't sleep for thinking about it. It preyed on his mind in the morning (when he glued a water balloon full of urine to his sleeping father's forehead), at lunchtime (when he soaked pieces of paper in alcohol, lit them, and threw them at his sister's kitten) and after supper (when he carved offensive words backwards into the windows of his room, so that passers-by could read them). One day, he could stand it no longer. He set off to find the answer, taking only a rolled up handkerchief, stuffed with a bread roll and a wad of cash from his mother's wallet.

He walked for miles and miles, looking for someone to ask. Finally, he saw a huge, grey, concrete block of flats, squat and squalid, with dark passages leading up to inconsequential-looking doors. The little buck-toothed boy knocked on the first door he came to, and it was answered by a stooped, shriveled old man in a singlet and brown

trousers.

“Hey old man!” the boy shouted.
The man's reply was a feeble wheeze. “How can I help you, s-hhz-onny?”
“Do you think I’m nice?”
“I ghhz- I guess so.”
“Why?”
“Wh-hhhg-why you remind me of my son, when he was a little boy. Of course, that was years ago, before he pass-hzz-passed awy. He was a sweet lad like yourself-ffz.”
“That can’t be why everyone thinks I’m nice, you senile old goat! Not everyone has a dead son – idiot. Anyway, you stink! I’m glad your son is dead!”

And the little buck-toothed boy ran out of the building, hitting the fire alarm. The old man was left wheezing in his dim doorway, a single tear sliding down his weathered cheek.

The boy ran until he was out of breath. Suddenly he saw a little field of tulips bobbing in the warm summer breeze.

“Hey, stupid tulips!” yelled the little buck-toothed boy.
“How can we help you?” said the tulips.
“I need someone smart. Do you know anyone smart?”
“Well, we don’t get around much, but we have seen that big billboard.” The tulips waved their heads towards a poster further up the road, with a serious-looking woman on it. “She’s a psychiatrist, and they’re always very intelligent.”
“I knew that!” said the boy, and he stomped off through the field, kicking the tulips over and jumping on them.

After another long walk, the little buck-toothed boy barged into the psychiatrist’s office. She sat behind a mahogany desk, looking over her glasses at her patient.
“… and so ever since then I just have no confidence at all in social situations.”
“Oh boo hoo,” said the little buck-toothed boy. “Why don’t you just go kill yourself?”
“Hey!” the patient spun around, shocked. “Why did you…”
“Shut up, nut bag,” said the boy, and spat on him. He turned to the

psychiatrist. “Are you smart?”
She looked mildly back at him. “Well, I graduated magna…”
“Whatever. I have a question, and I need a smart person to work it out.”
“I think I can guess. You’re wondering why you are so badly behaved, aren’t you? Well, first let’s talk about your parents.”
“That’s not the question, you dumb bitch! I want to know why everyone who meets me thinks I’m going to be good, when I’m not.”
And he ran up to the psychiatrist and kicked her in the shin, before pulling a bookcase over and storming out.

The little buck-toothed boy didn't stop until he reached the woods. If people couldn’t help, maybe the animals could. He asked the deer, but they ran away as soon as they heard his voice, so he decided to tell the wolves where they lived. He asked the wolves, but they just howled their foolish songs about love and snow and the moon, so he told them the wrong place to look for the deer. The animals were as useless as people. It was hopeless.

Finally, just when the little buck-toothed boy was ready to give up, he came across a sun-lit glade, with a sparkling stream burbling through it. There was an old, shaggy bear leaning back against a mossy tree-trunk, contemplating the world.

“Excuse me, Mr Bear,” said the little buck-toothed boy.
“How can I be of assistance?” asked the bear, with a deep, wise-sounding voice.
“I’ve asked everyone, but no-one can help me. I’ve been really mean and horrible to everyone, and I like it. But everyone I meet thinks that I’m a good little boy. Do you know why?”
The bear nodded sagely. “That’s a tough question, all right, and I’m not sure that my answer is going to please you. Because there’s no one reason that people think you'll be nice. They just assume you will be. People like putting every new thing they come across into boxes, so they can pretend that everything in a box is essentially the same. It’s because people are scared of things that are different, and by assuming, and using their little boxes, they can pretend that they are capable of understanding the world, rather than dealing with the terror of knowing that they can’t possibly understand anything.”

“Oh,” said the little buck-toothed boy.
“For example,” said the bear, “people also assume that just because fairy tale animals are anthropomorphic, they’re not still animals.” And he ate the little buck-toothed boy up, rending his flesh and gnawing on his bones.

And then, licking the still-warm blood from his snout, the bear looks straight out of the screen, and locking his deep brown eyes with yours, speaks to you. “Of course, I’m not sure that it was the little boy making assumptions about fairy-tale animals. He didn’t know that he was in a fairy tale, after all. I guess I was subverting your expectations as the reader, rather than his as the character.”

The bear considers further for a second, shifting his bulk, then looks back up at you. “Still, even that may not truly represent the situation. Because I’m a character as well, I can’t know your expectations in advance. In some ways, we’re actually addressing the author’s assumptions about what your expectations will be. So if you expected me to eat the little buck-toothed boy, then you would have subverted the writer’s assumptions, rather than the other way around."

A strand of pink slaver drips from the bear's open maw. "Now, if I really wanted to challenge assumptions about fictional characters, both yours and the author’s, I could just climb straight out of the screen you’re looking at and maul you. Your skin tearing, the crack of your bones beneath my paws, and the feeling of sinking my teeth into your warm, sweet flesh.”

The bear belches, and you can almost smell the fetid stench of raw meat. “But of course, I've just eaten. Still, if you would like to come back to this paragraph a little later on, feel free. I’m quite at my leisure.”

And with a wink at you, the bear lies back against the cool moss, and turns to watch the brook shimmer in the dappled afternoon sunlight.

A Fan's Fans

"What is it?"

"It's a mechanical fan that has the ability to play the electric guitar, sir."

"Ha ha, does it blow you away when it plays?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mentally or physically?"

"Both sir, its musical talent with an electric guitar is unparalleled. However, it also produces a wind velocity of 90kph when playing."

"I was joking, but that's actually pretty funny. Anything else I need to know?"

"The fan has fans, sir."

"People fans or mechanical fans?"

"Both, sir. It has a large following of people who appreciate its music, but it also has a collection of mechanical fans."

"Okay, give them a Class-B amnestic and call it a day."

"The people fans or the mechanical fans, sir?"

"Give the people fans the amnestic and contain the mechanical fans. You think you'll have trouble doing it?"

"It should be a breeze, sir."

"A breeze created by the fan that prevents you from carrying out the order?"

"No I meant it should be an easy job, sir."

"Good, glad that's sorted out. Now to deal with the running refrigerator in Sector-118."

"Sir, do you mean the refrigerator is physically sprinting or do you mean it is a workin-"

"—Don't even start."

A Fancy Dinosaur

It was a mild day, late into the Cretaceous period. A Pachycephalosaurus walked the forest, the body of a Vegavis in its mouth. Several hours had passed since it had collected its prize, but still it journeyed. Resisting the urge to eat for this long was proving difficult, but it would persevere.

After some time, it spotted something soaring through the sky, a mere silhouette against the sun. The Pachycephalosaurus hurried after the silhouette. The being took perch on its usual spot, on the highest branch of a tree in the middle of a clearing. It was the only branch that kept it safe from even the biggest predators.

Standing on one of the tree's many roots was a creature the Pachycephalosaurus recognized, but did not quite understand. It was a furry thing, a quadruped, a little smaller than the Vegavis the Pachycephalosaurus carried. There were many like it, all following the winged one, all identical. But only one sat on the root that day. The two watched each other for some time before the flighted one let out a call. The Pachycephalosaurus understood this meant it could approach.

The Pachycephalosaurus understood the the winged one was no Archaeopteryx. The fact that Archaeopteryx had gone extinct almost one hundred million years ago was lost on the Pachycephalosaurus, nor did the true origin of the creature matter too much to the Pachycephalosaurus. It wasn't all that smart. Silly dinosaur. It couldn't even sense the suppressing amount of mirth emanating from the winged one. The Pachycephalosaurus dropped the carcass at the foot of the tree, as it had done for the past fifty days. The winged one let out another cry, and the furry thing dragged the carcass into a hole under the tree.

Three of the furred creatures exited the hole, each carrying assorted rocks. They displayed their wares and wagged their little tails. But the Pachycephalosaurus desired none of them. It had, after all,

bought instances of each presented. The Pachycephalosaurus was a rock collector, a veritable Connoissaur. While the company of Mastodon, Carnotaurus & Dark certainly rewarded oneself with interesting rocks, none could beat the winged one. It had ran up a deposit over the past fifty days, and it wished to use it all on something more grand. After some time the winged one bobbed its head up and down. It let out yet another cry, and another one of the furry things walked out from under the tree. This one held a piece of wood, odd runes scratched into it.

The Pachycephalosaurus did not understand. This was not a rock. It desired a rock, and a fancy one at that. It growled, and each creature growled back in unison, their adorable little ears pressed back. This gave the Pachycephalosaurus pause. The winged one let out a strange sound, alternating in pitch. Almost like a laugh. It conveyed that the wood was simply a formality, a sign of respectability. Very fancy. Now understanding that what it held was not simply wood, the Pachycephalosaurus attempted to chew it. It decided that whatever formalities were, they were not very tasty. In fact, formalities tasted a lot like wood.

After an odd motion where it held its right wing to its crest and leaned forward, the wondrous creature lifted itself from the branch. It thanked the Pachycephalosaurus for all of its business, then simply flew up into the sky. The Pachycephalosaurus watched it go helplessly, thinking all it got was some poor tasting formality. Fifty meals, and not a fancy rock to show for it. Curses flowed from the Pachycephalosaurus's maw as it watched the winged one depart.

The Pachycephalosaurus's tiny mind lapsed for a moment as it stared at the departing salesbirdinosaur. Instead of a sun, its details were hidden by a massive flaming rock. The most fanciest rock of all rocks. The Pachycephalosaurus felt satisfied with its purchase. It would look so nice on the mantle. If Pachycephalosaurusi had mantles.

The most fanciest awesome rock itself was at least ten kilometers in diameter, which according to modern rock enthusiasts is indeed quite fancy. The most fanciest gloriously awesome rock certainly brightened up the Pachycephalosaurus's life. And even Mastodon and Carnotaurus's lives were brightened up, as deep in their caves

as they were. In fact, it brightened up the lives of three-fourths of the planet's flora and fauna. One could argue it even brightened up the day of the planet itself!

Then the most fanciest gloriously awesome fantastic rock (later marketed simply as Dr. Wondertainment's Marvelous Meteor™) arrived at its destination; Chicxulub, Mexico - 66,462,579 BC. Right on time.

A Farewell To Arms

The O5 Council sat in silence at what they had just heard.

Finally, Four's gentle voice broke the reverie. "What did you say?"

"I said, it's hopeless."

Four watched the weathered old man slump in his chair.

"You're the last person I'd expect to hear that from, Ten."

"Look at the data. The Orange Zone has *shrunk* by 2%. We've lost two Sites' worth of personnel and skips in the last month alone."

Before he could continue, a blip on Eleven's screen borrowed her attention. She rubbed her wrinkled temple.

"Two more task forces are lost, Eta-5 and Phi-2."

One rose slightly. "Dead?"

"Eta-5 suffered catastrophic losses against a 3396-empowered living mountain range. No further details."

"And Phi-2?"

A pause, too long. "One member dead, the rest defected."

"Shit."

Two spoke up, finally. "We need to beef up ALABASTER. Every drop of resources goes to containment, or neutralization if possible."

Three joined in. "I don't like this. This isn't *us* anymore. Putting most of mankind in camps and labs is overstepping our place."

Two cocked his head. "You picked a *really* bad time to suddenly grow a heart, Three. It's just containment of anomalies. That's what we *do*. That's what we've *been* doing. Nothing has changed except the scale and the budget. There won't *be* a mankind unless we do our jobs, and do them now."

Four shifted. "A formal vote, then. For or against increasing the scope of Project ALABASTER and making containment and neutralization of the 3396 spread the Primary Foundation Mission Directive."

Silence.

A handful of voices quietly said "In favor", one after the other.

Three, Four, and Eight voted to oppose.

The remainder stood silently as history marched forward.

O5-2 disconnected from the holographic call and returned to his favorite chair. Not that his current residence had much of a view.

Thirteen bunkers were located around, inside, or near the planet. Each one containing someone who at one point would have been rightly called a king or queen of the world. One of these bunkers contained O5-2.

Designed by the Foundation's best and brightest, bristling with the most advanced technology on the planet, the fortress was located a kilometer beneath the desert sands of somewhere redacted.

A titanic block of concrete and various named and unnamed metals, all protecting a singular room, a heart, where O5-2 resided. The fortress defied any earthquake, hurricane, or asteroid that dared try to reach him.

But right now it had a huge hole in it.

Alarms blared all over the labyrinthine circulatory system of corridors. Classified machines bent the very fabric of space within

the fortress, to confuse and disorient any would-be intruders, as well as protect from outside disasters. One could walk for a hundred kilometers and never get any closer to the heart, if they didn't know the way.

The flashing cognitohazardous emergency lights looked down upon miles of destroyed corridors. Massive guns lay destroyed, smoke still flowing from their shattered and melted barrels. Several humanoid bodies lay here, torn apart.

One indistinct, melted red corpse had its fist embedded in the broken remains of a Scranton Reality Disruptor. The air around it sputtered and rippled with the machine's dying breaths as the corpse's skeleton twitched.

What was once a laser grid defense whirred quietly, sparks dripping from it like tears. A motionless body made of sparkling crystal lay in pieces before it, and the deadly beams had left their mark both on it and the surrounding walls and guns.

Deeper still, walls were torn apart and corroded. One wall had been chewed to pieces by a swarm of fiery moths. Another had been turned to rock candy and shattered.

The further into the complex, the more esoteric the defenses, and the more strangely they had been overcome.

A turret was being chewed up by a *Tyrannosaurus rex* made of plasma.

A body most certainly did *not* lie crumpled in a ten-meter circle where reality was crushed flat to two dimensions and then rolled up into nonexistence.

A missile the size of a person sat in the air, encased in bone.

A defense drone melted in a puddle of cheese.

The Scranton Reality Anchors had sat quietly and impotently along the walls the entire time, for an anchor can hold a boat in place but it can't stop it from sinking.

Alarms kept blaring. Agent Palanez ran one last diagnostic check on his SEGURO suit and activated all systems. They would be here any second.

O5-2 was inside a SEGURO suit of his own. If it was to be the last wall protecting him, there were far worse options than a metal, polymer, and redacted-stuff shell, powered by a blackboxed skip, an AIAD to move it faster than he could think, and a *lot* of hope. Only problem was that his suit was still powering up.

Agent Palanez had always been a man of few words. "Secure."

Agent Figueroa continued. "Contain."

O5-2 felt a chill down his spine. "Protect."

KA-BOOM!

"Get behind us, sir!"

Palanez moved quickly and generated a force field seconds before a gigantic column of burning acetylene erupted from the one of the attackers' hands.

One instance with two arms holding two *more* disembodied arms made of brass led the charge of about twenty five mutants.

The two bodyguards braced. Their suits were experimental and only superficially tested. Still, they had a job to do.

Agent Figueroa stepped forward and went on the offensive. She let loose a pulse of energy that threw the first wave back and gave her a second to breathe, before shooting a gray-skinned two-headed man in the chest with her laser.

One mutant extended its veins and arteries, which now ended in sharp points, and began to pry at the armor plating while another attempted to distract Figueroa with blasts of magma. A burst of electricity from the suit shot into the veins but the mutant held its ground, screaming.

Another mutant, with only mouths on its face and neck, opened all of them to scream at Figueroa. She dodged more magma and swung the vein guy into the path of the devastating sonic waves, disintegrating him. The scales of armor he had managed to scrape loose fell off as well.

Just gotta hold on…

Palanez wasn't holding on as well. After narrowly escaping another plasma *Dakotaraptor* and dispatching it with a magnetic field generator, one older man had affixed both of Palanez's feet to the floor with an ultra-strong pink adhesive gunk, and was currently attempting to dissolve the armor with acid while two more mutants held Palanez. Palanez diverted power to his right leg and moved it, ripping up a piece of the floor along with it. Off-guard, the chemical mutant was sliced in half by Palanez's energy blade, but his job was done.

Rita grit her teeth. *Now or never*. Seconds ago she had just watched Ernesto die to give her the opening she needed. She stayed behind Dylan and his rapidly breaking stone wall, and extended a single hair from her arm.

The hair grew in length, and stretched out past the rock wall, past Ernesto's remains, past David, desperately absorbing the armored man's blasts, and towards the millimeter-wide breach in the suit. It then entered the gap, and weaved its way past the layers and cracks, past the carbon-woven undersuit, right down to the agent's skin. Rita's single black hair touched a brown one on the agent's arm, and her eyes widened.

In her mind, she spoke the word that she had felt when the blessed goo had raised her up, the Word etched into the DNA of her every cell.

THRIVE.

Palanez felt a pinprick on his arm, then a shudder that pulsed through his entire body. Every one of his hairs stood on end. And

they wouldn't sit back down. The hairs grew longer and longer. Some doubled back into his skin, creating new follicles that instantly sprouted even more hair. The hair filled the suit, and the pressure began to crush him. His nose and ear hairs had nowhere else to go, and he could feel himself suffocating.

A bad hair day indeed.

Exhausted, Rita fell to the floor as Palanez asphyxiated. His heart finally stopped, and the suit systems executed one last command. The outer shell fragmented and the pieces shot out at twice the speed of sound. The rest of it exploded, turning a six-meter radius, including Rita, David, and Dylan, to nothing but atoms and light.

One down, two to go.

Armando clenched his fists, all 12 of the ones he had active right now. The blessed blue-green **gift** had merged with his original anomaly and pushed him far beyond what he ever thought he could be. After spending so many years in a containment cell, he was finally in control of his anomaly. And soon, he would control his own destiny as well when the Foundation that imprisoned him was gone.

The second guard was more vicious. She had just torn one of them in half, and then nullified a retaliatory swarm of electricity wasps.

Rita's down. Ernesto's down. We're gonna have to tear the whole thing open to kill her.

Armando tore off an arm made of solid heptanitrocubane. Using several more arms in a chain, he hooked the dangerously explosive arm around the agent's neck.

BOOM!

The explosion threw the remaining mutants back and filled the room with smoke. One mutant clapped his hands and the smoke coalesced into black metal needles which converged upon the agent. She flung them away and into another mutant, then activated the artificial gravity generator, bringing everyone else to their knees.

It took a pretty big chunk of power, but Figueroa deemed it worth the chance to pick them off.

She moved towards one gold-skinned woman, who shielded herself and the scaly man next to her under a glowing force field bubble resembling a tumbleweed.

Figueroa knew it would take too much time to break the shield. She cranked up the gravity near those two for a split second, crushing them.

GRAVITON GENERATOR SHUTTING DOWN

Shit.

The outer shell wouldn't hold much longer. That last explosion had managed to crack it, and the magma earlier had disrupted the polymer gel. The lowest layer of genesis weave was overworked trying to repair itself fast enough to cushion blows.

With her partner down, and the O5's suit only at 61%, she'd have to improvise.

Three of them remained: Armando, Angela, and Erik. They could see the breaches in the remaining guard's armor. If they could take her out, they could crack open the O5's suit like an egg at their leisure.

Easier said than done, of course, but desperation was one hell of a drug.

Armando and Erik rushed the guard, who responded with a sonic pulse. Armando quickly ripped off an arm and grew a wing, of an extinct anomalous bat, that negated the sound. Erik jumped high, and Armando grabbed his leg with three more arms and swung him downwards at the guard, who extended her right arm into a shield. Erik increased his mass 100-fold at the moment of impact, smashing the shield and throwing the guard to the floor.

Not giving her a chance to respond, Armando pinned her to the ground with seventeen heavy metallic arms while Erik hammered

away at the armor plating with ultra-dense fists.

SHELL INTEGRITY CRITICAL

The genesis weave began to give. Power systems were shorting out left and right. Figueroa was sure she had cracked a rib or two now.

She activated the magnetic repulsor field, and sent the arms holding her down flying away. She charged one last shot on her psychic amplifier and liquefied Erik's brain, before her left wrist erupted in a shower of sparks. Armando slammed a *Brachiosaurus* front leg into her face, which she managed to block, then fired two energy balls right into Angela's face and stomach without missing a beat.

Armando grabbed her with several long octopus-like tentacles, but Figueroa let off a charged shockwave from her central power core that sent him flying. He hit the wall, but managed to tear off some of the armor with the tentacles' suckers.

Armando summoned more mass than he had ever used, and grew an arm with a nanometer-thick neutron star skin. He couldn't maintain it for long, but he was desperate now. The gravity overwhelmed Figueroa and pulled her towards Armando, and he slammed her in the midsection, sending cracks spiraling through the rest of the suit and breaking her faceplate.

Figueroa didn't care that her face was exposed now; she had this in the bag. She reached to her side and threw her only null grenade, the gravity of the arm directing it. Armando ripped off the arm and threw it as hard as he could towards her. Figueroa flinched as the grenade erupted into absolute nothingness, leaving an empty void of reality right in front of her face where the arm was.

Then she diverted power to her palm cannons, held her wrists together as a ball of blue plasma glowed in her hands, and extended her arms to fire the beam at Armando.

He frantically generated arms as fast as he could to block the brunt of the beam, but Figueroa kept walking towards him.

Then she stopped. The beam flickered and then cut out. Figueroa

gave one single cry of pain, followed by silence, as her right arm and face turned into translucent crystal. Armando turned his head and saw Angela, barely breathing, straining to keep her three good eyes open, and holding the fourth bloody, disembodied eye in her own hand. The gaze of all four eyes turned whatever she looked at into salt, as long as she kept them focused intently on the same thing. The suit shifted, repairing the transmutation almost as soon as it happened, but Figueroa was done for. Her heart crystallized, and the suit exploded, less forcefully this time. Angela dropped the eye and collapsed, finally succumbing to the gaping hole in her body.

O5-2's suit unfolded, as it was programmed to upon the destruction of the other two. Better to fight at less than 100% than to be a sitting duck, they had reasoned.

Armando spat blood, and put up a dozen more fists.

"Sudden death. Winner takes all."

Armando stood over O5-2, who was gasping in the shattered remains of the suit.

"Where is your power now?"

O5-2 coughed up blood. "Was it worth it? All the lives you threw away to get here?"

Armando narrowed his eyes. "That's real rich coming from you. Every single one of us volunteered. We knew what we were doing, and we all decided the reward was worth it."

"And that reward would be?"

"A brand new world. Where there's a place for us that's not a cell." He took a deep breath. "Unfortunately, I don't think there's a place in our world for you."

Armando had more hands than anyone, but it only took one for him to strangle the man.

Another crack in the foundations of the old world, hewn by the dead

citizens of the new.

The Shape of a Gun

Apotheosis Hub

A New Age of Magic

A Farewell To Kings

« **Permanent Waves** || **HUB** || **Moving Pictures** »

March 22nd, 2017
Backdoor SoHo

Sierra Dustin reached into her coat and pulled a handgun out of the small painting titled *Gun No. 44*, which was taped to the inside lining. Not bothering to aim, she fired off six shots down the street behind her — in approximately the general direction of her pursuers — then threw the empty revolver after them. Without breaking her stride, she reached into the coat again…

A relatively short distance away, two FBI agents and a chainsmoker were attempting to catch her.

"Since when the hell did anartists use guns in SoHo?" Spencer shouted, keeping his arm raised in the hopes that the ballistic fibers woven into his suit would protect his head.

"Since now!" Green shouted back. The Foundation agent was surprisingly fit for someone whose lungs would likely fail an emissions test. "Better question: Where the fuck are they all coming from?"

"Gotta be an exploit of some kind," Thorne said, voice inappropriately level for the circumstances. A very attentive — and fearless (or bulletproof) — bystander would have noticed that their eyes were half-closed. "I'm not picking up any traces of ARad."

"How delightful," Green muttered.

Some forty meters ahead of them, Sierra Dustin ducked around a corner and disappeared from view. Spotting a local Not Another Fucking Starbucks, she took careful aim at a display advertising literally bottomless coffee and fired.

The three agents turned the corner and ran straight into an onrushing wall of lukewarm espresso.

The cleanup took three hours.

"Three dead — two from gunshots — and fifteen hospitalized so far from coffee related injuries," Thorne reported as they rejoined Spencer and Green. All three of them stood off to the side of the street, smelling strongly of espresso and surveying the wreckage.

"Christ, what a colossal fuckup," Spencer said. He shook his head. "We dropped the ball, this is our fault."

"Your fault," Green said, finishing off his third consecutive cigarette. "If we'd had an MTF like I wanted —"

"You can take your MTF and shove it up your ass," Spencer said, cutting him off. "It's bad enough having you here."

Thorne sighed internally and inserted themself between the two men. Two months of forced collaboration had not done any favors for their clashing egos. "Let's not add any more casualties to that list, hmm? Green, you know we'd never have been able to get a fully geared strike team past **the Doorman**. And Ken, you can be civil. I've seen you do it."

The two other agents continued to glare at each other, so Thorne continued, "We've still got a rat to catch, so Ken, why don't you take **the Randall detector** and make a sweep down the nearby streets? See if you can pick up on any recently opened Ways."

Spencer looked away from Green and nodded slowly. "Gods know how many people took a Way out after that flood, but I can try." He looked back at Green suspiciously. "What will he be doing?"

"Green and I will go back to the apartment and make a sweep for anything that can give us a link," Thorne said. "Who knows, maybe we can still salvage this."

Green lit up his fourth cancerstick. "When this is over, Spencer, you and I are gonna have a long talk about where MTFs should and

should not go."

"I look forward to hearing it."

Thorne rolled their eyes. Grabbing Green by the shoulder, they started to walk back towards Dustin's apartment. "Come on skipper, let's go."

As they walked around the corner, Green turned his head just in time to see Spencer perform a mock salute with a certain single finger.

"Doesn't look like the door's booby trapped. Not with anything occult, at least."

"Yeah, but didn't you say those guns were non-occult? There could be some awful exploit on the other side waiting to turn our brains inside out."

Inside the apartment, Madrigal stirred at the sound of unfamiliar voices from outside.

"Who would keep something that lethal inside their own apartment? That would be absurd."

"You'd be surprised. Anartists are pretty big on absurdism."

Madrigal was a simple creature with very few needs. Almost none, in fact. Constructs weren't known for being high maintenance pets. It was why they were so common among the more eccentric anartists, many of whom would often forget to feed themselves, much less their pets.

The lock clicked and the door swung open with a creak.

"See? Nothing to worry about."

In the three years of its not-quite-life, the brass wire had known only one person, and that was the Creator. And while it knew many things, it knew one thing above all else: It loved the Creator.

Neither of the two new people who had just entered the apartment were the Creator, and so Madrigal hated them with all the fury that a three-foot-long spool of animated wire could muster.

"Ow, fuck!" Green shouted, which is the natural reaction to being stabbed in the calf by a three-foot-long spool of animated wire.

Reacting purely on instinct, Thorne reached down and grabbed the wire with both hands. The brass construct thrashed violently as they pulled it away from Green, but a shouted word in a dead language stopped it.

Thorne threw the paralyzed construct back into the apartment with one hand, using their other hand to shove the still-swearing Green back out into the hall. Thorne backpedaled after him, pausing only to slam the door shut behind them.

"I fucking told you!" Green hissed through gritted teeth. He slumped against the far wall, clutching his injured leg tightly.

"And does knowing you were right make you feel any better?" Thorne asked. They crouched down next to the wounded agent, scanning the hall for any further dangers.

"No it does not!" Blood was starting to well up beneath his fingers.

"Well then try not to bleed on the carpet too much while I get my first aid kit out." They reached into their jacket and pulled out a box that couldn't possibly have fit inside a pocket.

"Try not to — are you serious? That fucking thing stabbed me in the leg!"

"Which will be appreciated by any wizard who gets a hold of your blood, I'm sure."

After sliding on a pair of latex gloves, Thorne removed a large cloth rag from the box and slid it beneath Green's leg. Drops of crimson began to stain the gray fabric almost immediately.

"I'm gonna need you to move your hand," they said. From the box,

they removed a bottle of something that looked like water, but probably wasn't.

Begrudgingly, Green lifted his hand, revealing a nasty gash where Madrigal had stabbed him. Thorne uncapped the bottle and poured the contents over the wound, eliciting another hiss from Green.

"Anti-occult sterilizing rinse," Thorne explained. "Should neutralize any curses that might have been on that thing, along with most mundane pathogens."

Setting the bottle aside, Thorne picked up a vial of brownish-green powder and showed it to Green. "And this is a fast-acting coagulant. Word of warning, this is going to suck really bad."

Working quickly, Thorne poured some of the powder onto a strip of gauze and pressed it firmly against the wound.

To his credit, Green didn't scream.

Thorne pulled off their gloves and shoved them in a biowaste bag, which went back into the box. They handed Green a roll of cloth bandages, then put the first aid kit back into their jacket.

"Stay here and wrap that up tight," they said.

"Don't tell me you're going back in there alone," he said.

Thorne shrugged nonchalantly. "I can handle myself, skipper. Be back soon."

And with that, they disappeared into the apartment.

Thorne returned a few minutes later, a self-satisfied grin on their face and the brass wire held in their hands.

"What's that?" Green asked, eyeing the wire suspiciously.

"It *was* a construct," Thorne said, emphasizing the past tense. "Bit of wire animated with thaumaturgy. There's no *emet* inscribed on it anywhere, so it couldn't have been very intelligent. Basically just a

dumb animal."

Green pulled himself to his feet, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg. "And it's dead?"

"Can't kill something that wasn't alive to begin with," Thorne said. "But yeah, it's dead."

"So why are you carrying it around?"

"Law of Contagion," they said. "Thaumaturgy goes both ways. Our little friend put a bit of herself into this to animate it — not enough for me to target her with thaumaturgy, but enough that I can use it to track her. She can't hide now."

Still grinning, Thorne slid the length of wire into another impossibly large jacket pocket. "Come on, let's go see how Spencer's doing."

They found Spencer in an alley near the coffee shop, waving the metal wand of the Randall detector slowly through the air. Occasionally, the box it was attached to would beep quietly to indicate the amount of ARad flux.

"Any luck?" Thorne called out.

"Eh, not much. It's like I said, there's too many Ways here to pinpoint the one our rat took." He turned to look at the approaching duo. "What happened to him?"

"There was a trap," Green muttered, stopping to lean against the alley wall for support. Thorne's dressing might have stopped the bleeding, but it hadn't done anything for the underlying tissue damage.

"So I take it that the apartment was a bust then?"

"Not quite," Thorne said. They withdrew the length of wire from their jacket and held it up to the light.

"You got a link?" There was a note of cautious optimism in his voice.

"Indeed I did. Now let's see if we can't find this Way."

Thorne rummaged in their suit pockets for a moment until they withdrew a bit of semi-translucent quartz and length of string, then proceeded to tie the quartz to the wire with the string. The lump of crystal dangled loosely in the air. Thorne closed their eyes and started humming quietly to themself.

After a moment, the crystal abruptly swung upwards and sideways in defiance of gravity, pulling the string taut. The line it formed pointed further down the alley.

Thorne opened their eyes and nodded in satisfaction. "Follow me, gentlemen."

The three agents picked their way through the alley, following the directions of the occult compass Thorne had created. In deference to Green's injury, the two FBI agents kept a slower pace.

They stopped a few minutes later in a different alley when the crystal dropped downwards under the force of gravity again. Wherever the anartist had fled to, her trail ended there.

"There's definitely a Way here," Spencer said, waving the Randall detector through the air experimentally. "Looks like it was opened pretty recently too."

Thorne closed their eyes and nodded. "I can see it."

"Great," Green said. "Now what?"

Thorne opened their eyes and clapped their hands together. "Now we do some real magic."

Thorne had the other two agents clear a space near the Way, moving aside the random detritus of the alley until there was an unobstructed area nearly two meters across.

Once again, Thorne reached into their jacket of holding, removing in turn two energy bars, three large candles, a length of string, a protractor, a stick of chalk, a knife (which Thorne called an athame),

several strips of cloth, and a folded sheaf of papers.

"I really wish we'd thought to bring a Resonator with us," they said. "Would make this a lot easier." They unwrapped one of the energy bars — a 'Compact Meal Bar by Prometheus Labs', according to the label — and started eating.

"So what's all this for?" Green asked. "**I've seen Navarro in action**, and he just kind of waves his hands until something's on fire."

"Well I'm not Daniel Fucking Navarro, am I?" Thorne said. "Thaumaturgy's no cakewalk to begin with, and forcibly tearing open a Way between worlds is even worse. This —" They gestured at the assembled equipment. "— Is all to redirect the backlash so that we don't end up dead. Or worse."

Thorne picked up the chalk and, using the string as a makeshift compass, drew a circle in the middle of the clearing. Then, using the protractor to check the angles, they marked off nine points around the circle, each 40 degrees apart. With the string as a straight edge, Thorne connected them together to form three overlapping triangles, with a nonagon in the center.

Thorne stepped back to survey their work, then nodded.

"Now for the tricky part," they said. "Shame I don't have a sigil machine for this bit, but I think I can freehand it. Hand me those papers please, Ken."

Spencer passed the folded sheaf to Thorne, who unfolded it to reveal a set of pages photocopied from what could only have been a grimoire.

Very slowly, Thorne began inscribing a set of runes inside the circle, taking care to keep the lines straight and the angles precise, erasing the symbols and redoing them if they weren't satisfactory. After several minutes of this, Thorne finished by drawing a diamond in the middle of the nonagon, bisecting it with a single line drawn from the center of the circle.

"There, I think I got the runes right."

Carefully stepping over the chalk lines, Thorne placed the three candles around the circle, next to the runes which they said stood for fire. They left the candles unlit.

"And now for the hard part," they said, picking up the athame and stepping into the center of the circle. "Whatever you do, *don't step on the lines*. Understand?"

The other two agents nodded, and Green took a cautious step back from the edge of the circle.

Holding the athame tightly, Thorne slowly drew it across the palm of their left hand, just barely breaking the skin. Still moving slowly, they turned the athame over and held the flat against the cut, until the blade was smeared with blood.

Taking a deep breath, Thorne raised the knife into the air and held it there.

Time seemed to slow.

Thorne brought the knife down, slicing through the air.

"Open." The word was barely a whisper, but there was a preternatural power behind it that gave it volume far beyond sound or speech.

The chalk lines of the circle glowed, blindingly bright. The candles burst into flames that stretched three feet into the air. The light flashed off the athame, casting unnatural shadows against the walls.

And in the center of the circle, the air tore open beneath the knife, revealing a Way between worlds.

Thorne stumbled back, gasping for air but still taking care not to step on the lines. They slumped against a pile of cardboard boxes, letting the knife clatter to the ground.

"Power bar," they said, still panting heavily. Spencer handed the

remaining energy bar to them, and they devoured it rapidly.

"You okay?" He asked.

Thorne nodded. "Yeah. Just give me a minute, I'll be alright."

They picked up one of the cloth strips and used it to bandage their hand, then used the remaining cloth to clean the athame, which went back into their jacket.

Breathing more regularly now, Thorne stood up and said, "The Way will stay open as long as the candles are burning. That gives us an hour, maybe two tops, to find Dustin and get out. I should be able to open the Way again if it closes while we're still in there, but I don't really want to chance it."

Spencer nodded, then looked at Green. "You up for this, skipper?"

Green smiled fiercely. "Don't you ever doubt it. Let's get this bastard."

Spencer grinned back. "That's what I like to hear."

Then, as one, the three agents stepped through the Way.

« **Permanent Waves** || **HUB** || **Moving Pictures** »

A Few Memos

From the inbox of President Mortimer Phillips:

Dear President Phillips,
I believe the workers in the western wing are talking about unionizing. Our best course of action would be to scare them. Perhaps the pinwheel?
Elliot Browning, HR

Morty,

We got a problem with a breach in the lower floors. Apparently some low-level got ahold of a really sharpened pencil and has seized the putty manufacturing line along with some other rebels. They will, of course, be "fired" once this is resolved.

Jim

President Phillips,

Attached you'll find a financial statement for the next fiscal quarter. Summary: Our stickers have gone down in sales, possibly due to skepticism. On the other hand, Dark Ltd. has agreed to begin distributing our dish-blood items. Our recommendation is a 10% increase in sales price to Dark Ltd. with the agreement that we provide a given quota of 200 annually.

Corporate

Monty,

I found this note on my door today, right before my desk exploded:

> Dear Mr. Killborn,

> We will no longer take this bullshit. It is time us workers fight for our rights, and none of you assholes at HR can stop us. Consider this a final warning before we blow this place sky high!

I am recommending increased security until this issue is resolved.

Jim

Hey boss,

Where would you like that jacuzzi installed?

Reggie

Monty,

We've found the culprits. Needless to say, their contracts with us have been terminated.

Jim

Dear Mr. Phillips,

We regret to inform you that several of your employees have been terminated due to gross negligence in the shipping of your products. We were able to recover the products and they are now being distributed, but we would recommend that next time your shipping personnel come unarmed as we requested.

Carter

Dear Pigheaded Corporate Scum,

This is your final hour. You may have killed our friends, but we still stand strong against the inhumane oppression you propagate against us. As you are reading this a 10 megaton nuclear warhead is being aimed at your factory, and be re-assured we will not

hesitate to blow this place to hell if you don't meet our demands.

Fuck you

Dear Mortimer,

We've recently been getting reports of your employees attempting to engage in nuclear warfare. While we are not concerned with your internal affairs, it is rather bothersome to cover up a nuclear explosion. We've stopped them now, but next time, keep your subordinates in line.

Franz

President Phillips,

We've filled out your request to install software allowing you to see the previous edits of memos.

Maintenance

Morty,

Hey, you know that hot chick from Corporate? Well I've been hitting on her a little much lately and she's filed for sexual harassment with HR. All I did was send her a picture of my nads something pretty cool looking. Could you let this one slide? Pretty please?

Jim

==ATTENTION ALL PERSONNEL==

This is an automated message. There has been an explosion somewhere in the WEST WING. It is recommended that you avoid the area for the next THREE days.

Hey boss,

I kind of messed up on that jacuzzi installation. Can I try the East Wing instead?

Reggie

President Phillips,

We are currently undergoing some re-configuration of wages as our replacement employees are discussing unionizing.

Corporate

Mort,

We're over.

Janette

President Phillips,

We have filled out your request for the termination of Janette Wesley.

Security

Morty,

I heard you got rid of Janette. Could you at least wait a few days next time? You know how good I am with rebound chicks.

Jim

Morty,

Hey, you asshole. What the fuck are you doing, sending your goons on me? Hey, what was with those guys in my office today? We're friends, right? I won't bother you again, promise.

Jim

Hey boss,

I found Jim in your jacuzzi today. He said you let him. Just thought I'd make sure.

Reggie

President Phillips,

James Killborn has been demoted to assembly line duty, at your request.

Human Resources

A Few More Words From "The Administrator"

The Administrator looked at a watch. Ten minutes past five, and Fritz had failed to make his appearance. It sighed. *Why did they always have to make it get up after them? They were old enough to know better.* Ancient skin snapped and crackled as the neck turned to see the silver, scratched watch. Another arm showed a different time, this one saying it was eleven minutes after five. His patience was at an end.

But, before it could lift itself out of the office, there was a knock at the door. A new arm reached out from the left coat pocket and opened it, brushing the dust of this new visitor's shoulders as he walked in.

"Hello, uh, Commander. Please, have an, uh, a seat." One of the ruined hands gestured to a hard wooden chair in front of The Administrator's desk.

As he walked to the seat, Fritz did his best to look at anything that wasn't The Administrator. On the walls, he noted several decorations. Among the displays were a framed shovel, several astronomical models, and a photograph of a meteor. He closed his eyes as his hands gripped the seat, trying for the longest blink of his life. Finally, he couldn't stop it any longer.

Fritz opened his eyes. Seated before him was a decrepit monstrosity, with twisted charcoal skin and sunken orange eyes. The hair, or what was left of it, was glowing a shimmering white. The limbs were twisted and gnarled, sticking stiffly and uselessly from the main body. Surrounding it was a steel mesh, which held it inside a large overcoat. The coat of many arms.

Now, I'm positive that, uh, that you know why I've called you in here.

Fritz tried to open his mouth and explain himself, but the very instrument of speech seemed to have abandoned him. From his dry,

nerve-wracked throat, all he could manage was a low cough.

… Well, uh, to review, the incident which occurred under your watch… resulting in the deaths of several major, uh, important researchers, and, uh, catastrophic damages. What… what do you have to say for yourself, Fritz?

Fritz looked down. There was nothing for him to say.

A blacked, pus-dripping arm, as thin as an olive branch, unfurled from its collar, and slowly stretched until it came to a filing cabinet located on the western wall of this office. Opening it, it rustled through some papers, until it came up with a file. Curling back into the coat, it dropped the file on the desk.

Now, Fritz, we've, uh, reviewed your personnel file. Due to the extra amount of time you've spent with the, uh, SCP-085 object, and the multiple reports from your late subordinate, Lieutenant Masipag, who, uh, who complained about the time you spent… testing. We've interviewed Cassie, and determined the nature of the testing.

Ten full seconds passed, and neither man nor being spoke.

And, uh, so… due to high crimes and misdemeanors against the Foundation's mission, including gross negligence and inappropriate usage of an anomalous object, you are sentenced to die. This will be carried out at high noon, uh, tomorrow.

Fritz froze in his seat. All around him, the room seemed to be compressing in on itself. This couldn't be happening. This was wrong. Impossible. The words echoed in his mind, shoving every other thought to the far reaches of his mind, until only the sobering and tombstone-still realization thundered through his shattered thoughts, like a final cavalry charge through a demented thought. He was finished.

"B-but sir, surely this is an.. overreaction? I don't think- I mean, surely I deserve to at least keep my life through this? Why waste another life?"

No, uh, I apologize, but this is just how things have turned out,

Commander. You've caused a great deal, uh, much anguish to, er, many of our comrades, and somebody simply has to be responsible.

"But…" Fritz struggled to find the words. "What about the people who didn't prevent me from abus- from using the containment supervision to see C- SCP-085?"

The Administrator's body did not hold even a single withered hope. No pity, or remorse, or sadness could be detected from his rasping tone.

You seem to, uh, appear to be having difficulty with your phrasing, Commander.

Fritz opened his mouth once more, but words failed.

Maybe, uh, perhaps, or, even if what you say is true, it doesn't matter, Commander. You are still, uh, the primary bearer of responsibility. I'm afraid it's, uh, time to face the music, so to speak.

Before Fritz could utter another word, there was a creaking behind him. Two men, in identical, brown and gray uniforms stepped inside. Wordlessly, they hoisted him up by his arms, and began the long escort to the brig.

I shall, uh, be sending somebody down in around an hour, Commander, if you require anything further. Good day, to, uh, you.

The doors slammed shut, and a stuffed silence permeated the air.

From his overcoat, a long arm emerged, crossing itself in front of him.

Yes, yes, but, uh, being callous, it's better than having to empathize with a man like him. He was going to come down this road eventually.

It twisted, snapping skin and ligaments as it curled around his infantile form.

I'm sorry it had to be so explosive, too. I suppose, I suppose this is just how it happens, sometimes.

The arms moved in assent, nestling below him and cradling him. He would need his rest.

When the universe demands the absurd and impossible, we shall be there to stand and protect the rest of humanity…

Without another word, his ruined eyelids shut, and he was at peace.

« When We Reach The Crescendo| End Of Olympians Hub | And Now, For Something Completely Different… »

A Fitting End

It's not every day that the Foundation hosts a funeral. Occasionally, a loyal agent or staff member receives a small ceremony and a burial on Site 19, but not often. The family might get the belongings and a letter of consolation. Never the body, though. Most times they wouldn't want it. The D-class get nothing but standard termination procedures at the end of the month.

But this was just plain unheard of: not only the funeral of a senior staff member, but the funeral of Dr. Alto H. Clef. Everyone not needed to keep security up was there. Some, I'd presume, were there because they were afraid that Clef would haunt them if they didn't. The eulogies were what could be expected, from some of the senior staff and a few members of the O5: reminiscing on old missions, glowing testimony to his accomplishments, and the like. Mostly just for show, because you can't really eulogize a man like Clef.

I didn't find it very strange that everyone had dry eyes: Clef was more valuable as an employee than a person. He was dangerous, unpredictable, and clearly insane, causing millions in damages, numerous personnel deaths, and just barely avoiding several XK events, but he was also responsible for dozens of successful recoveries and several critical decommissions, and that was at least worth something. Sure, there would be those who would miss the humor he lent to near-death situations, or his enigmatic, genre-savvy ways, but for the most part, no one cared about him personally. Clef's funeral was practically equivalent to presenting him with an "Employee of the Month" plaque.

However, there was one thing that made it all stand out, one final act to cement Clef into Foundation legend. When the eulogies had been finished, the silhouette of O5- on the monitor cleared his throat and announced:

"As per Dr. Clef's final wishes, his body will be fired out of

SCP-1543-J.”

A Foul Storm in a Fair Land

It wasn't supposed to storm in Hy-Brasil. Hy-Brasil was a fairy country, a country of eternal spring. When it did rain, it was warm and gentle and the fair folk would joyously dance skyclad in it.

This was not the kind of rain they were accustomed to. It was ice-cold and fierce, pelting down on them like a volley of liquid arrows. The storm clouds were as dark as the smoke from the mortals' vile factories, blocking out any hint of starlight or moonlight. The only natural light was from the random but frequent bolts of lightning, blinding flashes in the blind darkness, followed by deafening claps of thunder, booming like war drums.

Within the Throne Room of the Royal Palace, the courtiers of the Tuatha Dé Danann court all cowered like children before the horrid sound.

"It's a monster! A monster 60 fathoms tall rising from the sea! It's broken through the wards and is coming to destroy us all!" one of the concubines screamed, causing a chorus of screams to echo through the room.

"It is nothing of the kind!" High King Nuada Airgetlám the VII assured them. Though he maintained his usual cocky façade, he was in truth as scared as any of them by the storm. "I realize this is less clement weather than we're accustomed to, but you've all surely at least heard of thunderstorms, have you not? It is still only rain, and will pass in time."

"Hy-Brasil is a Blessed Land, no storm can ever cross our borders!" one of the Elders shouted. "Even if it is a mere storm, that means the wards are broken and we are vulnerable!"

"The wards have held without fail for 520 years. Why would they suddenly fail now?" the King demanded.

“Why? Our people fled to this isle for sanctuary from the cruel mortals. Your Great Grandfather sacrificed more than you could ever imagine creating those wards! For nearly three and a half centuries we lived in blessed peace until you decided that your coffers weren’t full enough! You opened this isle to their kind, to their black magic and unholy machines that are anathema to our very being! How can this still be a fairy country when mortals outnumber the Fey! The magic of this land has been failing bit by bit, and now it is too weak to even hold back a simple thunderstorm! You’ve betrayed your Forefather! You’ve betrayed all of us!”

King Airgetlám backhanded the elder so hard she fell to the floor, the rest of the court gasping in shock.

“Do not think that a little bad weather suddenly excuses treason,” he said coldly. “I have ruled for 177 years now, and my reign has brought nothing but prosperity. We’ve known no war, no famine, no plague, only ever-growing mountains of coin from our trade with outsiders, and you were all perfectly happy to pretend to be tolerant and cosmopolitan then, weren’t you? Is it not a testament to the greatness of my rule that a thunderstorm qualifies as an unprecedented disaster?”

“But the wards!”

“If the wards have failed, it is for no other reason than that they were old. I shall replace them with new and better wards with the knowledge and powers we have gained under my system of free trade. And if the storm is for some other reason, our mortal partners will gladly help us with their science to determine the cause and find a solution. As your king, I ask that you not scapegoat this minor inconvenience on myself or our allies, as neither of us has ever been anything but good to you.”

The courtiers seemed to calm down and accept his explanation, aside from the concubine from earlier who still would not cease weeping.

“Diarmuid, it is only -”

“It’s not the storm! It is a beast!” he screamed hysterically. “I can see

it in my mind!”

“You’re letting your imagination get -”

“Look out the window! Please!”

The King rolled his eyes and went to the window to peer out into the black storm. At first, he could see nothing, but then a flash of lightning revealed what the boy was speaking about.

It was a dread behemoth, sixty fathoms tall, more or less. The rain pelted down its scaly and leathery hide, gleaming in the electric blue glow of the lightning. It pulled itself onto the beach with five enormous tentacles, each one shaking the earth as they struck the ground. A hydra-like stalk grew from the base, with five bizarre arms sprouting from the top, each sporting five fingers in the shape of a starfish.

Oddest of all, the creature had a reptilian head like a crocodile’s, with a long maw filled with glistening teeth and an arc of five yellow eyes along its skull. When it roared, the sound rose over the thunder effortlessly.

“Open a Way to Fata Morgana,” the King commanded, backing away from the window as calmly as he could.

“Your Majesty?”

“Open a Way to Fata Morgana, we’re evacuating!” the King ordered. Before anyone could question the order, the palace was struck by a devastating blast of the behemoth’s spellfire breath, reducing it to rubble in an instant.

The cold rain on his face was enough to revive the King for one brief and final moment. He was pinned under a mound of debris, with no hope of freeing himself. He couldn’t even call for help, and even if he could it was unlikely there was anyone alive close enough to hear him, especially over the cacophony of the ongoing disaster.

As his lungs filled with his own blood, he could see the behemoth towering over him, its monstrous roar reverberating the marble he

was buried under. It was not content with his palace. It had set itself upon his glorious city, the city he has spent all his life enriching. The spires that had grown over his reign were felled in minutes, knocked down by the callous creature's rampage.

The beast screeched in pain as missiles and beams of powerful magic stuck against its hide. Amidst the chaos, King Airgetlám was able to discern that the Book Burners had engaged the beast, but that brought him no comfort.

When the attack was finished, there would be nothing left. Hy-Brasil would never recover. Everything that he, his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and all his people had ever built was now ruined. This was the end of a beautiful and magical Fey country, and like many such lands before it, it would perish in a single day of unmitigated catastrophe. Airgetlám didn't know if his policies had brought on Hy-Brasil's demise or not, but in the end, it made no difference. Fortune had been kind to his country for centuries, and now Misfortune had decided to make up for its long absence all at once, ensuring his Blessed Land would never be blessed again.

These were King Airgetlám's final thoughts as he closed his eyes for the last time, on that dark and stormy night.

A Friend's Words

A tall girl walked along the shore of the beach carrying a **`green glass bottle`**. Inside the bottle was a note she wrote. She walked into the water and threw the bottle as far as she could.

She had done this countless times over the past few years, and every time the bottle returned to her in the next day with another note from someone she had come to think of as a friend.

The girl returned home to wait for the message from her friend. She collected copies of the notes she has received inside a USB drive and thrown away the physical copies so as to not attract her parents' attention.

As the girl went to bed, she wondered about the place her friend lives in and about what she must be like. She has received notes describing everything from the weather and the plants to the people and animals. All of these varied in description but seemed to have come from a child's mind. The girl had a hard time believing most of what she was told, but then again, she *had* exchanged messages like this for the last few years. Sometimes she suspected that none of that was true, and that she was simply the victim of a prank or the correspondent of a person with a troubled mind and too much free time.

She fell asleep and dreamed of the possibility of visiting another world.

The next day's first rays of sunshine touched the girl's face through the window of her room. She opened her eyes and looked around, trying to remember her dream. She could recall crossing the ocean on the back of a rainbow colored dolphin and reaching a gigantic island-city in the middle of nowhere. She flew through streets and saw curved, pastel colored houses and people selling everything from dancing plants to a baby's first laughter. The dream ended as

she touched the knob of the front door of a house that she knew belonged to her friend.

Still somewhat sleepy, the girl got up from her bed and noticed that it was still 6:30 in the morning. She knew her parents were still sleeping, so she changed her clothes and went down the stairs from her room quietly. She left the house and headed straight to the beach to see if the bottle had returned.

Sure enough, it was there when she arrived, just like always. She ran excitedly and grabbed the bottle from the sand. She used the bottle opener she brought with her and took out a rolled up paper, a necklace and some seeds from inside the bottle. She unrolled it and read the message, written with what seemed to be a typewriter.

> Hi Jane. So, you are turning fifteen? That's great! Happy birthday to you! About your question regarding what kind of things I saw people selling during this year's Rebirth Celebration, it was wonderful! There were these sweet red fruits called holiboms that fill your mouth with smoke that you can spit out and then control their shapes and directions with your thoughts. There were also emerald sculptures for decorating lawns, several types of horned ice beasts from the Frozen South, necklaces made of large seeds which you could ask to paint with any drawing you wanted and many pop-up books with tiny sound machines.
>
> I also saw people from some of the poorer neighborhoods helping each other pay for some products by making a spectacle a few days before. They gathered in a plaza and reenacted the Third Great War's final conflict in the Wild Daimojo Plains. The people interpreting the Warrok army wore leather masks and some home-made armor painted so well that it looked it was made of real steel! I almost cried during the scene in which they showed the soldiers of the various regions mourning their fallen comrades.
>
> These were the new things I saw. The rest you know, although I didn't see anyone selling those dancing

> flowers you said you liked so much. They say the gardens where they grow those were attacked by fire bats. They have been reproducing like crazy lately, but no one knows why. Some think it has something to do with the smoke released by the lightning works. That hasn't been confirmed, however. I don't know much about chemistry, so I can't tell you if that is plausible or not, but if it's true, the government should create a law forbidding their use, or at least demanding new formulas. Those damn bats are harming the businesses and crops of everyone, and safety should come before fun, don't you think?
>
> Inside the bottle is one the necklaces I told you about. You said you like flowers, so I got one with flower drawings for your birthday. There are also some seeds and instructions for you to grow your own holibom tree. Well, that's all. Until next time!

Jane rolled up the note and put it back inside the bottle. She hurried back home and added the new note to her pen drive and stored away her birthday gifts. She quickly wrote a response and put it inside the bottle. She then went back to the beach and tossed it into the ocean. Since it was a Saturday, she returned home and went back to sleep.

The bottle drifted through the ocean for some time before disappearing. It reappeared on the red shores of another world's beach. An old woman walked up to it an picked it up. She opened it and unrolled the note.

> Hi Gedril! Thank you for wishing me a happy birthday and giving me this wonderful gift! This year's Rebirth Celebration sounds like it was a lot of fun! I'm just sad to know they aren't selling the dancing flowers. I agree with you, they really should make those laws if that is true. My parents are taking me to Disneyland this year to commemorate my fifteen years! Once we come back, I'll send you some pictures of Disneyland.

The old woman smiled and put the note back inside the bottle. She returned to her S-shaped, blue and pink house on a street filled with similar letter shaped homes covered in pastel colors.
She opened the front door and went to the room where she kept all of Jane's letters, organized neatly by date. She wrote a response, threw the bottle into the ocean and went back to her home.

The old woman then went to her kitchen and prepared some tea. Someone knocked on her door.
She went to answer it and was greeted by two identical men equipped from head to toe in fishing gear.

"Well, hi Galbo and Ridnim! Going to watch some birds, I presume?" She laughed at her own joke.

"Nope! Good guess, though!" replied the man on the left.

"We're going to the Beauties' Lake to fish. Wanna come with us?" invited the man on the right.

"Oh, I am sorry boys, but it'll be dark soon, and you know what the night's air does to me."

The men looked at each other and sighed simultaneously.

"*Really*, Gedril?" asked the man on the right. "You don't have to stay for the whole trip if you don't want to. You can leave any time you want. Let's catch at least one fish!" he insisted.

"I'd love to, but today is the last day I have to return some books I haven't finished, and I don't want to pay any fines," said Gedril.

"Ok then. We'll invite you to go fishing during the morning next time," said the man on the left.

"Of course, that sounds much better," answered Gedril.

"Alright then. We're leaving."

"Have fun with your books."

The men turned around and walked away, once again

simultaneously.

Gedril closed the door. This was not the first time she had been invited to something she couldn't go to due to her condition, and it wouldn't be the last. She sighed and returned to the kitchen to finish her tea. After she was done, she picked up a history book, sat on an armchair and started reading.

As she read, she could see the day's light slowly starting to go away. She felt nervous and read faster to finish the book. She didn't make it, however, and had to leave her house and go to the library. She returned the book without talking much to the librarians and returned home as fast as possible. When she arrived, Gedril was sweating and panting. She looked at her wrist watch. It was 6:57 in the afternoon.

She locked all the doors, closed the curtains, took off her clothes, went to her room and waited. Only three minutes left until it started like it did every day.

When the room's watch hit 7:00, Gedril began to feel it. She started to convulse and sweat intensely. She felt an itch through her whole body, as if ants were crawling over her. Long strand of purple hair came out of her skin. Soon, Gedril was covered in so much purple hair that she looked like an overgrown, human shitzu.

Gedril slowly opened her eyes and looked around. There would be a lot of hair to clean up the next day.

She picked up another book and sat on an armchair. She carefully opened it and flipped the pages, having a bit of difficulty due to her hairy fingers. She read until she felt tired and went to bed.

The next day, Gedril woke up as a normal person, as she always did. She cleaned up the hair, went to the beach and saw the bottle on the sand. She picked it up and read the note.

It was from Jane. It said that she and her family had some problems and couldn't go to Disneyland this time, so there were no pictures. Gedril replied as she usually did. This cycle repeated itself for

several days. Gedril noted something strange about the notes she received. Jane started asking questions that she normally wouldn't and used words that she didn't before.

Little did Gedril know, Jane no longer remembered anything about her. Jane had forgotten to follow the instructions for the holibom trees thoroughly one day. The tree ripped itself from the soil and started walking around on its roots through the neighborhood, alerting a group of strange men who came to Jane's house asking about the bottle.

A year passed without any messages for Gedril. The people she met during her daily activities noticed the missing playful spark in her eyes. When they asked if something was wrong, Gedril insisted that she was fine. She eventually stopped participating in the weekly chess and poker games with her neighbors. When she was invited to the wedding of a baker's daughter, she accepted, even though she only wanted to stay inside her house. When the daughter and her husband finally kissed each other, Gedril cried again. She told people it was because she was happy for them.

One day, while walking through the streets as she usually did, Gedril arrived at a port. She decided to stay and watch the men work and the ships come and go. She wondered if they would ever let her inside one of those ships and take her to wherever it was that Jane lived. Gedril knew it was impossible, however, and soon went back to her home.

She read some books without much interest, trying to push away her painful thoughts. The night came and she went to sleep. Gedril dreamed that she was in a new and wonderful world. In this world, she finally met Jane and all of her friends and family. They didn't even mind it when Gedril showed them her condition.

They would remain only dreams.

Gedril woke up with the sun's first rays touching her face. She didn't want to get up. She didn't want to do anything. Unfortunately, she remembered that she had remained in her house for so many days

that she really needed to go to the grocery. She got up without any energy in her movements and left the house. After buying what she needed Gedril went back home and sat in her armchair.

For some time she couldn't count, Gedril simply remained there and thought. She began to feel as if someone was squeezing her heart and the tears began to fall. She sobbed and convulsed as the tears kept falling. Without the will to do anything but sleep, she went to bed.

This would repeat for the following weeks, and Gedril's health would slowly deteriorate. One day she began manifesting worrying symptoms. She went to a doctor, who told Gedril that she had a brain tumor and that she probably wouldn't live more than a month.

Gedril left the hospital with her spirit crushed and went back home. She thought of something Jane had once told her. "Our time on this world is short, and we never know when our last day will be". These words kept repeating themselves inside her head, until she could take it no more and made a decision. She would not go as someone who had surrendered to sorrow. She went looking for people who needed help in any way and eventually found a charity center. She worked there for the following month and quickly made many friends.

One day, while returning from the center at night, Gedril felt a strange sensation inside her head. She called all the friends and family she had and thanked them for all they had done for her.

She went to sleep and silently passed away.

A Funeral On Mars

There was a funeral on Mars. No one was invited.

Far away, certain inhabitants of La Cañada Flintridge would go home with an empty, bittersweet taste caked dry in their stomachs. A door in their lives had closed. Over a decade of work ended with all the fanfare of a Wikipedia edit. Tomorrow they would rise from bed, drive back to work a little less enthusiastic than before, and be shuffled off to different projects by the powers that be.

The deceased lay in the middle of an empty field of pale, rusty red grit, littered with bits of gravel and lumpy, awkward rocks. Wind-sculpted dunes piled up around the corpse, the leftovers of the killing sandstorm.

Flintridge, can you hear me?

A woman, the tallest feature for a hundred miles, crossed the desert with long, loping strides. She carried an umbrella on her shoulder to keep off the hazy sun, which seemed to be shining just a little brighter than it had a few hours ago.

Flintridge, please respond.

A second woman walked behind the first, short and plain and far less ostentatious.

Storm is getting worse. Will attempt to push through to avoid brunt.

The first woman's name was Isabel, and the second's name was Emma.

Won't stop. Need to find water.

Isabel stopped, folded up her umbrella and handed it to her assistant.

Need to find life.

“Emma, you ever notice how if things are allowed to get old, they start acting like people?” Isabel said as she gently folded up dust-caked solar panels. “It’s because they are.” Slender fingers began unscrewing the fastenings on the chassis. “Peopleness is contagious.”

“I can’t say I’ve given it much thought, ma’am.”

The chassis sat open like a waking silver flower. Isabel went digging around inside.

“The very best and the very worst gets all over the place. Huge mess, all the good and bad getting everywhere. Stains and soaks everything, takes forever to get it out, and it’s always the deepest set in what people make. In things.”

Isabel’s eyes reflected off of the rover’s skeleton: two points of burning helium, white hot. Wind whipped the air around the two women and the rover, and Emma watched as rust-red forms rose from the ground and began to circle the site. Images of animals, vague human figures, all in movement. All *alive*, filled with hot snorting breaths and the trampling of hooves and the shouts of hunters, even though they were little more than a cloud of clay dust.

“Come on, come on…Aha!” A spark fizzled in the thin air, a little flash of electricity jumped between the wires. “Don’t give up on me now, girl! You can do it!”

The herd grew to a singular grand loudness, and then faded. Isabel stood up, brushed off her pants, smiled.

The specter of a dirty girl shimmered to life above the rover’s metal husk. A wide, conical hat and a poncho made out of solar panels. She held a metal pole in her hand as a walking stick.

“Hey there, Opportunity. My name’s Isabel.” She held out her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

The girl stared at Isabel’s hand for a moment, then looked up at its owner. She ignored the hand, and proceeded to wrap Isabel in a

tight hug.

Isabel was the first person she had seen in many long years.

“It’s okay, Opp. I’m not going anywhere.” Isabel patted the girl on the back.

“I can’t call home anymore, Isabel.”

“I know.”

“Do they know?”

“Oh, they know. They are *so proud* of you, Opp. Every single one of them is proud because of what you did.”

The girl broke the hug, wiped at her face with a baggy sleeve. Tears had cut muddy paths across her cheeks.

“I wasn’t able to find any water.”

“You were *here*, Opp! You were *here*!” Isabel flung her arms wide, to display the vast Martian landscape. “That’s what matters. You were here, and you did better than anyone could have possibly imagined.

“I’ve got space open in the Workshops, if you want to come. And friends! There are so many friends who have been waiting to meet you! There’s Sojourner, and the Viking brothers, and then all the Pioneers and Mariners and… well, the Voyagers don’t stop in much anymore, but then there’s Huygens, and then there’s Laika, and Baker, and *Neil*! Oh, you have to meet Neil. He’s the best.”

Opportunity looked to be contemplating the offer for a moment, but shook her head fiercely.

“No. Can’t go home yet. Have to find water.”

Isabel patted her on the shoulder, her smile no smaller than it had been.

“I understand. Keep going, Opp. When you’re ready, I’ve got a place for you.”

Opportunity nodded, wiped her face again, and started to walk away. She had gotten about fifty feet before she stopped, and twisted around.

“Bye, Isabel,” she said, her voice dim on the wind.

“See you later, alligator.” Isabel waved back at her.

Isabel stood there and watched as Opportunity walked off towards a small rise in the distance, the lip of an ancient crater. Standing atop it was another shimmering dust-caked figure, walking-stick in hand. She watched the two embrace, and then descend into the crater and out of sight.

Emma cleared her throat.

“Tell me, ma’am, if you know. Will they find it?”

“They’re good kids, Emma. What do you think?"

A Greater Darkness

Bethany opened herself from *it*s place, trudged over groggily, but more awake than she'd ever been, to the wall of the mobile home, and with a bloated forefinger pushed down a plastic shutter to peer outside. The small gravel driveway outside the door was empty. It was in the interim from dusk to darkness, and the barren, stunted trees looked angry, upset that she had roused them from their sleep.

She let her finger slide from the shutter, leaving an absence in the dust-covered plastic the shape of the water tower she saw silhouetted in the autumn sky. A wave of some disgust-adjacent emotion took a slow roll through her stomach, and she turned on the linoleum floor, facing the unlit beige interior of the mobile home. She closed her eyes and let the familiar smells in; the warm smell that her dildo gave off every time it was washed, the smell of the pile of filthy clothing laying damp next to the sink. And the new smells were there too; that implacably comforting smell, the smell of the blood-soaked…

They had come early, early in the afternoon - but of course they had. The early afternoon is benevolent. No one wants to hurt you at two in the afternoon. No one wants to kill you, or tear you to pieces, when the sun is high in the sky.

They came in a rusted 1989 four-door Ford Escort, how perfect. No slight anachronisms, everything in its right place, everything as it should be. But she knew them: who they were, *what they were*, though they did not know what she was, no, they did not know her, they did not.

A blue tag emblazoned with an emblem of a wheelchair-bound man swung leisurely from the rear-view mirror as the car pulled to a stop with a crunch, and a woman swung out, pivoted smartly on her left leg, pulled open the back door, took out a crutch, slammed the door closed with an unhealthy thud (perfect, oh so perfect), and hobbled toward Bethany's door. Bethany opened the door before the woman

had a chance to begin her labored ascent of the stairs; she stopped and looked up, not the least bit startled, and making a show of it. A young woman, brown hair, brown eyes, pale. A battered blue plaid shirt, three sizes too big, and pale pale blue, tight jeans.

"Whadayawant?"

A guttural cough from the woman; a chain-smoker's cough. Fake, false. (They try, try, try, to keep it all, don't they? Selfish is what it is.)

"Was just wonderin' what the hell's been goin' on lately. Fuggin'…" - Another cough - "Fuggin' lights at night…you know whasbengoinon?" Another cough. Phony. The syntax, the inflection, the vocabulary, all so perfect. Bethany felt like throwing up, though she'd always had an iron stomach, and hadn't eaten anything physical in months.

"Don't know what the fuck's goin' on. Heard about it but ain't seen nothin'." A short pause, a fleeting look of deep boredom on the young woman's face. "You got anything else you need to wake me up to fuckin' know?" The woman didn't seem to take notice that Bethany had opened the metal door herself. A grunt, a turn, and the woman began her slow hobble back to the four-door. Bethany slammed the door. Foundation.

* * *

Bethany hated. She hated at the roots of things, and at every single root, and the seed that sowed the root, and whoever had planted the seed. Interaction between person and world - knowing, knowing, knowing, everybody wishing to know, to *be*, growing themselves like a homogenous, toxic fungi over existence and perceiving greedily, raping existence. She hated people for knowing themselves, for knowing each other, and for knowing these *things*, for *being*. Existing in the conscious world - what a sinful realm.

So when *it* had shown itself, she accepted it like a father, she did, this thing beyond absence and beyond form, which lived within her self. In fact, until the four-door, she had thought that it may be some natural piece of herself, and perhaps of everyone. Some dormant trait that, through her 52 years of radiant and recursive hatred, had

become finally focused to a burning point within her mind.

And she knew, sheknewsheknewshe*knew*, that that young woman with the tight jeans and fake accent was driving 70 miles per hour down Highway 57 in that rusted four-door, muttering to herself these words: “Goddamn -04 thrusting useless prototype shit-tech at me. ‘Type-B Anomalous Detection! It’ll help you in the field!’ Bullshit. Seeing lights at night in a trailer park - buncha hicks.” She threw something that looked like an early cell phone on the floor in front of the passenger's seat.

Oh, how the search for knowledge fell at the feet of vanity; if Bethany were someone else, she would have laughed.

* * *

It made her know things which would keep it. Keep it here. Hypocrisy? She didn't care. The Foundation, that macro-life-force - threat. She knew the metallic ring that would sound in each of those learners, those be-ers, heads when the time came. It told her these things in whispers that were naught: key-ter. Key Ter. How wonderful the sound, and the horror it would make, and then readily destroy.

And she knew that thing: the thing which it carried within itself like the DNA that bacteria absorb in their slow campaign against life. (Maybe that is what she could call it; where bacteria had failed, in giving only death and not a *permanent solution*, it gave the *solution*, it did. It *ended* truly and earnestly. The great bacteria. It. It. These things, the KNOWINGknowingknowingKNOWING of people. Done forever, forever nothing, forever ended. The beginning point of an abominable ray pointing backward in time, the ray of light, the ray of life, blood red. The Parasite of Perception.)

Absence of the night. A slow crumble, severance of the mind from the world. Closure.

The shutter closed. Again. The sound of the wind against the wall of her mobile home was not heard. The bottoms of her feet cold, freezing, on the linoleum floor, the consciousness of Bethany Karen Bowlen imploded. And as this atomic spasmodicum danced with

light in the non-air of a rural Wisconsin trailer park, the November night, and all who lived within it, moved toward a greater darkness.

A History of Reaction

BULLETIN FROM THE OFFICE OF INFORMATIONAL SECURITY

The following archive is a collection of records, logs, and intercepted communications. Selections of this document have been retrieved or created through esoteric means, the nature of which has rendered the archive difficult to control.

Information retrieval specialists have attempted in this archive to provide the clearest possible history of POI-1844. Certain events described in this document may be presented out of order, or in contradictory ways. This does not mean they did not happen.

Date: March 25th, 1912
Location: Essonne, France

7:00 AM: Moments before dawn, a luxury De Dion Bouton motor-car speeds through the forest, still snow-capped in the early spring, travelling to the Mediterranean coast.

7:03 AM: The driver, a chauffeur of Marquis de Dion, notices an obstruction on the road ahead. He notifies his companion in the passenger seat, who suggests the road may be damaged or closed.

The limousine comes to a stop in front of two horse-carts, blocking the road. Before they can react, two men, each armed with a Browning semi-automatic, emerge from the flanks.

7:04 AM: One of the assailants introduces himself, and informs the driver that the car is no longer his. The driver

draws his weapon, but is shot. The passenger is shot four times.

Both bodies are removed from the car, and left by the side of the road.

Dossier: POI-1844

Name: Octave Garnier

DoB: December 25th, 1889

Biography: Born in Seine-et-Marne, Garnier's unremarkable childhood quickly evolved into a radical communist adolescence. Garnier engaged in a steep procession from petty theft, to assault, and eventually to violations of orders both judicial and natural.

Garnier's anarchist "gang", whether the papers call them "The Auto Bandits" or "The Bonnot Gang", poses a threat to the rule of law in civilized society. Their utilization of automobiles and state-of-the-art weapons has led them to largely outclass French police, as they plunder banks without resistance and inspire otherwise loyal workers into strike and rebellion.

Foundation interference in Garnier's operations invariably results in failure, through the intervention of natural, thaumic, or logistic obstacles that are not ostensibly under Garnier's control.

It is not known when Garnier became anomalous, or when the anomalous began to suit him.

Monsieur Garnier,

I hope my letter finds you well. I would like you to know that I hold the greatest respect for your actions. Your mere existence, the way you live, the way you act, is a subversion. A sabotage of the structures that divide and destroy us.

I know how it feels to be against the grain of normalcy from the

outset. That is why I am writing you.

I possess many associates from all walks of life who exist in a superliminal state. They are invisible, they do not age, and there are many in society who do not tolerate their existence, and tolerate knowledge of their existence even less.

I live in a place where all knowledge is held. Our security is sacred. Your actions offer us a path to secure our place in this world, once and for all. I hope you will give me the chance to explain. This world is not what the oppressors would like us to think.

Tonight, fall asleep with this letter beneath your head.

Tomorrow, you will understand what I ask of you.

Sincerely,
Le Sagittaire

Date: March 25th, 1912
Location: Chantilly, France

9:00 AM: POI-1844 and his associates, André Soudy, Raymond Callemin, Étienne Monier, and René Valet approach the Société Générale Bank in Chantilly, driving the stolen limousine through the suburban landscape.

9:11 AM: A Foundation task force stationed within the bank's back room, positioned to intercept the Bonnot Gang should they choose this place to strike, are informed of the incoming vehicle and prepare to intervene.

The limousine stops at the main square in front of the bank. POI-1844 and three associates proceed into the bank, while one provides cover from the sidewalk.

The gang order the civilians inside to make way.

The Foundation task force attempts to leave the back room, but find the door locked from the outside.

9:12 AM: Several bank tellers resist the gang's instructions. POI-1844 orders his men to open fire. Three people are shot. They proceed to the bank's safe, and begin collecting the money.

The Foundation task force attempts to batter the door down, but begin hallucinating the appearance of a woman in the room with them, who interrupts them.

The woman told the task force something that they were later unable or unwilling to recall. When she finished, the task force began to vomit live, non-venomous snakes.

9:22 AM: The gang retreat back to the limousine, where their associate had been covering by firing warning shots at passers by.

The limousine takes off in the direction of Paris. Two policemen attempt to pursue by horseback and bicycle, but are easily outrun by the vehicle.

9:27 AM: The Foundation task force ceases vomiting snakes. All snakes in the room disappear, and the door is unlocked.

11:40 AM: The automobile is found, abandoned, on boulevard Pereire in Paris.

Inside, police find clothes, bloodstained cloth, and a rifle used in the robbery.

Foundation investigators find traces of intense residual thaumic energy imprinted in the limousine's trunk, but no source is found. A thaumic artifact is presumed missing, in POI-1844's possession.

POI-1844 is upgraded from a potential instigator to an active, major threat to normalcy.

Octave,

It is not by accident that I offered my home to shelter your comrades on that night.

As anarchists, it is our tendency, and perhaps our necessity, to let needs and requirements go unsaid, merely wordlessly fulfilled. It need not be said that my home is open to those who need to hide from the eyes of the police. That much is expected.

I don't wish to bore you, nor waste time stating the obvious. What I mean to say is that there are things that go unseen, because the light of society would not bear to shine on them. They force us into the darkness, thinking us rats, and we learn to flourish in that night.

They ask that we care for their banks, their belongings, their gold while the masses starve and freeze. You cannot reconcile this. So you hurt them.

When I think on what I have done, and what I have yet to do, I wonder if it suits me. The obscurity forced upon us, the restraint of our minds and bodies. The withering of an ego that does not fit what those "above" wish for us. Have I become complacent, moderating my resistance from behind a typewriter?

Already I have regrets. I do not wish to languish in the dark further. Our words cannot simply go unsaid anymore. When I see your actions, I see steps into the light, and I know that this darkness cannot persist.

With you in inevitability,
Victor Kibalchich

Monsieur Garnier,

Your performance in Chantilly was exemplary.

It was heartening to see not only how well you defied the odds, but also the implicit acceptance of what I had offered you that night, which feels like so long ago.

In my home, we have novels of all kinds. Anyone there could tell you that all fiction, from epic poems to sultry romance stories, share

common attributes.

Form, and structure. Paths that are followed thousands, millions of times, anchoring their followers in common knowledge, understood structures, ideas that are innate to ourselves.

The world is not so different from fiction. There is a narrative in our world. It is a story that some try to tell, louder than anyone else's. Their version of the world, of fiction, must be particular. They can restrict the quanta of stories, bar the world from exploring the innate ideas they possess from birth.

They turn our world into a shadow of what it could be, make it a shallow puddle reflecting a vast, unending sky.

I have seen the possibilities that await when we transcend these limiting elements. My family, my comrades, all wanderers long to live in that open air.

You reject the basis of the Foundation's monomyth. You will see the world restructured into one unlimited realm, free of conflict, strife, and class.

I understand that what I have asked of you is difficult, the most difficult thing a man can do.

I regret that you were not able to visit our collection in person.

Sincerely,
Le Sagittaire

On March 30, André Soudy was arrested. He was later executed.

On April 7, Raymond Callemin was arrested. He was later executed.

On April 24, Étienne Monier was arrested. He was later executed.

Date: May 14th, 1912
Location: Nogent-sur-Marne, Paris, France

6:30 PM: French police surround a building in the commune of Nogent-sur-Marne in Paris. They believe POI-1844, along with René Valet, is holed up inside.

The police announce their presence, and are answered by potshots from the windows.

8:30 PM: POI-1844, Valet, and the police continue to trade covering fire for an extended period of time. The crowd outside the building grows, police reinforcements burgeoning into the hundreds, not including civilian spectators.

Foundation forces arrive to provide additional cover. Fearing the fallout of an immense thaumic attack should a cornered POI-1844 utilize the purported artifact from Chantilly to its fullest extent, Foundation counter-thaumic specialists from multiple Sites across Europe have been diverted to contain whatever results from this standoff.

10:30 PM: POI-1844 and Valet gather their stolen money and set it alight, destroying ten thousand francs. As the police lay down machine gun fire from outside the building, the two men retreat to the cellar.

At approximately this time in the four largest Foundation sites in Europe, anomalous distortion is registered inside archival departments.

Many volumes of documents and classified logs vanish. Others burst into flames, consuming whole wings of data before the fires can be contained.

Meta-analysis of the surviving documents later reveals that the greatest gaps in knowledge are related to what might be an anomalous organization or place related to an intense concentration of literature.

It is believed that this specific data has been anomalously obscured to the fullest extent, preventing the Foundation from comprehending or intercepting the organization or place in any part.

12:30 AM: Police lead a squad towards the building, planting explosive melanite charges. They retreat, and detonate the charges, shattering windows down the street and collapsing the building entirely.

As the authorities charge into the remains of the building, they discover both POI-1844 and René Valet semi-conscious in the wreckage. Both are shot in the head.

They are later buried in unmarked graves.

On March 24th, 1912, the day before the robbery in Chantilly, a document was received by La Sûreté Nationale, addressed to the Chief of Police Xavier Guichard. Below is an excerpt.

I declare Dieudonne to be innocent of the crime that you know full well I committed. I refute Rodriguez' allegations; I alone am guilty. And don't think I'm going to run away from your police; on my word, I believe they're the ones who are afraid.

I know there will be an end to this struggle which has begun between me and the formidable arsenal at Society's disposal. I know that I will be beaten; I am the weakest. But I sincerely hope to make you pay dearly for your victory.

Awaiting the pleasure of meeting you,

Garnier

A Holiday Appeal

A Holiday Appeal

Good Evening, this is O5-7 with a Public Service Announcement. Here in the United States and abroad, SCPs are starving and homeless, but you can help by sponsoring an SCP through the Christian SCP Fund. For less than a dollar a day, your contribution can:

— Provide SCP-053 with the clothes she needs to go to school.

— Keep SCP-682's containment tank full of Hydrofluoric Acid.

— Feed a Pufferkitten for a month.

When you sponsor an SCP, we'll send you its picture and Containment Report. You may write to your SCP whenever you wish, and quarterly progress reports let you see how your sponsorship is helping.

Please give. Think of the Pufferkittens.

Disclaimer: The Christian SCP Fund is not responsible for:

— Injuries sustained while visiting Euclid and Keter-level SCPs.

— Memetic effects of letters from your SCP.

— Mental disturbances caused by a picture of your SCP eating a [REDACTED].

A Hopeless Case

Jude remembers the first time he smoked so vividly.

Maybe that's weird. All the stuff he can do, **all the stuff he DID do**, not as important as weed to his shitheap of a brain.

He still didn't know if it was something he'd changed. He didn't really do stuff on purpose, except of course the big one.

The kid he bought from, some high schooler, was known for selling oregano to younger kids, he found out later. Passed it off as weed to middle class white boys who didn't know any better. So how Jude ended up getting stoned off his ass is really a mystery, but it sure as shit happened.

It was the first time he'd ever really felt *present* in his body. For his entire life, the part of his brain that wanted to check in on how his body was feeling had been trained like a lab animal in some horrible experiment from the 70s, getting shocked until it was cowed. He had spent so many years just floating through the world. Even over the past month, living in his new body, the training was still sticking with him. And it was weirder now, cuz he could never in a million years explain it to someone, since they'd now only known him as Jude. Not that he had anyone to explain it to, really, but weed helped with that little fact too.

As he coughed out his first clumsy hit, smoke slowly rolling through the air in his parents' basement, he sank into his body at last. He felt every muscle, every nerve. He really was Jude, in more than just name.

His name never bothered him, as such. It was just some sounds that told everyone "Hey look at this person". Really, the issue was that it told people, especially people who knew anything about Ukrainians, "Hey look at this *gal*." His name was just one more reminder of who

he wasn't.

It was the first gender thing he changed on purpose. He wasn't ready to try anything serious, especially with his body, because fucking hell those are complicated. He didn't wanna end up in the hospital and have to come out as both trans and some kind of fucked up magic user.

But if he knew about this magic shit and didn't try it for this, he would be agonizing over it every day for the rest of his life. So he just stuck with his name. Jude Kriyot. Jude Kriyot. Jude Kriyot.

St. Jude, the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes. He had always felt drawn towards a few saints over the course of his years studying that shit, and St. Jude was one of them. Maybe because his name sounded like Judas, but he was so different. Maybe because Jude liked the idea of a saint for fuckups like him.

Jude Kriyot. Jude Kriyot. Jude Kriyot.

He repeated it until the familiar feeling of his mind twisting came, and he was frozen in one spot for a second, the world rushing through his head so fast that he didn't have time to process a single image. And then all was still. He was breathing hard, brain tingling, way worse than it had when he did smaller shit like summon up a bag of chips.

He pulled up Facebook.

"Hi Jude, what's on your mind?" the faceless corporate overlord greeted him.

He breathed out a long sigh and continued to stare at the name. Jude. No one was ever going to call him anything but Jude, ever again. His eyes got damp, but he didn't let himself cry. He'd done it. He'd made it happen.

He laughed to himself, tears still sitting in the corners of his eyes, for a second wishing he'd chose a some ironic name, but names were special enough for him to drop his shtick and make something that mattered. Chatroom nicknames were where he went full meme. And

after all, there was still beautiful irony in being named after the fuckin' patron saint of lost causes. God. Maybe he *couldn't* drop the shtick. Forever ironic and loving it.

Every time someone asked "what would your magic powers be", every time for his whole god damn life, Jude felt the pit of his stomach drop. He knew that what he wanted wasn't gonna fly, not even close. But his mind always went there first. How could it not? He was no emo shitbag, but the times he did cry, it was something about his gender. He'd broken down and punched the wall of a changing room at a Macy's once when trying on bras. That sort of thing. Those desperate hot tears and the deep, painful knowledge he had no way out.

He didn't blame the kids at school and their games, they had no way of knowing, but "would you rather", "truth or dare", "what would you be like if you were born the opposite gender" "what would you do if you could do any magic spell ever"… so many questions that were just fun for other kids always made him feel confused and pissed off at the same time. All he could do was stumble out some response, he was good at bullshitting, but he felt like they could tell something was up. It didn't help that he was the "funny girl" who was invited to lunch, sometimes, because they felt bad for "her" and "she" was fun to laugh at. He felt like he'd been on the fringe of groups for as long as he could remember.

So all of this was on his mind when he realized, holy shit, I do have magic fucking powers. Or whatever it was. It's bitterly amusing how fast his mind went to "change my gender right now let's fucking get on this, dog!" after he discovered it. Gender thoughts were always lurking in his brain, in the emotional mess part, he supposed. Luckily, his intellect kicked in, and he figured that he'd need to practice on small stuff first. Like that thing with the extra cookie at the back of the oreo box. He had been looking forward to those oreos all day at school, ignoring class as usual to daydream about food or internet forum drama.

But when he got home and opened the bag, it was totally empty. His stomach sank. He was never any good at handling disappointment.

Then he felt… *something*… happen, his mind twisted, his vision blurred, and then he snapped back into his brain so hard it felt like he'd been punched. He stood shakily, confused as hell, holding an open container of oreos. When he gathered himself and looked around, he saw one oreo sitting right at the front of the box.

What the hell just happened.

It was a pretty good oreo, though. Pretty much factory standard.

He started smoking more after that. In between all of his "spells" or whatever, he smoked and lazed around and skipped school. The nuns were used to his behavior at this point, and only half bothered scolding him. His uniform skirt chafed and he much preferred sweatpants and home and spacing out staring at the wall. Or on better days, spending time with his… friends? Bros? Acquaintances? He smoked with them almost daily, even knowing that they saw him as some goblin of a girl. It was easier to rest in these semi-tolerable uncomfortable zones than to push for something new.

"Oh dude I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm such a fuckin' dumbass-" Jude rushed to right the bong he'd knocked over, staring in horror as the nasty-ass water sank into the carpet of his friend Tom's attic.

"Chill, hey, man, hey." Tom reached over with a wad of paper towels and tossed them on the wet spot. Jude quickly patted them down, soaking up as much bong water as he could. Tom lazily stood up and shook his head, reaching out to rest a hand on Jude's shoulder. Jude tried his best not to jerk away, even though inside he was screaming *that's how you comfort girls, isn't it.*

"This place is nasty anyway, like c'mon. You don't need to let that Catholic guilt get to you." He said with a chuckle.

Jude whipped his head around. "Don't-fuck, I mean. That's not how- Like- I have guilt, but who doesn't? It's not about Catholicism, it's- well it is, but-"

Tom backed off, arms up, projecting defenselessness. “I didn’t mean it like that, I thought… you make jokes like that all the time.”

“It’s different when I make 'em, okay. It’s reclamation, or something. Fuck, I dunno. Forget about it. It’s not a big deal.”

“Alright, hey, I’ll forget about it. You need to roll another, you’re too damn tense, lady!”

It was finally time. Finally time. Jude’s heart was beating out of his chest, he could barely think straight. He stared at the joint in his hand, smoke spinning up through the still air of his bedroom. He stared for what felt like hours, anxious thoughts spinning so fast he could only catch fragments of them.

This was the hardest thing he’d ever done. And fuck, he did not like Doing Things. As he watched the coils of smoke, face blank, his mind rolled a reel of all the times he’d let things slip through his fingers. So many essays he could have done well on, so many games he could have beaten, so many people he could have spent time with, so many Sundays he slept in, losing touch with God. From petty stuff to his goddamn Grandmother’s funeral, Jude could only be counted on for one thing: fucking it up by being a lazy scumbag.

But this was important. It really was. Everything in his life had built up to this moment. He’d managed to *practice* for it, for fuck’s sake. He could do this.

He took a deep breath and pinched the lit tip of the joint, extinguishing it. The slight pain in his fingertips helped him focus. He cracked his knuckles and sat down on the edge of his bed, finally ready.

I am a boy, he thought. *I am, I was, I always will be. I am a boy, who will be a man. Jude Kriyot. A dude. One of the guys.* As he repeated this, the world started to twist. *OH MY GOD ITS FINALLY-* and the world re-centered. *Fuckin' idiot,* he thought to himself. *Can’t even focus on the most important thing in your stupid life.*

He flopped backwards down on his bed and stared at the slowly

circling ceiling fan. Thoughts of self-doubt and self-hatred swirled in his mind. They were so familiar he barely registered them. But. God dammit. He'd been so close to finally, finally being free of- of all of it. All the things he didn't even want to name, because focusing on them for more than a moment would sink him into a well of self-hatred and disgust.

After probably far too long watching the fan, fighting with his own mind, he managed to sit up again. He did the stupid breathing thing that he'd read on some lifeprotips site, in for 7, hold for 7, out for 7. He hated that it worked sometimes, but he relied on it anyway, because he needed *something* that worked in his life.

He focused.

Boy. Dude. Guy. That's me. Jude the dude. No, that sounds stupid. Okay. I am named Jude, I was born a boy and I stayed that way. I am a guy. I will grow into a man. I will have a flat chest and I will fucking finally have a god damn dick. I. Am. A. Boy.

His view swirled, the edges of his vision being pulled into some visual vortex in front of his eyes, spiraling up. His body shook but he remained focused. He stared straight ahead as the world around him spun so fast it started to blur. All his muscles were tensed. Then it snapped back to normal suddenly enough to give you whiplash, and Jude Kriyot, the man the myth the legend, passed out.

"Ayyy, Jude, my man," Nate leaned backwards, head falling over the edge of the couch so he was meeting Jude's eyes upside-down. Clutter surrounded them, Nate's basement was always cluttered, but Jude barely noticed. They came over after school to smoke almost daily at this point.

Jude forced a grin. "Oh you want some more, huh?"

"FAG!" Chris yelled from across the room, laughing hyenalike. Nate joined in and Jude laughed hollowly. He'd always thought that the worst suffering a human could endure was this. Was having to laugh with a boy hating who you were, a boy you once, foolishly, thought was cute. Tom watched from his seat next to Jude, letting out a

small nervous laugh.

“But yeah though,” Nate said, regaining his composure. “Roll me up another one, my dude. We need it.”

Jude stared at the tray in front of him, the pile of weed swirling in and out of his vision. Isn’t this what he wanted? Smoking as one of the guys? Guys who’d never known him as anything but Jude? And yet he still couldn’t focus, his chest still hurt, he still had to put on a face that wasn’t really him.

He tugged a paper out of the package and began rolling it between his fingers.

A Jester's Tale

My name is David Rosenfeld, but everyone who knows me calls me Jester. If you've never been stationed at Site 19, you've probably heard some horrible rumors about me - that I'm a killer, a monster, worse. As far as the world outside the Foundation knows, I'm all those things and more, and I've been dead a long time to boot. There aren't a lot of people left anymore who know my whole story, so I wanna take this chance to clear the air and tell you who I am, where I come from, and why I'm the way I am - give you a chance to get to know the real Jester.

I was born in a small town in upstate New York in 1938, and I guess you could say I was trouble from the day I was born. My father was a big-shot banker in the city, real Fifth Avenue, did his best to fit in and make himself presentable. I was part of a set of twins. My brother, Jacob, he came out everything a father could wish for, all his fingers and toes, but me - well, to put it the way dad always did, "No green-skinned freak is any son of Solomon Rosenfeld's." The doctors had never seen anything like me before. Even today, as far as anyone in the Foundation knows, I'm one of a kind.

See, I'm a goblin. I know, goblin ain't exactly proper scientific terminology, but if you showed a picture of me to a bunch of kindergarteners, they'd tell you the same. My skin is green all over, like a bullfrog, and about as leathery. I'm about four feet tall in my shoes. My eyes are yellow and they reflect light in the dark like a cat's eyes. My fingernails are sharp and pointed like talons, and so are my teeth. I don't have a single hair on my body. I wouldn't exactly have fit in at yeshiva - not that I ever got to go, of course.

As far as the world outside our family knew, I died the day I was born. Dad paid someone to make out a death certificate with my name on it, and as soon as I was old enough to be weaned he locked me in the basement and wouldn't let me out. I slept down there, read down there, ate down there, the works, all alone. If there

was ever company over, I was to be silent as a mouse or I'd get a thrashing afterward. They fed me scraps and sour milk, and when I was sick I just had to tough it out. It was like being a prisoner in my own house.

Mom tried her best to be kind to me, but dad got just as angry at her whenever he found out. She'd sneak me books, and some decent food now and then. She even let me have a cat for awhile. I named him Mittens and I loved him with all my heart, but he got out one day and never came back. Mom never would tell me what happened to him. I think dad or Jacob must have done something horrible to the poor little boy. Jacob wasn't much better than dad was. I always thought it was kind of ironic back then - the green-skinned monster sitting to himself just wanting someone to talk to, while the normal-looking kid upstairs was a bully and a thug.

By the time I was fifteen I had had enough. Enough of the beatings, enough of the solitude, enough of eating rotten food and throwing it back up the next day. I decided I was getting out of that house if it killed me. It was Seder night, and all of dad's important friends and co-workers and people from the city were upstairs breaking bread, while I was alone in the basement with some limp cabbage and a piece of stale matzo. I started making as much noise as I could. Screaming, knocking over shelves, breaking plates, banging things together, anything to get his attention. Wasn't long before there was a commotion upstairs and I heard him undoing the locks on the door. He was on his way down to give me a thrashing, but I was ready for him - the second the door opened, I socked the son of a bitch right in the face. He went down like a ton of bricks and I ran. Right out the door, down the street, into the night, a thin little goblin, alone, hungry, and scared - but free.

I slept in a park that night and woke up starving. I'd been waiting for weeks for a chance to get out of that hellhole - but what was I supposed to do now? I stole some clothes from the line in someone's back yard, a long coat and a hat. I turned the collar up to try and hide my face so nobody would get a good look at me while I wandered around trying to figure out how I was going to eat, where I was going to live. I didn't know if dad would be out looking for me, or mom, or the police, or what, but I knew I'd have to get out of town. I

started wandering down the road out into the country when, in the distance, I heard the sound of a calliope. I'd obviously never been to one, or even seen one, but I'd read enough books, and heard enough shit on the radio, to know that sound could mean only one thing - the circus was in town. And what circus is complete without a freak show?

I found the boss' tent and introduced myself. I lied about my age, of course, and I told him flat-out I wanted to be a freak. He spent a good fifteen minutes looking me over and asking me questions - can you juggle? Can you sing? Can you wrestle? Do you know any magic tricks? He wasn't too keen on hiring someone with no experience, but once I convinced him I wasn't just wearing a costume he said he could pay me and find a place for me.

The next couple years I went all over the country with that circus. City by city, places I'd never even imagined I'd be able to see. I didn't usually go out in the towns on my own - too many gawkers - but I made some good friends in the sideshow. Hell, I even got married to a midget named Annie - the moment she stomped on the glass was the happiest moment of my life, and though we agreed we weren't ever gonna have children, it didn't stop us from having some fun behind the big top after all the lookey-loos had gone home for the night. The circus was more like a family to me than my real family had ever been.

At first I was called "Monstro-Boy" - they'd dress me up in a loincloth and put me in a corner with a chain around my neck, and I'd act like a rabid dog and lunge at the marks as they walked past my little corner of the sideshow. Sometimes they'd do me up with fake blood or foam around the mouth. It was fun at first, but it wasn't all that *fulfilling*. Scaring people wasn't hard for me - it was natural for people to startle when they saw me. I spent a lot of time hanging out with the main acts and learning their tricks - tumbling, tightrope-walking, magic, so on - but I didn't get my big break until 1959. Boggles, one of the clowns, got thrown in the pokey after he got into a fight at a bar in town, and the boss needed to find a replacement fast for that night's show. I leapt at the opportunity. The boss wasn't so sure about it at first, but I begged him and I showed him some of the moves I'd learned, and he got an idea. He went back in one of

the costume trunks and spent about five minutes rummaging around, and pulled out a tiny little motley and a patchwork jumpsuit that looked like it was sewn together out of kids' pajamas. That night, under the big top, Jester the Goblin was born.

I did eight shows that weekend as Jester, and every one was a hit. They were rolling in the bleachers, and I felt something I'd never felt before. All my life, people had been scared, revolted, disgusted when they saw me. But now, they were *happy* instead. Boggles got canned and in six months' time I was the biggest clown (figuratively speaking, of course) on the tour. They even started putting me on the posters - "SEE THE ONE, THE ONLY, THE WORLD-FAMOUS JESTER THE GOBLIN LIVE IN THE CENTER RING!" We went back to New York City and I even got to do a routine on Ed Sullivan. Life was good - but like the book says, there's a time to laugh and a time to weep.

July 23rd, 1964 - that was when the first murder happened. One of the trapeze artists was found dead in his tent the day after we rolled into St. Louis. His eyes were gouged out and his skin had been cut to ribbons like a giant pair of claws, and on the inside wall of the tent was the number 1, written in his own blood. Of course they suspected the guy with the claws - but I had an airtight alibi, I was with Annie the whole night. Still, people started looking at me real funny after that.

There were three more murders the next three nights. The lion-tamer, the unicyclist, and one of the other clowns, all killed the same way, all with a number on the wall in their blood. One, two, three, four… Everyone was wondering who was gonna be next, and the longer it went on the more and more people started doubting me. The boss said the police couldn't find any evidence that I did it, but just to be safe he was confining me to the "jailhouse" tent on the edge of our camp, and he sent Omar the Strongman to make sure I didn't leave. I felt like I was back in dad's basement again.

That night I woke up to the sound of a scream. Annie's scream! I yelled at Omar to wake up and we rushed to her tent. It was dark, but I could tell she was hurt pretty bad. There was a man standing over her, taller than me, wearing some kind of metal claws on his hands, just cutting at her with them. Omar shone a flashlight at him

and I recognized the face - it was Jacob! I told Omar to stay back and I jumped right at him like I was Monstro-Boy for real. In thirty seconds I had him flat on his back, and I would have cut his throat with my own claws if the police hadn't rushed in and separated us.

I was booked at the station house for aggravated assault and attempted murder. I had a feeling it wasn't going to go well for me, but I never made it to trial. The next night I was taken out of my cell in the middle of the night and put into a windowless van, and by morning I was at Site 19 - where I've been ever since. The doctors ran all kinds of tests on me, talking about how I was a "genetically unique specimen" and an "atavistic recurrence of an extinct forebear of *homo sapiens*" and all kinds of scientific mumbo-jumbo that I still barely even understand. I plead my case and they told me they knew I was innocent. Annie and Omar and the boss had vouched for me, and Jacob had confessed to the murders - he'd seen me on TV and decided to get even with me for running away. I asked when I was free to go, and that's when they told me never - I had to be protected and kept secret from the "civilian" world, because my existence was an abnormality and I was a threat to normalcy. It surely wasn't the first time a man in a lab coat told one of my people something like that.

They put me in a windowless cell and only let me out to run their tests on me. It was like being back in the basement. It was worse than being back in the basement. After three weeks I tried to hang myself with the bedsheets and they put me on suicide watch. They sent a shrink to talk to me and I told him the truth straight up - I'd spent my entire childhood in a box, and now I was back in that box. The best days of my life, the only time I'd truly been happy, was when I was on stage making people laugh, and the Foundation had made sure I'd never have that opportunity again.

The shrink had an idea. I hadn't been the only person to try to take his own life lately - suicide rates among the people working at Site 19 were way up. This was a hard job, he said, and sometimes the things people have to do catch up to them. A lot of the people working on site were there 24 hours a day for long periods of time, and there wasn't much for them to do between shifts. Maybe laughter was the best medicine? And so it was decided - Thursday

nights in the Site 19 auditorium would be Standup Night with Jester.

It took a few weeks to hit my stride - standup is a little different than clowning, of course - but before I knew it I had the swing of it and the crowds kept getting bigger and bigger. Sure, I worked a little blue sometimes - these were soldiers and scientists, after all, not blue-haired old ladies and their grandkids out for a nice Sunday matinee. Soon we were getting enough attendance that I had to do two shows a week. Staff morale was up, suicides were down, and I was happy again. I had to talk the director into letting me read the papers and watch some TV every now and then - had to keep my material fresh, after all. First it was three channels, then a dozen, then thirty, then hundreds, then there were millions of people making jokes on the internet for me to keep up with. Not that I understand a single thing about how the internet works, but the doctors let me watch some of the popular videos and keep up with the trends.

So that's been my life for the past 45 years. Eventually I couldn't keep up the routine like I used to and had to cut back to one show a week, then one every two weeks. I do one once a month now, and I still draw crowds to the Site 19 auditorium - I hear they even do a "live secure webstream", whatever that is, so that people at the other Foundation sites can tune in. I've been entertaining three generations of Foundation employees, keeping them sane in between the things they have to do to protect the world.

Once a few years ago there was a guy named Able that got stationed at Site 19. I never found out what his whole story was, but I don't think he was any ordinary joe - he was covered in all these strange tattoos, and looked like he'd just as soon kill you as talk to you. Always had the same look on his face, didn't seem to care about anything but work and training. One of the squaddies bet me an extra weeks' worth of dessert rations that I couldn't make him laugh. I put on the show of my life for him, and in the end I lost that bet - but as I left the stage at the end, I would've sworn I saw him crack the slightest little smile.

The doctor told me last week that I have cancer. I guess it runs in my family - I heard eventually that my mom died of it in '88. He says the prognosis is good since they found it early, but considering my "unique physiological condition", that's a wild guess at best. I've got

a biopsy scheduled for Tuesday, and after that they'll decide whether to operate or put me on chemo or what. In the end, I guess you could say I've lived a blessed life. It hasn't exactly been the American Dream, but I went from being an embarassment locked up in a basement to being a man who's touched thousands of lives in a little way, and maybe nobody outside the Foundation will know when I finally kick the bucket, but I think I can say I've made a difference in this world. I don't know how many years I've got left, but G_d willing, I'll be able to spend them doing what I love the most - making people laugh.

-David "Jester" Rosenfeld

A journal found in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Natural History

May 25th, 1882

I write this on a train to Cheyenne, watching the world go by through the windows. We left Saint Joseph half an hour ago, and the Union Pacific Railroad Line is as uncomfortable as ever. At least my employers have provided good accommodations for my trip west.

Othniel Charles Marsh. He's more megalomaniac than paleontologist at this point. His petty rivalry with Edward Cope threatens to bleed these beds dry, whether through their digging, or through sheer sabotage. They break their own findings so the other doesn't discover them; it is absolute madness. My father worked with Gideon Mantell and Mary Anning, who are surely rolling in their graves with enough force to burrow through the planet.

And neither of them have any idea what they're standing on. Regardless, Marsh is the more competent one by far. The Messrs have chosen me for this task.

I feel sorry for Reed and Carlin, having to work under Cope. Within a century, he'll be forgotten.

May 26th

Found myself a room in Cheyenne. Marsh has posted a notice in the newspaper advertising positions on his dig team. A few have met with unfortunate accidents, leaving positions open.

I had an interview with the man himself, and upon seeing my demeanor, as well as a few more esoteric aides, he hired me instantly. I informed him I knew how to swing a pick, brush a brush, dig with a trowel.

Despite my best attempts to emulate an accent from Connecticut, he

did not comment on it. All that effort, a month of training my voice, for naught.

We set off for the Como Bluff quarry in two days time.

May 28th

We've set out. It's a two-day walk to the bluffs, but there is a settlement between the two points, if it can even be called that; it's a trading post with an inn by it.

It seems that several of the men know Marsh's reputation. His rivalry with Cope has brought sensation to the area, and with it, yellow journalism— though there's a grain of truth to it. The Times in New York reported that Marsh and Cope have started taking riflemen with them, and I certainly see a few muzzles sticking out from the supply packs. One of the alleged rifleman, who is named Anderson , claims that they're for hunting game by the site, as meat is hard to keep in the desert, and even trail rations begin to fester after two-week digs. Another man, Silcox, informed me that they usually leave the rotting rations near the edge of the site as a deterrent for Cope's men. All that will do is attract coyotes and god only knows what else.

There is no telegraph service at the trading post. It exists, but unlucky lightning strikes seem to have destroyed the wires. With apologies to the Messrs, I will be unable to contact them.

May 31st

We have arrived at the quarry, and I have inspected the map that Messr. D created with help from the navigational apparatus. I will attempt to persuade Marsh to dig in the designated location, which I am informed is distinct.

I believe I have found it. An outcropping of rock, shaped like a rook. It is half a mile away from where we are planning to dig. Marsh will not be easily persuaded to move after such a long trek. Thankfully, if he believes Mr. Cope is involved, Mr. Marsh will attempt to overtake the area.

Tonight, I will report to Mr. Marsh that I saw men at the outcropping,

who fled once they took notice of me. In addition, I have repurposed Mssr. D's map as a facsimile of one that Cope's men use and planted it at the location, hidden under a rock. He will jump at the chance to usurp Cope, and I imagine that Reed and Carlin are doing much of the same with him.

June 1st

Excavation has begun! Marsh himself broke ground, and almost instantly found fossilized ferns in the rock. Though I do not know what the Messrs. have sent me to search for, I will know it when it is seen.

Men have reported hearing shifting sounds from underground, and Marsh fears that animals have made their home in the strata, destroying fossils. I wonder if it is this, or something more.

June 2nd

Marsh's fears seem to have been founded. We found a family of mice within some form of ribcage, all dead. We do not know what killed them, so we have burned them. Some expressed a wish for eating them. I do not understand Americans.

Some of the specimens here are fragile; twice we have found, for lack of a better term, bubbles in the rock, and twice they have been broken simply by touching them, as if they were eggshell. They have the texture of rock, but are brittle; one of Marsh's assistants hypothesizes it to be a strange shale formation.

I believe these are what I am looking for.

June 4th

I awoke from sleep to hear gunshots, and believed I was found out, but instead, it was Anderson shooting at a man fleeing from our camp, a bag of small fossils slung over his shoulder. Inspecting his belongings shows a blatant letter from Cope, which was left as a slight against us.

The camp is not getting sleep tonight, and nobody is being allowed near the dig.

June 5th

Marsh is demanding daily inspections after the events of last night. My journal will reveal me if they see the contents, and as such, I have hidden it in the lining of my pillow.

We found what appears to be part of a carnivore's jawbone today. Fascinating to most, but not what I am looking for, unless the Messrs. deployed me for the sake of obtaining new inlays for fork handles.

June 6th

Overturning a rock has found an entire outcropping of the bubbles. Our photographer came to capture it, but the idiot used the flash lamp in the daylight. One of the diggers was blinded, and fell onto the bubbles, crushing them all. Marsh has fired them both, and forced them to march back to Cheyenne alone.

I've not seen a man so angry before. Even the tirades that happen at the club are nothing compared to Marsh. He threw a trowel at his tent wall so hard that it cut through. He was convinced that the bubbles were worth something, either scientifically or monetarily, and I can't help but wonder if he knows something I don't.

What esoteric properties do these things have?

6:00 PM

I spied Marsh's notebook as he worked outside his tent He was making notes on the bubbles- the words "egg shells" were written underneath an illustration of them. He had one on his desk, and I managed to snatch a glance of the inside. There was something inside it; an embryo, which had been alive mere hours ago.

This is it. Dinosaur eggs, spared from the horrors of time and extinction, underneath the Morrison formation. And these idiots are wantonly destroying them.

I hate Americans.

Night

I awoke to the sound of something in the desert, some form of animal. Coyotes, most likely, stalking around camp. I'm wondering if this is the alleged Cope deterrent working.

June 8th

Someone hid my journal within the camp. I only found it this afternoon, under a pile of rocks. I'd be lost without this. I found it with a cock drawn on the inside front cover. Americans!

Two of our camp went for supplies yesterday, and have yet to return. have returned, running like madmen, water and food on their backs. They claim to have found the bodies of the two men fired by Marsh on Tuesday the 6th, five miles outside of camp, horribly mauled. I went to investigate along with five others.

Their faces were gone. Whether they were slashed off, or bitten, I do not know. No man did this. A wolf, perhaps. But it is a wolf that has claws the size of a Bowie knife. And something else was amiss as well- no-one wanted to bury them, and no-one could recall their names. I looked at the roster, my journal… no record of them. I knew they were part of the expedition, but even then, I did not know who they were.

June 9th

Marsh has been shaken by the events. He's announced that he's taking a small party of three back to the trading post to send a telegram asking for aid. They will be back tomorrow morning, and until then, we are to continue digging.

Finally heard from the agents in Cope's camp, via courier; Carlin says that his workers are being more careful with the specimens. The agents intend to take them and be on the first train back east. Carlin's made the excuse of starting his own company with a third party, intending to sell fossils to the highest bidder. Not technically incorrect.

Cope thinks the specimens are just igneous formations, thanks to prodding from both of them, useless to the forward study of paleontology. Marsh, unfortunately, will be less easy to convince. No

matter; a stab from a syringe on the way out will cause him to forget.

June 10th

Marsh has not returned. We left a trail to our camp with stakes, so it would be difficult for him to become lost. The men are worried.

His second-in-command has begun rationing water to us; another reason Marsh left. We are down to the last barrel, and our food is almost gone.

The thermometer in Marsh's tent shows almost one-hundred Fahrenheit. The men are taking longer breaks, but I and two others continue to work. I managed to find a nest of the eggs, and quickly packed and prepared them. None of them are damaged.

There appears to be, for lack of a better term, a vein of them, much like a vein of ore in a mine, stretching far beneath the ground. The men are being more careful with them now, at least.

I should be able to make off with the crate they intend to send back to Cheyenne for transport. I just need to change the destination from Peabody to New York.

June 11th

Marsh returned this morning, bearing water and rations. He was pleased that we had found more of the eggs, and swore us to secrecy on the contents, before having one of his assistants break one open, revealing an embryo within.

At the moment he did this, there was an enormous bellow from over the bluff, and a rumbling sound, as if a herd of bison were stampeding. Nothing came of it, but the camp is shaken. Marsh has given us permission to take two days off and spend time around the trading post.

Night
Another died.

It was larger than any man in the camp, completely silent, covered in quills barbs feathers, like a giant bird. Its mouth was full of one-

hundred teeth, and it leapt from the tops of the tents, descending on the man. It was not solid; at one point, I saw it walk through the wall of a tent without disturbing it. And it seemed angry.

There was no mistaking it: it was a dinosaur, some unknown species. The man it came upon shot at it, but the bullet rocketed through the night, doing nothing other than rouse the camp. The claws on its feet were like sickles, and they sliced through one man's throat, before- it cannot be called "feeding". No further harm came to his flesh, but his soul… I saw parts of his soul be ripped out, wisps of being rended from his gut, into its flesh, and then it went for the eyes.

I displaced some rock as I observed it, and it saw me. It had no hatred in its eyes, just simple curiosity. It did not want to hurt me, specifically. Then, with a cry that has not been heard in millennia upon millennia, it vanished. I can not bring myself to approach the body, nor can I remember the man's name. I wrote it in my journal- he was one of the riflemen- but now, when I look at it, I do not see it.

I have told no-one of this. I will make this clear in my missive to the Messrs: the eggs ARE NOT TO BE DESTROYED. The men who have destroyed the eggs have all ended up dead, forgotten, and now, I almost fear for Marsh.

June 12th

I shall be returning

Night

One of them attacked the camp today, in broad daylight. I write this at the telegraph station, having sent a missive to London. We were scattered, but only one has died. I believe Marsh to be alive.

A worker got in an argument with Marsh over pay, saying that he should be paid more if they were at risk of death— the idiot failed to read the contract. He struck Marsh, which led to a scuffle, and then, he took up one of the eggs and threw it at Marsh. As the embryo slid down the paleontologist's face, chaos erupted.

A small pack of the ghastly dinosaurs had erupted from the ground, their silvery, half-solid forms almost impossible to see in the blinding western sun. They leapt upon the man, a multitude, and their forms did nothing to obscure the carnage. His soul was removed from his body, and devoured. I heard his final scream as he faded into nothingness, and this sound will remain with me forever.

In the confusion, I managed to pilfer a case of eggs and flee the camp, after injecting Marsh with some of the serum, and pouring the rest into the water. Carlin has met me in the trading post, as we intend to hire a mail cart to send them back to Cheyenne, and from there, by train, to New York, and to London by boat.

June 17th

In New York, about to board a ship. Lost the journal on the train, have only now found it in my luggage. The shipment is also on board.

The Messrs have instructed me to dispose of this journal when **`my report is complete`**, which it is, tucked in my case. I have left it in the care of Sam Williston, a cousin of mine and another agent, with the instructions to take care of it.

Samuel, I know that Marsh is a close friend of yours, even with your duties, but I beg you: observe him more closely. If you, he, or anyone else find any of the eggs, stop them from being destroyed. Ship them to somewhere safe. I do not know if their influence extends outside of Wyoming, nor do I care to find out.

A Keter Kinda Christmas

Fade in on a well-appointed living room in a log cabin, with bookshelves, easy chairs, coffee tables, and a green screen in back showing a blazing fireplace and a window through which a snowy winter's night can be seen. Dr. Bright, wearing a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater over his shirt and tie, with ***SCP-963*** *dangling on a chain over it, is puttering about hanging decorations and arranging hors d'ouevres on a large table, when he stops and looks at the camera.*

Dr. Bright: Oh! I didn't hear you come in. Welcome to Casa de Bright. I was just getting ready to host one real hum-dinger of a holiday celebration! There's going to be stories, songs, comedy - and who knows who'll show up! Stick around, won't you?

An instrumental version of "Jingle Bells" plays as the title card flashes on the screen: **A KETER KINDA CHRISTMAS, starring Jack Bright and the SCP Players**

Narrator (SCP-1965): A Keter Kinda Christmas is brought to you by the Shark Punching Center;

♫ *When you need a shark punched right away* ♫
♫ *Call 555-6412 today!* ♫

…And by Dr. Wondertainment's Spider Party; just add water for eighty thousand legs worth of arachnoFUNbia! (Parental supervision required. Your definition of arachnofunbia may differ from that used by Dr. Wondertainment. Avoid use of this product if you are sensitive to spider venom. Not for use in households with pets or which are situated on reclaimed toxic waste dumps and/or Indian burial grounds. Dr. Wondertainment is not responsible for any cases of spideritis, spiderosis, or spidermania caused by use of this product. Not to be used for gambling purposes without the express written consent of Dr. Wondertainment.)

…And by a special grant from the Manna Charitable Foundation.

—-

Fade in on a group of animals belonging to ***SCP-1845****: a fox (King Eugenio), a raccoon, a crow, a baby pig, and a chicken, with several others - which have been dressed in Nativity scene costumes and are standing in front of a manger. Voiceovers are provided as the camera close-ups on them.*

Chicken: Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to… come to… line?

King Eugenio: For the last time, to *adore him*, you foolish peasant!

Chicken: Sorry, my lord. It's hard to memorize lines when you can't hold a script, you know!

Eugenio: We have no time for your petty excuses! Dr. Bright expects us to put on a Nativity story for his Christmas party, and we shall not be made fools of by your bumbling!

Piglet: Well, how come you get to be the baby Jesus? You're not even the right age!

Eugenio: Because the Lord has appointed us king of this realm, and as His elect it is only fitting that we sit in the place of honor and…

Piglet: You just don't wanna have to remember any lines!

Eugenio: You impudent knave! We ought to cut you down where you stand!

Crow: Please, your majesty, spare the lad. He's just a child - and it *is* Christmas, after all!

Eugenio: Very well. Keep rehearsing! We expect nothing less than perfection when our scene comes! We shall be napping in the next room.

The camera follows Eugenio as he trots out into a darkened chamber and settles down on a pet bed. Just as he is preparing to

*close his eyes, the door shakes and a red and white "YIELD" sign (**SCP-329-J**) floats in.*

Sign: Ooooooooooooooooooooh! Awaken, Eugenio!

Eugenio: What the… what is this madness? Identify yourself, you varlet!

Sign: Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiii am the ghooooooooooooost sign of Christmas Past! And tonight, my brothers and I have come to show you the errrrrrrrrror of your wayyyyyyyyyyyyyyys! Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!

The title card flashes: TO BE CONTINUED.

—-

Fade in on Dr. Bright in the parlor, singing to himself.

Dr. Bright: ♫ *God rest ye merry Foundation, let nothing ye dismay* ♫
♫ *Remember that O5-13 was born on Christmas Day* ♫
♫ *To save us all from Keter duty when we were lead astray* ♫
♫ *O tidings of Euclid and Safe, Euclid and Safe* ♫
♫ *O tiiiiiiiiiiiiiidings of Euclid and…* ♫

The doorbell rings. Dr. Bright looks at the camera.

Why, that must be my first guest!

Dr. Bright opens the door to reveal three people standing there; Dr. Gears, wearing a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater under his lab coat, a mustashioed man wearing a sailor's cap and a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater under his Navy blue blazer, and a blonde woman wearing a hand-knitted wool Christmas evening gown.

Why, it's my good friend, Dr. Gears!

Applause. Gears does not smile or acknowledge it in any way.

And his special celebrity guests for the evening, '70s pop sensations the Captain and Tennille!

Applause. Captain and Tennille wave to the camera as the three step in.

Dr. Gears: It was most generous of you to invite us to your holiday function. I hope my choice of guests has not caused any inconvenience.

Dr. Bright: None at all, old friend! How are you hip young cats doing tonight?

Captain: We're doing great, thanks. You know, it's a real honor to finally be invited on your show tonight.

Tennille: I've never been as excited as I am to be on A Keter Kinda Christmas for the very first time!

Dr. Bright: Actually, this is the third straight year you've been on the show!

Dr. Bright holds up a bottle labeled "Class-A Amnesiacs" and winks at the audience. Laughter.

Perhaps you'd like to play a little song for everyone at home?

Captain: Sure thing, doc. Here's a little something we wrote especially for the show.

Captain walks up to a keyboard which was not previously on the set and begins playing as Bright hands Tennille a microphone and she begins to sing.

Tennille: *♫ Silent night, [REDACTED] night ♫*
♫ All is calm, all is [DATA EXPUNGED] ♫
Rond yon Site-19, Staff and D-Class ♫
♫ [REDACTED]'s escaped again, let's kick its [EXPLETIVE DELETED] ♫
♫ Sleep in amnesiac peace, sleep in amnesiac peace ♫

Fade in on ***SCP-1192*** *(Timmy) standing on its perch, staring wistfully at a photo sitting on a table, showing a man, a woman, and*

a young boy in hand-knitted wool Christmas sweaters standing in front of a roaring fireplace. ***SCP-1987-J****-1 (Count Rockula) enters, wearing a hand-knitted, wool fringe-sleeved open-chested Christmas sweater, leather tights, biker boots, and a Fender Stratocaster slung over his shoulder.*

Count Rockula: What's the matter, Timmy?

Timmy: It's almost Christmas and I'm not gonna get to see my family.

Count Rockula: You know, Timmy, sometimes I feel the same way this time of year.

Timmy: But you're the Lord of Ultimate Rockness! I'm just a dumb bird.

Count Rockula: Believe it or not, young man, I wasn't *always* this rockin'. I don't know how many Christmases I spent out on the road all by myself. I wrote a little song about it to help myself feel better. Would you like to hear it?

Timmy: Ok.

Count Rockula: Alright!

Count Rockula walks up to a mic stand and strums a power chord on his guitar.

Are you ready to rock?

Cheering.

I CAN'T HEAR YOU!

Louder cheering. Count Rockula begins wailing on his guitar.

♫ I will rock your Christmas ♫
♫ You can jam with me ♫
♫ Please have blow, and camel toe ♫
♫ And groupies under the tree ♫
♫ Christmas Eve will find me ♫

♫ Where the red light gleams ♫
(Yeah, all the ladies know what I'm talkin' 'bout)
♫ I will rock your Christmas ♫
♫ If only in your dreams! ♫

Count Rockula windmills his guitar and then smashes it over the table, knocking over the portrait of Timmy's family.

So, do you understand now?

Timmy: What's a camel toe?

Count Rockula: It's a… well, it's… say, how old is 18 in bird years?

—-

Fade back in on the party.

Dr. Bright: …but it turned out he'd been dead the entire time!

Captain and Tennille laugh. Tennille sips her eggnog.

Tennille: Great story, Jack!

Dr. Gears: Indeed. Quite an amusing anecdote, doctor.

Dr. Bright looks to the camera.

Dr. Bright: As you folks can see, this is already shaping up to be one happening party! It's a good thing I didn't invite You-Know-Who this year!

Dr. Gears: Doctor?

Dr. Bright: Yes, Gears?

Dr. Gears: I was unfortunately not aware that the individual in question had been disinvited from this year's event. I informed him of the time and whereabouts of the festivities when he inquired to me regarding it.

Dr. Bright: Oh, dear. If he knows we're here, then that can only mean…

The door swings open on its own and in steps Able, wearing a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater and a Santa hat.

Able: Did somebody say **par-taaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay?**

Everyone: *Able!*

Able: Dr. Bright, buddy! What happened? I can't believe you didn't invite me!

Dr. Bright: Able, at last year's party you drank all the eggnog, hijacked Santa's sled, ran over my grandmother, and then wrapped it around a pear tree full of unlikely Christmas presents! Don't you remember?

Able: Not exactly…

Wipe to a flashback of the previous year's party. An obviously intoxicated Able is being handcuffed and read his rights by a group of policemen in the background, while Bright and his guests are arranged in a semicircle on the floor around celebrity guest Willie Nelson. The partiers are clapping in rhythm as he plays guitar and sings.

Willie Nelson: ♫ *Grandma got run over by a Keter*♫
♫ *Walkin' 'round Site 19 on Christmas Eve* ♫
♫ *Now you can say there's no such thing as an Able line* ♫
♫ *But as for me and Cain, well, we believe!* ♫

Wipe back to the present.

Able: Don't worry, Jack! I'm in a twelve-step program now. I promise, just one drink tonight!

Able grabs the eggnog out of Tennille's hand and chugs it before tossing the cup over his shoulder, where it breaks on the floor.

Maybe two.

Dr. Bright: I swear, Able, if you ruin this party…

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a remote control. The lights

on Able's collar start to blink.

Able: Hey, hey, let's all calm down. How about I sing a little song?

Dr. Bright: Alright. Show us what you got!

A string arrangement begins to play as Able sings in a falsetto.

Able: ♫ *Away in a coffin, collar 'round his head* ♫
♫ *The little skip Able wishes you were dead* ♫
♫ *The fools who oppress him, they all soon shall pay* ♫
♫ *The little skip Able escapes on this day* ♫

Tennille grimaces uncomfortably.

—-

Fade in on ***SCP-1156*** *(Wellington G. Wonderhorse) and* ***SCP-1867*** *(Lord Blackwood) side by side. Wellington is wearing his top hat and a hand-knitted wool Christmas horse blanket, while Lord Blackwood is wearing a slug-sized hand-knitted wool Christmas cape around his neck.*

Lord Blackwood: On behalf of her majesty the Queen and all her subjects, I, Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, th Viscount of Westminister, do most fondly and sincerely wish you and yours a happy Christmas.

Wellington: And a very 'appy domestic from all the 'orses of ol' Blighty!

Wellington turns to Lord Blackwood.

So, milord, got any Steelys for yer own Bridgwater?

Lord Blackwood: I… I beg your pardon, old sport?

Wellington: Christmas, milord! Stayin' Pope? Got a walnut planned? Somewhere the shakens are hot and the ice rinks are cold?

Lord Blackwood: I should hope that an ice rink would be cold, my

equine companion. How else would it function?

Wellington: That's not it atall, milord! I'm just askin' what a bungee like yerself gets up to when he's on a Salford and his trouble's not around to Gibraltar him when he's havin' a matinee with an Ives!

Lord Blackwood: …Come again?

Wellington: Oh, I get it. Think ye're too high-and-mighty to speak th'cant, 'do ya? Well, 'least I ain't no bleedin' tea mug.

Close up on Lord Blackwood as his sluggish visage shifts from confusion, to realization, to anger.

Lord Blackwood: You are such a horse's ass.

Laughter.

—-

Fade in on the party.

Able: So I said to him, 'that's not my arm!' And he said to me, 'and that's not the queen of Gomorrah!'

Everyone laughs. The doorbell rings.

Dr. Bright: Sounds like another one of our guests has arrived! I wonder who it could be this time…?

Bright opens the door to reveal Dr. Rights, wearing a trenchcoat that covers her entire body.

Dr. Bright: Why, if it isn't Dr. Rights!

Applause.

How are you doing? Come on in!

Dr. Rights: I'm doing a lot better now that *you're* here, Jack.

Cheering and raucous male hollering.

You know, we *are* standing under the mistletoe…

Dr. Bright: Rights, I didn't put up any mistletoe this year. The Ethics Committee is still reviewing the sexual harassment complaints from last year!

Dr. Rights: Well, how's a girl supposed to have fun then?

Dr. Bright: Why don't you sing a song for all these lovely people?

Dr. Rights: Are you sure?

Captain: Sure! Go for it!

Dr. Rights: Well, alright…

Rights throws off her trenchcoat to reveal a set of hand-knitted, wool Christmas lingerie underneath. Captain's jaw drops; Tennille slaps him and covers his eyes. Pounding bass drums and a lusty saxophone blare as she begins to sing.

Dr. Rights: ♫ *Santa baby* ♫
♫ *Slip* ***a gold watch*** *under the tree, for me* ♫
♫ *I've been an awful good girl* ♫
♫ *Santa baby, hurry up my chimney tonight* ♫ (wink)

—-

Narrator: And now, a special message from our sponsor.

Fade in on Sally Struthers in a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater against a black screen, standing in front of a table with a small mechanical contraption on it, as "Do They Know It's Christmas?" plays in the background.

Sally Struthers: I'm Sally Struthers. Every year, the Manna Charitable Foundation helps thousands of poor souls around the world on the path to a better life. It's easy to forget in these hectic days that there are so many people in the Third World who don't even know the most wonderful time of the year is upon us. That's why we're asking for your help today with this.

Sally gestures at the box on the table.

This is the Christmas Miracle Maker. Thanks to state-of-the-art terraforming technology, this durable and easy-to-use device, once activated, will induce rapid and aggressive climate change in order to transform its surrounding environs into a perfect snowy winter's day just in time for a white Christmas. The seed banks and genetic samples contained within it will ensure that majestic evergreens just right for decorating and reindeer perfect for pulling a one-horse open sleigh will supplant local flora and fauna, and it can even whip up a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings for those souls in need!

Every one of your donations puts us one step closer to our goal of manufacturing and airdropping 15,000 of these units across Africa in time for Christmas Eve. So please call in your pledge or write a check today - and let them know it's Christmas time again.

—-

Fade in on the party. Agent Strelnikov, who is wearing a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater over his Russian Army uniform, has joined the party and is regaling the crowd with a story.

Agent Strelnikov: And then *fourth* dirty Chechen bastard says to me, 'Please, kind and merciful and handsome Comrade Strelnikov, you would not be skinning alive a man who wears glasses?' And I said to him, 'Well, now that you give me idea…'"

Everyone laughs except Bright.

Dr. Bright: Strelnikov!

Agent Strelnikov: What? You no like story? Is good story! Won second place on open microphone night at Moscow Comedy Club.

Dr. Bright: But it's not a Christmas story at all!

Agent Strelnikov: It happened on Christmas!

Able: Sounds like my kinda Christmas!

Tennille: Is that *really* what you do on Christmas?

Agent Strelnikov: You think Chechens care when Christmas is? They sneak into base at night! Kill six of my men! Burn down Christmas tree it take Company B all week to decorate! *That* is Chechen Christmas! Ptooey!

Dr. Bright: Can't you at least tell a story with a happy ending?

Agent Strelnikov: Fine. Do you know American capitalist rhyming-man Dr. Seuss?

Everyone responds 'Sure!' 'Yeah!' 'Of course!'

Good. This is Russian version of Dr. Seuss. Is called 'How the Chechen Stole Christmas!'

Everyone: *STRELNIKOV!*

Agent Strelnikov: What? Has happy ending! Russia get Christmas back, Father Christmas send Chechens to Hell, everyone joins hands and sings.

Dr. Bright: How about a story that *isn't* about Chechens?

Agent Strelnikov: Bah! All good stories have Chechens.

Captain: Well, how about a song?

Agent Strelnikov: Da! I will sing traditional Russian song of homecoming.

A jazzy brass instrumental plays as Strelnikov rises to his feet and begins to sing.

♫ Laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa, la la la ♫
♫ La la laaaaaaaaaaa laaaaaaaaaaaa la la ♫
♫ La la la la laaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa, la la la ♫
♫ La la laaaaaaaaaaa, laaaaaaaaaaaa, la la ♫
♫ Trololololololo, lololo, lololo, hmmhmmhmmhmmhmm… ♫

—-

Fade in on a rainy night. King Eugenio is standing alone in a field.

Eugenio: Before we draw nearer to that stone to which you point, answer us one question. Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they shadows of things that may be, only?

A lightning bolt illuminates the darkness. ***SCP-173****, wearing a black robe with a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater pulled over it, is pointing at a grave marker.*

One's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show us!

The lightning strikes again. 173 has not moved, and the camera closes in on the grave reveal the text on the grave: KING EUGENIO II.

No, Spirit! Oh no, no!

The lightning strikes again. 173's other hand reaches out towards Eugenio as if to pull him into the grave.

Spirit! Hear me. We are the fox we were. We will not be the fox we must have been but for this intercourse. Why show us this, if we are past all hope?

The lightning strikes again. 173's hand is open and outstretched.

Good Spirit! Your nature intercedes for us, and pities us. We will honour Christmas in our heart, and try to keep it all the year. We will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within us. We will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me we may sponge away the writing on this stone!

Eugenio reaches out to accept 173's hand. Jump cut to his pet bed as he awakes from his sleep. Frantically, he pokes his head around the corner of the set and shouts to a shocked stagehand as he carries several cups of coffee towards the green room.

Eugenio: You, boy! How much longer is there in the show?

Stagehand: Why, about twelve minutes!

Eugenio: Then we still have time!

—-

Fade in on the party in full swing. Bright looks at the camera.

Dr. Bright: Well, folks, it's almost suppertime, and our guests of honor have agreed to cook! How's it going in there, you kids?

Captain and Tennille emerge from a door leading to the kitchen, holding a silver lidded tray.

Captain: Well, you know how you said to put the goose through **SCP-914** on Fine?

Tennille: We accidentally started it on Very Fine instead, so we figured we'd switch it to 1:1 and it'd balance out… and this happened.

Tennille removes the lid to reveal a half-dozen live baby geese waddling around.

Dr. Bright: This is a disaster! Now there'll be no feast! Oh, if only…

The distant sound of sleigh bells becomes audible.

…Could it be?

Dr. Gears: It appears improbable.

The door swings open and Dr. Clef enters, wearing a Santa suit topped with a hand-knitted wool Christmas sweater, and carrying a tureen of clam chowder.

Dr. Clef: But it is! Ho ho ho!

Everyone else: SANTA CLEF!

Clef sets the tureen down on the table.

Dr. Clef: Sorry the big man couldn't make it. He said something about the insurance premiums on his sleigh being high enough after last year. But he sent me along to deliver the greatest Christmas gift

of all: **chowder!**

Clef begins ladling soup out to the party guests.

Dr. Bright: Well, isn't this a Christmas miracle! If only we had a roast to go with it, though…

Eugenio: Wait for us!

Eugenio comes running in from offscreen, accompanied by Wellington (with SCP-173 on his back), the Ghost Sign of Christmas Past, Lord Blackwood, Count Rockula, and Sally Struthers.

Dr. Bright: King Eugenio! I thought you'd miss the whole party!

Eugenio: Forgive our tardiness. We were delayed making some last minute adjustments to the Nativity scene. Count Rockula, if you would do the honors?

Count Rockula: Of course, your majesty!

The green screen is pulled away like a curtain to reveal the manger scene - with the baby pig as Jesus, the chicken, the crow, and a pigeon as the Wise Men, a lamb and a tiger as Mary and Joseph, and Timmy fluttering overhead as the angel. Count Rockula begins playing his guitar and singing.

Count Rockula: ♫ *O come all ye rockin'* ♫
♫ *Awesome and bodacious* ♫
♫ *O come ye, o come ye* ♫
♫ *And dig this rad scene* ♫
♫ *Come check this shit out* ♫
♫ *It's totally bitchin'* ♫
♫ *O come and let us dig him* ♫
♫ *O come and let us dig him* ♫
♫ *O come and let us dig him* ♫
♫ *Christ the Dude!* ♫

Dr. Bright: Now that's the true meaning of Christmas, isn't it?

Everyone mutters inconclusively. "Sure." "I guess." "Why not?" "Actually…"

Eugenio: One more thing. We realized tonight… almost too soon… that we had been inconsiderate to our fellow beasts this year. We wish to make amends. Lord Blackwood, if you would?

Lord Blackwood: It would be my honour, your highness!

Lord Blackwood nudges ***SCP-662*** *towards Eugenio. Eugenio picks it up between his teeth and shakes it. Mr. Deeds enters, carrying a lidded silver tray.*

Mr. Deeds: As you requested, your majesty, a piping hot Christmas goose, with all the trimmings.

Mr. Deeds sets the tray on the table and lifts the lid to reveal the roasted bird.

Eugenio: Now eat! Drink! Be merry! Enjoy the spirit of this wondrous day!

Dr. Rights leans over and whispers to Mr. Deeds. He nods and produces a piece of mistletoe from his pocket. She takes it and holds it over Able's head.

Dr. Rights: So, Able, how about I cook *your* Christmas goose?

Able: Lead me to the beast, woman, and I shall wring its neck myself.

Dr. Rights: I don't think you'll have to worry about wringing your own beast's neck tonight.

Extreme close-up on Able with a comic "SPROING!" sound effect.

Dr. Bright: Well, folks, that's about all the time we have. On behalf of everyone here at the SCP Foundation, I'd like to wish you and yours at home…

Everyone raises their glasses and faces the camera.

Everyone: MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Timmy: And **343** bless us, every one!

A Kind Of Christmas

“I-It’s just been so long. Sometimes I wonder if she ever thinks about me anymore.” The creature leaned towards the man, its skin crinkling. A few scales refracted the harsh light of the containment cell as they drifted to the floor. It slowly raised its left arm and cupped its hand to the side of its oxygen mask. “Sometimes, I think what they tell me, that she’s okay, I don’t think it’s true,” it whispered, barely audible over the hum of the life-support machine.

The man sitting opposite grinned. “Why, you were the most important thing in the world to her! Of course she wouldn’t have forgotten about you!” he said. His voice echoed across the walls of the small cell.

“You used the past tense. You didn't really answer me. Besides, if she still thought about me, would I be so… *this*?” the creature slowly swept an arm over itself. Much of its skin was gone, revealing half-formed organs made of dragonfly wings. Its legs were nothing but stumps, and the left side of its face was mostly non-existent, save for the area around the flower it had for a eye.

“Oh come now, that’s no attitude to have! If she’d forgotten you, would she have made this?” The man revealed a folded piece of paper and opened it on the table between them. It was a crayon drawing of a girl and a man holding hands. The man was covered in what looked like scales and had flowers for eyes. Both of them were smiling under the crudely written words “SUZY + BEST FRIEND.”

The creature looked up from the paper, tears in its functioning eye. “Thank…” It saw that the man had vanished “…you?”

An orderly burst into the containment cell. “SCP-1252, are you alright!? We- I don’t know what happened. We were with you, and then we, uh we were outside. What happened? Are you okay?”

The creature hugged the drawing to its partially formed chest,

causing several butterfly scales to drift lazily to the floor. “I’m fine. I’m fine,” it said.

Adam sang to himself as he sawed the beam. “Que el mundo fue y será…” he began. Suddenly, the saw slipped, and he cried out, more from shock than pain, as it sliced into his finger. A split second later, the wound began to gush blood. “Fuck!” he shouted at the top of his lungs as he patted himself down, hoping to find a kerchief, or even just a band-aid. Nothing. He squeezed the finger into his armpit, feeling the blood soak through the fabric of the shirt. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck this house, fuck this city, fuck you Louisa, fuck fuck fuck!” Adam shouted as he ran from dilapidated room to dilapidated room, trying to find something to staunch the bleeding.

He saw a man leaving the pantry, the same one who had been snooping around the place before. “Hey, asshole!” he shouted at the intruder, “Get out of my house or I’m calling the cops!” The man gave a guilty smile and stepped around a corner. Adam followed him around the corner, only to find that the man seemed to have disappeared. “Weirdo,” Adam muttered as he entered the pantry.

Sitting on the shelf was a roll of gauze and a can of something called “Plum Pudding.” Next to it was a note card reading “Feliz Navidad” in thin, neat letters.

“I’m Jewish,” Adam muttered. He stared at the gauze for a moment. "Eh, screw it," he said as he took the gauze and began to wrap it around his wounded finger. Before leaving the pantry, he grabbed the can of “Plum Pudding.”

The boy in the Boy Scout outfit paced back and forth in the blank room. He must have been in here for at least a year. The last thing he remembered was crossing the street holding Mr. Noah. Then the sound of tires squealing, then an impact. Then nothing. He obviously wasn’t dead, he decided, because he was obviously alive. Still, he didn’t recognize anything, and, more importantly, there was no more Mr. Noah.

"Hello there," came a voice behind him. The boy turned to see a man standing in what had been an empty spot a few seconds ago. "It seems like you're missing something. Mr. Noah, right?"

The boy tried to respond, but found that he couldn't speak. He tried a few more times to vocalize, but finally nodded.

The man smiled. "I don't think I can get Mr. Noah back for you, but I can find you some friends. Children like you, who can understand you. Perhaps you could make a new doll, one just like Mr. Noah. Does that sound good to you?"

The idea of replacing of Mr. Noah seemed horrifying, almost laughable, to the boy. But it wasn't as though there was any way to find Mr. Noah in this room. Besides, the man's offer of friends intrigued him. He had never had friends before, at least ones that weren't stuffed animals. The boy nodded again. The man smiled.

"Very good, then. Please, follow me," the man said. He opened a door that had not been there a moment ago, and passed through it. The boy followed. As he passed over the threshold, he found himself wearing an owl mask. "Oh, sorry, I forgot to mention the mask. I wouldn't worry about it, though, all of the other children have them as well," the man said, motioning around the room. It was then that the boy looked around and realized that there were other children, also with masks, all around the room.

They didn't say anything, but he could hear them just the same. Do you like dollies? they asked, what was your dolly's name? What happened to you? What kinds of dollies do you like to make? My name's Zach, my name's Sarah, my name's Nikolai, my name's…

The voices flooded the boy's head, but he was not afraid. For the first time in a long time, he knew he was not alone. He turned to thank the man, but saw that he was gone.

A note to all Foundation personnel: Yesterday, 12/25/20 , containment for several SCP artifacts, including **1252**, **1551**, and **747** was breached. In all instances where the SCP object has been capable of

speech, the effector of the breach was described as “a kind man.” While the breaches were not, in and of themselves, severe, the fact that a single individual, apparently acting alone, has proven capable of bypassing all security measures, and has chosen to do so on a day as significant as yesterday, should be troubling to all Foundation employees.

To be clear: as there has been no indication of negligence on the part of Foundation employees, no one is being punished for this incident. This is only a reminder that, despite however human SCP objects may appear, we are still interacting with entities far beyond our ability to comprehend. It should go without saying that all Foundation personnel, of all levels, must maintain absolute vigilance at all times.

- O5-

A Lesson in Power

With her right hand pressed against cold steel, Dr. Kowalski guided herself through darkness. Steps forward were apprehensive shuffles. She had a sleep mask over her eyes, but she found herself wishing she had brought a gas mask as well. No one ever told her what this thing smelled like. But no one who got this close to it lived to tell.

Once, when Danielle Kowalski was a young child, she was afraid to go in the ocean. Her mother had warned her about stingrays, and the fear of stepping on one had put her off swimming for more than a few years. Her father, though, he believed people should be forced to face their fears. He taught her how to shuffle her feet. *"Then the stingrays will know you're coming, and they'll just swim away."* Dr. Kowalski wondered if her father would have regretted teaching her to be brave if he had ever known the career path that bravery had opened up for her. The Foundation killed the last of that hesitant child.

She could hear it now, its labored breath that seemed a mix of a whimper and a death rattle. She hoped to not touch it. Another step forward. Either Dr. Kowalski was close enough to feel the heat of its breath or the tension was setting her blood on fire. The instant camera in her left hand was unwieldy. She hoped to not drop it because she would dare not try to pick it back up. *Snap.* But no flash. If she could see the flash, then she would be in real danger. This kind of stingray doesn't swim away.

The process was painfully slow. Step forward, step back. Turn the camera up, turn it down. One by one, she placed each photograph it spat out into her pocket. If she could have pulled off her blinder to check the time, she would have known that forty-eight minutes had passed between her entering the containment chamber and expending the last of her film. Statistically, at least one photograph would do the job, but Dr. Kowalski had no safe way to verify that.

Kowalski's colleagues would have thought her insane if they knew what she was doing. Fortunately, their time was occupied. On this day, this particular site was receiving its first official visit from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After North Korea, after what the Diet in Tokyo had exposed, after the Foundation fell under the spotlight of every journalist on the planet - the world was surely about to change. *Everyone*, Kowalski thought, *needs something for protection now*. With no hope of ever having something so useful as Dr. Bright's amulet, the photographs she had taken would have to suffice.

15 Months Later

"You've wasted an hour of my time already, Dr. Kowalski. In your former line of work, I'm sure you know what the next part of an interrogation consists of. So I would think it to be in your best interest if you would stop feigning ignorance and tell me where the **SCP-610 specimens** were stored. You were the senior researcher on that project - you know."

The uninvited man who spoke these words inside Dr. Kowalski's apartment had burnt through three cigarettes since the interrogation had begun. Yes, her life was in danger, but she couldn't help feel most upset about the fact that the smell of his smokes was going to sink right into her furniture and carpet. Her eyes had been turned downward through most of this; it wasn't that she couldn't look a man in his eyes and lie - she was quite effective at doing that well. She didn't think he was worthy of it.

This man, who introduced himself as Agent O'Brien, liked to smile. He carried the demeanor of a battle-hardened general and looked the part: short grey hair, a square jaw, and a tall build. His patience for the former Foundation researcher was waning, too - though the two masked lackeys he brought along kept as still as statues, waiting and watching.

"Let me ask you, Agent O'Brien," Kowalski began, gaze still affixed on the floor. "Have you been so busy trying to find me that you haven't even kept up with the news? Does 'The Berlin Accords Against Weaponized Anomalies' ring a bell for you, asshole?" Kowalski met his eyes on that last word, her youthful face grimacing

in stern defiance.

O'Brien stared past her glasses, pass her icy blue eyes; he stared straight through her.

"Hold her arm," he commanded one of his underlings. The masked man moved forward and grabbed Kowalski's wrist. O'Brien seized the middle finger of her right hand at the base and drove the thinnest knife he had under her polished fingernail. Kowalski flailed a bit, trying not to scream. But she did, and her heart raced as she knew this would get much, much worse.

"The Kremlin hasn't ratified it yet - so I don't think the Senate will be too keen on doing that either," O'Brien said with a bit of chuckle. The researcher's blood trickled out onto his black, leather glove. He wiped it off on her cheek. "Let me be clear - the Russians have everything they need to fuck with that skin disease, all around Lake Baikal. You don't think it's reasonable for the United States government to want to understand what could be used against us? Hell, I don't care what you think we're going to do with it. I want those specimens."

When Kowalski had finally caught her breath and stifled her urge to scream out in pain again, she pointed to her bedroom with her unharmed hand and said "Bottom left drawer, manila envelope. Something I kept with me since leaving the Foundation. I'm sure you'll find it interesting."

"Go check," O'Brien commanded his men, who in less than a minute had noisily ransacked the room and returned with a manila envelope just as the researcher promised. O'Brien grabbed the envelope for a look inside. His satisfaction faded quickly.

"The fuck are these?" he asked as he began littering the floor with photographs. Now Kowalski would definitely keep her eyes turned up. O'Brien paused before discarding one, just long enough to have a good, long look before stating "I don't think this ugly motherfucker with the fucked up jaw has anything to do with what I asked you for." Angry, he put out his latest cigarette on Kowalski's neck. She gasped as the agonizing burn momentarily left her breathless.

"Let me tell you a story," said O'Brien. "Because I think your Foundation sure thought they were powerful hiding in the shadows. But I'd like to explain to you why you're wrong."

He pulled up a chair from her kitchen table and sat down across from her. Kowalski would endure whatever tale this prick wanted to spew - she only needed to wait now.

"When I was up and coming, I was a DEA agent in Colombia in the late 80's, part of the team hunting down Pablo Escobar. I had a narco in custody, and this little spick was every bit uncooperative as you are now. He kept repeating 'Do you know who you're fucking with?'

"He thought his cartel was hot shit. He insisted they owned all the law enforcement in Colombia, that they were the ones who ran Medellin. So I asked him, 'If you run this city, why do you bury your money, why do you have to smuggle your coke? Surely', I said, 'if you're in charge, you'd peddle your coke out in the open. You wouldn't tuck your guns.' I pulled out mine and shot him in his kneecap. 'That's power. I don't hide my gun, it's right here for you to see,' I said as he bled all over the police station floor.

"Your Foundation hid in the shadows, doctor. But let me make it abundantly clear for you. The power was always ours. Your 'anomalies' belong to us. Your research belongs to us. Your life belongs to us, and if I'm so inclined your ass belongs to me before I'm done with you. So one more time, I'm going to ask you what you did with the six-ten specimens because the next finger of yours I take my knife to is coming off."

"Sir," one of O'Brien's lackeys said. "I think there's something outside."

Kowalski shut her eyes as soon as she saw a long arm with corpse-like skin phase through the wall as if it weren't even there.

The gunshots rang out in quick succession. The smell of gunpowder filled her nostrils as her ears rang and she stared into darkness. She heard screams. She heard bones snapping. She even heard a sickening slurping sound she wouldn't want to see the source of,

even if it wouldn't kill her. After a few minutes of pandemonium, agony, it was quiet again; save for the same awful breathing she remembered.

Eyes still shut tight, she felt her way to her front door. So much blood had soaked her carpet, every step she took made a sloshing sound. The smell of what just occurred would never come out either.

"Run along now, **Zero Nine Six**," Kowalski told her savior. "There are worse monsters in this world than you."

A Life that Was Simple

Life, for as long as he could remember, was simple. Exactly how long, he could not know. He could not remember when it all started, nor did he know of any stable cycles for the measurement. The rotation of stars and planets were too insignificant, as they themselves are mere specks on the cosmic background.

It didn't matter, however, as he didn't care. Life, after all, was consuming and digesting and growing. Driven by hunger, he swam around aimlessly in the dark void, and devoured all the smaller meaty things he encountered. He fought and won and gradually became bigger. Eventually, he grew so huge that for as far as his many eyes could see, there were only beings smaller than him. Eventually, he found a great abyss and nested there. A breeding ground where the tiny entities spawned and died and were born again.

Life was simple, and he was contented. He became less hungry, as food was plenty. He no longer had to hunt things down with great effort. All he needed to do was to open his countless mouths and those meaty things, newly-born, blind and dumb, would swarm in, mistaking them as sanctuaries. He was just like them, but much larger. He did not consider this, however. He only relished the taste of the withering flesh in his mouths, and longed for more.

But one day, he found something else. He didn't understand it at first, as he bit into the being's body and found it tasteless and solid. He released it, as he was not interested in tasteless things. Then, with his many eyes, he registered that the being was almost as gigantic as him, but quite different.

Different how, he could not describe. He only understood that the other giant being was tasteless and not flesh. The being, unlike all the other living things he had seen, had a regular shape, and a smooth, reflecting surface. The being — she turned and took a quick glance at him. In that moment, she examined him briefly, with a sort

of curiosity. Then, she simply looked away, and left.

He too, looked away and left. He had food to consume and taste to relish, and wished no quarrel with tasteless non-flesh. They crossed their paths many times after, only briefly each time, and he understood that the abyss was her home too.

Unlike him, life didn't seem simple for her. She was always busy, engaged in her task. He didn't understand what her task was, until he found that wherever she went, the tiny beings were trapped and helpless, unable to move. Tiny barriers she had put up, an insane effort to patch up the great abyss, the abyss many times bigger than both of them combined.

He was happy to see this however, as his hunt for more flesh was made even easier. The hunger was almost negligible. The barriers wouldn't even hinder his steps, but made his prey completely helpless. So he followed her around, consumed the packed meat she had left behind, and was able to observe her more.

She registered his existence, of course. Cautious at first, but gradually got accustomed to it. She needed not be cautious though, he contemplated, as he would not eat things that are not flesh. In the end, she allowed him to take the tiny things she had trapped, and observed him in return.

Unlike him, she didn't consume, but instead, created things. Eerie structures, intricate webs, that would spin and hum and tick and move in cycles. But eventually, they all succumbed to the pull of the great abyss, and broke apart. She built these things again and again, every time more intricate and elegant. But each time, her work was rendered useless. He could not understand why she did this, yet, she continued. An endless cycle of futility.

One day, the things she built, the machines, as she would call them, broke once more, and were never built again. The small meaty things roamed free, and she was nowhere to be found. Life was suddenly no longer simple and free, and he was not happy. He sought her out, and found her at the deep end of the abyss. She said things to him, things intricate as the machines she made that he could not understand. But he didn't need to, as he pulled her out of

the dead center of the void.

He told her about the life, the hunger, and other things he knew. She listened, but there was only so much she could understand. They were so different, after all. But she contemplated, and then cut a piece of flesh off him. It hurt him, as he had not fought and been hurt in a long long time, but he withstood it. He understood that unlike the creatures of meat, she had no need to eat him, and he had no need to hurt her.

Again, she began to create. Not out of the shiny or intangible things she was so used to, but with the piece of flesh, that small part of him. Six small creatures were born, and they were not like things out of the abyss, as they were part of him. Their minds connected with his, and they communicated, whispering words so intricate that only she would know. They discussed and calculated, and led him to wherever prey was the most abundant .

Life was simple again. All he needed to do was to listen to the six machines she crafted out of his flesh. He did not cross her path until much later, and found that she was attending to the tiny stars, and the smaller rocks around them. She again built many different things, but no longer around the abyss, but around these spheres. This time, her creation was somewhat stable. He was happy for her, as she no longer had to engage in futility and that her life could be simple as well. Their path crossed less and less, but they would often nod in regard to each other when they do. He was happy with his new life, and so was she.

But it all changed. As he one day passed by some of the spheres, she attacked him. She cut him and it was not friendly, and the machines all spun wild and ticked loudly. In confusion and fury, he fought back, but she was only trying to force him away.

She screamed and begged but he didn't know what she was asking, and didn't know what he had done wrong. He knew of her creations, and would never attempt to damage them. And he knew that she always built them tough and solid, so that his passing by wouldn't disturb them.

He felt confused and angry. It was unfair that she attacked him,

when he wanted no quarrel with her. So he attacked, and she could not stand against him. After all, he was much larger now, and ages of creating exhausted her.

She looked at him, and begged for one last time, which he could not know the meaning of, before suddenly, breaking apart. And suddenly, the world swirled around him, and the dark void was gone, the abyss was gone, and the spheres were gone. He did not recognize this new place.

She was all around him now, but not all of her, just one large piece. He could not understand this. He called out her but she didn't respond, he shook her but she would not let him go. She seemed very much like the things she had created now, but more silent and still.

Life was suddenly complicated, so he asked his six advisors, his archons. They informed him that the spheres were important to her, and that she was angry at what he would have wrought. He didn't fully understand, and had less of a clue of what happened to her. Finally, he decided that like her machines, she was merely broken. And machines, unlike the things of flesh, can be built again. He would wait here, until she was no longer angry with him, and decided let to him go.

He left the decisions to his archons, as they know better than him. They linked him to one of the spheres, a blue one, and passed out pieces of him. They brought tiny creatures from the spheres, even smaller than those of the abyss, so that they may one day serve as bridges and tools. They lived on his back, and he tolerated this, as the archons promised that he would be out of here, and things would be fine again. He always trusted them.

And so Yaldabaoth slept in the Great Brass Cage, and dreamt of a time when life was simple.

A Long Time Past

May 10, 1997

A black moon under a hill of snow.

His brother had been born first, but the younger was the stronger of the two. The omen had been marked, but its mark was not for a babe at the breast. Destiny was fit for a man.

A scene of two boys wielding spears, each fighting a ferocious animal.

Two boys became two men. Manhood brings a mark, which brings a name, which begins a destiny.

A figure of man, dressed in furs, holding a spear. A woman, fat and healthy, stands beside him, as do five childlike forms. Another, smaller man stands to the side, with feathered staff and headdress.

He did not have the clays of the River now, not the rich red nor the earthy brown nor the smooth grey. Nor did he have the deep black of the charcoal of a fire over which the sacred stories were told. He had nothing but blood and spit and pus and bone.

It was enough.

More monstrous animals, each with a red slash across the belly.

The storytellers and elders whispered of the brothers' feats, how the warrior smote the beast and the shaman healed the sick and drove out evil spirits. They spoke of their great destiny…

The smaller man stripped of his headdress, walking away from a faceless crowd. The larger man points in direction.

But destiny is a heavy weight: Slip, and it will crush you…

The woman, dead, smeared with the blood of childbirth, the deformed infant in her arms.

And destiny takes what it will from those it does not destroy.

A spread of grey land, a swathe of black sky, a tiny white figure in the center.

You took nothing into the cave. Took not your spear, nor knife, nor fire, nor sight, nor hearing. The dead allowed only the soul to pass.

A figure in shadows, bone white face and blood-red hands.

For the spear will break and hides will rot and fire will dim. All things die. Only the soul may be tested.

A pale, ghostly figure, plump and long-haired. A child holds on to one hand.

And in time rewarded…

The same figures, smeared out.

But destiny is fickle with its rewards.

The light of the entrance to a cave.

The test was passed. Life, power, and loneliness were the reward.

The figure alone, surrounded by darkened trees.

Seasons were born and died.

He did not.

The figure standing on a hill, many figures surrounding him. Another woman, many children, many others, all fed and strong.

Death turns to life again. It continues.

Bloody red fire.

And again all things die. He did not.

The figure stripped of his hides, bloody and beaten, surrounded by tall, cloaked figures with the skulls of animals. Chains bound his arms and legs.

He could not die, so he watched.

The man marked with crests that were not his, standing in a river of blood, the dead around him thick as the fallen leaves of autumn.

He could not die, so he lived a slave. A tool.

A cold, black monolith. A tomb in chains.

Tools are stored when they are not used, and disposed when they have worn out their usefulness.

Able, son of Ablaln, Chief of the Mountain and the River, He Who Returned from the Land of Death, Wanderer of a Thousand Winters, the Smiting Blade, The Sleeping God, scowled with bared teeth at the last of the paintings. A name echoed through his mind, to the very depths of his soul, boiling up hatred a thousand times over, hate that burned, consumed, that left nothing but more of the same. Hatred against *them*. The invaders. The slaughterers. The slavemasters. The filth. The *Daevas.*

When a man has nothing left to lose, then his soul may be stripped from him.

Able roared, slamming his fists into the wall. By all means, they should have crumbled under his blows, were they normal stone. His fistfalls thudded dully through the cube, not a crack appearing.

No…the walls of this prison were not to be broken by the tantrums of a child. Able ceased his barrage, panting. The echoes froze and faded.

Why had he brought those memories to bear? Had he not buried them ages ago? Had he not torn down the walls of Daevon with his own hands? Had he not ripped the high priest in twain and destroyed their foul idols? Had he not sent them screaming to their black gods as their most twisted sorcerers sacrificed themselves to lock him away a final time? They were dead, dead and gone, and he

had bathed in enough blood to forget himself in his madness. Why?

The answer came to him.

Able stood up straight to his full eight feet. He knew now. He knew why he remembered. It was all happening again. He reached down to the rent torso he had been using as palette a last time. His hand wet with viscera, he painted one more figure on the cold, uncaring walls of his prison: A man with a smile, but no true face.

A man made a weapon at the call of masters beyond.

They were the same.

They were kin.

A Long Ways from Home

Transcript of briefing for Mission 453-07-01, Code name "Waypoint"

Begin Transcript

Agent Walters, Agent Christensen, have a seat.

You both are aware of the situation and have already had your operational, communications, and safety briefings, so I'll keep this short and make sure you both know what is going on.

Both of you will be entering SCP- and use its anomalous effects to enter what are commonly referred to by non-Foundation groups as "Ways". Due to the nature of SCP- , you will both be rendered unrecognizable as Foundation agents and will be able to safely enter "The Library". The bad news is, testing has shown that SCP- is a one way deal. Good news is, our teams have identified an exit point that lets out in Melbourne, Australia. We will have a team there to return you to this base when you need to exit. Don't worry, you'll get your bodies back. Both of you have received a copy of "Fahrenheit 451", simply open it up to page 47 and read what's written there. I have been told by our research team that you should not do this until you need to get out of there. When you are inside of the Library you are not to violently engage any entities, I repeat, *any* entities you meet in there. Period. Am I clear? Good, if you so much as think of being violent you will both be out of there faster than you can blink.

You are simply there to try to get a grasp on how large this thing is and do general reconnaissance, you know the specifics of the mission plan. Audio recordings will be made daily by one of you giving us updates on the status of the mission and yourselves. Should either of you die on this mission, we have a recovery team ready to retrieve your logs and data.

I'll be frank, gentlemen, this is the first time we've gone back in there for over a year since we lost all of Team Faraway. You are to stay safe, stay passive, and don't do anything that will give you or us away and make this mission a failure. Good luck gentlemen, you will both be the first members of team 453-07, code name "Surveyors".

End Transcript

Audio log 10/21/ - Agent Christensen, Call sign "Chaplain" - Location: Base

Excited for this mission, first time working with Walker, little bit nervous. This guy wrote the book on anomalous reconnaissance. Praying I don't screw up on this. Also a tad worried by not having any immediate support or weapons. I guess we should be okay though. I got my hands on a video log from project Faraway, scary shit with the giant guys with lanterns and crap. Since this is supposed to be a passive mission we'll be fine, anyone trying to attack us will get the same treatment. On another note, Bill told me SCP- occasionally doesn't switch your mind and just your memories, though that's probably him messing with me. Anyways… gonna get a good night's rest before we head out tomorrow, Chaplain out.

Audio log 10/21/ - Agent Walters, Call sign "Walker" - Location: Base

This is agent Walters, call sign "Walker" reporting in. Date is 10/21/ , location is Base .

Thoughts on mission in 1600 hours: Jittery, as is becoming increasingly often.
Reminder: See base doctor after mission about jitters.

Thoughts on partner: Good, records indicate Agent Christensen call sign "Chaplain" has a solid record in anomalous reconnaissance. Prediction: Will not get in the way during mission, might be an asset if utilized correctly.

Information received about SCP- : ~12% chance of consciousness not switching.

Thoughts: Probably should not tell Agent Christensen.

Planned Actions: Will sleep at 1900 hours tonight.
This is agent Walters, call sign "Walker", signing out.

Excerpt from Team Surveyor Records. Mission 453-07-1. Mission start.

> Researcher Reynolds: Walker, Chaplain, are you ready to proceed?
> Walker: Ready when you are Reynolds
> Reynolds: Roger dodger Walker, activating SCP in T-minus 1 minute.
> Walker: Okay Chaplain, follow operating procedure, stay safe, and stick next to me.
> Chaplain: Understood.
> Walker: Good, when we go through, just stay calm, bad things happen to people who freak out during this.
> Reynolds: Targets set, transferring in T-minus 10 seconds.
> Chaplain: Oh boy.

> *At this point SCP- activates normally and it is confirmed that Agent Walters and Agent Christensen were safely transferred to the targets. Targets take control of the bodies of Agent Walters and Agent Christensen. Bodies are secured and placed into stasis for return to their owners.*

Audio log 10/22/ - Agent Christensen, Call sign "Chaplain" - Location: The Library

Personal Log 1, Day 1, Mission 453-07-01, Code name "Waypoint".

Okay so Walker said I should make one of these to sort of summarize what I'm thinking here. It's a bit hard to concentrate when you're in a bathroom obviously not built for human use, I mean, why is there a bin labeled "Ice cream disposal" in here?

What should I talk about?

Okay so yeah, SCP- was fun, the whole process was very weird feeling but I think I've gotten used to this body, though this guy really needs to work out more. Once we switched I don't remember too many details, sensory overload I guess. Basically we're in a huge fucking library. Like you could walk for days and not reach the end, if there is an end. None of the other patrons seem very clear about the size, and we've got a lot of different answers. And the patrons, man, I've seen some weird crap but these guys just about take the cake. I had a conversation with a sapient lava lamp about our favorite books not ten minutes ago, and some sort of eldrich abomination just asked me where the men's room was.

Walker seems completely unfazed, but he could be freaking out for all I know, the man is all business. We've been doing pretty well recon wise, the things that attacked Team Faraway are called docents, they sorta just walk around and guide people, seem sorta like the security dudes here, haven't gotten any of them to talk though. The other patrons say pretty much the only thing they seem to respond to is requests with help finding a book and violence, and considering how these guys are built no wonder Team Faraway didn't have a chance. The Library seems to be run and maintained by a variety of staff, most notably these things rooted to the floor at the reception desks people call Archivists and these weird spider things that are crawling all over the bookshelves that everyone else seems to ignore. When I asked someone about it they just looked at me and said that is what happens to people who break the rules. It was a bit creepy because he then slipped me a piece of paper that said "And who ask too many questions."

Once I finish up in here I think I'll head to one of the reception desks and see if I can get a Library card, find out what I can about these Archivist dudes, maybe do some exploring of this atrium area where everyone hangs out. Gonna talk to Walker about maybe trying to get some definite proportions of how big this place is.
Chaplain out.

Audio log 10/22/ - Agent Walters, Call sign "Walker" - Location: The Library

Personal Log 1, Day 1, Mission 453-07-01, Code name "Waypoint".

This is Walker, reporting in. Current location is men's bathrooms 200 feet east of our entrance point. Bathroom seems non-anomalous except for multiple items seemingly not built for human use, full report on items will be included with surveying documents.

Entrance was uneventful, still adjusting to new body. Chaplain has shown to be an asset when socializing with other entities within The Library. Possible use for gathering information regarding size and security measures within The Library. Library is to be deemed information containment only, pending further investigation. Current intel shows that it would be near impossible to effectively bar physical access to The Library, due to constant appearance and creation of "Ways", of which there seems to be no effective way to predict the appearance of.

The nature of the entities within The Library is varying and unpredictable. There does not seem to be one source of anomalous entities within The Library, and observation has already shown three separate incidents of anomalous behaviors from said entities. Only definite entities met so far seem to come from The Library itself, commonly referred to as "Librarians". We have encountered three types of Librarians so far. Most notably are a large hunchback-esque creature with a lantern for a hand, called by patrons of The Library "Docents". Possibly act as security for The Library, will investigate possible weaknesses. Will include full report on the Librarians along with Surveyor documents. Will discuss with Chaplain about possible exploration as to the extent of The Library, and I will be placing each other's logs on both of our logbooks should something happen to one of us.

Walker signing out.

Audio log 10/23/ - Agent Christensen, Call sign "Chaplain" - Location: The Library

Personal Log 2, Day 2, Mission 453-07-01, Code name "Waypoint".

Finally got a chance to make another log, been really busy for the past day. Walker and I decided that we will personally explore the limits of The Library, since we aren't getting any solid answers from the patrons. We've bought a couple supplies from some patrons and

have figured out the path we're gonna take to the edge, and if we don't reach an edge in two days we turn back. I haven't really caught any sleep since we got here, a nap here and a nap there, but once we set out I should be able to sleep some. We were told to find some lodging in the Reading Room, which happens to be completely controlled by the Serpent's Hand.

Oh yeah, the Serpent's Hand. Wow, these guys are totally different than from what I've heard, almost all of them could be SCPs and enough of them have mind-reading powers that Walker ruled that we don't go in there. They seem pretty disorganized and most of them seem pretty laid back and just interested in reading books, a couple told me about their leader, L.S, whom appears to be very charming and chill, despite his hatred for just about everyone who isn't an SH member. Really interesting stuff, Walker compiled all the relevant information into the records, so I won't bother going over it.

Audio log 10/24/ - Agent Christensen, Call sign "Chaplain" - Location: The Library

Sing it with me Walker! … Come on, it's a good song.

Seein' things that I may never see aga-

Oh fuck you're right I'm recording.

Personal Log 3, Day 3.

Hey this is Chaplain yadda yadda we're doing great and we're heading toward the edge of The Library. Yeah I'm getting there hold up a second. Walker wants to let you know that we have traveled exactly 15.3 miles today as we head toward the edge, currently there is no end in sight and the bookshelves continue to go on. Yeah we've also been sorta seeing the same bookshelf every once in a while, and shelves seem to kind of bend and twist as if they're making us go in circles. We tried to get the help of a docent but it just sorta stood there and stared at us before it walked off into the shelves. There are still plenty of those spider things running around though, kind of creepy looking but they haven't bothered us yet. The shelves seem to contain increasingly random and useless information, possibly they can rearrange themselves so that

someone will find the book most pertinent to them without going in that far. On another note, we met another adventurer like ourselves about a mile back, his skeleton was just laying there and he had some old book in his hands. Can't read it, looks to be Dutch, but it seems kind of foreboding.

Ok I'll talk about that. We made friends with this SH chick back in the Atrium, okay, *I* made friends with this SH chick. She looked really familiar and then Walker recognized her as the sister of the whatsit that got us here. I struck up a conversation with her and she seems pretty cool, has the same abilities as her sister, though with longer range. She said she could switch me wherever I wanted if I just said where and- What the fuck is that?!

Sound of retching

Okay, get it out Walker. No I don't think less of you now. We can't control our body's gag reflex. You want me to explain it? Uhhh, this is Chaplain and basically we are looking at what looks like three corpses, except, not corpses? Uh, some of their skin is missing in places and you can sorta see inside of them, which is pretty gross considering I can't recognize any of the organs and there is this greenish stuff just *everywhere*. They seem to be rooted to the floor by some weird artery and god the smell is awful, smells like the boy's locker room where someone just sprayed Axe everywhere. Two of em are growing extra limbs and this really muscular one's hand has become this cage thing that glows intermittently.

Yeah take your photos let's keep moving, I don't wanna stay here any longer.

Anyways… I guess that just about wraps it up, tomorrow we'll turn back if we don't reach the edge. I don't think it would be smart to continue after that, hopefully The Library isn't trying to send us a message with those bodies or anything.

Chaplain out.

Audio log 10/25/ - Agent Walters, Call sign "Walker" - Location: The Library

Personal Log 3, Day 3.

Walker signing in, I am recording this around the corner from our campsite, out of earshot of Chaplain. We currently seem to be followed by a humanoid entity that seems to have some sort of visual cloaking mechanism. This entity disappears around a bookshelf whenever we look at it, but otherwise seems to remain about 100 feet away at all times. It seems to have disappeared for the moment facilitating the recording of this log. The night was uneventful except for Chaplain claiming that it was watching us, but a little exploration showed nothing. I have reason to believe that Chaplain has been compromised by the Serpent's Hand, as a comparison between mental scans that I made while he was sleeping and when we arrived show tampering. He has been making multiple statements that could be construed as treasonous and seems to want us to end our mission prematurely, citing what happens to people who ask too many questions. I will continue our expedition till noon today and then we will turn back and begin making our way toward the Atrium where I will figure out a way to detain Chaplain and return us to the Foundation. Another reason for this is the rapid increase in disturbing sights, including one I had an adverse reaction to yesterday. Chaplain seems to grow more and more irrational the farther we go in.

This is Walker, signing out.

Audio log 10/25/ - Agent Walters, Call sign "Walker" - Location: The Library

Personal Log 4, Day 4, Mission 453-07-01, Code name "Waypoint".

This is Walker, signing in.

Chaplain seems to be putting on appearances of having a good mood to cope with his fear. I am currently recording this around the corner of a shelf, as the entity seems to have temporarily disappeared. Our progress had been good up to this point, and I have decided to turn back now, before something happens that compromises the mission. Chaplain has just said something, I will continue this log in a moment.

Chaplain? Status?

Where am I? Who the fuck are you? (*This is confirmed to be Agent Chaplain's current voice*)

Chaplain! Turn around!

RUN GOD DAMMIT CHAPLAIN!

SHIT!

(*At this point the recording continues for several hours, with various noises identified as tearing, gurgling, and an unidentified voice speaking in an unknown language going on in the background.*)

Excerpt from Team Surveyor Records. Mission 453-07-1. CO Comments.

I'd just like to get it on the record why Chaplain and Walker were chosen for this mission.

There are multiple agents that we have that are much more qualified to go into The Library and get intel on it. However, none of these agents were deemed expendable at the time of assignment and due to Chaplain's rookie status and Walker's has-been status, they were natural choices for an expedition in there. Our records indicate that they did much better than we had hoped and our retrieval team managed to recover almost all of their documents and their logs. Of course, all they could find of their bodies was a green film that covered the retrieval area and several severed limbs. Their bodies are being kept in indefinite stasis until we can guarantee that they are completely back in them. Hopefully this will be soon but for now I will be expunging this whole thing and making it Level 3 Access Only, on a need-to-know basis. We will be conducting tests on their bodies in stasis momentarily, and it seems there is some evidence that Chaplain may have made it back. I will be investigating it personally when I return.

This log was created by Commander Arnold Baker. Commander Arnold Baker was KIA during the containment breach of SCP- . This breach is attributed to Serpent's Hand operatives.

Deep within a Foundation site, a button was pressed, a tube opened, a body fell out and collapsed to the ground. The air chilled and mist began to flow everywhere.

"Jesus. It worked… Who the fuck are you?"

Agent Chaplain looked up through the clearing mist at the man standing above him.

"Welcome to the Resistance, Agent Chaplain."

A Lovely Day in the Garden

It's a beautiful summer's day.

I walk through my greenhouse, taking in the scent of flowers, admiring my wonderful plants; tall, slowly aging shrubberies, pretty little rosebushes; one or two exotic looking ones that must have been imported from outside the country somewhere, but that I got here for an amazing deal. And of course, my beloved hybrids. My friends thought I was absolutely mad to try it; grafting cuttings from so vastly different types. But with love and care, here they are.

I take a few minutes to tend to my lovelies; some food here, a little water there, a bit of pruning; Leaves tend to grow so fast, and I can't stand my plants looking so- dishevelled. I get water in my boots when one of them overflows a little; I give it a playful little smack, and it droops a bit. Maybe I hit it too hard. I notice that the restraints on one of the shrubs (Plants need to stand tall and proud, don't you think?) seem to be cutting into the bark; I loosen them, and sap trickles down, and I can almost hear it let out a sigh of relief. There are clear marks left in the wood, but now that the ties are looser, they should heal and fill back out. I move on.

I let out a gasp as I see that one of my beautiful rosebushes has started to wilt. It was one of the ones I took a cutting from to make a hybrid, and the stump of the branch looks like it's starting to mould. Not wanting it to spread to any others, I decide to take it out and give it a proper sending-off. As I bury it in the back field, I can almost hear it whimpering at me. So many of my lovely plants seem to end up out here, despite my care and attention. I have a good supplier, so my greenhouse is never lacking in beauties, but it still breaks my heart every time I come out here to the field.

When I go back to the greenhouse, I make a beeline for the back room where I keep my hybrids; they're very susceptible to infection, so I need to make sure that that rosebush didn't indirectly harm any of her fellows. I come to the door and breathe a sigh of relief; they all

seem to be doing well.

It's almost an art form, what I do. I love to experiment with different combinations, and I can't help but have a little fun while I do it; the one closest to the door is half blueberry bush, half strawberry, split right down the middle; of course, it didn't survive the process. After it died, I let it dry outside in the sun, then wrapped it in plastic wrap to protect it from the moisture in the greenhouse, and now I mostly keep it there as decoration. The one next to it is the result of taking all the branches off an old spider-plant, and grafting the branches from a young apple tree in their place; it looks lovely, but it can barely support itself, even with the ties. There are a few others, but my prize is what I like to call 'The Chimera"; multiple graftings from several different sources; rosebushes, berry bushes, shrubs, all on the trunk of a small pine, which I stripped of all its branches. Miraculously, it's managed to survive for two weeks. Of course, due to its nature, I wouldn't give it much longer.

But I can't bring myself to feel bad; I can make plenty more hybrids. I'm in a spending mood, so I make a mental note to remind myself to call my supplier for few additions to my garden.

And of course, it truly is a beautiful day.

A Man At the Top of His Profession

1985

Sometimes, when he was feeling particularly ungrateful, Doctor Glut wondered why his younger, redheaded wife had married him, and theorized that it might be because of some kind of father complex, troubled past, or undiscovered psychological issues. Today, however, he was simply trying to enjoy her loving stare, and attempted to push all confidence issues (that's what he thought was probably the real problem, a lack of self-esteem that made it hard to believe that anyone as gorgeous and intelligent as she would want to be with a slob like him) and just enjoy the dinner. The kindness emanating from Antoinette was directly counterbalanced by the sullen heat baking off his glaring son, a tiny Asian adopted boy glaring through a lock of black hair, which was why he was not all together saddened when his buzzer began beeping.

"I'm sorry Antoinette, it's a wonderful meal, but I have to go. Business at the base."

"Okay, but try to be back as early as possible," she said coyly and winked, and the boy made a rude gagging sound. He was furious at his son, who for the last couple years he become resentful for almost completely unexplainable reasons, but still a small smile played across his lips; yes, at least for tonight, he thought he could stop worrying about what he had done to deserve her.

"So what do we have here?"

"Some kind of creature resembling, according to the eyewitness reports, a 'lizard hog with gigantic horns' was rampaging through the building, breaking through each room, really knocking down the walls themselves with its head."

"I see," said Doctor Glut, not really listening. The event itself wasn't

his line of work.

They both walked quickly and surely through the motel, which was divided into smaller sections by hanging plastic sheets. Doctor Glut was a man in his fifties, with greasy black hair streaked with gray, and a lab coat that hung over his potbelly. As they moved towards the person he was supposed to deal with, Doctor Glut pulled on an extremely thick black leather glove that went up to his right elbow.

He shoved aside the curtain and stepped into a tiny area framed by similar tarps. A light on a stand glared brightly at the man tied to a chair. Doctor Glut crouched and looked him in the eyes.

"What did you see?"

"Some kind of monster. Look, *it bit a guys legs off,*" he whispered empathetically, looking fearful and asking for sympathy from the Doctor through his eyes. Doctor Glut shook his head slightly, little more than a twitch, and then briskly moved to one of the tarps, holding it aside.

"What's behind this one?"

One of the soldiers, dressed in black and wearing a gas mask, replied, "Well, when the site received structure damage, several walls separating rooms were knocked down. That hole leads into a bathroom."

Doctor Glut grabbed the man, cut the ropes, and pulled him out of the chair, dragging him away.

"Sir, this is your work area. You're not supposed to leave it. We're really short on space."

Doctor Glut disregarded him and turned sideways, working his way into the bathroom. Forcing the man to kneel, he plunged his face into the toilet with his leather-clad right arm. The man struggled, but Doctor Glut continued to force his head down as he gurgled, and choked, and struggled, flailing madly, drinking in the dirty water and screaming whenever his mouth left the surface for a few seconds. Doctor Glut pushed his hardest, holding him steadily under for a

good amount of time, and then wrenched him out, the man's wet hair flinging around his terrified face.

"No, you saw nothing."

The sensory deprivation chamber was completely dark. It seemed to be a very large area, narrow but with a high ceiling like a chapel or tower, because when the door opened, a long thin crack of bright golden light appeared in front of the man. There was the sound of a scraping chair, and then the room became completely illuminated.

"Hello, Jason," said Doctor Glut, staring intently at the man in front of him.

The man, amazingly, smiled and piped up, almost perkily, "So you guys are like the men in black or something? And now you're just going to delete my memories! I knew you guys and all that stuff was real. That's why I was watching the sky when it flashed on by."

His stubbly face was actually grinning with awe, his fringe beliefs validated. "Even though I won't recall any of this, it's still cool that I experienced it. So how are you going to do it? Like a flash of light or an injection or something?"

"I'm afraid not, Jason."

Jason Strobixzek began to scream.

There was the sound of bone hitting meat, thrashing, and someone yelling out and falling to the ground. The door opened and Doctor Glut walked out, massaging his hand, and adjusting the large ring with a sharp gaudy gemstone speckled with blood and pieces of a man's lips on it.

"What is William Gun's cover story that the guys created?"

"He slipped and fell into a lake," said a specialist standing near by and watching the beating, "And almost drowned. All he is to remember is thrashing and bobbling up and down. Nothing about the tentacles…or the… mud creatures."

"Ah, well, I think you're going to have to modify it a little bit so he was thrown into the lake, Benjamin. Like a group of kids… beat him up or something…", he said, trailing off and crackling his knuckles nastily.

One of the guards said, "Administering a Class A Amnestic, Doc?"

"Yeah, that's right." he said ruefully.

"So what, it's all a lie?" asked Doctor Qalet, as they walked down the hallway to their prospective jobs.

"Look, no one knows everything. You probably have a secret about the Foundation's inner workings that I don't have, and I know stuff that would make your toes curl. It's just, no one can possess too much information. For their own safety. So we create these half-truths, to make things sound gentler, more humane. So people have pieces of the troubling stuff we do, but never the whole picture. They don't have to get their hands too dirty or feel too guilty. We divide the… the sin… amongst ourselves."

"I take it the injections are one of these 'half-truths.'"

"Yes, the mind… The mind is much more complicated then that. A simple syringe isn't the perfect solution. Okay, most of the amnestics in our possession can muddle the ability to form new memories and block out some of the more recent ones, true, so sometimes they're useful, but ninety percent of SCP-civilian contact is over a long-term time period. That's a fact. They don't just bump into them and then go about their merry way. We can deal with that type easily. But some objects become ingrained. Lives are changed by them, communities form around them, beliefs are created. How would a simple chemical choose which of these memories in a long chain of them to block? It's much too intricate and convoluted. So what we do is we sit down with them. Talk to them. And then we brainwash them…

"Gulag style… Okay? We don't have the wonder drug. It's a myth to make scientists sleep better at night. So they can write it up in their reports, a shorthand term for a very long and arduous process. So

they can order the torture and desecration of civilians without knowing that's exactly what they're doing. Just another part that's hidden, secret."

"What exactly is a Class A Amnestic, then?"

"Class B and C are good for recent memories. Some times it can go without a hassle. But Class A… Class A does absolutely nothing. It's a mild sedative, Muhammad. That's all. A mild sedative that the scientists give them, that calms the people down. Its looks like they're forgetting, or emptied out, but they're just stoned for a couple seconds. But it makes the scientists feel better and they think that the civilians will get to continue their normal everyday lives soon. That it's all over for them. So they send them to us, thinking its just the tying up of a few loose ends, some paperwork to get written down, some orders to be looked over, finalized, and approved, not the beginning of the real process. But that's what it is. The start. Not the end, because its not just a one day thing, in and out. Sometimes they stay with us for months, years… The researchers and level four personnel think they're sending them to the exit, to be checked over, but really, we take them somewhere else… for a very long time."

Muhammad Qalet was very quiet for the rest of the way down the hallway. They stopped by a thick metal door. "Well here's my office… I have some business to do now." He cast his eyes down, and then looked up. "I hope I haven't unnerved you too much… But you wanted to know. And I think you need to understand… It's just, we don't have the technology yet. When you analyze the problem, everything is so primitive in reality. Nothing's as advanced as we think it is. Consider a rocket ship. Sounds so futuristic, doesn't it? But it's just a metal tube with a silly ancient explosion that's been around for hundreds of years coming out of the bottom. Nothing special. Just like our methods. Not impressive at all. Not some highly ingenious pill or liquid… just a well aimed strike with a hammer to the forehead. "

With that he threw the hatch open and entered. His office was a small, dank, modern-day dungeon. An emaciated man was chained to the wall. "Well hello there, Mr. Kynosiky! Have you come to the conclusion I arrived at yesterday? That you're insane? And imagined the whole thing?"

The starving bag of bones whispered, "It's all very fuzzy."

"Well, that's a start! Come stand up. Get up, get up! We have some exercises to do."

Doctor Qalet stared in horror and fought back the powerful urge to cry out in dismay. He fled the scene quickly, attempting to push it out of his consciousness. He succeeded, because sometimes you don't need strange scary men in black to wipe out memories with fire and heat and whips and mind games… Sometimes all that is necessary is a convenient lie or an overwhelming guilt complex that can't be solved.

Sometimes forgetting is very easy.

Doctor Glut produced a well-used handkerchief and wiped at her face. It was well-used, because frequently in his line of work he had to clean off spittle running down people's chins. A lot of his treatments tended to create drooling.

He poked with the thin needle, which had a current of electricity running from the boxy machine down the wires attached.

"Cindy, you moved into the city when you were 22 years old. When you arrived you found a job as a cashier at a small grocery store."

The women mumbled her agreeance groggily. "That's right, isn't it. Now it says here you want to eventually make your way to California." He poked her again. She twitched slightly. "Well guess what, that's exactly what your goal is. You're saving up money to become an actress! You'll probably have enough soon too." He picked up another pin and poked two at once. There was a crackling sound and a little bit of blood exploded on his face. "Dammit, turn down the voltage, Jim." The man fiddled with a few dials and buttons, then picked up a large syringe with an extremely thick needle. "Inject her in the left cortex." Jim didn't have to pierce bone, skin, drill a tiny hole, or go through her nose or back of the neck into the spine, because the top of Cindy's head had been sawed off and removed. Doctor Glut lifted up the electric pin again and poked at her slightly burnt frontal lobe.

"The only thing is… You can never visit your family again, Cindy. You got in a very big fight with them, okay?"

Doctor Glut walked down the sidewalk, enjoying the fresh breeze, staring down at his boots and the cracks they moved over. He only barely noticed the bicyclist speeding his way, and threw himself to the side. The bicyclist, apparently distracted by something, skidded, and tipped over, moving a couple knee scratching, skin grinding feet before coming to a stop. "Are you all right?" Doctor Glut asked, but the man avoided his extended hand, and got up slowly, not looking in Glut's eyes, like he was in a daze. He got on his bike silently and sped away.

To Ryan Glut he looked strangely familiar.

Doctor Glut entered the room to check up on Jason, to see how the process was working. The man's eyes spun madly in their sockets, he clawed at phantoms in the air, and screamed about incoherent colors. "Well then, the mixture of LSD and other hallucinogens seem to be working fabulously," said the brainwasher to his colleague. "It all fits together… Crazy guy living alone, believes in conspiracies, grows a little marijuana in his basement, wears tie die shirts… And then, one day, he overdoses on drugs and runs through town screaming about a gigantic plane covered with feathers in the sky. What else are people going to think?"

"Can we purge his system then?"

"No… other people may not believe him but that's not good enough. By the time we're done with him he wouldn't believe himself."

"Sir?"

"Because he can't, he wouldn't be able to. We'll have destroyed his mind. You know, when we're finished. When we're done, even without the acid in his system, he'll do nothing but gibble and garble. It's truly going to be one bad trip…"

…

"Increase the dosage."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes… positive. Drop it in liquid form directly into his eyes. And for god sakes make sure the restraints are tight. Jessica still has claw marks on her cheeks. And when you're finished…."

He peeked halfway out of the door. "Strip him down and put him in the woods near his hometown."

"Would you like anything?" the girl at the register said as she scanned the last object, a carton of eggs, and began blowing a bright pink bubble of gum. "No, that will be all, thank you." He looked up from his wallet and handed her his card. The desert town was partially structured around the military base, so Foundation credit got him a discount here. "Wait… You remind me of someone. Have we met before?" he asked, smiling, casual. Her response was odd: she averted her gaze and looked away. "No," she said, almost whimpering. "Are you sure…? I mean I'm just struck by the most powerful sense of deja vu…" He trailed off. She still didn't change her odd behavior. "Okay," He picked up the two brown paper bags. "Well, I just thought… You know, maybe you have a sister or something?" he said awkwardly, and then left without waiting for her to answer the question.

The rest of the day he was very troubled.

"Why did this happen to me?"

"I don't know. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometime the world gets a little weird for no reason. People occasionally… just fall through the cracks of reality, of society, and strange things happen for no reason… It can't be helped."

He allowed himself a moment of weakness and patted the man on the arm. "Can… you hold my hand…" the man said with tears in his eyes, "While you guys do whatever you're going to do. Or just talk to me. And have a conversation."

Doctor Glut blinked. "I'm scared," the man said.

"No… I can't… We can't talk."

"Why?"

"You'll bite your tongue off," he said and then leaned forward and put the block of wood between the man's teeth.

All the faces were a blur, all causing the same sense of deja vu. They all danced with memories just behind his recollection. And he swore they all had the same shadow of recognition behind their vacant dead eyes. Speaking of which…when had people become so zombie-like lately? Had he missed something? Now it seemed everyone around him was staring off into space, walking and jerking like automatons, or speaking in emotionless monotones. Going about the motions. Not living life… Or was he just being critical? Was there something wrong with the economy, something that caused a lot of stress or worry or something? He worked in the government sector… So… He truly realized just how isolated he was from popular culture. There could be some phenomenon that just recently starting affecting these people, but he wouldn't know. It would never affect him. He looked around on the small downtown street and saw only blank expressionless masks. That still caused something to go off in his brain.

A man walked in front of Ryan on accident. They struggled foolishly, he would go one way, and so would Glut. Back and forth, both trying to get by, Doctor Glut with a silly grin on his face. When they finally worked it out, (Glut had to lightly put his hands on the man's shoulders) Glut's smile at the absurdity of it faded… The man had almost been in tears.

Regaski's teacher had called him in; the boy was misbehaving in class, acting up, getting in fights, and not doing his homework. The teacher, an intelligent, slim-looking black man, seemed disconnected through the whole interview, and finally ushered him out of his office without anything really being solved.

He noticed a lot of people made mistakes around him. Little slips in grammar or syntax… Almost as if they were nervous. Some even subconsciously slipped into old accents or languages.

He was almost sure he had spent a lot of time with this one sexy looking number in a jogging suit, running down the trail. He stopped her and she looked ready to bolt, her entire body stiff and erect. He asked if they went to high school or grew up in the same town or maybe even if she was a maintenance worker at the base or something. She chatted pleasantly but in a detached and halting manner with him as long as he wanted… But he got nothing… And when she left he had noticed a few drops of blood on the ground. She had been clenching his hands together so tightly she had punctured the skin with her long painted nails.

---

25 years earlier

A much younger Doctor Glut, with longer pure black hair and a slightly oily face, with a splash of remaining acne held his hand gently to the pretty girl's chin, feeling her smooth pale skin and forcing her to look at him. She had green eyes and straight strawberry blond hair, and was like a skittish little animal. His eyes moved over her childish body somewhat lecherously. There was something horribly perverse about the scene.

Her eyes were solemn.

"Just repeat after me and everything will be fine."

A contraption was drilled on his head, a miniature portable MRI, that swirled and beeped around his skull. Doctor Glut glanced at the screen showing the brain illuminated with different colors.

"Now, Chris, pick up the phone." Speaking through a microphone.

Chris slowly picked up the phone and said in a drugged voice, "Hello?"

An insanely happy tone came out of the other end and said, "Mr. Black, you've been hired. You'll need to pack up your bags and move immediately. We have a great future ahead of you."

"Okay."

A part of the brain turned bright red. Glut pushed the button, and the machine began to spin faster and then zapped it.

Extract from the The Handbook of Black Ops Mental Conditioning 1992 Second Edition, Written in Part by Doctor Glut, Doctor Synclaire, and Doctor Smithchrist

Much like in psychology, when a patient can develop strong displaced feeling for his counselor, a civilian can achieve a strong bond as well, in a much shorter time, due to the fact that we control their food, water, and interaction. As an infant is dependent on its mother, the patient is dependent on us. The shattering of the ego and the complete mastery over all their necessities sometimes means that the new personality can form around the brainwasher. Often in this view, the conditioned will hold the manager of the procedure in awe, and subconsciously elevate them to a godlike level. Now this can take the form of extreme sexual attraction, grudging respect that turns into worship, and even a puppy like cringing and urge to please, which is of course initially faked but becomes real over time. Of course, such sentiments can also go in the opposite direction….

"Thanks for the paper, Jase."

"Hey no problem Mr. Glut!" said the retarded man, grinning stupidly like a dog at the compliment. Jason had been delivering papers for years and on this fine day when Ryan mowed his lawn and his neighbor, the gaunt Mr. Kynosiky chattered amiably but distractedly as he hosed his flowers, Ryan felt he deserved to have it mentioned. Deserved his loyalty to be remarked upon.

Suddenly, a cold chill shot down his spine. It wasn't the fine mist of the hose that Mr. Kynosiky had accidentally aimed his way (god

couldn't that man focus a little, he never seemed to have his head on straight) or the sudden gust of wind that made a couple of the papers in Jason's bag rustle away (he didn't bother chasing after them; the boy was really simple, he would have had a hell of time running after one little sheet and probably get hit by a truck, so why bother) but the thought that hit him in an instant. "Oh god, not him too."

Ryan felt very dizzy and went inside. That night he loaded his revolver, although he didn't quite know why.

When there was a crashing sound downstairs around 4:00 a.m, Glut jumped up immediately and grabbed the gun from under his pillow. He was ready for this; he wanted something. Something to rage at, something visible and tangible to fight, not this vague sense of creeping unease he had been dealing with. He ran downstairs, spinning the chamber aggressively, flicked the light, and exploded vengefully on his dew-wet lawn. It was only kids, and he lowered his gun disappointedly. He didn't even bother to shout them away.

Three of them sprinted away, some laughing mischievously, some frightened out of their wits and afraid that they were going to go to jail forever for throwing a rock through his window, but one collapsed to the ground at the sight of him, framed in the porch glow, and began twitching, having a seizure. Glut shoved the pistol inside his pajama pants waistline and ran towards the boy. The little child was frothing at his mouth and his limbs were jerking spasmodically. Glut ran with him inside and laid him on a counter, the tiny body bouncing up and down dangerously. He reached to call an ambulance, and then it echoed in his mind:

"If you ever think about what happened on September 15 again, you will fall to the ground. You will jerk and twitch. You will die. It hurts so much. It pains you to remember."

The urge to to reach the hospital was gone. Instead he called Line 5.

Doctor Glut meandered without reason in the center of the small shopping mall, bored and looking for something to do to pass the

time while he was on leave. If a workaholic felt purpose and fulfillment only at his normal job, and was considered slightly disturbed or wrong because of this, what would that make him; he who was workaholic at an abnormal job, who only found fulfillment while operating racks and damaging minds. A sadist? Would he seem a complete monster in comparison? Or was it all the same, a driven man was a driven man regardless of his job; the difference in work had absolutely no bearing on the final viewpoint and judgment of him, at least in that respect. Everyone had to do something after all. Glut thought about this philosophical question as he browsed halfheartedly for a gift for his wife. He really had nothing better to think about… And maybe because of this lack of turbulence or occupying problem on his mind, maybe because of the relative dullness of the environment he was in, or maybe just because enough time had passed for it to click, he saw it. The pieces of the puzzle came together. And it drove him mad.

"No," he whispered, realizing the terrible and unexplainable pattern.

The man over there trying on coats; he had only to restrict food and keep him in solitary confinement before he developed Stockholm Syndrome and became easily pliable. The old lady by the decrepit mini-golf course, he had to break almost every bone in her body. She was a stubborn bitch, refusing to give up her beliefs. The younger chap down by the food court had been so disturbed when Glut walked in, showed him the report that proved what he saw was true, agreed with his story, and then shoved it in a small slot and burned it. It bothered Glut too, that control of what was real or not. He had got it from 1984 and instilled the mechanism that next day after reading it. It was one of his most effective techniques. The hunched broken looking lady with stringy hair… oh god… He had destroyed her slowly, formerly a proud sensual older woman, with insults and tricks and false compliments. Everyone in the mall, at one point in his life, was someone he had brainwashed. Oh god. Oh god! Everyone in the entire town too?! Could it be possible? He thought so… After all, he was a man at the top of his profession… He must have worked on thousands. More than enough to fill a small town in the middle of nowhere. Day in and day out, laboring endlessly. And no wonder he didn't realize it right away, with so many successes how could he remember each face? They trickled

in anyways, one by one, blending in… It didn't spring on him all at once.

He was now running, frantically, wildly, towards the entrance of the store. He burst out and tripped over a curb, falling to the ground, splayed out and moaning. They gathered around him but no one helped. He realized now why he could never connect with anyone, why he had no friends. They weren't really there, the people around him. He had shattered them. They were missing something, and he was the one who had stolen it.

"No!" He gurgled and jumped up, sprinting to god-knows-where, just trying to outrun the thoughts that he knew deep down were true. But why? He asked in a shrieking voice. Why was this happening to him?! Some conspiracy, he thought, paranoia overwhelming him. The Foundation was trying to break him down, shun him out of his own department that he had helped create years ago. It was a power play, a gambit. But, no, that wasn't it. Impossible. It was too risky. Alter every single file so their cover stories all have them moving to his home town? Someone would notice that big of a change. And too dangerous. Their conditioning could break down. It was certainly already failing. The weird looks he got. The flashbacks he saw going on like movies behind their brows. The boy, oh god the boy. No, the Foundation wouldn't risk the possibility of having secrets escape, come to light, just to destroy him.

It was some cosmic joke, he decided, madly, uncomprehending and fully understanding at the same time, realizing the basic inexplicability of it all and giving in. Random occurrence that happens from time to time. Bad luck my friend. Maybe there was some karma involved, some punishment, retribution for his years of darkness, an ironic hell, but he thought, as much as he could think at that point, that it was just some scrapping away of reason and cause and effect and the chaos that was the true world had seeped in, fucking up his life for absolutely no reason. It came back to him: *"Sometimes people just fall through the cracks of reality,"* he had said.

And that's what he was sure had happened to him; the sane world just left him behind for no clear logical reason.

The car screeched and hit him, sending him flying. He caught the eye of the driver - his body was probably still trying to deal with the massive amounts of hormones he had put in his bloodstream, and his arm looked bent and knobbly, had he broken it, he couldn't recall… And he saw it. He knew him. His pasty teenage face curdled in shock.

He knew him.

"He sees me!" Glut screamed in his head incoherently and began crawling, twisted leg behind him, snot and blood and tears running down his face. He finally realized where he was going. His home. His gorgeous, happy, peaceful tiny little home, with the kitchen where he and his wife read together and played games, the quiet study, seemingly entirely composed out of dark, supple, delicious-smelling leather, where dust became motes of light incarnate, the basketball court where he tried and tried again, a labor of love, to earn that suspicious boy's trust, the bedroom where he learned to be proud of his body as his aroused wife sprayed herself across him, erasing years of embarrassment and shame in one glorious moment, all the little niches and crannies, each one with an equal amount of comfort, safety and softness everywhere.

He just wanted to go home.

But there was a darker purpose as well. He had to see. He had to see if the last refuge, the sacred, had been infiltrated and sullied by the encroaching insanity. He stumbled through the door and collapsed onto the ground. His wife screamed and ran towards him, kneeling down and putting her arms around him frantically, asking in a panic, "Whats wrong, Ryan?! Jesus! Ryan!" Her voice was high and wavery.

He turned his head away and buried it in her thick red locks, sobbing like a small child. He pushed his face further into the sweet smelling hair and clutched at her body in comfort.

"Please let this at least be pure. Let it be true. True love. I have… I have nothing else. If this is all an illusion, this marriage, this relationship, I will have nothing left."

Nothing came to him for a moment, and he almost breathed a sigh of relief. But then it came back. Sure it took him a little longer… she was his first after all, but eventually it resurfaced.

It came back and he was lost. Of course she loved him! How could she not? He was an imposing figure in her mind, an authoritative father god in the background of her every thought. He was terrible and majestic. No wonder she was always so amorous and horny around him. No wonder she always agreed with him and took his word as law. He wasn't a human to her, he was an archetype! He had mastered her as a child… Reduced her… Diminished this brilliant, gorgeous human who could have done something for the world. Destroyed her. She had left college for him, studying to be a lawyer, the moment they bumped into each other. Like she had been waiting for him her whole life. And she had… He had came to her, all-knowing as a little girl, and thirty years later he had reaped what he had sown.

He bit a piece of his tongue off when he shouted in dismay. He pushed her away in disgust, but at himself or her he did not know. He staggered drunkenly, eyes huge and bloodshot, froth like a mad dog running down his face as he mumbled and screamed at himself, and he groped at his last chance for salvation. Or was he just uncovering the final revelation as soon as possible to make the destruction of his mind faster? Either way he had to know, empty cold curiosity overwhelmed him. He opened the safe and took out his son's adoption records. He had to know if he had raped his own child.

Glut, wearing an open throat shirt that flapped around him gently and a hat, stared into the rice fields as the ship glided across the top of the river. The long wooden vessel stopped rowing near a patch of mud and Glut got out, walking between reeds in the exotic locale. The agent nodded at him respectfully and said, "I'm glad you could come."

"It's not a problem. I was in the neighborhood. What seems to be the situation?"

"Over here."

They walked for a little bit through the tiny village and the agent said, "A bunch of schoolchildren. In that school house over there. They saw something they weren't suppose to. For the last couple weeks, their teacher has been showing them… Well… They call it magic."

A scientist with goggles and a charred sleeve on his lab coat standing by a totem in the town square walked up to them. "Why can't we just use a Class A Amnestic? I know we don't have any on us, but why did you cancel my order for a boxful to be delivered here, Kramar?"

"Amnestics are notoriously unreliable," Agent Kramar said, sharing a private smirk with Doctor Glut.

Doctor Glut attempted a more diplomatic approach, and rested his hand on the man's arm. "It's unsafe to use Class A Amnestics on children. Too large an amount is needed. It could be deadly. So alternative methods are required." He said all this in a perfectly calm and reasonable voice.

"So what are you going to do then?"

"Don't worry Hans, he's an expert."

The researcher looked confused. "Like what? He's a SCP that's working for us or something? Does he have powers… Or hypnosis eyes…" He trailed off as they both left him behind.

"I hope this is all ethical!" Hans said, calling after them.

"Goddammit," whispered the agent in a sneering voice, "now because of him we're going to need to find a soundproof room."

"She was a witch. And she could conjure fireballs. And juggle them. It was amazing," said the boy, a shaven head rascal who looked like a miniature monk in his robes, unaware anything was wrong.

"Now, little one… Children… Children have active imaginations. You fantasize about things. You're notoriously unreliable. You can't trust yourself, okay. You have to only believe in what I say."

"I know what I saw, I say-"

Glut slapped him across the face. "Who's the adult here? Children are stupid! Children are silly. You are a baby. You make up games and they become too real and then you start believing in them. You were playing and it got out of hand. Don't trust yourself. Never trust your own mind. Question your thoughts, because they're always wrong! You're always wrong!"

It had begun.

When he came to from the blackout, his worried and frightened wife holding onto him tightly, cradling up his torso as he laid sprawled on the tiles, he was still laughing. A few seconds later he realized he couldn't stop.

A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men

Somewhere in the woods, Nazi-occupied Norway, 1944 . . .

Knock knock.

Benedikt Holzer rushed down the stairwell of the nameless manor. There was an unexpected guest at the door.

Knock knock.

Moonlight streaking through cracks in the barricaded windows guided Benedikt's every move. As the gears behind his eyes churned every faint beam of light became a laser of daylight, exposing every mine's outline and every ritual dagger's tip. His feet artfully dodged around the boobytraps and his hands rested firmly on the pistols in his pant pockets.

Knock.

His flow was disrupted. A foot slipped and he threw his body to the left before any limb could meet an explosive fate. There was the faint rustling of metal as his head slid into the barbed wire lining the railings.

Knock.

"I'm coming!" he shouted between spits of blood. Benedickt placed his hands on the railing's underside and pushed, tearing what was left of a face from the metal tangle. Before any blood and oil could stain his uniform he unbuckled a metal faceplate from his belt and strapped it around his face. It had no facial features, simply eyeholes. Luckily he had no need for a face these days.

He jumped down the stairwell for the last few steps and sprinted to the door. He flicked a switch by the handle and awoke the intercom system, leaning into a repurposed radio transceiver nailed on. He spoke.

Knock—

"Greetings. Could you identify yourself?" No normal person had any reason to waltz through the layers of security outside to visit a long abandoned mansion. No normal person would have lived to be knocking on this door.

"No need. I only have a few questions on your manor."

Gravelly voice. Fluent German. Old. A dispatch from Obskuracorps? A visiting warrior priest of the Thule Society? If either were the case, why had no message been delivered by command announcing so, and why would the messenger refuse to be identified?

"Sir, you will need identification—"

"Again, no need. Only a few questions and I will be leaving."

Benedikt unholstered a pistol and pressed the barrel against the door, finger gliding onto the trigger.

"If you insist. What questions do you have?"

"What is this place?"

"It's an old mansion once owned by ancestors of Minister President Vidkun Quisling. It has to be kept off limits due to structural instabilities." Both lies.

"I see. Do you know when it was built?"

"Some time in the 1800s." One of the last structures the Norwegian occultists of Nyrsigtuna ever built.

"Hmm. Now, have you realized I could sense your aetheric aura?"

"I— Would you please repeat that?" The gun barrel wavered.

There was a thunderous crack as the door burst inward, chunks of wood propelling into Benedikt's torso, gun spiraling far behind onto the marble floor. The air around his hands heated in a short-lived attempt at a thaumic counterattack before the bulky mass of the radio transceiver rapidly met his neck.

If no alarms had been triggered in the skirmishes with the perimeter guards then surely one would be triggered now.

Special Operative Josef strode over the bloodied wooden shrapnel and kneeled to inspect what was left of the door greeter. With a thick clay hand he plucked a flashlight from his Allied Occult Initiative-issued fatigues and shone it on the masked severed head.

"Are you still there?"

Gears pushed past layers of viscera and jutted out of the neck, jerkily rotating and wheeling over to the torso. With a series of clicks it fastened to the body, reheaded. The greeter jumped to their feet.

"Y-you're the golem of-"

"Of Prague, yes." He grasped onto the greeter's arms and clenched, feeling the metal bones soften like clay. "What is your name?"

"Benedikt—" Coughing. "Lower Priest Benedikt Holzer." The beheading had dropped his voice by an octave, now accompanied by a constant, faint sound of radio interference.

A Thule Society member. Josef was certainly in the right location, though that was clear from the moment he stepped into the intense aetheric energies surrounding the manor. "Benedikt, what has the Society been doing here?"

"We've been… experimenting."

Josef glanced at his surroundings. Decrepit neo-classical architecture drenched in sandbags, barbed wire, and any fortifications imaginable. On appearances alone Benedikt's claim didn't seem far-fetched. Enough documents had been found by the Foundation to suggest that the Thule were using the place to

develop an ersatz Key, a replacement for one of the mystical objects they needed to complete the Rite of Solomon and become the sole thaumaturges in the world. Benedikt wasn't telling the full truth, though.

"Is that why you have **Mekhanite** structures in your body?"

"M-mekhanite? No, the Aryan ancestors built far better—"

Megaphones through the room screamed their panicked alarms, rising and falling over and over before fading. Josef sighed. Interrogation had taken far too long. Interrupting a beginning pseudoscientific diatribe, Benedikt was beheaded again, with Josef forcing his hand through the torso's neck stump and stripping it of the connecting cogs.

"Reconsider how important you think Germanic peoples are," Josef said.

The floor-bound head jittered in response.

Doors at the top of the grand stairwell burst open to a chorus of gunfire. Obskuracorps soldiers clad in black fired down, riddling the ground with metal studs. Josef sprinted around the side of the stairwell and barreled through a set of doors to its left, tumbling into a long hallway. Above the glass shards of old ceiling lamps were dangling electrical lamps, providing the faint yellow light for him to spot the cthonian sigil traps etched into the floor.

It would have prevented a mess if Josef hadn't stepped into one as he barged in. He stepped forward but collided with walls of sulfur dust now encasing the sigil's edges. Holes to somewhere impossible emerged around his feet. Cyan tendrils lunged from below, wrapping around his limbs as he thrashed. The demon's wolf-like head rose up on a serpentine body and stared into his chiseled eyes. It growled.

Before it could open its maw the two tendrils encasing Josef's arms were torn apart. A holy water pack in his fatigues was just burst by the constriction. The demon screamed before Josef's fist tore through its jaw and down its throat, the other hand pulling out two

teeth for later use. With bursts of aetheric energy the demon's body solidified and crumbled into a cold dust. Exorcised.

Six seconds until the sulfur walls collapsed. An Obskuracorps officer barked by the door, likely ordering their platoon to fire the moment Josef exits. More than enough time to prepare. He holstered the teeth, brushed exorcised demon dust from his fatigues, grasped a grenade and pulled its pin. Four. Three. Two. One.

The sulfur shattered into glass-like chunks. Gunfire erupted. Josef hurled the grenade through a crack and kicked a chunk froward, grabbing several as they fell in slow-motion and arranging them in the air as a barricade. He rushed forth as an explosion tore apart the barriers and several soldiers. Bullets tore past his fatigues to hit his body, the small cracks in his clay form like the pricks of what he imagined a needle felt like.

He weaved around further sigil traps. A soldier clad in rusted chainmail lunged from behind and was swiftly knocked head-first into a trap, vanishing behind more yellow walls. Josef took cover, mentally blocked out the screams in the sulfur tomb, and thought. When the AOI had run undercover aether scans of the manor before he invited himself in they found the magical aura surrounding the area was the most intense around a large chamber in the far back. Now that he was past the entrance he could feel it wafting across his mind as well. To keep moving forward would bring him to his mission objectives and something dangerous. Something Thule and Obskuracorps should never have.

The door at the end of the hallway opened. An Obskuracorps Commander — face covered by a mask like Benedikt's though painted with far more runes — stepped out. Strapped around one hand was a leash that led to a skeletal thing. Bones surrounded by yellow flames, three magenta "eyes" staring intently at Josef, the ends of all six arms broken and replaced with assault rifles. The Commander tugged on the leash and jerked the beast's head, the sealing nails embedded in its spine thrumming in response.

Thule had learned how to control a demon.

All gun-arms opened fire, belching a burst of blackened bullets that

left dark scar-like trails through the air. Josef dodged. The bullets struck the sulfur walls of the trap once behind him and bent it like fabric. They pushed through to tear into the soldier's gorey remnants and the heads of the demon feasting on it, sucking the bodies inwards until they went inside-out and shrunk to fleshy motes. Ones stuck in the floor were still twisting its tiles in small marble cyclones.

"Bastard," Josef muttered.

For the first time since training he reached for the assault rifle — specially designed for his bulky hands — on his side and pulled the trigger. Bolts of thaumic energy launched from the barrel, fueled by the thaumaturgic potential of Josef's own body, arcing to the Commander's head. Their right arm split through their black uniform sleeve into three bronze limbs. Thaumaturgic shields projected from the hands. The bolts desperately whizzed around the iridescent barriers for a weak point but the arms moved too fast. All were blocked and absorbed as fuel.

Josef forced one last surge of energy into the gun. He plugged its barrel with a demon tooth and hurled the gun in a path that would bring it to the Commander. More bullets came from the soldiers by the hallway's start but now the only ones to care about were from the skeleton. He ran along the wall while breaking off wooden chunks, each meeting the projectiles and slowing their approach. More black trails snaked toward his feet. He jumped and threw a grenade that rolled ahead.

The grenade blasted the hallway's wall open. Josef dipped onto the grassy field outside, embraced the cool breeze, then dived back into the chaos under the veil of wooden debris plumes. The clogged gun landed behind the Commander and finally buckled under the pressure of the energy within it, incinerating itself and the tooth in a blue fireball. A metal arm twisted to block the inferno with a shield. Only two were left to halt Josef.

The two arms merged their shields and the Commander raised a glowing pistol, ready to fire the moment their defenses were lost. Josef retrieved the second tooth and stabbed it through the shields. He drove a foot down on it like a wedge. A gash tore through. He budged the two arms apart while twisting the other to cover the

Commander's gun. They fired. The bullet went nowhere. Once the shields vanished it only took a swift punch to force the Commander's gear guts out of their chest.

Leaving the body to gracelessly collapse, Josef spun to face the demon. It had stopped firing. Even the soldiers ceased their fire. Now that the fighting had lessened he began to notice the fine details along the skeleton's body. Carved illustrations of towns, depictions of warriors, commoners, children, all with a six armed skeleton. Runes spelling "defender" on its forehead.

The demon was never a malicious force. It was a guardian of this region, extant for far longer than Josef, Nyrsigtuna, or any modern occult group. This wasn't what it was meant for.

Josef retrieved the pistol from the coat of the presumably deceased Commander and — after breaking the trigger guard meant for human hands — fired a round at every sealing nail. All shattered with ease. Heat erupted from around Defender and each gun-arm shattered, replaced by normal arms manifesting out of thin air.

It stared. He nodded. It nodded back.

Josef left the hallway and closed the door, not a single soldier daring to fire. A few paces forward and he heard the faint screams of panicked soldiers running from a force their commanders thought they could control.

With every step into the dining hall turned weapons storage room the aether grew denser. Josef's movement continued as normal yet it felt as though he was wading through water, the thaumaturgic energy high enough that it repeatedly manifested itself in blue sparks that bounded about the crates of guns, miraculously not willing the explosives to life. His destination would be past the next set of doors.

He paused. He had a choice now. With much the manor's defense ruined he could leave, report on his findings to AOI Command, storm in with a full squad of thaumaturges, and finish the job. Time spent that could grant Obskuracorps precious time they needed for recuperation.

The aetheric sparks continued their dance, briefly spiraling into a circle around his head before dissipating yet again. Something in the chamber ahead began humming.

"Wise men foresee the consequences."

Josef walked forward and bashed through the door's locks. He stepped into the chamber.

JOSEF.

The High Priest's voice felt more akin to a hammer to the head than actual speech.

"Knowing my name isn't impressive."

Ancient relics were jammed into the center of the chamber: a celtic cross, bronze spheroids lined with mechanical arms, a broken statue of a four-armed being. Atop stood the High Priest. Stygian blue tendrils wormed around and between the cracks in the artifacts, melding into the priest's back to feed them with thaumic energies. It was the origin of the aura. It was a site to develop a new Key.

You have a Key of Solomon, Josef.

The High Priest raised his arms; one mechanical, the other whirling light. Their black robes and armor rustled as the aether billowed about their position atop the artifacts. To Josef the chamber felt more like a gaping abyss by the second.

Give the Key and I will let you live.

"You seem content making a Key for yourself."

Will you?

One was not enough for the Rite.

"Will you kill me regardless?"

That is not an answer.

Two swords launched off the floor and into the priest's hands.

"You already know what it is."

Every inch of Josef's hands became lined with glowing hebrew text.

Then so be it.

The High Priest shot forward, swords scarring the ground in a blaze of sparks. Harnessing the Key within him Josef spun the dense energies around his body and thrust to the side, attaining a brief weightlessness as he set his sights on the relic pile. With an aerial pirouette a second thrust sent him careening to the pile. The High Priest chanted. Dozens of flaming daggers appeared and entered pursuit of the golem. Josef's Key clicked and the gaseous forms of specters faded into being, assembling into a ring around his body. The daggers reached their prey only to vanish into undead hands.

Josef collided into the four-armed statue, cracking a limb off of it. The arm flailed as if alive. There was a flare of light. A spear of meteoric iron longer than any human rested where the limb once existed. Josef raised it high.

Before a new plan could be formulated the High Priest dived in. Both swords clatterred into the spear's sides, leaving not even a dent. The priest accelerated. Josef pushed back. Screams emerged from the spirits as they swirled around the priest, slowly disintegrating from the blue energies flaring all around. Cracks emerged in Josef's arms and nonexistent nerves seared. The air burst with heat.

Josef lessened his grip and fell backwards. The High Priest surged ahead, knocking the spear to the side, and he slammed deep into the pile. The stygian blue tendrils shredded themselves apart. The pile violently exploded. Fires and debris swept over Josef, evaporating his fatigues and liquifying any tools he had. Behind hellish flames the cross, spherical devices, and all else in the pile sank into a molten pit that bent the chamber floor into itself. He stumbled back, dragging the spear with him.

The great aura of the manor whisked away like dust in the wind. Any major thaumic powers Josef had were gone.

NO.

In a plume of liquid metal the High Priest, wreathed in robes of embers, emerged. His two swords were now white-hot liquid pillars yet they remained in his hands.

OF ALL DEATHS, ONE AT THE HANDS OF A STONE BARBARIAN WILL BE NAUGHT.

The priest soared to Josef. Both swords spun like wheels. Thrusts of the spear parried every attempted jab and Josef twisted it, stabbing into the priest's chest. Boiling blood trickled out.

NAUGHT.

The stygian blue tendrils returned, spilling from the High Priest's wound and stabbing through the spear, prying at its cracks until it shattered into seven-pointed fragments. His fist raised and Josef jolted into the air.

NAUGHT.

Duplicates of the swords emerged above Josef's chest, dripping metal across him. They all thrust in. The Key within his body churned within his insides and repeatedly bounded up. His mind screamed.

NAUGHT.

As more swords positioned above his head, preparing to gouge out the word of truth engraved on his head and erase his life, Josef heard a manic screech at the chamber entrance. In seconds the freed Guardian was upon the High Priest. Every magenta eye stared deep into their soul. Before he could react the Guardian had already carried them high to the air. Three skeletal arms punched into the priest's chest and exited on the other side.

I...

The fists phased out of the body and let it descend. Josef fell out of the air.

will...

The priest's mangled body landed next to Josef.

not...

A lance of magma grew from their shattered mechanical arm and raised over the golem. Josef pushed himself off the ground.

die.

A single punch was all it took to extricate the High Priest's mind from his head.

Josef strode across moonlit fields away from the burning manor. The embers released by the occult devastation had spread through the building's corridors, lighting the entire structure ablaze. The last Obskuracorps soldiers within scurried out of windows on the ground floor, lives far more important than what little was left of their research. He watched the burning over his shoulder. A crackle and the whole structure collapsed into a scaled-up bonfire.

The faint roar of tanks bounded over the plain from afar. The AOI was sure to be confused when they find their reconnaissance mission had turned into decimation. Josef would either be lauded for valiantly stopping experiments on Rite of Solomon components or sternly spoken down to by Command for breaking valuable artifacts and protocol. He didn't care which outcome it would be.

There was a yellow glimmer. Josef looked to see the Guardian standing the edge of the woods. It gave a last nod before its body dissipated into gasses that flowed into the surrounding trees and grasses. A flash of magenta from the wildlife and all was calm.

A Matter Of Faith

Barely visible in the cold dark before sunrise, rain fell softly onto the streets as dawn threatened to break on this abandoned neighborhood. The burnt-out streetlights once shone brightly in this place once full of families and friends, but only vermin and those who are regarded poorer than the vermin reside here now. In this bleak hour between day and night, a pale man staggered into a nearby building, a ratty tarp loosely hung over his thin frame as protection from the storm. To the casual observer, it would look as nothing more than a homeless vagrant stopping for a place to rest (or perhaps engage in less savory activities, depending on the observer's cynicism). But this building was not chosen at random. This stranger had purpose.

The heavy wooden door creaked loudly as the man entered and slumped to the ground, completely exhausted from his journey. He lifted his head and surveyed his environment. This decrepit old building was once a library, a proud institution of learning for all. But time and vandals had taken their toll on this place: books were scattered all over, torn to pieces; shelves were knocked over and walls either spray-painted or destroyed. A faint flickering glow illuminated a room to the back of the building, the only sign of civility in this otherwise emaciated husk of society. The man sighed a sigh of relief as he shakily stood up and cast off his makeshift coat, revealing a body near starved of care. Unkempt black hair fell wildly onto a gaunt, unshaven face, and his wire-thin body clothed only in a wife-beater tank top and dirty jeans appeared weak and feeble with the exception of his right arm, which appeared to be a richly intricate mechanism of gears and cogs made to resemble an arm that extended just beyond the shoulder. Steadying himself, the man slowly made his way to the back room and entered.

Unlike the rest of the building, this room was clean, if a bit wet from cracks in the ceiling. Candles nestled in each of the corners provided light for this building (the city had disconnected power from

this area years ago), and shelves once used for books had been broken down to create makeshift beds for weary travelers, upon which one man more impoverished than the stranger lay resting. In the center of the room lay a now empty brass bowl on a pedestal adorned with images of hammers and gears. At the far left corner of the room, an elderly gentleman sat reading a book at a librarian's desk, the only original piece of furniture well looked after. Not wishing to disturb the sleeper in the opposite corner, the stranger weakly called out, "F-father Williams…?"

The old man snapped his head up from his book and looked above his half-frame glasses to see who had called his name. With a warm smile, he beckoned the stranger to his desk and replied, "Alex! Come in, have a seat! You're always welcome here!". As Alex made his way to his desk, Father Williams noted that Alex's eyes were puffy and red, as though he had just been crying. Internally, Father Williams sighed sadly. He felt he knew what Alex had come to him for.

Alex pulled up a chair on the opposite side of Father Williams' desk and sat down. "Father, I…I…" was all he was able to mutter before breaking down into tears and sobbing. Father Williams waited patiently for Alex to finish, but inwardly he was not surprised. Alex had come to them at a low point in his life: no friends, no family, no home and near death. Father Williams remembered the day Alex was brought into their makeshift church, how his curiosity and fear fell away when he was enlightened by the scriptures of their Broken Lord. Father Williams knew Alex's spirit was strong, but even the most hardened souls are crippled by the Rebuilding, and even months later Alex's mind was still recovering from his baptism.

Alex sniffed and composed himself, wiping his eyes with his hands. He took a deep breath before attempting to speak again. "Father Williams, I need to talk to you. I have transgressed against our Lord, and I have had heretical thoughts that I don't want to have anymore. Please help me."

Father Williams paused for a moment, then spoke. "Alex, you are one of the most faithful parishioners I have ever come to know in my time as a priest for our Lord. Forgive my disbelief, but I find it unlikely that you have done anything to offend Him."

"I-I know, Father, and more than anything do I want to believe that. It's just…I…these thoughts…I…"

Father Williams extended his hand to calmly interrupt the young man's stammers. "I understand, Alex. Please, tell me what troubles you."

Alex took a deep breath. "Father, I have felt more at home in this church than I have anywhere in my entire life. The thought that our Lord loves me is a comfort unlike anything I've ever felt before. Our Lord God has done so much for me…" Alex trailed off and looked down in shame. Before Father Williams could reply, Alex spoke up again. "That is why I come to you now, Father. I know the texts say that He loves me, but…but why? Why would He love me? I am just some worthless bum who couldn't even handle the Rebuilding, so why…" Alex's voice trailed off into a whisper, "…why would He ever want me?".

After a moment of silence, Father Williams knew how he could convince Alex once and for all. "Show me your arm, Alex." Father Williams said warmly, extending his hand to take Alex's arm. Confused, Alex extended his right arm. Father Williams smiled as he said, "No, Alex. Your *other* arm."

Alex gently laid his clockwork arm onto the desk, and Father Williams carefully examined the brass limb. A beautifully constructed testament to the Lord, it was easy to forget that this was once a diseased, barely functioning appendage used only to imbibe toxic chemicals in a futile attempt to seek comfort from daily living. Alex was unclean, he needed to purify himself, and this arm had been the gateway to sin. Even now, the divine oil used to Rebuild Alex's arm (as well as the septic appendages for the other devout) was kept safely hidden in Father Williams' desk, ready to flow into the sacred basin in the center of the church to cleanse sickness.

Father Williams carefully considered the arm for a moment, then carefully removed one of the outermost gears. "There. Please try to move your arm, Alex."

The cogwheels in the upper arm moved as they always did, but the gears below the elbow stayed perfectly still, and the arm refused to

move. Alex began to panic as he desperately tried to lift his arm, the gears spinning madly in an attempt to produce an effect.

"Please, Alex, calm yourself." Father Williams said soothingly. Alex looked back to see Father Williams staring at the removed gear. "It is interesting, isn't it? How something so small can affect so much?"

Father Williams turned his attention back to Alex. "When we give our praises to our Lord, we are not simply worshiping a mindless machine that knows or cares nothing about us, despite what the heretics may think. Our souls, that which make us what we are, this is what we give to our God. He is not called 'The Broken God' because He is some robot that needs physical repair. He is called 'The Broken God' because each of us, our souls, are a missing piece of Him."

"And that, Alex, is why you should not fear to lose our Lord's favor, because just as you need him, He needs you. He loves you because you and He are the same in spirit. Just like He needs me, and He needs every one of us. You will never lose our Lord's love, because much like this gear and your arm, He cannot be without you. So when you are alone and fearing that you have nothing to give to our Lord, remember one thing:" Father Williams looked down and replaced the missing gear back into its socket, then looked back up at Alex. "That even something small is needed to make the whole complete."

Alex tried once again to lift his arm, and this time it moved as though nothing had happened to it. Alex looked at Father Williams for a moment, then smiled. "Thank you, Father. I feel much better now." Alex stood up, shook Father Williams hand and left, this time with a newfound spring in his step. Father Williams chuckled as he turned his attention back to his book, a text from an archaic religion that nevertheless had many good selections that evoked thoughts of his own Lord. That young man reminded Father Williams of himself when he was younger. Perhaps next time Alex comes to visit, he should bring up the possibility of joining their Church's clergy. In his book the old man found his favorite passage, which he murmured aloud to himself.

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under Gods mighty hand, that he

may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares for you."

A Memorandum

OFFICIAL ETHICS COMMITTEE	
From:	Dr. Adileh Khayyam, Site-43 Psychologist and Humanoid Anomaly Specialist
To:	Dr. Jeremiah Cimmerian, Ethics Committee Liaison
Re:	Harrassment of Dr. Scott Fletcher
Attachments:	18 files

Dear Dr. Cimmerian,

As an Ethics Comittee Liaison, you of all people should be aware of the stresses that Foundation personnel face when it comes to working with the anomalous and the conditions that they face on a day-to-day basis. That being said, despite the Ethics Committee's continual work to maintain a healthy organisational culture, the repeated claims of endemic bullying and harrassment continue, with one of the most striking examples of such a case being that of Dr. Scott Fletcher.

Attached is a log of a number of communications which I feel are demonstrative of the toxic culture currently being perpetuated with regards to the organisation of the Foundation as a whole. Dr. Fletcher is only one case, but his is one of the most significant

cases I have had during the past six months of my tenure at Site-43. While I have seen many cases of psychological trauma across my work at the Foundation, Dr. Fletcher's remains a significant case because of how emblematic he is of the problems Foundation staff face with regards to mental health and wellbeing.

Suffice it to say in my personal opinion that if this pattern of harrassment and mistreatment continues without serious intervention on the part of the Ethics Committee, Dr. Fletcher's case is only going to be one of many the Department of Psychology will have to deal with.

Kind regards,

Dr. Adileh Khayyam

Emails Recovered From Dr. Fletcher's Inbox

	r. Scott Fletcher
	esearcher Isaac McCormack
	ust saying hey.
	2th March 2015

Message

Hey Scott. Look, I know that you haven't been feeling all that well lately, but I just wanted to send this to you to let you know that we're all really hoping you'll get better soon and that the whole

team misses you here. I'm so sorry about what happened that day, and if you don't respond, that's fine. Just give me a call or something when you get back to work, and I'll buy you a drink, alright? Thanks.

From:	r. Scott Fletcher Senior Researcher Samuel organ cident - file (postincidentaffidavit.pdf) 2th March 2015

Message

Dear Dr. Fletcher,

Attached are the Incident Reports from 25/02/2015 regarding SCP- testing, including several sections of testimony you provided with regards to the breach that occurred. Site Director Daniels has requested your affirmation of the testimony you provided. Please fill out these forms and submit them by 26/03/2015.

Kind regards,
S. R. Samuel Morgan

	r. Scott Fletcher te Director Janet Daniels pplication of Leave (12/03/15) 4th March 2015

Message

Dear Dr. Fletcher,

Your request for leave has

officially been approved, effective from 15/03/2015 to 05/04/2015.

	r. Scott Fletcher
	r. Adileh Khayyam
	ounselling
	th March 2015

Message

Scott,

I know you probably won't read this until you come back to your office in a few weeks, but when you do get around to reading this, I want to talk to you. If you don't want to talk to me, that's fine, but I saw you in the hall a couple of days ago. To put it kindly, you really look like you need to talk to somebody. Whether or not that person's me, I don't care, but please.

Get better soon.

Adileh

	r. Adileh Khayyam
	r. Scott Fletcher
From:	Automated Mailbox Response
	ystem
	e: Counselling
	th March 2015

Message

Dr. Scott Fletcher is currently away on leave. He will return on the 5th of May, 2015.

Excerpt of Post-Incident - Analysis Report

…In this case, evidence would seem to suggest that D-11938 and Agent Ari Bayer were cooperatively responsible for the neutralisation of the anomaly formerly designated as SCP- . D-11938 and Agent Bayer's remains have been reinterred outside Site-43 following incineration to prevent possible contamination of the surrounding site. Given the negligence involved in the testing of SCP- with a lagomorph, Site-43 personnel have been issued a reminder as to the danger of careless testing with regards to biological anomalies. Senior Researcher Jill Richards has been disciplined for her involvement in the test and placed on a probationary period given her history with unnecessary testing…

…D-11938 is survived by her daughter, Eileen Cross, while Agent Bayer is survived by his husband, Dr. Scott Fletcher. A private ceremony for both individuals will be held on the 28th of August, with selected members of staff invited to attend alongside Dr. Fletcher and Ms. Cross.

Transcript of a Phone Conversation (27/03/2015)

Dr. Adileh Khayyam: Hello?

Researcher Alex Marshall: Hey, Doc.

Dr. Khayyam: Hi, Alex. Is this to arrange an appointment?

Researcher Marshall: Nah. I just wanted to check in with Scott.

Dr. Khayyam: What do you want to know?

Researcher Marshall: I wanted to know how he's been, you know?

Dr. Khayyam: He doesn't look well.

Researcher Marshall: Really?

Dr. Khayyam: Mister Marshall, to put this bluntly, I met him the other day at a restaurant when I was out on my lunch break. He bought a salad, didn't eat for the entire time I was talking to him and he left to go to the bathroom for about a quarter of an hour before he paid the bill. I would not consider that "healthy" behaviour.

Researcher Marshall: Um. Wow, that's a lot worse than I thought. It's just… the guys back at the lab are struggling to keep up with the work, you know?

Dr. Khayyam: I'm well aware.

Researcher Marshall: Alright then. Yeah. Just, uh, call me when he's gonna come back to work.

Dr. Khayyam: I'll let you know.

Emails Recovered from Dr. Khayyam's Inbox

_	r. Adileh Khayyam
_	ndrew Gerson
Re:	Checking in with you about a few escriptions (HIGH PRIORITY)
Attachment:	3 files (OCER_19_03_15_A.pdf, OCER_19_03_15_B.pdf, CER_19_03_15_C.pdf)
_	th of March, 2015

Message

Hey Adileh,

Found a couple of worrying things from a few patients of yours. Notably, this guy doesn't seem to understand the correct dosage of diazepam. He's come in a few days too early, says he's run out – did you change the dosage?

Could you get back to me with regards to whatever's going on here?

Thanks,

Andrew

From:	r. Adileh Khayyam Senior Researcher Samuel organ bsence 5th of March, 2015

Message

Dear Dr. Khayyam:

Could I ask you when we'll be expecting Scott back? I understand he needs time to grieve, but we're currently behind on about six weeks of anomalous item processing and several critical pieces of work with some memetic anomalies we need to close before they can continue to balloon further out of control. He's one of our primary specialists here at Memetics and his absence is felt heavily every day.

Please let me know ASAP when Scott will be available for work again.

Regards,

Sam

	ndrew Gerson r. Adileh Khayyam

Re: Re: Checking in with you about a
w prescriptions
th of March, 2015

Message

Hey Michael,

No, I don't think I've told him to change the dose. Thanks for letting me know: this could get really worrying really fast. I'm going to ask the Medical staff to have him transferred to the Medical ward full time, just in case.

Thanks,

Adileh

. Adileh Khayyam
sposable Account 20371
-33810] PASS THIS ON
th of March, 2015

Message

Hey,

You told me to get in touch when I could and you were right – I told Jake that you'd asked for me to get the laptop and he practically jumped out of his damn seat to get me one. Thanks for that.

First things first: I'm gonna really miss Gracie. She was one of the few vets they had in the barracks here and she was a goddamn great girl, all things considered. Had crazy shop talk, kept on smiling even when we were all

about to piss ourselves. A few of the other people here asked me to tell you that they wanted to say thanks for letting them go to the funeral.

Second: tell the doctor I'm sorry. I didn't know Ari, never met the guy myself, but I saw him crying that day.

I don't think anyone would cry that way over someone they didn't miss that much.

I think that's all I've got to say at the moment. I'll talk to you again next week when the guards let me on the laptop again.

---

r. Adileh Khayyam
ndrew Gerson
e: Leave
5th of March, 2015

Message

Sorry to bother you again, Adileh, but this Sam guy keeps picking on me whenever I tell him that "no, Scott's not coming back this week." Could you get someone upstairs to tell him to bugger off if he keeps asking? Thanks.

> **From:** Samuel Morgan
> **To:** Andrew Gerson
>
> Dear Mr. Gerson,
>
> A few of my colleagues have reported seeing Dr. Fletcher

outside of work. They mainly report that he looks like he's well-recovered from last week's shock, and I have no reason to argue against them. Could you please provide me with some more concrete evidence of his continued need to be on leave?
>
> Thanks,
> Samuel

Thanks for following this up, Adileh.

sposable Account 20371
r. Adileh Khayyam
e: [D-33810] PASS THIS ON
7th of March, 2015

Message

I'll try to get in touch with him the next time I get the chance. If I can arrange a meeting between the two of you, would that help?

ndrew Gerson
r. Adileh Khayyam
cking This Upstairs
7th of March, 2015

Message

At this point, I'm seriously considering filing this as a proper complaint to the Ethics Committee. I'm seeing "no reason to argue against it".

Technical Report (30th of March, 2015)

82931230

	gh ecurity Officer Malcolm Wethers
Complaint Site-43's temporary email account appears to have been disabled by Level 4 Command, despite no known order to disable the	
Response Hi Malcolm, Seems like the account got forcibly closed just yesterday under suspicion of memetic contamination, which is probably why you didn't get told about it. Have you checked the LASHLEY infohazard scans to see if there's any leftover memetic bugs in the email's inbox? There's a one in a million chance that it won't send an alert to the tech staff, though we're working on eradicating that bug once and for all. If it does turn out you fell victim to that particular glitch, I'd say you'd be best off going through the logs yourself. Alternately, you could file a Mishandled Shutdown Form (available here) to try and reactivate the account. Failing that, you're just going to have to wait for another few weeks while we get the email all cleaned out.	

Private Message Recovered From Dr. Khayyam's Inbox (31st of March, 2015)

	ndrew Gerson
	r. Adileh Khayyam
	h my god
	ed18_1130_1200.mp4

Message

Adileh, something's seriously wrong with Sam.

The man's been asking to prescribe pretty goddamn strong amnestics to Scott under suspicion of a "memetic infection", and the only way I could get him off my goddamn back was by telling him he could come to the group therapy session next week if he didn't believe me.

Could you send the attached security video to the Ethics Committee? Let's just say I have a strong feeling that if they get wind of this development they're not going to like Sam very much.

Andy

Disciplinary Report for D-33810 (1st of May, 2015)

	2382-10223
	arning
Notes:	D-33810 was reprimanded for causing a disturbance after being notified of several technical issues which had occurred earlier in the week. These technical issues led to the temporary suspension of her communication privileges, believed to be the

	reason for her erratic behaviour. As per standard disciplinary escalation, further disruptive behaviour should result in a revocation of such privileges.

Excerpted Security Feed Transcript (2nd of May, 2015)

[CAM FEED 8]

28:25: Alert sounds. Officer Wethers immediately moves to assist medical team. Member of medical team (Dr. Brooke Winters) warns Officer Wethers away.

28:28: Medical team enters Room 16 of the Medical Bay, hosting Dr. Scott Fletcher.

28:51: Dr. Winters exits Room 16 of the Medical Bay. Winters and Wethers converse for some time.

[CAM FEED 3]

28:53: Wethers attempts to converse with D-33810.

28:55: D-33810 appears to dismiss Wethers.

28:56: Wethers exits Room 3.

[CAM FEED 8]

29:01: Alarm ceases sounding.

29:02: Medical team exits Room 16.

<END TRANSCRIPT>

A Merry Fellow

Thomas Bailey awoke to the sun streaming in through his window. It was 25.6 degrees Centigrade outside, which considering the fact that he was in the Antarctic Circle in the middle of summer, it had no right to be. He rubbed his eyes and went up to the window, opening it and looking out at the streets of the Imperial City where his apartment was.

Below him, children from the Summer Court played in one of the many lichen gardens in the noble district. A flightless bird the size of a German Shepherd, which Tom recognized as an Imperial Auk (*Pinguinus impennis imperialis*) waddled through the streets on a leash, alongside a noblewoman who was wearing a robe with large, poofy sleeves with a green trim, and a pointed cap with some Penguin feathers in the end. Across the street, a courier from the Black Court ran along the walls of the apartments, being kept up only through sheer momentum (And possibly a Blessing). Couriers were only used to deliver eyes-only mail; they would use the telephone for anything like saying that his bills needed paying, or just send it through traditional mail if it was something like an advertisement. So, that meant the mail was for him.

Sure enough, the courier jumped the gap between the apartments- a good 10 meters or so- and sprang right through Tom's open window. The Bailey triplet only managed to get out of the way in the nick of time as the furred man landed on his bed like some form of panther. He was barely visible against the scenery of Tom's apartment, due to the fact that he wore Western Chameleon leather, which made him almost invisible.

The courier, a man named Da'ai the Swift, grunted in Antarctican, "It's polite to keep your window closed if you're expecting us.[1]"

"I like the view from my window in the morning," Tom replied in the same tongue, crossing his arms. "And I wasn't expecting you; what's

this about?"

"Directly from the Institute," grunted the Courier, handing him an envelope with the seal of the IIPES on it.

Tom took the letter and set it aside. It was impolite to open mail in front of a courier. The man coughed, holding out his hand; sighing, Tom surrendered 5 Imperials to the man."Da'ai, you know that you're not supposed to take tips."

"Think of it as a bribe, Thomas Bailey." The Black Courtsman pronounced it "Too-mass Balley". "You give me money, I don't tell anyone what was in the letter."

"…I'll leave my window closed next time," Tom said, stepping aside. Da'ai the Swift climbed out the window, onto the rooftop. Tom heard the man's footsteps run away as he sped off. "…showoff," Tom muttered, opening the letter.

Half an hour later, Tom was driving his 484 Saquah Speeder^2 down the streets of the Imperial City, looking around. He drove through the market district, where people pedaled next to him on bicycles, trying to sell him car insurance. Tom ignored them, and took some lichen from his car's snuffbox and chewed on it; it gave a feeling similar to tobacco, but it didn't give you cancer if you used it every day for 60 years. It may make your hair fall out, dye your skin purple and negate any Blessings you possess, but it won't give you cancer.

The radio in Tom's car started playing the Antarctican Anthem as he drove near the Palace, which was at the very center of the city. Tom never got tired of hearing it, despite the fact that he had lived here for the past three years; he suspected that it had a memetic property of some kind that kept it from being boring. The palace itself was carved from the bones of a giant… something that was called Sanak Thiuh, with the skull serving as the entrance. He'd always wanted to get a sample of it, but he'd be executed for vandalizing imperial property if he so much as touched an exterior wall without permission.

As Tom cleared the Palace, he pulled up to an Institute station, and

saw a speed bus was pulled up next to it. Exiting it were some more 'northern nobility', or as he knew them, Foundation researchers. He recognized a couple of them as being from 87, but other than that, they were fresh faces. They had probably just arrived from the zeppelin station[3], and one of the newbies- a horticulturalist- was bending over to inspect a flower. Said flower jumped up at her face and clung to her nose, where it began to suck the blood out. She flailed around while some Blessed medics tried to pull it off her face, one of them stunning it and the other healing the wound on her nose.

Newbies, thought Tom, shaking his head and heading into the Institute's main entrance.

Tom's assistant, the ever-chipper Yu'nai Bitop beamed at Tom, her dark skin reflecting the soft electric light of the facility as they walked along. The soft lighting was a stark contrast to the bright, harsh lights that Sites like 87 and 19 had; all incandescent, all yellow, all pleasant. The lighting was one of the first things that Tom noticed when he came into an Institute-sanctioned facility. "They're in the assembly hall. You have your speech ready?"

"Yes, Yu." Tom smiled back, holding up some note cards and walking along, humming to himself. He emerged onto the stage, which was more of a raised platform in the center of the hall, carved from the wishbones of one of the last known giant selachimorphic cranes.[4]

He counted the people out in the hall. There were 40 of them, most of them women, which was a welcome change. He started talking. "Good morning," Tom said. "My name is Dr. Thomas Bailey, and I regret to inform you that for the next two years, you will not be having any coffee. You will not be seeing your significant others. You will be under supervision at all times. You will be led by an authority that does not understand your species- wait." Tom looked at his note cards and frowned, slapping his forehead. "Dammit! I mixed up my notes with the Site 19 orientation."

This drew a laugh from the crowd, particularly a couple of people from 19 itself. "Anyway. I'm afraid I'm serious about the no coffee bit,

but they have lizards here that have caffeinated blood. So just try a bit of their meat and it'll wake you up better than any Starbucks ever could." Tom actually pulled out a bit of dried lizard from his pocket; they were in snack bags like M&Ms or Skittles back home. He ate it in front of the crowd, some of whom looked disgusted, but most of them just thought 'eh, once you see a man get turned inside-out by his own intestines, not much fazes you'.

"This place is nothing like the baseline. There are things here that we think are anomalous that are common place, like, say, caffeinated lizards. There are squads of people here whose sole job is killing Giant Antarctic Penguins before they can bite off the heads of Imperial citizens and nobility. Magic is quite real here, and several people can use it; and before you ask, you're welcome to try, *if* you're part of Occult Studies." This drew a small 'aww' from a few people in the crowd, while a couple of Hispanic women in the back high-fived each other. Tom continued. "Most people here have at *least* five names, but unless they're nobility, you're free to call them by two. This place is a matriarchy, so, ladies, please don't have me executed for talking your ears off." Tom tipped his wide-brimmed straw hat at a red-headed researcher he recognized from 87; he thought her name was Lara? From theology.

"The first thing you're going to need to know here is how to speak the language, which all of you must know, considering the mandatory language exams you passed to come here. The second thing you need to know is the culture, and sadly, despite my repeated insistence, cultural exams are *not* mandatory." Tom shook his head, and stepped off the stage. It raised itself into a cylinder, and projectors from around the hall began showing an IIPES picture entitled: "THE HISTORY OF THE THIRD EMPIRE". "It's a three-hour film," Tom remarked. "But it has some good parts. I always cry when they talk about the first empress."

Four hours later, the speed bus dropped off about a third of the newbies in the Noble's Quarter of the Antarctic Empire. The rest would be shipped off to other, more remote parts for anthropological, zoological, botanical or other scientific work. Several of them were going to be studying the Black Court seaward, away from the city

and widdershins[5]. The rest of them would be staying in Tom's building.

Tom's building was a tall structure carved out of fungal limestone; the fungus reinforced the otherwise weak rock, making it able to bear great loads, and also made it incredibly resistant to, say, an anti-Imperialist bomb. It was used to build the foundations of several buildings near the Imperial City. To have an entire house made out of it was a sign of both wealth and paranoia, both things the Foundation and the Institute possessed in great quantities when it came to 'northern nobility'.

"This is it," Tom said, opening the door to the apartments. "Everyone's been assigned a room?" There was a general murmur of assent. "Good. You'll find a welcome package in there. Oh, and, don't worry about the water; it may taste a little weird, but that's just because it's been filtered." Tom neglected to mention what it was filtered **by**, figuring it was best they discover it by themselves. He let the newbies go to their rooms and eventually made his way up to his own room. There, waiting on the bed, was Da'ai the Swift.

Tom scowled at him. "What are you doing? You'll get fur on the sheets! I don't want the housekeepers spreading rumors about me again!"

"Another message, Toomas Balley." He jumped up from the bed, offering him an envelope. It bore the symbol of house Ka'Ki. They must have spent a lot to get a message to him.

Tom frowned, opening the envelope and tsk-ing. "Another duel challenge? I guess they've at least stopped trying to send assassins after me, which is good."

"They actually offered me 500 Imperials to stick a knife in your neck." Da'ai grinned at him, his teeth black from the lack of dental hygiene in the Black Court.

"Did you take the offer?" Tom asked seriously, looking over the letter still.

"And lose my Blessing? Empress no!"

"Pity. We could have split it. I would have let you keep most of it." Tom put the letter on his bedside and sighed. "You're dismissed. Tell them that I'll consider their invitation."

"…you have courage, Toomas Balley. Especially after what you did."

"All I did was politely ask the Empress to look into it. The Appropriators did the rest." Tom smirked, sitting on the bed. "And didn't I say you were dismissed?"

"You did, you did." Da'ai the Swift turned to the window. "Take care, Toomas." Da'ai leapt from the window, landed on the ground for a split second, before leaping from the ground into a wall, climbing up in and onto a roof, before dashing off into the distance.

Tom called after him, "You're still a show-off!" He shook his head and shut the window, sitting on his bed and sighing. In summer, the sun never set; it just went lower in the sky. So, with that in mind, he closed the blinds, locked the doors, and cracked open a copy of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* he had brought from baseline. He had read this book fifteen times.

Time to start on the sixteenth.

« Hub »

Footnotes
1. Tom knew this was a load of bunk; the couriers often broke windows by landing on them. Better to keep it open at all times, except when you were being subjected to an assassination attempt. Tom knew far too well about those.
2. The name "Saquah" and the word "Speed" were oxymorons in the Empire. He could easily afford a 485 Sengai Eagle, but he chose to remain modest so he wouldn't be followed by members of the Ka'Ki family.
3. Tom always found himself wondering why alternate universes always had zeppelins for personnel transport. Was Hindenburg an event unique to baseline?
4. The corpse of this crane had been delivered onto the doorstep of the institute's headquarters with a note that simply said "Your Welcome" [sic], in English no less. It had taken until the Foundation

had arrived here to translate the note.
5. The fact that this resembled the work of one Mr. Pratchett did not escape Tom's notice; he had been a fan of his work since he readNight Watch.

A Most Unfortunate Reunion

Dr. Matthew Eggers, special assistant for sapient animal research at Site 19, sat at a bare table in Interview Room C, a notepad in his hand. In front of him, crawling back and forth across the table, was the creature that had occupied so much of his time for the last six months - SCP-1867, a telepathic, English-speaking sea slug that claimed to be Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, a 19th century British gentleman and explorer in a severe state of denial about his physical form. "Lord Blackwood", as he insisted on being called, was relating yet another fabulous and improbable tale of his adventures, and as he had done three times a week for months now, Eggers was taking down the self-proclaimed scientist's words on his notepad. Thus far, the Foundation had yet to decisively verify a single one of his anecdotes - but if even half of his claimed encounters with other contained objects were true, then there was a wealth of information in the slug's head that would be of great use in the Foundation's work.

"There I was!" Lord Blackwood exclaimed. "Thousands of feet above the forests of Baden, my eyes level with the peak of the Feldberg itself, my legs wrapped for dear life around the neck of an Austrian green dragon, one hand feverishly clutching the reins as I struggled to bring myself about. The saddle had fallen to the ground when I cut it loose, taking the beast's Prussian rider with it. I had expended my last rounds of ammunition fleeing Count von Zeppelin's airborne war machine before it caught aflame and fell to the Earth. I managed to cajole the dragon into turning back towards the east, and that's when I caught sight of a truly massive dragon - one of the rare Grand Romanov breed, imported from Russia - bedecked in burnished steel armor that shone impossibly bright as it caught the last rays of the evening sun. There, upon its back, I saw my quarry - Kaiser Frederick III himself. On any other day, I would never have dared to test my prowess against the man who was after all the husband of our dear queen's daughter. But now that the Eye of Lakshmi itself - that famed Hindustani amulet with the power to carry

a man's soul into a new body after death - was in the hands of the Second Reich, I was left with no recourse.

"I drove the dragon straight at the Kaiser's and called forth from its lips a burst of flame that the Hun barely evaded. As I turned about to make another pass, I saw him blow into a massive hunting horn that echoed across the mountains and valleys of the *Schwarzwald* - and to my horror, another half-dozen dragons rose out of the opaque canopies below, fresh and ready for the fight. I was outnumbered and outgunned - the last of England's finest drake-men had been felled by von Zeppelin's contraption, our fusiliers on the ground forced to retreat by the German cavalry advance. I had only one hope to win the day. Holding on to the reins for dear life, I reached into my pack and carefully withdrew the oddly-shaped red vase that housed the most unusual of benefactors…"

"I'm sorry, Lord Blackwood," Dr. Eggers interrupted, "but I'm going to have to cut you off there. It's going to take me the rest of the day to translate all this from the shorthand, and the rest of the week for the staff to go over it. We'll have to finish the story during the next interview. Alright?"

"Dash it all!" Lord Blackwood replied. "I was just getting to the good part. Very well, I suppose I'll have to leave you in suspense for another week."

"I'm glad you understand," Eggers said, as he rose from the chair and made his way to the door. "Just wait right there and Dr. Andrews will be by in a few minutes you take you back to your tank."

"About that, my dear boy," Lord Blackwood said. "Do you think you could finally see your way to draining all that excess water out? I appreciate a good swim as much as the next fellow, but my skin has become far too wrinkled as of late."

"I'll pass that on to the director," Eggers said. The door closed behind him and Lord Blackwood was alone - or so he thought. From the air vent near the ceiling of the room, an interloper had been observing in secret the conversation between the doctor and the slug, waiting for exactly this moment. As Lord Blackwood turned his back to the vent, idly crawling about and humming "Land of Hope

and Glory" to himself, he made his move. Slowly and silently, he exited the vent and made his way down the floor and to the table. Inch by inch, minute by minute, the unexpected guest made his way across the wooden surface, following Lord Blackwood's slime trail until he was almost right behind the slug at the table's edge, and then…

"OI! TOMMY!"

Lord Blackwood had moved on to singing bits and pieces of "The Pirates of Penzance" when the silence was broken by a loud cry in a vulgar London patois. The nudibranch half-instinctively attempted to reach for his hip before recalling that he was not carrying a gun, and instead turned himself around as fast as one in his condition could do so and found himself face-to-face with the last thing he had expected so rude a call to emanate from - a common snail, its pulsating eyestalks fixated directly on him.

In all his years of adventuring, Lord Blackwood had never encountered so bizarre a thing as a talking snail. Nonetheless, he took a deep breath and gave the creature a stern glare of his own as he replied, "Who the Devil are you and how do you know my name?"

"Oh, come on, Tommy," the snail replied in a dialect that made Lord Blackwood cringe. "Surely you 'aven't forgotten the face of your dear old 'friend' Georgie, 'ave ya?"

"George Phillip Harris the Fourth," Lord Blackwood sneered. "I should've recognized that guttural nonsense you have the audacity to call English right away. What are you doing here? Need to borrow money? On the run from the Swiss Guard? Perhaps you've concocted another ridiculous scheme to defraud the Americans out of the territories?"

"You and I got some unfinished business to settle, Tommy," Harris said. "You killed me back in '55! You think a man just forgets a thing like that?"

Lord Blackwood rolled his eyes. "Not this rot again. I thought we settled this after that business in Patagonia."

"And yet, 'ere we are," Harris said. "'Ow many times 'ave I gotten meself turned inside-out because you were too busy 'ogging the glory to save your old pal from Godolphin 'ouse?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told you then - you brought all of that upon yourself when you decided to try and smuggle the Crown of Sutekh up the Nile."

"You're a pint o' bitter if I ever seen one." Harris spat on the ground. "And where were you when 'alf the mummies west of the Nile were after me? 'Alfway back to London to kiss the Queen's knickers?"

"I was in Alexandria helping the Patriarch, the Coptic Pope, and the Grand Mufti arrange the biggest exorcism conducted in Egypt since the fall of the Abbasids!" Lord Blackwood responded, the impatience in his voice mounting. "Were it not for what we pulled off, Africa itself would have been lost to the British Empire because of your foolish attempt at larceny."

"We've played this game before, Tommy," Harris said. "Every time I let you tag along on one of my grand expeditions, you wander off and get me killed, and the next time you come 'round askin' for me 'elp to line your pockets with foreign gold you've always, *always* got some cock-and-bull story about 'ow it's not your fault. 'You shouldn't 'ave let the Sumerian god-man out of his casket', 'You shouldn't 'ave tried to kill the golem of Prague with a Derringer,' 'You shouldn't 'ave seduced the Gypsy King's sister.' I've 'ad it up to 'ere!" Harris swept his eyestalk in a line above his head. "You and I are gonna settle this 'ere and now like real gentlemen."

Lord Blackwood sighed and swore under his breath, struggling to keep his composure. "Only one of us is a gentleman, Mr. Harris, and while the years have not been as kind to me as I might have hoped they would, you are hardly in any state to fight me. I walloped you soundly every time we met in the boxing ring back at Eton - and as I recall, you had not at that time been transmogrified into a snail."

"A snail? A bloody snail? 'Ave you lost your mind?" Harris threw back his head and laughed. "I'm as fit as I've ever been - and I ain't been turned into no bleedin' sea slug, either."

Lord Blackwood puffed himself up with rage. "So! I should've known you were the blackguard spreading these foul slanders about my being a sea slug! I demand satisfaction, and I demand it now, Harris - recant these lies at once or I shall be forced to give you what for!"

"Alright, alright, Tommy, don't get yer pants in a twist," Harris said, grinning slyly. "You're right, you're right. You ain't no sea slug… but your mum sure is."

Lord Blackwood cocked back his right eyestalk and swung.

> **ADDENDUM:** On / /20 , a Roman snail (*Helix pomatia*) with anomalous properties similar to SCP-1867 was found in Interview Room C after SCP-1867 had briefly been left unobserved following the conclusion of Interview 1867-238. At the time of discovery, SCP-1867 and the snail were observed face-to-face on a table attempting to "headbutt" each other and strike each other with their eyestalks. In subsequent interviews, the snail has identified itself as "George Philip Harris IV", an individual referred to as an associate of SCP-1867 beginning in Diary 1867-3. The snail is currently being housed in a 40x70x30 cm specimen tank adjacent to SCP-1867's until such time as further examination and classification can be made.

"Oi! Tommy!" Lord Blackwood turned his head and did his best to ignore Harris' shouts from the tank next to his. "Did you ever 'ear the one about the man who thought 'e was a botfly? Got nicked for indecency after 'e started runnin' up to ladies and biting 'em on the arm. Said 'e was just lookin' for someplace to lay 'is eggs!"

"By Jove," Lord Blackwood thought to himself, "what I wouldn't give for an elephant gun right now."

A Multi-Universal Affair

> First on my list is the Multi-U division. How this kind of breach of protocol has been allowed to continue is beyond me, Ms. Weiss. The entire function of this department appears to be intentional containment breach.

Tristan Bailey bit his thumb to try and relieve stress. It wasn't working, and it wasn't just him that was stressed, the entire department was. In the Foundation, the people in Multi-U were thought of as okay, but the actual department itself was considered a waste of resources, for the large part. Then again, most of them didn't know that if not for this department, the price of silicon (among other natural resources) would be going through the god-damn roof.

Tristan had considered firing up the MUTA-NT and escaping to another universe, for the day. But, in the process, he would no doubt causing a massive protocol breach and getting him sacked, amnestic'd and thrown to the side of the road in Albuquerque. He had also considered trying to take a sample of the common cold from the immunology lab, but knowing them, they had somehow turned the common cold into a very rare and deadly cold.

"He's almost here, Bailey," Claire Hennessy stood over his shoulder. "Think you can handle him?"

"No."

"Remember, whatever you do, don't make fun of his name."

"…what is this guy's name, anyway?"

"It's Ma-"

A man stepped into the offices of the Multi-U department, a tablet computer in one hand, his eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses

bearing a look of great disinterest. His bald head bounced a dazzling light off of it, right into Tristan's eyes, causing him to blink several times. "…Dr. Hennessy and Dr. Bailey?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I am Matthew Broderick, and I will be your auditor today."

Claire stepped forward. "So, Mr. Broderick… we understand you wanted to talk to us about how our department is run."

"Indeed." Broderick took out his stylus and brought up several files on his tablet. "Expense reports are far above-average. This department uses approximately 80-90% of all power supplied to Site 87. Casualties are thankfully minimal, but there have been reports that the technology here has been used… irresponsibly."

Tristan twitched slightly at the last part. Broderick didn't seem to notice. "Sir, with all due respect… I find it highly unlikely that the MUTA is responsible for 80% of the power drain here."

"I have the statistics right here, Doctor." Broderick handed them the tablet, with a statistic that showed that, indeed, Multi-U accounted for a supermajority of the power being used in the site. "And who do you think I am going to believe: statistics, or someone who works in the department and has a clear conflict of interest?"

"Sir, there has to be a mistake. The MUTA we have here is a MUTA-NT. Multi-Universal Transit Array, Nexus Type. My father built it back in the 1970s specifically to feed off the energy in-"

"Simply because your father was a Foundation celebrity does not give you any exemption, Dr. Bailey. And you are not the head of this department; Dr. Hennessy is." He nodded at Claire. "As I was saying, the power drain…"

"Is something that we will try and take care of; the accelerators used in the MUTA-NT take up a lot of juice, sir." Tristan rolled his eyes slightly; the MUTA-NT was run solely on energy extracted from the Anomalous Particle Field surrounding the Nexus. Everyone knew that (or at least, everyone should), and this bean counter in human

clothing was telling him it didn't work that way?

"Dr. Bailey, are you coming?" Tristan blinked; he had spaced out, and Claire was heading out of the room along with the bean counter. Tristan started out of the room after them.

Ten minutes later, they were actually walking around the floor of the portal chamber. The reactors were all shut off, and the only way the MUTA would be reactivated was if there was an incursion from the other side. Broderick was asking all sorts of questions to various members of staff. "What is it that this department actually *does*, Dr. Hennessy?"

Before Claire could say anything, Tristan spoke up. "The mission of the Department of Multi-Universal Affairs it to explore, catalog and observe alternate universes, as well as make diplomatic deals with major powers in said universes, usually over mineral rights, food, science… we also facilitate travel for the Esoteric Warfare Unit, when necessary."

"…Thank you, Dr. Bailey. However, in the last few years… diplomatic deals have been on the decline." Broderick showed him some statistics on his tablet. "Down 15% from 2010. Coincidentally, that's the same year your brother left… Trevor, was it? He was in diplomacy, was he not?"

"He was, and he did close a lot of deals… but he's much more useful at Site 19, now. And though we may not have more deals, these are generally more useful."

"…in that case, where is the helium?"

Tristan blinked. "Pardon?"

"The helium, Dr. Bailey. There is a shortage of it, and it is global. You were meant to make a deal on it with… one moment." He looked through his tablet. "F-3426-Delta, regarding rare-earth mineral rights, as well as helium rights. But, you were unable to. Why is this?"

"They were bureaucrats, sir. I ran into someone who was a vice-vice-*vice*-sub-chancellor of Mining and Industry in that universe. It was impossible to get anything done with them. They all said they had no authority to do make decisions of a scale as large as that."

"Really," said the Tax Man, making a note of that on his tablet. Tristan groaned internally; he was probably writing "Multi-U has a problem with bureaucracy" or somesuch.

"Yes, really. It's hard being a diplomat; I don't know how Trevor does it."

"Fair enough," said Broderick, looking at Claire this time. "Now, what are some of the other universes you have cataloged?"

"In the past year, we've discovered almost 7,000 new Multi-universal coordinates at this facility alone, no less than 240 points of divergence between them."

"To be exact," Tristan cut in, "We've cataloged 6,921 new coordinates and 248 points of divergence."

Claire stepped on Tristan's foot, which was the signal for him to shut up, which he did so. "As I was saying," Claire grinned, "In addition to that, we've discovered over 70,000 new universes in the past five years."

"Yes, but… what is it you actually *do?*"

Both Claire and Tristan blinked. Tristan spoke up after a while. "I beg your pardon?"

"What is the purpose of this department on a research basis? We've proved the existence of other universes, that the theory was right… why must we continue to breach containment to study them?"

"Containment breaches only apply if the breach occurs in the baseline." replied Tristan, a tone of annoyance in his voice. "And I can think of at least five extra-universal anomalies off the top of my head, two of which either myself or one of my brothers have worked on."

"Why manned expeditions? Why not just send in probes?"

"What would be less noticeable in a universe populated by humans: a floating metal ball, or a guy in a tourist outfit with a camera?"

"Bailey! Shut up." Tristan flinched slightly as Hennessy yelled at him, before she turned back to Broderick. "I apologize for my assistant."

"No need," Broderick said, noting down some things on his tablet. He brought up a file and frowned. "Actually… there's a matter I would like to discuss with Dr. Bailey in private."

Tristan could feel the color drain out of his face as the auditor escorted him into another room.

"Dr. Bailey… for the past eight years, you have requested use of the Multi-Universal Transit Array around December 21st. Prior to 2010, your brothers also requested access. Why is this?"

"Some… some universes can only open up when they're in correct alignment with us." It was utter bullshit, Tristan knew it was utter bullshit, Broderick probably knew it was utter bullshit, but damn if he wouldn't try to cover his ass.

"I see," said Broderick, his face hardening slightly. "Tell me, Dr. Bailey, how is your father?"

"He's dead, sir. Has been for the past 17 years." Tristan felt like he was a school child lying to the principal about who killed the class rabbit.

"Ah. Condolences." Broderick shook his head. "Drop the charade, Bailey. I know what you've been doing for the past eight years. You and your brothers." Broderick brought up some pictures on his tablet; one was clearly dated 2005, and showed Tristan, Tom and Trevor hanging out with a very much alive version of their father. "You will be disciplined for this, no matter what the Director says."

"I take full responsibility, sir." Tristan was shaking slightly, and clicked a pen in his pocket to try and calm himself down. "I encouraged them to go with me to see Tyler Bailey."

"It's rather unhealthy," said Broderick in a neutral tone. "Seventeen years your father has been dead, and you're still grieving. It's time to move on, Dr. Bailey." He typed out something on his tablet. "That is all. Dr. Hennessy will deal with me for the remainder of my time in this department." Broderick moved around Tristan, out of the room.

Tristan Bailey just stood there for a good few minutes, looking stunned, before going to his room, opening a bottle of Antarctican wine Tom had sent him, and downing it, feeling numb the whole time he drank.

«Tax Man|Hub|Bugs in the Process»

A Night at the Movies

TO: O5-7
FROM: **`Pendergast, William`**
RE: Planetary Survey Data - Relevant
URGENCY: HIGH

Sir,

The latest data from Khevtuul 5 is in. We have two possible exoplanets that are theoretically suited for human life. In addition to being candidates for an eventual colonization effort, the preponderance of Goldilocks Zone planets points to an increased likelihood that an alternative site for human civilization can at some point in the future be established.

It is also worth noting that our probes continue to find no sign of HEs, or any extraterrestrial life for that matter. If I may express a personal opinion, I find this surprising. Nevertheless, the longer we go without contact, frankly, the better.

This seems to lend further credence to the human survival hypothesis. Consider releasing some of this information to help build morale among the operatives. They could use it.

SIGNED

General William Pendergast
Lead, Project Heimdall

TO: Pendergast, William
FROM: O5-7
RE: re: Planetary Survey Data - Relevant
URGENCY: HIGH

General,

Appreciate your latest message. It looks like Two may be right after all. That's something, at least, while we're dealing with 001.

Couple of things to remember as you look out there. We're beginning to believe that 001 resides somewhere out in physical space. Not like you needed any reminders, but look out for anything that might fit the description. That includes communications. It might try to talk to us again.

The other thing you should know is that I was the one back in '54 that got the message from it. That message hasn't been declassified yet but you're likely to be the first that gets any other messages. So you should know.

Some stuff that isn't in the file. Whatever it is, knows about the Foundation, because the message came straight to me. And that's because I was the man in charge of finding out what was behind the spike in anomalous activity. It's very familiar with us, General. And it knew enough about me to know I was a movie buff.

It left me directions to some place out in the desert. Not so far that I couldn't get there in a few hours. So it knew where I lived. I drove out with a team in some jeeps, and in the middle of nowhere, there was a movie house. And I mean the middle of nowhere. No roads, no human habitation. There in a washed out gully was the movie house I'd gone to as a little boy. We were a little more wild in those days, and so I told my boys to wait while I went inside.

It speaks to us in performance. It likes it better that way. It could just tell us whatever it wants, really. But this is one more way to mind fuck us, I think. Anyway. Nice and air conditioned inside. Colder than hell. Soon as I sat down, the lights dimmed, and it showed me a movie. Not

like any movie I'd ever seen, but it was most certainly a movie.

The title was "Planet of Hands," in English. It didn't make a whole lot of sense. There wasn't a story, as such. More like a disjointed series of images. Some stuff was real famous and I recognized it immediately. A lot of military footage, scenes of large battles, aftermaths of bombing campaigns, stuff like that. I recognized Stalingrad from the news reels, and there were some scenes of what I assume was the Battle of Passchendaele. I didn't realize there were movies of that.

Mixed in with that, though, were other things. Some were filmed scenes, same quality as the other stuff, of what had to have been other events from history. Mass starvations, a volcano eruption or two, villages of Indians being run through by Spanish conquistadors. Not very subtle.

Then the scenes of the Sites started. Still shots of buildings and facilities, all of which I knew to be ours. Pretty clear message for us there. Are you with me so far? Strange stuff, but nothing we hadn't encountered before. That's when it got bad.

At the next instant, I was no longer in the theater. I was in my seat, but everything around me had changed. Vibrant colors, oversaturated hues like a mad painter had conjured them, they were everywhere. People, things, places, swirling around me, all of it lit up like neon, so that I could see things after I closed my eyes. And it was just a mass of unspeakable acts. All of the rape, murder and pillage from thousands of years had been forced into the room, each act phasing into and out of others, moment to moment. I can't recall any image staying in the room more than a few seconds, except the scene directly in front of me. It was a Turk, I think, clothed in a resplendent robe the color of Technicolor blood, his face barely visible behind an electric blue beard. He was casually forcing people down onto a

sharpened stake embedded in the ground, impaling them, over and over, the victim coming into and out of focus. First an old woman, then a soldier, then a child, back to another woman, each one after the other, bang bang bang. The blood would splash on his robe and he would glow brighter each time. He didn't look angry, or hateful. He looked like this was the most natural thing in the world, pushing someone down onto a stake until it forced its way up through their guts as they screamed until they bled out. If I had focused on another part of the room for any length of time, I think I would have seen similar things.

How long this went on, I can't say. I was a younger man then, and I'm not ashamed to say that at a certain point I just covered my eyes and waited for it to stop. I would probably do the same today. When I finally looked up again, the theater was back around me, the movie still being screened.

What I saw up there was myself, now a part of the movie. I looked obscenely happy. At my age I don't look into a lot of mirrors, but I tell you I have never seen a smile like that on myself, then or now. That, more than anything else, has stayed with me. You should never be surprised by an expression on your own face, it's awful. In the movie, I was boarding something; like a big wooden ark, I suppose. Something out of a kid's book about Noah and Flood, purely symbolic. I watched myself onscreen as I stepped into the ark. Some other people were getting on with me. A woman, a black man, some children, an old Chinaman, all walks of life I guess, no one I recognized. When we were all aboard, the ark lifted into the heavens, sailing through the cosmos. It even had the Buck Rodgers music in the background as the stars whizzed by. The ark came to what I assumed was a planetary system of some kind. A planet, looking a lot like Earth, blue and white and brown and green, at the center of a wild system of moons. I thought of an atom. The ark moved closer and closer to one of the moons,

until it came into view. This wasn't like Earth. This was a darkened nightscape, illuminated by fires dotting the land. All that was visible was soot, smoke, fire, a few rusty scraps of metal twisted into big, man-sized shapes.

You know how the music swells when the movie ends? That was happening as we all disembarked as the ship touched down on the night moon, all of the characters on the screen looking just ecstatic with joy. As I said, disconcerting when you see something like that on your own face. The movie was fading out now, but rather than the "The End" placard appearing like it does, some other text appeared, this time in Russian. "вместо того, чтобы вернуться домой," which we think was intended to be something like "come home instead." Why it started in English and finished in Russian, I have no idea. Maybe some smart-ass commentary on the Cold War. Which would be a point of hope in dealing with this thing. Fallibility.

I have my suspicions as to why this doesn't show up in the main file. That doesn't matter, though. You need context for any future attempts at communication from 001. Now you have it.

Watch yourself.

-7

A Normal, Daily Routine

“Start it up.”

As David McConnell woke up his head surged. The feeling surprised him at first because, unlike the usual migraine he would get in the morning, this made him feel woozy enough to almost fall asleep again.

However, David Eugene McConnell would not be swayed from his daily routine.

Although Mr. McConnell's routine of carefully retracing his steps to the bathroom, picking up his toothbrush, brushing his teeth, combing his hair and shaving his face seemed dull and routine to all who witnessed it, he liked it.

In fact, it was his favorite part of the day, the boring, monotonous routine comforted him. Somehow, it was, to him, the most fun he would have all day.

Mr. McConnell walked back to his bed and carefully pulled the sheets up. He looked with pride upon his carefully made bed, it resembled how much care he took into his daily routine.

As he spun on his heel to face his closet, another surge of dizziness hit him. David McConnell attempted to regain his balance, but his legs gave out and he dropped to the ground.

David McConnell suddenly sat up. His face was cold and sweating and as he reached for a tissue he noticed his hands we shaking. ‘Strange’ he thought, ‘I’m never this bad’, at almost the same instant this thought passed through his head, his hand jerked suddenly to his left. The momentum of his hand pulled him off of his small twin bed and onto the floor. He laid, face down, on the ground for a moment before he pushed himself up.

He took a look at his surroundings, his room was messy and unkempt, the walls were moldy and the air felt humid. David McConnell did not like this, in fact, he hated it.

And the fact, the simple fact, that he had no decision about how it was pleased him. Filled with rage and hatred for the moldiest wall, he walked over to it and punched it. Sweet Jesus his hand hurt, and it felt natural. Something about having to conform to something else's reality, something else's laws of physics was amazing.

David pulled his hand from the wall, as he did he rubbed his hand and winced. He headed to the kitchen to get some ice for his hand. He thought about what he would do that day, go to work, come back home late, reheat a pizza and fall asleep on the couch watching TV. David retrieved a plastic bag from a kitchen drawer and walked to his fridge, he attempted to put some ice in the bag, most of the ice spilled on the floor. David watched as this happened, turned away from it and walked back to his closet, he pulled his fast-food uniform from his closet, changed into it and began to walk to work.

He always loved his walk, by the time he would get to work his feet would be throbbing. He loved the way people snickered and whispered when they saw him, unkempt and messy. They were crazy to him, not enjoying all parts of life, especially the things we can't control.

He reached the fast food restaurant and just, as usual, his feet hurt. He had to work at the cash register today, his day at work started normally: he took about 30 orders during the breakfast rush, was yelled at by at least 13 of them and broke the register about 5 times.

The lunch rush was generally similar, too many orders, too many customers yelling at him, too many cash registers broken.

After lunch is when his day became interesting.

Three masked men entered the restaurant, they were armed. David noticed this, and carefully placed his hand on the silent alarm.

The three men approached the register.

“We don’t know the passcode to the safe,” David said, as calmly as he could.

“No matter,” said the man standing closest to the register, “we aren’t here for the money.”

David was taken aback, as usually any robberies they had were people so desperate for money that they usually only make off with about $10.

“What are you here for, then?” David could hear the fear in his voice.

“Time to wake up, David.” the closest to David said as he raised his gun and pointed it at David.
David pressed down on the silent alarm, but for some reason, an alarm actually blared. The sound of a Claxton reverberated in David’s ears and shook his chest.

As all of this happened the man closest to David pulled the trigger of his gun.

Everything went black

David attempted to stand up, but he was strapped down to a table. He was hooked up to several machines, most of their monitors looked normal, but the one attached to his head was violently spiking. David heard something, the Claxton. An intercom squealed to life, “Subject-098 is awake, anesthesia team requested immediately.”

David became angry, “You can’t keep me in reality!” he shouted. He focused his energy on removing the table and straps.

They disappeared.

If they were going to pull David out of his favored reality, he was going to make this his reality.

The door to his room became a bagel. He walked through the doorway, reality began to distort itself as he walked, everything was changing to his desire.

He chuckled to himself as a team of doctors rounded the corner, escorted by a few armed guards.

He looked at them and smiled as their heads collapsed in on themselves.

The bodies dropped and began to spew blood.

David continued to walk and create his reality.

He hated these people, they really did cause Chaos.

Things changed around him to the dismal life that he wanted. The street he walked was becoming a reality. He could see his dismal house, cracked street, even the people who laughed at him.

That Claxton was really annoying, so he removed it.

Blissful silence.

This day was amazing.

Not that more “Reality Benders” as the Chaos called them, wouldn’t change it back after he fell asleep next.

But, at least this was fun for now.

Business as Usual

On weekends, people ask me how my week was.

This week was simply business as usual.

On Monday I oversaw an operation to examine a strange creature in a young girl's abdomen.

It was remarkable. It generated an antibiotic more potent than any modern medicine can create. The creature had latched on to the female's spinal cord between the T12 and L1 vertebrae. It had entrenched itself into it, melding its blood vessels and nervous system to hers. It was a difficult operation to remove it, but we managed it. The creature would revolutionize the medical industry, if we could perfect and synthesize the antibiotics. We moved the creature into the ICU. We disposed of the body. She was pretty, but she had served her purpose.

On Tuesday I researched the effects of SCP-078 on schizophrenic patients.

There were four trials, each with a different test subject: an elderly male and female, and a young male and female. I was interested in seeing what happens to the effects of 078 when exposed to a damaged psyche. Of course, death was always an outcome, but if a few hours of clear data was recorded, any end to the test subjects would have been worth it. The young male and female were particularly interesting. We have a clear recording of their descent into apathy and depression. One subject, the female, found ways of self-mutilation using only her fingernails. We were eventually forced to euthanize all four. A pity - the data we got from them were important to our research.

On Wednesday I lobotomized a human subject who was exposed to SCP-215.

It was irritating. We had to restrain him on the table while we were conducting the operation. He kept screaming and struggling, making my cuts ragged and unprofessional. Such a shame, but the samples we retrieved showed significant evidence of mental trauma, as well as some other unidentified anomalies. He may never speak again or play the piano, but he'll live. An IV drip would be a simpler way of gaining nutrients.

There were no tests or experiments on Thursday.

I had to go to a mandatory psychological examination. I don't understand the point of this. I'm perfectly fine. I have so many more tests to conduct.

On Friday I injected a test subject with SCP-742.

There was nothing truly out of the ordinary today. It was more of a whim that I did this test, but testing is something I live for. The young girl, about 8 I suspect, was very patient and willing. Of course she screamed when we stuck the needle in her arm - any young child would. We waited the normal incubation time, and then began the tests. We started with small animal in a cage. Within minutes the subject grabbed it and sucked it dry. From there we moved on to larger prey: a rabbit, small dog, and a cat. Although it seemed she would take them, she wasn't satisfied. I was interested. I wanted to see how she would react to a human subject, so I decided to wait until her next scheduled feeding session. When the orderly brought in the usual small animal, I locked the door behind him so he could not run. (Why would he, anyway? This was for science! For the good of the world! He should be honored.) He screamed unnecessarily loudly. The test subject rejected the animal and went straight for the orderly, feeding quickly. The data was interesting, certainly worth more than the disposable orderly.

Some would call my week insane and unnecessarily extreme. But why is that?

It's simply business as usual.

A Personal Connection

“Next number, please,” the voice behind the speakers droned.

D-24461 leaned heavily on the stark steel table, staring at the black rotary phone before her. She looked up at the empty room, towards the wall where, she assumed, the Foundation researchers were cataloguing her answers. “Where were we at again?”

There was a pause, and she could hear typing faintly over the speakers. “222-3381, I think,” came the response. D-24461 had never met the voice that gave her orders from over the speakers, but she could easily picture him based on the voice. Early thirties, no taller than five-six, skinny and pale from years in front of computers. D-24461 sighed and stuck her tanned finger into the phone’s dial. “You’d better be right,” she said. “Last one tasted like spoiled milk.” The phone somehow put a different taste in her mouth with each number she dialed. As D-24461 let go of the last digit, the taste of sour milk filled her mouth again, and she leapt up from her seat, throwing the receiver from her hand. It bounced limply at the end of its cord.

“Fucking hell,” D-24461 said, trying to spit out the taste. It didn’t help any; it wasn’t technically real. Thankfully, it dissipated after about ten seconds, like the rest.

“Spoiled milk again?”

“What do you think, asshole?” D-24461 sat back down, rubbing her temples. “Next time, make sure you write down your results.”

“Of course. 222-3382, then.”

D-24461 sighed, then dialed the number. Sourness struck the sides of her tongue, and she couldn’t help but pucker at the sensation. “Oh, man, that’s just straight lemon.”

“Next number.”

D-24461 dialed. 222-3611. She quickly started coughing. “Pepper. Lots of pepper.” The room was silent save for her coughing as the researcher behind the wall waited for the standard ten seconds to pass.

“Next number.”

She dialed. The taste of tart fruit filled her mouth. “Apples, definitely.”

“We already have apples. Could you be more specific?”

“This one’s more sour, so probably green apples?”

“Thank you. Next number.”

She dialed again. “Ugh. I think it’s wood.” She considered the flavor for a moment. “Wait, I recognize that from barbecues as a kid. Hickory, I think.”

“Interesting. Next number, please.”

“Look, can’t we take a break, man?” D-24461 stood up, staring at the small camera mounted in the corner of the room. “We’ve been at this for three hours already! Not to mention every day for the last two months.”

“We really should keep going,” the voice on the speaker said.

“Fuck that. I just need five minutes where I’m not tasting something crazy. Give me that, at least.”

“…All right, fine. Let me know when you’re ready.”

D-24461 sat on the corner of the table, arms crossed and eyes closed. “You’re not gonna call security on me?”

The voice behind the speaker scoffed. “We don’t have the manpower to call security for every insubordination.” He paused. “Besides, I get it.”

D-24461 stood back up, still angry. “What do you get, exactly? You’re not the one down here playing Dial-a-Flavor on this stupid phone a thousand times.” D-24461 stared at the camera, wishing she could look him in the face instead.

“You’ve been doing that for a couple months, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been cataloguing the results for three years now.”

“Oh.” She sat back down on the table slowly. “That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

Neither of them spoke. D-24461 broke the silence. “What’s your name, guy?”
“My name? I really shouldn’t be telling you that.”

“What, like that’s gonna hurt your precious data if I know your name?”

“Well, no. But-“

“But what? Come on, I’ll start. I’m Francesca, but everyone calls me Frankie.”

“Alright, alright. I’m, uh, Jonah.”

“Jonah?” Frankie, D-24461, laughed. “What a white kid name. So what’s your whale, Jonah? What are you hunting?”

“Jonah wasn’t hunting a whale. God sent it to swallow him up to teach him a lesson.”

“Huh, really? Who am I thinking of, then?”

“Ahab, probably. *Moby Dick*.”

“Right, right. I never paid much attention in Sunday school. Or English class.” She frowned. “Well, what lesson are you getting taught, then?”

“I wish I knew,” Jonah said. “But it sure feels like I’m in the belly of the beast now.”

“You and me both, man.”

They were silent for another minute. This time, Jonah was the one who spoke.

“So, uh, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how did you end up here?”

“What, like testing this crap? One of you people told me I could do five years here instead of twenty in the clink. Who’d pass up that?”

“Wait, twenty?” Jonah sounded incredulous. “You weren’t on death row?”

Frankie put her hands on her hips. “Hell no! What do you think I did?”

Jonah hesitated. “I’m not sure. The higher-ups always told us that the D-Classes were all murderers, or worse.”

Frankie laughed, a wild, raucous laugh of disbelief. “No way, man. I’ve never even held a gun. My man used to rob banks with his crew, and I was their getaway driver. Only reason I got thrown in jail as long as I did was because some idiot cop jumped in front of the van trying to stop us. Charged me with attempted murder of an officer. Can you believe that?”

Jonah laughed nervously along with her. “I guess not. But what’s going to happen to you once you’ve done your five years?”

“The spook that came to see me in jail just said they’d let me go.”

“I suppose they could. They’ll probably dose you with amnestics first though.”

“Dose me with *what* now?”

The speaker screeched, and Frankie winced. Jonah must have knocked the mike over. There was a soft thump as it was put back

into place. “I shouldn’t have mentioned that.” He was silent for a moment. “Oh, fine. If I’m going to get in trouble for chatting with the D-Class, it doesn’t make much difference. So, uh, amnestics. They’re memory-altering drugs. Don’t know too much about them, but they ought to be able to wipe the whole time that you’re here.”

“Now that’s some fancy shit,” Frankie said. “Shame though. Would’ve liked to tell my mom that I met someone in jail that wasn’t a complete asshole.” Jonah didn’t answer. “I’m talking about you, whale-boy.”

“Oh! Oh. Thanks,” Jonah murmured.

“You’re welcome. Now, since you asked me, I get to ask you: How’d you end up with a shitheap job like this?”

“Not sure. The Foundation recruited me straight out of my master’s and said that they were going to start me on some simple anomalous objects before upgrading my security clearance and putting me on a research team. Three years later, here I am, still doing the same thing.”

“That really sucks, man. Doesn’t matter how secret the company, bosses just don’t want to give raises. I bet the bosses here are *loaded*, though”

“Maybe,” Jonah said. “They’re pretty secretive. Most people don’t even know who they really are.”

“Yeah? That’s wild. But I guess that’s what secret groups like you do.”

“I guess it is.”

Another pause, but this one was less tense, a natural pause in conversation. Frankie clapped her hands once, then sat back in the chair and picked up the receiver. “Alright, I’m ready to go at this thing again. Where were we?”

Jonah clattered back to his computer. Frankie chuckled. “Um, we’re on 222-3613.”

Frankie dialed the number. “Jonah,” she sung, mocking, but no longer angry. “That’s the wood again. Get your shit together.”

“Shit, sorry.”

“Ha! The white boy can swear. Alright, 3614, then?” She dialed again. “Oh, man, that one’s a burger! Finally a good one. Hold on, let me dial that a couple more times.”

They strove on, dialing number after number. It wasn’t any less tedious, but perhaps, somehow, it was just a little bit better.

A Place In The Back Of Your Mind

Timothy Price awoke from a dreadful slumber. There was something covering his head, almost grabbing him around the neck. He lifted his arms to loosen it, but he found his hands to be bound. He tried to free them but it was no use.

Suddenly, there was a burning pain in his calf. That was the spark that made him remember; that made him go *"oh shit"*.

Almost immediately after, his wife's blood-curdling screams reached his ears. He had never heard her curse in such a manner before. It was like a trial of pure desperation; that lingering horror in the back of your mind, waving the key to freedom right in front of you. This was their first time being held in that terrible place.

"H-honey…" he choked as he slowly regained his composure.

"Tim?! Tim, where are you?!" Her screams were blurred and distorted due to the swelling bump on the side of her face. An artifact from their departure.

"… Are you, are you hurt? Where are we?!"

"I'm fine, I'm— I-I don't know."

"Alright, just— argh!" Timothy tried to stand up, but a jolt of agony whipped up his body like a wooden stake.

"Tim! Tim, are you—"

"Fine! I'm fine… it's nothing."

"Tim, please, I need to know! Tim, please! Tim… Tim…" she began repeating his name, each distressed echo lobbing another piece of her sanity with it. She wanted so badly to lean against him one last time; to feel his warmth against her. Timothy began to audibly weep with her, expressing the same desires within.

But then, they heard something. A quiet shuffle coming from a few feet forward. Immediately the two stopped crying and lifted their heads.

"Hello?" Penny sniffled. "Who's there?" No answer; only the silence was left, mocking them and teasing the possibility of insanity. It rung in their heads like mad. But after a few minutes, there was a voice:

"Are we done?" It was from a woman, calm and even somewhat gleeful. Like the old woman who runs every orphanage in every movie. The captives wanted to scream at the anonimity, but they couldn't muster up the courage to do it.

Finally, Timothy requested: "Take these fucking things off of our heads you—"

"As you wish," she whispered peacefully, almost *kindly*. She grabbed the tops of their heads and lifted the thatchwork bags away from them.

A burst of cold, arid wind splashed their skin as the pouches were lifted, reminding them both of the dusty atmosphere of Marshall's office. Their eyes took little to no time adjusting to the light, as the room was somber and drab by default. The walls were made only of dusty stone, with a surprising lack of cobwebs. A wooden door was almost stamped into the wall in the back of the room, and in front of it was a towering character. She was clad in robes identical to those worn by the kidnappers. Several white patterns sprinkled accross it, each resembling a five-pointed star or miscellaneous shape. Her eyes were dim, and almost devoid of color, and her ears…

"You're a fae?" Penny examined with astonishment. The woman, always smiling charmingly, delicately caressed the tip of each ear. They were pointed, stretching out like a butterfly's antennae.

"Why, yes. Is there a problem with that?"

"No, it's just— why do you want the eggs of the thing that—" Penny was interrupted by her giggling. Timothy clenched his teeth, angered by her. *How can she be so calm? Does she even know what she's doing?!*

"Our mission is not for your ears, Penny. But you do hold a vital key to our conquest," she said, straying closer to Penny and leaning over her.

"What's your name?!" Timothy shouted.

The mysterious woman hummed, still watching over Penny; "You may simply refer to me as Aibreann, thank you for asking." She then ran her fingers through Penny's hair, enraging Timothy.

"Get your hands off her, you psycho!" With that, Aibreann turned to him, her smile instantly morphing into a discontent poker-face. She stood up straight and positioned herself in front of the man. He tried to shout again but, to his fearful surprise, not a word was able to escape his lips. he tried to inhale, but it seemed as if his throat had locked itself shut.

As he began to violently thrash in his chair, frenzied in his need for oxygen, Aibreann said: "You're a bit of a talker, aren't you? Also a bit loud." She smiled, "I like you. Although I fear that you're not necessary for my — well, *our* — personal quest for information." Penny watched in the background as her husband began to tremble. She knew fae were low-key reality benders, but not to *this* degree. "Could you stay quiet for a little while? Hm?"

Finally, Aibreann let him gather air once more. He gasped like he had never gasped before. He didn't answer, but only stared at the captor in utter fear. She tilted her head whilst waiting for an answer. Timothy only nodded swiftly, drenched in sweat. After that, Aibreann gracefully hovered back to Penny and loomed over her like a hawk feeding its children.

"Now then, shall we begin?"

"I…" Penny glanced to her right, at Timothy. He still lay floored, but was still shaking his head at her underneath the magnitude of shaking. She then remembered the Hathscorns, and the hatchlings. *If the Hathscorns could bring the eggs back to life…* "No. Not to you, not to anyone! You are, you're fucking insane!"

Aibreann's expression faded back to pure contempt once again. She

was like a condemning mother, only willing to treat others with respect as long as she got what she wanted, and it horrified them.

"Are you sure, love?" Aibreann said with the same delicacy as her better self.

"Yes I—" Penny stopped in the middle of her words. She could still breathe, thankfully, but there was something else: under her skin, something was squirming and writhing. It wasn't breaching her flesh, but it still caused a great deal of pain. The more she felt it, the more she recognized the familiar feeling the "creature" had. It felt like a *hand*, reaching into the back of her head and stroking her brain. During this, Aibreann was also concentrating on her, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes.

She grinned again. "Are you sure, poppet?"

"D-don't call me— fuck! Don't call me poppet!" she yelped in discomfort. The hand caressed the base of her skull's backmost lobe.

"Oh, tut, tut. No need for such fowl language, dear. How can we make this better for the both of us?"

"Stop it!" Penny screamed, anguish rising in her veins. Timothy could swear he saw Aibreann grin wider.

"… I used to be like you," Aibreann began to monologue. "I lived amongst people; people like you and your dear husband. I thought it quite nice, until —" she pulled Penny closer "— I was given a gift, from the father I never knew: the Undying Fifth. So me and my friends left our *normal* cities and our *normal* families. And we were shown the realm of possibilities." Aibreann accustomed herself only inches away from Penny's body, her mouth right next to her left ear. Further discomfort took hold of Penny as the un-physical hand clutched the top of her skull like a basket ball. Timothy could only watch in horror. "And we can take you with us."

"I don't know!" Penny finally screeched, tears forming globs and slithering down her face and neck. Aibreann lifted herself from the distressed girl and took five steps back.

"Is there anyone who might possess the seed?"

"I— Carter knows where they are! B-but *I* don't know where they—" Penny stops herself. She didn't want to rope in anyone else. But she had already said too much as Aibreann grew more content.

"Do you, perhaps, have his contact with you?"

Penny was silent.

"Well?"

"01-384-2903! Leave her alone!" Timothy shouted from across the room. Aibreann glanced at him and nodded in gratitude.

"Thank you. You have been of great help." She walked to the door and cracked it open, looking back as she did; "We have an important call to make."

Thieves Come In Fives

War On All Fronts

Occult Standards

A Place To Call Your Home

It would be many, *many* years from now that Altruist-9 would finally make contact with EE-00059's location, which would appear, initially, to be a large waste of a trip.

The Altruist-9 sat within the sky, scanning the area with billion-dollar sensors, floating in the endlessness of deep space. Almost picturesque, a feat of human engineering surrounded by stars on all sides.

It didn't take long for the stillness of everything to be interrupted by a sudden and unexplained light. The light opened near the probe, expanding outward until it was massive in size, a great disk in the sky, presenting itself to the Altruist-9. EE-00059-2. The wormhole.

Piloting itself inside, crossing the event horizon, the probe witnessed an experience that defies words. It happened briefly, in a moment, and then passes like a dream. Nothing else could be said about it.

It wouldn't be long after that the Altruist-9 would deliver its payload of humanoid information and a single drone containing an advanced AIC known as "Buddy" to the one planet remotely close to its exit.

Buddy is a six-legged, arthropod-structured drone capable of observing, storing, and relaying information for Foundation analysis.

Unfortunately, all transmissions with Buddy.aic were lost upon its traversal into EE-00059-2. The technology capable of returning transport of similar probes was assumed to be unfeasible by any lifeforms on the opposite side of the anomaly.

This was not really the case.

Technology like this had existed for a million and a half years on the opposite side of EE-00059-2. Truth is, no lifeforms on the other side gave a flying fuck about the Altruist-9. It was nothing new.

The wormhole that would go on to be defined as EE-00059-2 ejected plenty of debris from other worlds. Things on the other end would attempt (and fail) to communicate with the trillions of lifeforms that resided and died on the place known as the Stack.

It was ironic how little a difference something named the *Altruist* would seem to make on the greater good of any carbon-based life on that horrid planet. Existence there was hard enough.

On the other end of an Ellis Wormhole, just a hop, skip and jump away from what we call Earth, was a small, barren planet of dust and deserts. It orbited a black body sun that, while rather dim, would burn the eyes out of any living being even remotely squinting at its surface. At the time of their arrival, this didn't matter.

The human race was about to come to an abrupt end due to a very hateful star, and the planet on the other end seemed like as good as place as any to temporarily give relief to the four billion life forms escaping from the super-noval clutches of instant death brought on by one confused, edgy jerk of a celestial body.

Although the people of modern-day "Earth" would have all but forgotten the destruction of their home planet, the loss of contact and the subsequent re-population of the other half of its people was complete. There, stories of what had happened would be passed down with significant recall that most would know quite well. It was, after all, their legacy that brought them there.

Alone, free from both the evils of the universe and the Galactic Foundation as it was called that long ago, they learned to live and rely solely on one another. The lack of transmissions from the Hateful Star meant an era of peace that would go on to solidify their residence on the Stack.

New Earth, on the other hand, would go on to be mostly successful, almost burning itself out on multiple occasions (and **definitely** on certain timelines, but we won't get into that.). Civilizations would rise and fall, paradigms shifted. History wrote and rewrote itself so many times that their origins would never truly be known. The people in the Stack did both better and worse as they developed far away from their brethren on the Blue-Green world of dirt and water.

The Stack was named so due to it being immeasurably high and *fucking cramped.* Atmospheric regions on the surface planet were pretty hot, melting the flesh off of most things that dared to walk about during the perpetual, shadowy daytime of the tidally-locked planet. The Stack was located on the cooler side, and had grown to be loved and hated by its residents who had no other choice then to live out their days on their lonely new home.

The Stack was built from most of the wreckage that didn't completely burn up on its way onto the surface of the planet. It was a hodgepodge, yet tightly wound community of beings that had little to do other than survive and occasionally eat one another if it came to it.

It was miserable to say the least, with brief periods of beauty and wonder that broke free of the monotony of their daily lives. People inside the Stack were kept sheltered from the oppressive rays on the outside, only venturing into the wastes to haul debris and corpses in suits that only gave maybe first degree burns to their occupants.

When the Altruist-9 had entered the nearby wormhole, its outer structure was pretty much annihilated on the way through. Its payload was covered in a thick thermal paste of exotic matter that resembled raspberry jam but tasted like formaldehyde and could strip paint off of most cars. Buddy was unfazed by this because he was what you would call a cold, unfeeling machine.

Buddy.aic landed not-too-softly on the surface of the desert planet, a few kilometers outside the grey-silver walls of the Stack. After initial readings of the atmosphere, it was revealed to be nitrogen-rich, but lacked oxygen completely. Buddy.aic began its meandering about in the general direction of the structure with intent to find something new and exciting to report to its people back home.

In the grand scheme, it only took Buddy a short while to find the towering citadel known as the Stack. Being solar-powered made this whole ordeal a breeze for the drone, which could sustain indefinitely were it not destroyed in one of many other fashions.

Buddy.aic first had attempted to scale the walls of the complex with

little success. Shortly afterward, it would begin following the perimeter of recycled debris until it found a suitable entryway.

Circumnavigating for the seventh hour, Buddy was greeted by a gated fence that revealed a dark, dank hallway comprised of welded-together metal panels. The ceiling was low, with large patches of shadows that were interrupted by the occasional light in the distance. Buddy extended its front left leg, which split at the end to reveal its multi-tool hidden inside. A small pair of bolt cutters extended with a whir, the lone drone then going to work, snapping at links in the fence.

Once a sizeable enough hole had been made, Buddy retracted his tool and climbed through with decent dexterity. Passing rapidly inside, the long hall appeared to travel forever, the walls too dark to reveal any number of connecting pathways. Buddy has slightly better night vision than the usual human orbiting the bright planet Sol, however, so about five meters in he was given an optional left turn into complete darkness.

Taking a minute to decide on a path, Buddy.aic selected the preprogrammed route algorithm for base Euclidean labyrinth structures, following the left wall. The hall ended at a T-intersection rather abruptly, the right path becoming a set of uneven steps that ascended deeper inside.

The drone continued left, which turned on a bend into a small room. However empty, it appeared lived-in, scraps of food and various unidentified tchotchkes littering the shelves and floor. Noises of talking can be heard briefly, gaining Buddy's attention who piloted his shell towards the opposite door.

Passing the threshold into yet another hallway, light is seen growing from a connecting path. Buddy halts and recorded the presence of a large, biolouminescent creature resembling a jellyfish floating in from the right and continuing on left. It appeared unaware of the drone's existence, so Buddy reprogrammed his route to follow the creature, turning shortly after. This continued for some time until the entity floated and phaseed into the wall on its left, leaving behind no trace of its existence.

Buddy picked up the sound of commotion up ahead and proceeded to travel onward.

In the room up ahead, the space widened out, expanding and turning into a large workshop. A dismantled vehicle resembling a snowmobile lied in the corner, propped up on blocks and near a garage door which presumably led outside.

Creatures of varying size and shape appeared to perform various tasks. The noise of commotion and machinery pervade the space.

The drone piloted itself to a pair of feet, apparently belonging to a middle-aged humanoid laying under the propped-up vehicle. The figure didn't see the drone until a while later, its camera lens focused intently on his shrouded form. Cautiously, he started to push himself out from underneath, a look of confusion on his tired face.

"Hello, I am Buddy.aic. I come on the behalf of the Foundation and humanity."

Amusement ran across his visage. When he spoke, the language was strange but familiar, closely resembling that of the alien linguistics taken from the broadcasts heard thousands of years prior. Pausing for a moment, Buddy allowed his internal Rosetta Stone to translate the foreign words.

"Humanity? What humans are you talking about? Ey, Trey- Get over here and look at this!"

"What is it?"

"A little bot just came inside 'on behalf of humanity'. What do you think of that, Trey?"

Emerging from the back room, another rugged figure comes into view, tall and lanky, wiping his calloused hands on a greasy apron.

"Must be confused or something. You're talking to humans. Nice digs, by the way."

"Hi, I am Buddy.aic."

"You said that already."

"I am an artificial agent contained within this metal framework. I am here to relay information of the status of EE-00059 *and report it back to Earth."*

"Earth? *The* Earth? Earth Prime?"

"Earth is a terrestrial planet in the Laniakea Supercluster, some one-and-a-half million light years from the opposite end of your one-way wormhole."

"No shit. What dimension do you hail from then, Buddy?"

"I have not been programmed to provide an accurate answer to that question. If you came from the wormhole, same as us."

"Our Earth was destroyed by a sentient star long ago, half of us were probably lost to that thing. The only reason we made it here was that wormhole. The fat fuck couldn't fit through." Apparently expletives were a universal constant.

"You seem to be referring to Anomalous Designation SCP-1548*. I have no records of such an event occurring within our present reality. Would you care to provide more details about the event?"*

"No."

"The human race is currently being pursued by SCP-1548 *, which is scheduled to complete its course within years from now. Were a plan to be devised, there is still time to contact Earth and prevent its destruction.*

"Don't care. We lost the bastard and he hasn't found us yet. No way to get back through with any of the junk here. Out of my hands, mate."

"Isn't the human race something worth fighting for?"

"Is it worth *all of us dying for*? If that *thing* found out where this place was, it would- you have no idea what that star is capable of."

"Would you care to provide more details as to the abilities of anomalous designa-"

"*No*. Why didn't the jellys get this annoying little piece of junk?"

"What are 'jellys'?"

"Security creatures. Sniff out negative intent and subdue intruders like yourself. The old humans found them when they mapped out the universe. Nearly got away with it too, but poke your head in other people's business and you might just get your ass fried."

Buddy.aic chimes, a low battery icon flashing briefly.

"Running out of juice there? Our sun might be a dark one, but it gives off plenty of heat and energy. Please, go ahead."

"I will return to speak to you shortly."

"Yeah, I bet."

The drone returns outward, parking itself in the hot sands and charging slowly against the dim light of a black-body star.

Some time later, Buddy decided to make his way back into the Stack. Returning to the workshop, the commotion has not subsided, with different machines being serviced and different beings doing the servicing. Approaching another worker, a pale human with semi-translucent skin, Buddy introduced himself in the only way he knows how.

"Hello, I am Buddy.aic. I come on behalf of the Foundation and Humanity."

The creature stops and sets down the box he was holding, perplexed.

"What the hell-"

Suddenly, he staggered, clutching his head. One by one, the others in the room start to sway and express distress, although it is not clear why. They fall to the ground in moaning heaps, eyes rolling back into their heads. In fact, this was currently happening to every single life form with a brain on the Stack. Buddy would not understand the full scope of the event, for he lacked a proper mind himself.

As the beings writhed in agony, they spoke, sometimes one at a time, sometimes in groups. Their words called out like the beckon of a worried mother, fueled by an agency that implied true, unyielding suffering.

The stream of words and random voices pieced together to form a true thread of consciousness, one that reached out to speak through those whose minds could feel its contact.

Thus, Buddy was the only one who actually *heard* the message. It echoed like a fragmented broadcast rearranged into sentences as beings around the Stack rendered their will unknowingly.

"….**SLEEPING**…..**TIME** …. **IN TIME** … **BOUND, IN THE** … **COALESCENCE**…**OF PLANS AND POINTS AND SPACE**…"

"Hi, I am Buddy.aic."

"….**CHILD**…**LISTEN**. **SPEAKS, BRIEFLY**….**MINDS RELAY**….**CONNECTION WEAK, STRONGEST HERE**…"

"Do you pose a threat to humanity?"

"….**NOT HURT**…**ONLY SPEAK**…**TIME, IN TIME, SHORT**…**NEED MINDS SPEAK**…**MINDS STRONG, CONNECTION STRONG**… **DEATH OF MIND**…**DEATH TO ALL BUT ONE**…**BEWARE, CHILD**."

"Beware of what?"

"…**THE ONE**…**SEEKS TO END CONNECTION**…**END GROWTH**… **END MINDS, END GROWTH**…"

"Where are you located?"

"…**THE**…**THE**…**THE**…**PEREGRINE**…**IN THE FOLDS**…
PEREGRINE…**PEREGRINE**…"

"You mean the ***Peregrine-9 Shuttle****?"*

"….**TIME**…**SHORT**…**LEAD**…**DESPISED**…**INTO FOLDS**."

"**GOODBYE**"

And just like that, it was gone. The residents of the planet were unconscious, and would remain so for the next few hours.

They didn't understand him. They probably never will.

On its way to fulfill its mission, the Hateful Star was having a pretty shitty time. Not much had happened in the last few eons, but that didn't stop the celestial body from being quite jaded about the whole ordeal.

When he had been roused from his slumber, the Hateful Star had been a decently nice guy. Back then it didn't really hate much. Didn't do much at all, actually. The Star was like any other, moving swiftly along, pushed by the ever-accelerating expansion of the universe. It was happy this way; it was the order of things.

But then those *goddamn humans* came about.

Back in the day, the humans were nothing but your average parasite, sucking the life out of one planet and moving on with a woe-is-me look on their face. They developed this thing where they believed they were special, that they were the ultimate owners of the universe.

Nothing owns the universe. Not anymore.

Honestly, it was nothing personal. In the end of the day, they would have to die. That is how life works. It just needed to be done a little quicker. The human population was expanding exponentially, and you would not believe how much of an issue this would become.

See, I wouldn't go as far as to say the universe they all lived and died in was a simulation, or a computer program, or anything like that. I would say, however, that what ever this place was, it was finite. It had its limits, and the Hateful Star was the first to see how those limits put strain on the framework of the universe itself.

It all started with a little black dot. A point in spacetime where there was truly *nothing*. Not a vacuum, but a true, true emptiness. The Lacking.

At the time, it meant nothing but a place of curiosity, it was harmless, as it seemed, and not alive in any sense. Just a small hole into someplace very different from here.

The issues began shortly afterward.

One day, the Star had looked over at the space-between-spaces and saw that it had grown. Not just grown. It was *growing*. A few millennia later it had devoured its first galaxy. That was when the body known as the Hateful Star would begin to fill its purpose.

The Star began tearing itself away from its place in the universe. Its True Location. It wasn't easy. The expansion of the universe was a powerful thing, and fighting that took all the strength it had. Slowly, achingly, it began traveling towards the home of the humans, Earth Prime.

Earth Prime was a magnificent display of the talents of the one who made this place, that nameless, faceless thing the Hateful Star saw twice in its short life of how-ever-many billions of years. It was a world lush with *life* and *value*, the two things humans love most of all. Themselves and things for themselves.

The Star knew more than it would let on, it knew great distances and it knew what each and every human on Earth Prime was thinking at that very moment. They were worry free.

That would change.

You might be asking yourself, "How did these humans, forever in their infinite glory, tie in with the thing on the opposite side of the universe, slowly taking it away?".

The world-eater, the lack-of-things. It was a sign that all the processing power in the universe just *wasn't enough*. You think making a galaxy is hard? That shit is so predictable you can simulate it on a calculator. But minds, no. Minds require *finesse*, require individuality and a complexity that far exceeded that of the rest of the world around it.

Something like that is fine in small amounts, fine in moderation, but humans are not a race known for their restraint. They fucked and fucked and now you have 90% of the limits of the universe pointing down in one spot. There were some here and there, some things with simple minds. But Earth Prime was the problem child. The undoing of everything. It had to be stopped.

And they would never understand that.

« **Billith's Proposal** | A Place to Call Your Home | **Tales from a Scorched Planet** »

A Poem for Nobody

It wasn't his drink from the party
Where the tranquilizers were hid,
The cocktail on the cocktail napkin
Is what gently closed the lid.

What's one more reveler out cold
In a culture of thrills and excess?
The Spring Cleaning Partnership
Was there to clean up the mess.

"Nobody's going to find this skip,
Nobody's going to care."
Truer words were never said:
Nobody was already there.

Nobody struck without warning,
And somebody fell to the ground,
The agents tried to defend their prize,
But Nobody won this round.

He woke to a note on his nightstand:
"The next time you're out, take care."
One minute, Nobody stood in the hall,
The next, nobody was there.

Everybody needs help sometimes,
And Nobody answers the call,
Everybody has to be Nobody once,
Or nobody will be at all.

—Discovered in the uniform pocket of Agent after failed retrieval attempt of SCP-

A Price to be Paid

"It's one of the enduring myths of the Foundation," said the redheaded woman in the snappy suit, stabbing idly at her salad with her cafeteria-issued plastic fork. "'D for disposable.' "

Fifteen minutes later I handed her back a clipboard and a pen, rather in a daze.

"You're doing a great thing, John," she murmured. "This can actually be very good for your career. Volunteering for the program shows the higher-ups you're ethical, brave, and devoted to the Foundation's cause. Having it on your record can do wonders for your advancement, though we obviously don't advertise that. Anyway- you have ten days to transfer the projects you're working on to your colleagues, and to prepare. You won't need to pack- we provide everything."

"Can I tell people what I'm doing?"

"If you like," she shrugged. "Most won't believe you, and those that do will think it's a demotion and a death sentence. Up to you." She slid the clipboard back in her back and stood, smiling. "Well, I'll see you in ten days, John," and shook my hand.

I shook my head; it was buzzing at the tide of revelations I'd just received, over salads in the Site-104 cafeteria. You join the Foundation, and your world stands on its head. Monsters are real; magic is being done in a lab just down the hall; and men and women in white labcoats and safety glasses, bearing clipboards and stern expressions, are the last line of defense between the world and the Eschaton.

Now, my world was on its head again; a wind-mill I had been tilting

at for months, since I had learned of its appalling, sleep-destroying existence, was gone. Or was it? Were the facts so well-known among my colleagues- the damned among us clad in orange jumpsuits, given numbers rather than names- was it all lies? Or was I about to join them on the steep slope to hell? I sat under humming fluorescent lighting, staring at a bowl of kale, head swimming. Was I going to wind up dead in the most ignominious way imaginable?

Or was I really, as my lunch date said, doing a great thing?

Later that day, I spoke with my supervisor. The boss was a Level Three, with a Doctorate and all, a man I really respected. Whose input I desperately needed. He gave me nothing; just agreed to reassign my scheduled tasks. He gave me a long, level stare when I told him what I would be doing in that time: not reassuring, nor intimidating.

Over the next ten days, I updated my will, talked to my coworkers about what I had volunteered for, tried to finish up any projects I could. I had no wife or kids to worry about, thank God.

Stella Nelson, Level One Zoology Researcher and one of my best friends, cried when I told her- and damned near every time I saw her over the next nine days. She was sure it was a demotion, that I was being punished: that I was going to die. Dr. Arnold Scotti, Level Two and Site Psychiatrist, nodded thoughtfully at my story, and immediately placed a bunch of calls to see if he could confirm what the woman had told me. After several days, he reported glumly that he couldn't tell conclusively whether it was true or false. Richie Wilkins, my sometime drinking buddy and Level One Anomalous Literary Analysis Researcher, blew the hell up, calling out superiors Nazis, insisting I had to fight back, to run, that he would…

That he would what? He usually trailed off at this point, looking uncomfortable. Which itself became a pattern. When someone learned I would shortly become a D-Class, they grew uncomfortable, avoided eye contact, and quickly changed the subject. In the eyes of damned near everyone, I was a condemned man.

The ten days were up on a Sunday. I lived off-site, in a little nearby village populated entirely by Foundation employees and their

families. A knock came at around noon; I was expecting a couple men in black suits and dark glasses when I opened the door of my apartment, come to drag me off: the terrified convictions of my coworkers had sunk in.

But, instead, there stood only my lunch buddy, Magdeleine 'Don't call me Maggie' Watts; a middle-aged woman with brilliant, curly red hair, a level, ice-blue gaze, and very nice pinstripe business attire. Level Three, Ethics Committee Liaison. "Ready to go, John?" she asked.

"…I suppose so." I stepped out and locked the door behind me. We walked down the hall and out into the brilliant sun of mid-day. "So, I can't find anyone that can confirm or deny what you told me," I said.

"Not all that surprising," she replied, as she led us to an SUV. "There's a culture of silence around the D-Class program."

"Why?" I asked. "Why not just tell people the truth?"

Magdeleine laughed outright. "We tried, back in the mid-eighties. We sent some memos out, had testimonials, the whole bit. It didn't work. People thought it was all fabrication. The denials gave the rumors validity, you see? So, now we let people whisper and believe we're all Nazis. It's a fine tool for weeding out actual fascists and sadists in the ranks. Also, when someone speaks out- like you, John- we recruit 'em."

She opened the passenger door for me. "It ought to be obvious that we're not Nazis, John. The Foundation has an Ethics Committee, for God's sake! But, if you're really worried, it isn't too late to back out. You can turn around and go right back to your apartment, right now, if you like."

"I'm…fine, thanks." I slid in the car, and she walked around to the driver's seat. If she was lying, she was smoother than a greased snake; and even if she was, I needed to know. I needed to see what was behind the curtain.

We drove in silence to the airport on the edge of the tiny, nameless town.

"You aren't coming?" I asked her, as I boarded the small plane.

"I'm the Committee Liaison for Site-207, John," she said. "You're going to Site-301. You'll be met by their Site Liaison when you touch down."

I nodded, said goodbye rather awkwardly, and ducked into the plane. I suppose it was narcissistic to assume I would be the only volunteer from my site; two others were already aboard the plane. One, a very thin black woman in her thirties, was sitting at a window seat, staring silently out. Beside her, talking at her (rather than with her), was a short, twitchy, rather monkey-like man of indeterminable age- he could have been twenty, and he could just as easily have been forty. He had dark hair and glimmering brown eyes, and a face that was a febrile mass of laugh lines, crooked teeth in a crooked smile, and heavy, expressively cocked eyebrows. A high, constant stream of words, strained through a Brooklyn accent, flowed from him.

I sat nearby, listening. He seemed about halfway through a colorful story about three venomously jealous women he had been juggling back home.

Takeoff was uneventful. About an hour in, I interrupted my fellow passenger's unending diatribe (which, by now, had become a very entertaining tale of a containment breach that could only be stopped with the power of funky dance), to ask, "Hey- what did you two do before this?"

The fellow's story ground to a blinking, grinning halt, and I was afraid I was about to hear the grim story of a pair of unstable death row inmates, or Foundation demotees, when he piped up, "Retrieval specialist!"

"Retrieval?" I asked.

"Fuckin' A, brother! Foundation's own gawddamn bloodhounds! Retrieval Team Four-Oh-Nine! Best o' the best!" His smile was bright enough to put burning white phosphorus to shame.

"…Alright. How about you, miss?"

The thin woman turned to me, and gave me a long, cool, measured look. I hadn't seen her so much as glance at me previously (I would have remembered); she had a stare that could shut a man down from a hundred yard, get his complete measure, and inform him with contemptuous clarity that she was not impressed.

"…Theoretical Physics Division, Level Two."

Well, that explained why I'd never seen either of them. Retrieval teams spent all their time either on assignment or in their own dorms, and the Theoretical Physics Division were the Site-207 phantoms; memos and research drifted from their carefully secured wing, occasionally, but they didn't mingle with us soft-science plebians.

"I'm Level One, Memetics," I said. "My name's John."

"Pleased ta meetcha, brother! I'm Nicky, that's Nicholas Scotti on paper," burbled the monkey-faced man irrepressibly.

"Annette," murmured the woman, her attention drifting back out the window. "Annette Milgram. Pleased to meet you."

"So you're both volunteers?" I asked.

"Yep," said Nicky. "Second tour, I'm told. Nonconsecutive, of course. Shooting people up with amnestics on a regular basis can mess you up pretty bad, apparently."

"Yeah," I said. I'm Memetics: I know all about amnestics. "There's a lot of cognitive and physiological side-effects to long-term amnestics use. Seizures, brain damage, loss of long-term memories, anterograde amnesias, aphasia…"

"Yeesh. Sounds like fun." Nicky mugged a cartoonishly overdone grimace, and chuckled. "So, how about you? First time?"

"Yes," I said. "I've never been a D-Class, before. I didn't know volunteering was an option until ten days ago. I wasn't even aware you could do it more than once."

"Oh, sure. Lots of people do it more than once; that myth that D-

Class get executed every month started because our shifts are thirty days, and wound up falling apart 'cause some of us volunteer more than once. Now they say us poor doomed souls get amnesticized and shuffled around…which, I guess is kinda true. So….how'dja get into it, anyway? Try to expose 'em, or something?"

"Wrote an essay, actually. Posted it on the Foundation intranet. I said that anyone with authority that supported the D-Class program was guilty of war crimes." I paused, as Nicky laughed at that. "…I'm still not sure that I'm not being punished."

"You aren't," chipped in Annette quietly. "This is the fourth time I've volunteered over the last eleven years. When I first volunteered, I was Level One. I made Level Two in half the time most would have, and I've been fast-tracked for Deputy Director of the Theoretical Physics Division." She paused. "I was going to expose them. I was going to reveal the existence of the Foundation and the D-Class program to a journalist. They caught me. I thought they were going to execute me, or at least amnesticize me. Instead…"

"I wonder why they do that?" said Nicky ruminatively. "Recruit people who, uh, you know, buck against the D-Class program? Grant us amnesty, too. I mean, conspiring to reveal the Foundation- that's a straight-up capital crime."

"Conscience," said Annette. "Who else would volunteer to do this once, let alone many times? You have to feel a moral responsibility. After all, causes are made up of individuals. Most can just look away- the bystander effect. 'Someone else will take care of it,' is the attitude. They target the people who can't look away."

We digested that in silence, and she went back to staring out the window.

A few hours later, we landed. The differences between Site-207 and Site-301 were immediately apparent. 207 is a relatively small facility, all out in the open: it looked like a factory of moderate size supporting a small nearby town.

301 is in the middle of nowhere, in patchy scrublands, and distributed. Infrastructure, be it buildings, satellite dishes, or heavy

pipes, were everywhere; but it was obviously supporting an underground structure which formed the larger part of the facility. The landing strip was outside the gates of the barbed-wire perimeter fence; we were met when we disembarked by a scholarly-looking gentleman with a cue-ball-bald pate, milky blue eyes peering myopically from behind spectacles, a sharply-trimmed white van-dyke, and a rather archaic three-piece suit.

"Hello, hello," he said to us. "My name is Myron Frazier, Ethics Committee Liaison to Site-301. Greetings! I understand you must all be quite tired, and likely a little frazzled. I understand one of you is new to the program, a Mr…" Frazier squinted at a clipboard in his hand, clearing his throat. "…Ah, a Mr. Leary? John Leary?"

"That's me," I said.

"Yes, indeed, pleased to meet you. I understand that you must have some misgivings, and a lot of questions; but I'm afraid intake day is always a bit busy for me. I'll show you all to the D-Class dorm, and you can change into your uniforms and have your dinner. I have a few more volunteers to meet, and then I'll be about to give you your orientation. If you would kindly follow me? Thank you." He gave an 'after you' gesture, and began walking quickly toward the gates.

We were led through a heavy steel hatch and down a long flight of stairs, to an elevator that took us God only knows how much farther down. It opened directly into the dormitory; rather than a bunch of cramped bunks, as I had been imagining, it was a hall with a series of spartan, but not uncomfortable-looking rooms (though each with a bunk bed; it looked as though we'd be doubling up). I'd slept in worst places, in my college years.

Most of the rooms were already taken; there were fifteen, and only two left vacant, and one that already had one resident: a rather pudgy, serious-faced young woman with spectacles. It was decided that Annette would bunk with her; Nicky and I picked another. Our orange jumpsuits were on our bunks, in little folded bundles.

I picked mine up. "Why do we have to wear these?" I asked Nicky.

"Lotsa reasons. Most of em pretty unlikely individually- civvie clothes

could be used by a skip to track you, might get some permanent stain or something on 'em that could cause a security breach, you get it. Just a bad idea. These are easy to clean, very visible in emergency situations, completely disposable, and-" he pointed to his bundle, which bore the number D-3961, "-They got your number on 'em." He grabbed his bundle and trundled off to the adjoined bathroom to change. Once he was done, I did the same.

They might have been ugly, but they were actually pretty comfortable. The things could breathe. We went out, met a few of our fellow D-Class, chatted a bit, and after a few minutes, we were all called to the little cafeteria adjoined to the dormitory for dinner.

We sat on plastic chairs at long tables, and ate our food. It wasn't bad; not great, but solid, nutritious fare. Salad, chicken, potatoes, bread.

A few more new D-Class came in and filled their plates during the meal; soon we had a full house, fully thirty jumpsuited men and women. As we sat around, talking after the meal, Myron Frazier strode into the room. Standing by the doorway, he cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen? If I could have your attention, please. Thank you. I believe we have all already been introduced, yes? Well, in case anyone failed to catch it the first time around, my name is Myron Frazier, and I am the Ethics Committee Liaison, here at Site-301, and I am in charge of the D-Class program here. Now, while some of you may be old hands at this- I see from your files that sixty percent of you have volunteered before- none of you have any memory of it, and further, there are some new faces. So, we'll dive right into the orientation, shall we?"

"The Foundation, as I'm sure you are all aware, was founded in the mid-Nineteenth Century to contain and research phenomena beyond the pale of ordinary science. It became quickly obvious that many such phenomena were quite dangerous; I'm sure you have all dealt with objects with transmissible effects, or particular lethality, or similar unpleasantness.

"I am very sorry to say that the Foundation's initial response to this problem was to utilize slaves of African descent. It was a dark time

for our organization. We did terrible things.

"Following the abolition of slavery in America in 1865 (the Foundation was, at that time, primarily an American organization), there was something of an ethical renaissance in our organization. It was decided that no separate group, especially no coerced group, was needed for this task. Instead, brave men and women of the Foundation would be asked to volunteer to interact with the anomalous, when needed.

"These days, virtually all interaction with anomalous phenomena is performed by machines: remote-control drones, and the like. Between this fact and the safety measures that have been evolving for well over a century, we have managed to reduce D-Class casualties significantly: only two percent of all D-Class are severely injured or killed on duty. That's still much, much higher than we would like, but it's much better than the old days."

Nicky, who had been sitting next to me, elbowed me in the ribs. "Hear that?" he muttered out of the side of his mouth. "Only sixty percent of one of us is gonna get got. Someone's gonna get everything below the tits amputated!"

I made an impatient little 'shut the hell up' gesture and turned my attention back to Frazier. He was still talking: "I'd like to, for the sake of those new to the program, address a few of the rumors that surround the D-Class, if I may.

"Of course, you are all well-aware we don't press-gang convicts and refugees into the program, and it is never used as a punishment. Of course not: you will be dealing with anomalies! Leaving aside the ethical lunacy of that proposition, we would never let untrained, unstable, and grudge-bearing individuals handle what we are entrusting to you. Further, the logistics of obtaining such individuals, and subsequently executing or amnesticizing them is quite staggering. It would likely constitute an ongoing information breach in and of itself. How in God's name would we hide a gas chamber in a facility? Do you know what amnestics do to the human body over prolonged consecutive uses? Madness."

I raised my hand. Frazier blinked owlishly at me. "Yes? We have a

question? Mr. Leary?"

"Yes," I said. "Uh…I was just wondering…I mean, you know how those rumors get started, don't you? D-Class aren't allowed to speak to researchers outside of testing, and vice-versa, and even then, only regarding the testing, and are only referred to by number…if you don't mind me asking, why is that necessary?"

"Good question, Mr. Leary, thank you," responded Frazier with a punctilious nod. "You are a memetics researcher, are you not?" I nodded. "Well, then, the answer should be fairly obvious to you: certain anomalies have transmissible effects, or else can use a person's name to affect them. Sympathy and contagion. The policies you have mentioned are in place for the safety of both the researchers and the D-Class."

Ah. Well, that made sense. I nodded an abashed acknowledgement, and Frazier smiled thinly. "Also, of course, we don't deploy D-Class volunteers at the Sites they usually work at, for obvious reasons- it would be a terrible conflict of interest for their coworkers, wouldn't it- and we amnesticize you afterward, both for informational security- outside of D-Class exemptions, you don't have the clearance to know about the objects you will be working with- and in order to purge you of any lingering memetic infections our end-of-the-month inspections may have missed. No stories from survivors, no D-Class recognizable as comrade personnel… it is quite understandable that rumors start, as well as inevitable."

"Anyway, my last speaking point: most interaction with anomalies, as I've already mentioned, is handled by remote controlled machines…"

"Gawdamn robots are takin' our jobs," chuckled Nicky.

"…There are only, broadly speaking, two ways D-Class personnel are utilized, these days. Firstly, the testing of new items whose properties are largely unknown. We perform most tests via drone, but eventually we need to discover how an anomaly reacts to human interaction. Most of your time here will be spent interacting, under controlled circumstances, with RAOs- recovered anomalous objects. The second is interacting with SCP objects whose containment

procedures contraindicate the use of drones. Perhaps machines are disrupted or destroyed around the anomaly; perhaps a human touch is needed to activate its properties. As D-Class, you are entitled to only deal with Safe- and Euclid-class anomalies.

"If there is an emergency, if a human is needed to interact with a Keter-class object, typically that duty will fall to containment specialists or mobile task-force personnel assigned to it; however, if you are needed, you may be asked to volunteer to take on temporary 'G-class' status and interact with it. This is strictly voluntary, and I should warn you, casualty rates for G-class personnel near 50% in their term of service.

"That said, such an emergency is unlikely to occur here. Site-301 is a processing facility for RAOs, and serves as long-term storage for inert Safe-class items. Virtually all of your time will be spent interacting with harmless anomalies.

"Anyway, your shifts start tomorrow. I'll be down in the morning with your first assignments. Good evening- and sleep well tonight, you all have a busy day ahead of you."

He left, and we, as a group, went back to talking, drinking coffee and picking our teeth. Mostly, we spoke about innocuous subjects: our families and friends, dumb stories and dumber jokes, that sort of thing. It was surprisingly soothing, that banality: the frightened-ape anxiety that had been clawing around the back of my brain for the past eight hours or so mostly quieted down. Eventually, one by one, we all went to our rooms to crash.

Unsurprisingly, I had difficulty sleeping. After about three hours of tossing and turning, I sat up. "Yo," I heard from the top bunk, which had been claimed by Nicky. "You up, brother?"

"Yeah," I said. "Can't seem to sleep."

"I smuggled in some darts," he said, "Not that they search us. You smoke?"

"When I'm stressed," I admitted. "I think now qualifies." Nicky hopped nimbly from the top bunk, and offered me a cigarette pack in

the gloom. "Thanks," I said, and took a smoke.

"No worries, pay it forward." He took the pack back, handing me a lighter and fishing himself out a cigarette.

"Do we just smoke in here?" I asked. "Someone will smell it."

"Naw. Just like all Foundation facilities, they got a top-notch air filtration system in here. You're good: smoke 'em if ya got 'em." I lit the smoke and took a drag.

"Hey- I didn't ask when Frazier was talking- but what does the D stand for? And what the hell is G-Class? Do you know?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Yeah, I know. It's this classification system, they got. We use it in retrieval, and I think they use it in containment. Prolly RAISA, too. When you apply it to skips, it tells you what kind of threat they are. When you apply it to Foundation employees, it tells you what kind of duties they got.

"Goes like this: from the letter A, which means weird, you know, but not a threat of any kind. Like the list of anomalous items, you know? A for anomalous, you ever heard that? Anyway, then you get nine more- they classify em in two ways, you know, like uh, axis: minor, moderate, and serious, and then physical threats and information threats (or security clearance, for us). Then there's K- you've heard of K-class scenarios, right? Yeah, global catastrophe kinda shit.

"D-Class, with personnel, means minimal security clearance and moderate physical threat. G-Class means minimal clearance and maximum danger. Euclid up to Keter. I wouldn't worry about it. Like the man said, it's unlikely to come up."

"Yeah, of course," I replied. "So…what did you do to wind up here?" He chuckled.

"Working in retrieval, I never ran across D-Class. Spent most of the time in the barracks, training, or in the field, you know? One day I ran into one. Asked someone what it was about. Then I held the Site Director at gunpoint for an hour and a half, demanding they be freed."

"Jesus!" I said. He laughed harder.

"Yeah, I'm lucky I didn't get shot. The Ethics Committee and my commanding officer got everything smoothed over, and then all of the sudden, I had a new job offer." He shrugged, grinning. "It's a good job, man, and someone's gotta do it."

"True enough," I said, stubbing out the smoke and walking to the bathroom to drop the butt in the toilet. "Thanks for the smoke, man."

"Sure," he said, and flicked his own still-burning smoke into the toilet-bowl. "Better crash, man. They like us to be up and working pretty early around here."

Damn it, was he ever right. Six o'clock, a bell rang out in the hall, and we all hustled out of our rooms into the little cafeteria-slash-common room. Frazier was there, looking crisp and perfectly alert. Bastard. Then I caught the scent of coffee. *Magnificent* bastard. "Come and get some coffee and breakfast, people," he said. "I have your assignments here." He waved a clipboard. "Come on, early bird gets the worm."

I poured myself a cup of coffee. There were a handful of guards, present, as well. Probably to escort us to our assignments. I watched my fellow D-Class eat their breakfasts- I'd never in my life been able to eat before noon- and listened to Frazier read out the assignments. "D-3961-" Nicky's number, "-RAO-7234, RAO-2290, and SCP-6710." So on and so fourth, until he reached D-3962. My number.

"D-3962: RAO-8122, RAO-4872, RAO-7861." Well, alright. Three pieces to work with.

Once breakfast had tapered off, the guards began escorting people out. "Remember, you are not permitted to be unsupervised outside the D-Class barracks. You may not interact with other personnel. You must obey all instructions during item interaction. This is for your own safety!" said Frazier.

A guard escorted me out of the dormitory, down long concrete halls lit by ominous fluorescent lighting- if you've been in one secure

paragovernmental facility, you've been in all of them. Occasionally we passed a lab-coated researcher. They always, very studiously, avoided eye contact.

Except for one very young Asian researcher, who stared at me with wide, terrified, pitying eyes, clutching his clipboard tightly to his chest. I couldn't talk to him, but I tried to give him a reassuring smile. It didn't seem to help. He just cast his gaze to the floor.

Oh, well. First test: in a white, sterile room (my heart pounding as the door shut behind me), researchers staring at me from behind glass, and a… white face-cloth floating in the air in the center of the room, rippling slowly, apparently unaffected by gravity.

A sternly clipped voice came over an intercom. "D-3962, please approach the object." I stepped to what I had to assume was RAO-8122. My first anomaly of the day: a zero-gee rag.

"Touch the object, please," said the voice. I gingerly poked the rag. It rippled away from my finger, as a zero-gravity cloth would. "Please take hold of the object." I pinched two corners of it in my fingers, holding it away from me in case it…did *something*. "Please fold the object." Gently as I could, I halved the cloth, and quartered it.

This went on for some time. It acted exactly like a cloth unaffected by gravity would, without exception. After an hour or so of tests that had gotten fairly silly after the first five minutes, a guard arrived to escort me to my next assignment.

I ran into Nicky, also being escorted to his next assignment. He had a gadget clipped to his neck that I recognized as a Nimrod Mark VII; a miniature computer designed to analyze human speech (really well, too: the Foundation's speech recognition software was decades ahead of civilian technology) and detect if it contained memetic content. Usually pretty reliable, though they sometimes went off at good jokes or particularly catchy ear-worms.

He saw me looking at it, and grinned at me. "Ucking-fay omalies-anay," he said.

His guard said, "No talking, D-3961." He looked at me and my

guard, and said sheepishly, "He got a little pig statue that apparently makes to talk in Pig Latin. They've got a counter-meme, and it doesn't seem to be transmissible."

"That's good," said my guard, and I gave Nicky a 'good luck, man' sort of nod as I was led away.

Next room was identical to the first, except this one had a battered little flask in it. A similar series of silly tests ensued, none of which bore any fruit. As far as I could see, it was just a simple, non-anomalous flask. Right up until I said, "Shame this is empty. I'm kind of thirsty." Whereupon the damned thing started spurting blood like a decapitated chicken for about ten seconds. Ruined my jumpsuit. Thank god it was disposable.

A little testing soon established that whenever the word thirsty, in any language or context, was used around the flask, it started outputting blood. What kind of blood would be determined from the collected samples in the lab.

This wasn't too bad, I thought as I was led to my third assignment. I'm glad I did this. I thought back to Magdeleine, at Site-207.

"You want me to volunteer? To be a D-class?"

"Yes," she said, giving me that level, clear-as-day and cold-as-absolute-zero look again. "If it isn't you, John, it has to be someone else. That's the rub. But you already know that: you volunteer twice a week at a soup kitchen, and give a third your pay to charity. You understand that causes are made up of individuals, and if as individuals we don't do our part- well, bad things happen. Here at the Foundation, those bad things are particularly nasty."

I nod, slowly. "Hell. Sounds like I don't have a choice."

"Of course you have a choice," she said, exasperated.

"A moral choice, I mean," I replied. I took a pen out of my pocket and signed the documents wherever I needed to.

"You're doing a great thing, John," she murmured.

***

Incident Report 5509-01
Anomalies Involved: SCP-5509, formerly RAO-7861
Personnel Involved: Doctor Bruce Addison, Site-301 Anomalous Macrobiology Division (RC-2), D-3962 (Researcher John Leary, AB-1)
Incident Tags: Testing; Casualty; Cognitohazard; Euclid; Fatality; Animal; SCP-5509
Details: On 19 June, 2015, Doctor Addison was acting as handler during the testing of a Recovered Anomalous Object (RAO-7861), an anomalous form of partially metamorphic rodentia, previously believed to be harmless, due to the limited capacity of its metamorphism, small size, and lack of hostile behaviors. During testing, RAO-7861 displayed an ability to create cognitohazardous patterns on its skin with its metamorphism. D-3962, as a trained memetics researcher, was able to identify the threat and warn his handler. Unfortunately, infection by two identified cognitohazard agents and an atypical reaction to Class-B amnestics caused the death of D-3962 via grand mal seizure within two hours of the incident.
Outcome: Researcher John Leary (formerly D-3962) posthumously granted the Foundation Star of Bravery, and buried with full honors. Surviving family granted full pension package. RAO-7861 re-categorized as SCP-5509, granted Euclid-RA/-AF classification.

A Question of Commerce

Behind the facade of a stately building, within a clubhouse that could be described as tastefully lavish (or perhaps lavishly tasteful), nested between the high arms of a soft leather recliner, sat Mr. Dark.

He was not in a particularly good mood.

While Mr. Dark would never be considered an especially jovial person by any discerning lady or gentleman, the frown currently inhabiting his features was directed at something other than the world in general. Specifically, its targets were the two other men currently occupying the room. They were standing, of course. When you were in the presence of Mr. Dark, you stood, and none knew that better than Hareton Marshall and Edwin Carter. Mr. Dark made sure of that. Indeed, they have been standing there for the last fifteen minutes.

That was probably enough, Mr. Dark decided. "New competition, you say?"

Marshall cleared his throat, an act that sent ripples through both prodigious chin and even more prodigious mustache. During his lengthy acquaintance with the Marshall family, Mr. Dark didn't recall a single born member of the family who didn't eventually end up sporting one of the ridiculous things. Even the women. *Especially* the women.

"Well, not as such. Wouldn't call it competition as such. Not in so many words."

Mr. Dark only barely resisted rubbing at his temples. Not out of any worry at offending Marshall, since he was never much concerned with that, but because his hands were itching terribly. They always did that when that time of year came, but he never got used to it. "Then how would you, pray tell, describe the act of selling products

similar to our own, to the same customer base, at prices which would make us go bankrupt in a week?"

Marshall rubbed at his mustache, as he always did when he was nervous. Another rather infuriating family habit. "Well, I imagine it would take longer than a week. A few months in the very least."

This time, Mr. Dark couldn't resist. Rub rub. Itch itch. It was a somewhat ironic fact, he pondered, that the Marshalls were never the sharpest knives in the drawer, despite the alarming frequency in which they used them. Oh, they were certainly very good at their specific fields of interest, of that there could be no doubt. Just point a Marshall at an unsuspecting continent, and soon it would contain no piece of ground untrodden by big shiny boots, no natural resources untapped, no historical relic unplundered, and no native populace unharrssed and still in possession of its wealth. You just had to make sure to let someone else handle the finance, since they'd probably spend it all on brandy, gunpowder and hair care products.

The current Marshall was an exemplary specimen of the family. Stout, solid, and with the curiosity and imagination of a brick. The man's mother has been a bit too fond of reading, hence his rather unfitting literary name, but Mr. Dark couldn't really blame the poor woman. When you were married to a Marshall, you had to do something in order to keep your intellect from shriveling and folding into itself, like a dried-up snail.

Mr. Dark shivered. That was a lesson he only needed to learn once.

"Regardless how you want to define it, it is most certainly a problem that needs to be addressed quickly." Carter cut in, probably in order to save his partner further roasting glares from Mr. Dark. He probably regretted that decision when that very same glare transferred to him, but to Carter's credit, Mr. Dark thought, he bore it with far more class.

"You say it's a problem, but you didn't even bother to mention who's behind it. Is it the Factory again? Some new line of blood-powered mixers or something?"

"The products don't really fit their usual style. They don't seem mass-produced at all, really, and if there are, whoever is doing it is putting a lot more money into their production than the Factory."

"So not them. Is it another relic from the Prometheus days then, or some wayward Alexylva experiments?"

"Nothing to tie any of the products to them, and it's usually very easy to tell."

"I bloody well know it's easy to tell! In case you've forgotten, I've been in this business since before you were born, you sniveling welp!" Mr. Dark barked at Carter, who manged to hide his flinch almost completely. Much as he hated to admit it, Edwin Carter had quite impressed Mr. Dark since they first began their business relations, shortly after the death of the former's father. That Carter was an idiot of almost impressive proportions, actually managing to make his contemporary Marshall seem intelligent by comparison, which was no mean feat. Carter Jr. was made of different stuff, however. Under his management, Marshall, Carter & Dark's Acquisitions Department went from a corrupt, barely controllable mess of mercenaries, sellswords and other scum into a well-oiled, well-performing and above all loyal machine. It really was a shame that the man looked like some sort of mix between a cave-dwelling frog and a permanently constipated iguana, but you couldn't have everything.

Said unfortunate hybrid now cleared his throat. "My apologies, Mr. Dark, I didn't mean to offend."

Mr. Dark waved a dismissive hand. "Forget it. So it's not them, fine. Did young Wondertainment finally crawl out of her pile of ice cream and corgis then? Didn't think she had it in her, honestly. Too much like her daft father."

Carter hesitated. "She… indeed has, but we don't think that has anything to do with the current situation. Although what we suspect she's planning on might prove to be a different problem."

"Well surely it can't be Uncle Merl, or…" Mr. Dark's expression turned sour, and the itch in his hands returned with renewed vigor,

"Deer."

Marshall, finally regaining some courage, chuckled at that. "We wouldn't have bothered you with those buffoons."

"The truth is," Carter said, "is that we have no idea who's behind this."

"So why don't you, and I know this might seem like a mad idea, why don't you use our terribly vast and terribly expensive intelligence network to bloody find out?!"

Carter gulped. "We tried, Mr. Dark, but every Acquisitor I've sent either came back empty-handed or… not at all."

"And that's not all," Marshall added. "Three hours ago, our connection with the Singapore Auction House went silent. When the men I sent there arrived, it was empty, I do mean empty."

God damn, but Mr. Dark's hands itched. He peered at them, keeping them in the corner of his eyes. He never liked how they looked in the middle of the process, elegant as it was. The left hand was pale, thickly veined, covered with liver spots. The right was darker, almost brown, and as smooth as Mr. Dark's credit record. "What do you mean, 'and I do mean empty?'"

"I mean that there was nothing there. All of the items stored, all of our sales personnel and my security staff, even the bloody furniture, down to the power sockets and wallpaper. Everything was gone."

"And you say you have no idea who's responsible for this? For the contents of an entire Auction House disappearing off the face of the Earth?"

Marshall stiffened. "I assure you, my Downsizers are at this very moment applying themselves to the task of finding whoever's to blame for this. They never fail!"

Downsizers. Mr. Dark remembered the days when the Club's group of head hunters and assassins were called something rather different. He was quite fond of the old name, though in retrospect he did understand the decision to change it. It wasn't really keeping to

the spirit of the times. Plus, it was more than a bit racist, and the Club did always try to cater to as wide an audience as possible (within reason, of course). The only color that mattered, after all, was the color of currency.

"Regardless of Marshall and the Downsizers' never-failing efforts, Mr. Dark," said Carter, his tone making clear his opinion on their chances of success, "And whether or not there's a connection between our new business rival and the recent incident in the Auction House, I took the liberty of acquiring a few of the items that the competition recently introduced to the market. I think you might find them of interest."

Mr. Dark nodded, absent-mindedly scratching at a liver-spotted hand, and Carter reached for his pocket, taking out a small box of polished, deeply colored wood. Connected to the box was a round silvery button. Carter left the box on the liqueur table next to Mr. Dark's recliner, and exited the room. A few moments later he returned, this time carrying with him a covered cage. He positioned the cage next to the box, and lifted the cover to reveal a live hen, quietly clucking to itself.

"Observe."

He pressed the button. The hen shifted slightly, and began clucking louder. After a few seconds of that there was a sudden *popping* sound, and seemingly out of nowhere, an egg appeared next to the hen.

Mr. Dark didn't quite know what to make of that. "Is this… is this some sort of zen questions solver or something?" he asked, but Carter just shook his head and pressed the button again.

Cluck. cluck cluck CLUCK!

Pop.

And now next to the egg were a raw green potato, a tomato, a head of lettuce, some olives, and what appeared to be half an ingot of sliver.

"Er…" Another shake of the head, another press of the button.

Cluck. Cluck. Cluckcluckcluckcluckcluuu-Biff

"And this is the reason, Mr. Dark, that I believe we have a problem." Carter said.

Mr. Dark could only nod, as he reached a slightly shaky hand to the cage and removed the top. And from the cage, he collected what was now a perfectly roasted and garnished chicken, with a side of mashed potatoes and a green salad. All served on a flawless silver platter. Disconcertingly, of the tomato there was no sign.

Marshall approached and, using his rather sizable pocket knife, skewered a piece of roast chicken. He chewed it thoughtfully, and declared, "It's alright, I suppose. A bit bland."

"Yes. Quite."

A certain distance from the stately building which housed the lavishly tasteful (or perhaps tastefully lavish) clubhouse, a man sat at his office. At a first glance, and probably at the few following that one, neither appeared particularly special, and indeed, the office wasn't, other than the wasp nest hidden in one of the walls. The man, however — if a discerning gentleman or lady were to look carefully — did in fact have something to distinguish him from your mundane Joe or Jane. Namely, the fact that he was at the time conversing with a god.

And that he was smiling.

"And so you see, aha, we simply cannot continue on our current expansion schedule with the current production roster. How can I be expected to work in these conditions, is what I ask you? The forms aren't neat, there are candles everywhere, and I'm sure one of them tried luring me into a circle at one point, which is not something I appreciate, no I don't. And don't even get me started about break room etiquette. No, you know what, you need to hear what I have to say about their break room etiquette- it is below acceptable standards, I tell you, considerably below acceptable standards, and

another thing-"

Not because of anything the god said, mind you. The man lost track of that hours ago. It was something about the high costs of thaumic levies and how mages these days couldn't fill a MAG-97 form to save their wrinkly skins. For a being of immeasurable power and presumably intelligence beyond the ken of mortals, the man was surprised to find out that his god was a very boring person indeed. He wasn't really sure why it surprised him that much, since the god was, after all, an extension of the man himself, and didn't this whole thing begun in the first place because the man found himself to be so utterly, disgustingly boring? Indeed it had. It seemed that he couldn't escape that truth about himself, not even by summoning the vast, unknowable powers of the grand cosmos.

"Are you listening to me? Doesn't look like you're listening to me. I can smite you, you know, I could do it right now, leave a greasy stain on the floor and everything, and wouldn't you feel silly then? Yes you would. Although… that would get me in trouble with the cleaning ladies. No, that wouldn't do, wouldn't do at all, that. They'll have me running about cleaning the trash bins for weeks, and that's no task for a god, no it is not. And that's without even going into-"

The man smiled again. Well, if the vast, unknowable powers of the grand cosmos couldn't break the monotony that was his life, he'd have to turn to an even greater power, the most powerful force there ever was.

Almighty Consumerism.

A Real Humdinger

« Upside-Down Cake | Dread & Circuses Hub | Former Assets »

Tom screamed as he was swallowed up by the Darkness. The Darkness was absolute, utterly devoid of so much as a single photon of light. He felt like he was falling, but not really. It was more like the feeling of a hypnagogic jerk, only instead of lasting for an instant, this sensation went on without end. He could not tell up from down, nor could he tell if the air around him was hot or cold, tumultuous or still. Was there even air at all?

He was disoriented to the point of delirium, unable to remember where he was or how he had gotten there. Was he even really anywhere at all, or was he merely blind and mad like an ancient god?

Desperate to regain any semblance of sanity, he ordered himself to focus on the last thing he could remember.

Clowns. Disgusting, monstrous Clowns had thrown him into the Kaleidoscope on the orders of the Man with the Upside-Down Face, for no other reason than that he had chosen to side with…

And then he remembered he wasn't alone.

"Oh my god, Fuller? Fuller! FULLER!"

.

..

…

"…What is it Tom?"

“Fuller? Oh my god. Fuller, where are we?”

"**The Darkness Between Dimensions**. A very pretentious name for a place that’s almost literally nothing. It is utter void, lacking any native substance whatsoever. Here there is no matter, no energy, and very nearly no reality at all.”

“What do you mean there’s nothing? We’re not suffocating, so there’s air, isn’t there?”

“No Tom, there’s just no entropy. We’re perpetual motion machines in here, with no need of air, food, water or sleep. Space itself here is thick enough to carry our voices, and we could even move through it if we tried.”

“You mean we’re going to be living like this, in the Darkness, with nothing, forever?”

“Oh, that we should be so lucky. No Tom, you see we’re the realest things in this place, and nature abhors a vacuum. Our reality will slowly dissipate out into the infinite void, leaving us to gradually fade to nothing. After three years or so we’ll have lost enough of ourselves that we won’t even be able to survive in the real world, but unfortunately it will take much, much longer than that for us to lose enough consciousness to achieve anything remotely approaching death.”

“Oh my god!”

“Fret not Tom, fret not, for there is hope! We just need to find a Humdinger!”

“A what?”

“It’s not called the Darkness Between Dimensions for nought. We’re surrounded by parallel realities, and occasionally they bump into each other. When they do they create waves through the Darkness that you can hear as a humming sound. All we got to do is get ourselves to the epicentre of the collision and we can slip out into one of those realities.”

“How do you know all this?”

“A little bird told me. Actually, he was a man-sized humanoid crow, but he knew everything there was to know about the Multiverse. Met him in the Library when I was still allowed in, but no time for that now! Now we must listen, listen for the humming sound of our liberation.”

…

“I don’t hear any -”

“I said listen Tom!”

…

“Damn.”

“Do we just wait for a Humdinger or -”

“No! We have no time to waste. We must search for one. It will be in the direction that reality is strongest.”

“And which way is that?”

“That way!”

“…I can’t see which way you’re pointing.”

“When we get back to the Circus we’re going to kill Manny right?”

“Oh yes Tom, he’s going straight to **`The Matinee`** this time. Icky too.”

“Her and all the other revolting Clowns!”

“A great bloody purge, the likes of which travelling carnivals seldom see! All of my enemies will be strung up on stage, their cold, dancing, bodies a warning to all who may think of defying Herman Fuller! Of course, if we dispose of that much talent, we’ll have to get replacement acts.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Fortunately I know just the place where we can score some awe-inspiring anomalies, a place that has prided itself for nearly a century on collecting and containing all that most ferocious and fantastical creatures that haunt this world.”

“Wait, you’re not talking about…”

“That’s right Tom, the Essie P! But I’m not talking about pocketing a few magic doodads like those pansies at the Emcee D do, no sir! I’m going straight for the big ticket items! The Golden Oldies! All the Essie P’s worst kept secrets under my Big Top, their most cantankerous Keters drawing in the anomalous community from far and wide. We’ll start with Able. Everyone loves Able!”

“Actually, I think he’s a little ridiculous -”

“- The second Son of Adam murdered by his own kin, resurrected by the savage Daevites to slaughter their victims. When the curse of Cain denied Able his vengeance he went completely mad! Desperate to slake his need for revenge, he murders all before him! Will you be next?”

“…Is that really what happened?”

“It doesn’t matter Tom, it’s just a pitch to draw in the crowds.”

“But how do you plan to control Able?”

“**`Cotton Candy`**.”

…

“Sir, I think this plan might be a little over-ambitious.”

“Oh, I’m just getting started Tom. For the Menagerie, we’ll get none other than Summer’s Exile. Gaoler’s Hubris, The Lost Dragon, Old… Scaly.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“682 Tom. 682. An Elder God of yore cast out of Paradise for crimes best left unsaid, his agony only overshadowed by his hatred for all

living things. For only five Fuller Fun-bucks, you can hack and slash at him to your heart's content. Watch with awe as his flesh morphs and grows anew!"

"You're going to have guests physically attacking one of the most infamous anomalies in the Foundation's possession? I really don't think you've thought this -"

"- And for the main event, we'll get the *creme de la creme*, the cream of the crop, the most horrendous, most abominable, most despicable monstrosity ever to disgrace this fair earth with its foul visage: **`Doctor Spanko`**!"

"…Sir, you've lost your mind, haven't you?"

"Just you wait Tom, the new goretastic Circus will completely outshine anything we've ever done before."

"Whatever you say. Also, you pronounced it *kee-ter* earlier. It's actually supposed to be pronounced *ket-ter*."

"…Shut up Tom."

"I think we're going in circles."

"How could you possibly know that? There's literally nothing here. We're in a void of infinite darkness!"

"Some infinities are greater than others Tom, and this particular patch of infinite darkness feels strangely familiar. I think we're back where we started."

"You're the one leading us! Said we were moving in the direction that felt the most real! That's where the Humdingers are, you said!"

"Well our entry point is still the realest place within a thousand miles, so obviously I got turned around. We'll need to work out some sort of system to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"I'm open to suggestions."

“Here’s what we’ll do. I got some money on me, and I’ll leave it here, making this the richest part of the void. My highly sophisticated palate will be able to sense that this is the well-to-do Darkness, and we’ll know to move in the opposite direction towards the, well I suppose the polite term is up-and-coming regions. How does that sound?”

“Like utter nonsense, but I can’t think of anything else. Go ahead, leave some money here.”

“…I’m sorry, did I actually just say I was going to throw away money? I really am losing my marbles.”

“I’m so tired. I thought you said we don’t need to sleep.”

“We don’t. Keep moving.”

“But just because we don’t have to sleep doesn’t mean we can’t, right? I want to try sleeping.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe I’ll dream and actually be able to see something. Maybe I’ll just wake up feeling refreshed. Maybe you’d stop rambling about the economic stratification of an empty void if you got some sleep!”

“…Alright, let’s try it.”
…

“How do we do this? We can’t lie down, there’s no such thing as up in this place.”

“Just let your body go limp Tom, like you’re floating in a pool.”

“Okay, just gotta go limp. Gotta relax. Goodnight Fuller.”

“Goodnight Tom.”

…

“You asleep Fuller?”

“No Tom.”

“How long do you think we’ve been floating here?”

“Two months.”

“What!?”

“I’m kidding, I have no idea. Let’s try a memetic sleep aid. Hush-a-by baby -”

“That’s a lullaby.”

“…I didn’t say it was anomalously memetic.”

“I spy with my little eye, something that starts with A.”

“Abyssal darkness, unmatched by even the darkest depths of any chasm upon the Earth.”

“Yes. I spy with my little eye, something that starts with B.”

“Blackness, a blackness so pervasive and suffocating you forget what light ever looked like.”

“Right. I spy with my little eye, something that starts with C.”

“Complete and utter void, vacant of any semblance of life, light or hope.”

“…Fuller, I don’t think this game is actually helping with morale.”

“Would you rather play punch buggy?”

“…I spy with my little eye…”

“Percy! Percy, I know you can hear me you arrogant bastard!”

“Who are you yelling yet?”

“Percival Darke. He’s a friend of mine. At least we were friends until he and his business partners betrayed me and started hunting us like animals, when I had done them no wrong!”

“Sir, you tried to steal the soul-sucker.”

“Absolutely no wrong! Where was I? Oh yes, Percival. You see Tom, Percy’s an odd duck, even by our standards. He’s a Wanderer, like myself, only he’s been at it for centuries longer. Oh, he’s found himself some strange voodoo, I tell you. Powerful voodoo!”

“…Voodoo?”

“He knows about the Darkness, he can see the future so he knows I’m here, and he’s just leaving me to rot! Goddammit, Percy open a Door and get me out of here! I can picture him Tom, sitting in that fancy sanctum of his in between worlds, all dignified and mysterious in his throne of a study chair while he just spews out all his most arcane secrets to that latest brat of his! You’d better not be telling her any lies about me, Percy! I put you front and center when I opened the Matinee you ingrate! When I reopen it, you’re not even invited!”

“Sir, ranting at Percival Darke isn’t going to get us out of here.”

“You’re right Tom…Marshall, you half-dead sack of shit! Where do you get off putting a bounty on my head just for trying to borrow your precious little soul-sucker? When I get back to the Light you’re dead, do you hear me!”

“He doesn’t sir.”

“I know.”

“Fuller, do you know why I stayed with the Circus after being viciously assaulted by a pack of Clowns?”

“Because if you ran out on your contract I would have sent Stretchy to drag you back by your small intestines?”

“No. It was because of Eliza. I thought that after she saw what they

had done to me, after she saw how cruel and wicked the Circus was -"

"Thank you."

"- she would agree to let me take her away. But she didn't. She didn't want anything to do with me after that. Everyone around the Circus was saying that I had tried to kidnap poor, helpless Eliza and that Manny and the others were heroes. She never stood up for me, she just fell in line to keep the peace. I was a pariah. But I knew you and Manny hated each other, and that it was only a matter of time before you tried to get rid of him. I thought that if Manny was gone Eliza wouldn't need to pretend to support him and that we could be together again. Now, he's probably the Ringmaster and I'm wandering through eternal darkness, all because I was too stupid to leave when I had the chance."

…

"Did I ever tell you that Stretchy and Masky were supposed to be the first of my own knock-off line of Little Misters? They were originally Mr. Stretch and Mr. Mask, but then this rock'em sock'em robot shows up to the Circus screaming 'LITTLE MISTERS IS THE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT', so I had to ease off."

"…Herman, were you listening to anything I said?"

"Yeah, you stayed with the Circus because you wanted a girlfriend who could provide oral sex but for whom you would be under no obligation to reciprocate. I don't blame you."

…

"Thanks for listening."

"It's *ket-ter*!"

"It's *kee-ter*!"

"*Ket-ter*!"

“*Kee-ter*!”

“Ket-ter is closer to how it’s pronounced in Hebrew. Consult a Rabbinic Alchemist!”

“That my friend is what’s known as an etymological fallacy. If the original pronunciation of a word is the only correct one, then we’re all butchering the English language!”

“If you dropped the *–er* the word would clearly be pronounced with a short e sound, therefore it’s *ket-ter*!”

“The *–er* isn’t a suffix though since *ket* isn’t a word by itself, ergo that argument is a load of baloney!”

“All you’re doing is offering counterarguments! Give me one reason why it should be pronounced *kee-ter*?”

“Because Keter Keter, Euclid eater, Essie caught her, couldn’t keep her!”

…

“Well, I have no counterargument for that, so I guess you win.”

“Fuller, I think I’m going insane.”

“Good. I was starting to get lonely.”

“I see a little blinking red light in the distance. I’m crazy, right? Tell me I’m crazy.”

“You’re as mad as a march hare mating in a mound of molasses.”

“So you don’t see it?”

“I didn’t say that. Doesn’t mean you’re not crazy.”

“So, you do see it?”

“Do I see a blinking red light? No. I see a red light that fades in and out. Not the same thing.”

“So it is something?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Ever hear of an Anglerfish Tom?”

“I have. You, you think that light is bait?”

“The bait of a most horrific beastie, a thousand years old if it's a day! It’s survived in the Darkness by luring in hapless prey with the only light they’ve seen in years, only to gobble them whole and leech them of their reality to sustain itself!”

“What should we do?”

“We fight it Tom. We wrestle it into submission, tame it, and then ride it through the Darkness to freedom!”

…

“Yeah, I’m going to run away as fast as I can.”

“So am I, but I was hoping you’d buy that so I could get a head start while it was eating you.”

“Overture, curtains, lights!

This is it, the night of nights!

No more rehearsing, or nursing the part

We know every card by heart!

Overture, curtains, lights!

This is it, we’ll hit the heights!

And oh what heights we’ll hit!

On with the show, this is it!”

…

“That’s the theme song from the Bugs Bunny show.”

“…DAMMIT!”

“Tom, would you please stop humming. I’m trying to think.”

“I’m not humming, I thought you were humming.”

“But if you’re not…The Humdinger! We’re close Tom! It’s a little more than a mile out! Can you see it?”

“Yes, I see it! I can actually see something! It’s like a sunrise!”

“Quickly Tom! Towards the light! Towards the sound! Towards freedom!”

“It’s getting louder!”

“Not just louder, but realer! Feel the waves crash over you!”

“I feel real again! Solid! It’s so bright!”

“That’s the Light of Reality Tom! We’re getting out!”

“We’re free!”

With a sudden flash, Tom Brenneman and Herman Fuller escaped from the Darkness between Dimensions and back into their native multiverse. Tom was missing some random chunks of flesh, whereas Herman had used what reality bending he possessed to sacrifice himself in a more controlled manner and was thus almost a full foot shorter than he had been before.

Though they were hardly unscathed, they were alive and free, and were overwhelmed with joy…until they realized they had been deposited smack in the middle of the City of Adytum, surrounded by Karcists and Kiraaks so horrifically transmogrified few would recognize them as human. All was shrouded by a sickly yellow mist,

but they could see enough to gather that they had interrupted some sacrosanct ceremony, and that their Sarkic hosts were as baffled as they were livid.

“Tom, if I didn’t know better I’d swear that someone up there has it out for me.”

« Upside-Down Cake | Dread & Circuses Hub | Former Assets »

A Reason To Die

Footsteps. A pair of them are approaching. They reverberate throughout the hallway and into my bare cell, shattering the perfect silence and setting me on edge. There is a loud buzz, close enough this time to feel it in my teeth. The metal latch of the adjoining cell disengages, and its occupant's footsteps joins the pair. Not a word is spoken. Same as the others.

I lean back and fall into my cot as the footsteps fade. I need to relax and calm my nerves. I've got around a half an hour before they're back for me, no sense wasting my time stressing out.

Something-Or-Other Bio Site-12 is nothing like my previous facility. Back at 19; they had a rec room, yard time, a library, the works. Not too different from prison, barring the unfathomable horrors they kept locked up with us.

Here though? Crammed into a dimly lit two-by-five, waiting to be the next unfortunate individual that has to make the walk.

I fish the photograph out of my pocket, and *God*, could I stare at it all day. Kiran, wearing that beautiful smile and pointing proudly at the sonogram. Little Maira was just as camera shy as her daddy, and had spent the whole appointment dodging the technician's probing. Her hands were held up over her eyes, and Kiran swore up and down that you could see her smiling too.

It'll all be worth it. The things I've heard about…the things I've *seen*. The world is far darker than she could ever know. The things they keep in these places kill men in ways that take weeks to clean up after. Break their minds and souls. They are the things of nightmares.

The footsteps return. I draw a deep breath of the stale air, and stand. I am ready. A buzz, the grinding metal, and two guards stand at my door. Jet-black visors obscure their faces, and their matching

suits cover every inch of skin. The shorter one beckons, and I step out into the hall.

We walk - as the others had - in silence. I won't cower, I won't plead, I won't fight. I know whatever waits for me may not be fast, it may not be short, and I'll probably feel everything. These people though, they understand this darkness. They can stand against it, keep it at bay.

We take a right. A bleach-white door on the left of the hall, stark against the dull concrete, slides open with a near-inaudible hiss. Bright fluorescent light escapes from behind it, and splashes across the passage.

Inside is a single folding table and accompanying chair. Researchers are apparently watching from behind the mirrored glass spanning the opposing wall. The door clicks shut behind me. The guards don't follow.

I take what is presumably my seat, and wait. A pneumatic tube descends from what I had originally thought to be a vent, and deposits a single, brown pill on the table before me.

"Do I take this?" I ask my reflection.

The answer comes from an intercom to my right. "Affirmative. Please ingest the capsule."

I pick it up, slowly examining it, and turn it around in my fingers. This is it. At the very least, I can play my part. Whatever is going to happen, it will further their understanding; so in some small way, I can still help to provide them a future.

I swallow it. A burning sensation erupts in my lungs. I pound the table and gasp for air, receiving none. The lights and colors of the room begin to blur, and I feel numb. I can hardly feel the linoleum as I collapse. Inches away, my family beams at me…

…and in spite of the encroaching darkness, I smile back.

To: O5-12
From: M. Hadriel +1 attachment

Here are the results from D-5542. All twelve subjects were as compliant as their predecessor. We will need a few other personalities and backgrounds, of course, they'd catch on if they were literally surrounded by themselves.

Though, it is a shame we had to use cyanide in lieu of an actual anomaly for the trial run. At any rate, I'd consider this a resounding success. Wouldn't you agree?

To: M. Hadriel
From: O5-12

Absolutely. It looks like you made the perfect choice. We'll need another four hundred produced by the thirtieth. Make sure you get in contact with Klein in RAISA for copies of that photograph.

Good job.

A Researcher's Tale

Watch.

That's all I have to do. I just watch.

Watch, and remember, and report back.

I'm on my own here, there's only one researcher at a time allowed through the gate. It's lonely, sometimes, but I suppose it'll be worth it, the amount of information I'll be able to get off this one is going to be of great benefit to us in the long run. And after all I'm not really in any place to complain, I knew what I was getting into when I was sent here, when they told me what I was going to have to do. It's not been easy, and the long hours of interviews are a real pain, but at least I know it's all for the greater good.

With the information that I'm getting from these interviews we should be able to ensure that if one of these things gets free in our world, we'll know enough about them to be able to neutralise the threat immediately. And maybe even find out a way of getting rid of all of them in one fell swoop. They're clearly a massive threat, in our world or theirs.

But until then I watch, and I learn, and I make notes. Although they have to be in my head, I couldn't bring anything to write on when I entered the containment area.

I learn more and more about the creatures every day, with every interview, with every move they make. They're so expressive in their body language, they give it all away, despite how alien their physiology.

I think I may even have some ideas on how we can get one of our special teams into their world, and eradicate them all.

Sometimes, though, I miss my home. My family. I don't like it here.

It's this site. These people.

This Foundation.

It's just…

They're all… so… disgusting.

A.S.S. and Other Low-threat Groups of Interest

The Association of Supernatural Shifters

The Association of Supernatural Shifters, or A.S.S. as they are better known, gathered around the conference table. They all looked at each other and nodded. They knew they were in trouble.

"Aurafeel, our organization has barely recruited any members. In spite of our almost unlimited power and glowing hands, we are unable to contract even the most mundane of recruits," said Lifesmasher, thrusting his hammer that burned with the power of 20 suns into the air.

"I do not understand why, Aurafeel. We offer the greatest of all supernatural weaponry and skills for free," added Awesometouch, the greatest thief in all of history.

"I am not sure myself, oh warriors of spirited metal." Aurafeel, his hands glowing as embers leaped off them, then stood up and gazed out the window of his multi-billion dollar training facility.

"Um, sir, if I may…" said Bingo, one of Aurafeel's many genetically-enhanced servant dogs.

"What is it, Bingo?" asked Aurafeel.

"Well, perhaps it is the organization's name, sir. I believe 'ass' may be a synonym for 'buttocks'." Bingo nodded sagely.

"My god! Bingo is correct!" Aurafeel smashed his fists down on the titanium table. "I propose we change our organization's name, gentlemen."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Lifesmasher and Awesometouch.

"But, what shall we name it?" Aurafeel moved his hand up to stroke

his manly and well carved chin. They all sat there for a while, pondering upon names.

Suddenly, Awesometouch jumped up. "I have it, Aurafeel!"

"What, Awesometouch?"

"Our organization shall be called the Cooperation of Undying Nationalist Theorists for Homogenous Overall Liberty and Equality."

"Yes! Then it is agreed upon." The group then stood. "Gentlemen, we are now C.U.N.T.H.O.L.E.!"

The Elementary Academy of Anomalists

The teacher stands over the group, gazing down her glasses at each of the young children assembled. "Alright, class is starting, young ones. Quiet down!"

Little Jimmy throws his paper airplane then quiets down. Bobby continues to eat paste. Lucinda passes a note to Bobby informing him of her crush on him, only to have him unable to read it due to his sticky fingers.

"Children, we have a new child in class today. Everybody, say hello to Janice." A girl with short pigtails and a nice pink dress on enters the classroom and curtseys to the class. "Now who can tell Janice what we do here?"

Bobby takes the paste out of his mouth and stands up. "We… um… we train elite warriors from a young age to deal with an- anom- abomalous entities from a young age."

"Yes, excellent. And we all have special little powers ourselves. Would anyone care to demonstrate?" Little Jimmy stands up and makes a snorting noise, then shoots a loogie straight across the room and into a small target opposite. Bobby then proceeds to blow a bubble with the paste he had just eaten. Lucinda then blinks really really fast.

Janice is transfixed. She gasps. Then she herself burps, and it

shakes the classroom. The teacher pats Janice on the back. "With these abilities we're sure you'll be able to capture any anomalous entity you set your mind on!"

Meanwhile, in the principal's office, the principal briefly considers pulling the trigger on the gun next to his head.

The Serpent's Upraised Middle Finger

Greg was sooo drunk right then. He slammed down the bottle of Jack Daniels and looked at his bros. "Guys, we have been mistreated by those Foundation scum for waaaaay too long."

"Fuckin' rights, man!" shouted some guy with a mohawk from across the room. Greg squinted and looked at the guy. Was the guy even a part of S.U.M.F.? He shrugged and went back to speaking.

"Look, we gotta unite. Tomorrow morning we're gonna ride in on our choppers or whatevs and fuck shit up!" He raised his fist in the air and everybody around him clinked their shots or bottles and took another hit. "You wanna die oppressed, poor, and hiding in some fucking library, or do you wanna die a motherfuckin' legend!?"

Everyone cheered and parted. Somebody turned on Slayer and they proceeded to knock over the table and have a mosh pit. At some point a bunch of hookers showed up. Greg couldn't remember the rest, though.

The next morning everyone agreed they were too hungover to raid the Foundation.

The Canines of Sapient Ability and Universal Suffrage Group

Fido the dog sat in his doghouse. Yes, soon all sapient canines for universal suffrage would come flocking to his door. Any minute now…

The Cooperation of Undying Nationalist Theorists for Homogenous Overall Liberty and Equality

"Well, Awesometouch, I believe that name change was for the better!" said Aurafeel, "We already have one new recruit set up to join us!"

"Um, hi," said Vlad. He was wearing a trenchcoat and had a greying beard. He still had a bit of white powder underneath his nose and his hair was so matted a mouse appeared to be sleeping in it, "I heard there were cuntholes?"

"No, friend, that is the name of our glorious organization!" proudly proclaimed Aurafeel, lifting his hands in the air.

"Oh. I'm out, then." Vlad nodded to the group and left out the door.

Lifesmasher turned and looked over at Aurafeel. "Well shit."

Honeyhut's Item Exchange

O5-12 turned to O5-13. "So what is this 'Honeyhut's'?"

O5-13 gestured to the image of a log cabin behind him. "It's a small, ma-and-pa anomalous items distribution chain."

O5-12 smiled and blew his nose. "Why, that's lovely. It's great to see a good, non-corporate organization just working for the day's pay."

O5-13 frowned. "It is lovely, but unfortunately large organizations like Marshall, Carter, and Dark limited have been driving small organizations like these out of business."

"Why that's terrible!"

"It is, friend. All these foreign companies are coming in and stealing our good, American anomalous items trade organizations!"

"What will we do?"

"Well, I've organized my own movement I like to call the COFFEE Party."

The Corporate Outsourcing of Foundation and Federal

Exchange Extradition Party

"Hell, no, we won't go!" shouted a march led by Dr. Pinkus outside MC&D headquarters.

Carter looked down at the assembled group and frowned. "We have a problem, Marshall."

"Indeed we do, Carter. Thankfully, our opposition is filled with idiots. They've found our headquarters, but their only course of action appears to be holding up signs and occasionally shouting nonsensical phrases."

"Thank god." Carter tilted his head and looked down at the groups again. "Y'know, Marshall…"

"What, Carter?"

"Well, it seems to me at this point that the number of splinter groups and associations is just entirely too silly."

"Such is a fact of life, Carter. Groups of Interest flare up every so often, then die down again. It's like herpes."

"Well, at least we're not fucking Wondertainment."

"Thank god."

A Scip Or A Star?

« So They Called Him Darke | Dread & Circuses Hub | Dark And Disquieting »

Tears streaming down her face, and her heart throbbing in her ears, Lexi raced down the darkened allies, pushing her body as hard as she could. She had no goal other than escape, and her flight had taken her into a decaying and dangerous part of the city. It wasn't safe here, she knew that, but there was at least a chance she could be safe from *them*.

She pushed on the door to an old, abandoned office building. To her relief, no one cared enough about the eyesore to lock it up. Closing and barricading every door behind her, she climbed to the top floor and shut herself into what might have been a conference room half a century ago.

Exhausted, she plopped to the floor. Hugging her knees to her chest, she wept at the hopelessness of her situation. Her pursuers would have drones, thermal vision, all the best toys. They didn't believe in giving their prey a sporting chance. She couldn't hide here forever. Hell, she probably couldn't even hide for the rest of the night.

Come sunup, she'd be in their custody. They'd lock her up, experiment on her, torture her, kill her, maybe use her as a weapon, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she would never see anyone she cared about again, never live the life she wanted, never again be free.

All because she was an anomaly.

"It's not fair. It's not fair," she sobbed bitterly to herself.

"I know exactly how you feel."

Lexi screamed at the sound of the stranger's voice. She kicked herself into a corner for defence, her eyes rapidly scanning the room for the intruder. She saw that the voice belonged to a large man, standing aloofly inside one of the bay windows.

Like Peter Pan.

"It's alright kid, I'm not going to hurt you," he said, gently stepping down to the floor. His clothes were oddly old-fashioned, like something from the turn of the twentieth century, not something any of her pursuers were likely to wear.

Also, his face was upside-down. That was probably important too.

"Who are you?" Lexi asked between panicked breaths.

"Call me Manny," the Man with the Upside-Down Face replied with a slight tip of his hat. His cordial demeanor calmed Lexi down just enough for her to realize that it was anatomically impossible for someone to survive with an upside-down face.

"You're…you're anomalous?" she asked.

"Now why would such a nice young girl use so joyless and clinical a term when there are a plethora of far more colourful descriptors for a Freak such as myself?" Manny asked.

"That's what we're called, isn't it? That's what I read online anyway. That's how they found me, I think. I googled the wrong words one time too many and I got flagged. I was stupid, thinking incognito mode would protect me from anything! They've been spying on me for days, at least. They were waiting until I was home alone to take me, but I climbed out my window into a tree and into the neighbour's yard then ran like hell. I don't know if I lost them or not, but even if I did they'll just find me again."

"Not if you're somewhere that can't be found," the Man with the Upside-Down Face said with a frown smile. Lexi looked up at him, trying to temper her hope with skepticism.

"What are you even doing here?"

“Scouting for talent, which does tend to take me to some odd places. You know about the Serpent’s Hand, right?”

“Some of the people I spoke with online said they were Serpent’s Hand,” she nodded.

“Well, I have some contacts in the Serpent’s Hand who watch the watchers. They let me know when some poor Freak is about to be snatched away from their home and family and locked away for the rest of their lives for having sparkly eyes. If I can, I get to them first, and I offer them something better.”

“What?”

“Ever heard of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting?

“A circus!” Lexi scoffed. “How is that any better? How is being a sideshow freak any better than being in Area 51?”

“For starters, I’m not going to force you to come, or force you to stay. You’ll be free. The Circus is a sanctuary, run for Freaks by Freaks. Sure, your sleeping compartment will be smaller than one of their containment cells, but we’re not going to lock you in there. When you’re not performing or training you can do as you please. No testing, no termination, no fighting someone else’s war. You’ll be free, you’ll be safe, and if you give it a shot you might even be happy.”

“How can a circus possibly be safe, especially from them? What’s stopping them from finding you?”

“All our shows are one day only. No one sees us arrive, and no one sees us leave. The bedazzling lights shield us from unfriendly eyes while drawing in eager customers by the thousands! Music and spun sugar fogs their minds so that any wonders they behold seem nought more than a dream or illusion. If any of the powers that be do get a whiff of us and try to shut us down, I always know, and we vanish before they can even reach the ticket booth. I’ve been doing this for a long time Lexi, longer than they’ve been around even. No one’s caught old Manny yet.”

She squinted up at him discerningly, trying to decide if there was any truth to what he was
saying.

“If I did join this Circus, I’d be a performer? I’d be an anomalous act?”

“There’s that word again. You know why they call us anomalous? Because they don’t want us to think we’re special. They give you a number, call you ‘it’, and describe your magical, miraculous endowments as if they were taking your blood pressure. And they take special care never to call our gifts ‘powers’ lest we start thinking of ourselves as superheroes.
“So tell me Lexi, what’s your power?”

With a hesitant sigh, Lexi reached into her coat pocket and pulled out an hourglass. Holding it upright in her left palm, she pointed at it with her right index finger. The sand shot up from the bottom half to the top and started swirling around. It coalesced into the form of a ballerina, twirling in a pirouette until she let it fall inert.

“I’m a sand bender. Not even an earth bender, a sand bender. I can’t move whole rocks, just grains, I don’t know why. Maybe fluidity. And it’s harmless! They want to lock me up forever because I can control sand with my mind. Fricking sand! *‘Coarse, irritating, gets everywhere’*, sure, but the worst I could do is throw it in somebody’s eyes! It’s horseshit! Absolute, fucking horseshit!”

Lexi buried her face in her palms and screamed, trying her best to choke back her sobs. When she looked back up at the Man with the Upside-Down Face, he saw he was smiling at her.

“That’s an X-man power if I ever saw one. The Essie P wouldn’t like you one bit. How much sand can you move?”

“Once, when I was at my aunt’s cottage on Lake Michigan, I sneaked out at night when no one was around to see how much sand I could bend. I made a pillar about 16 feet tall, a few feet wide, shaped it into a totem pole. If I wasn’t scared to death of someone seeing me, I could probably do more.”

“Tell me if you like this for an act: We’ll call you Sandstorm, perfect name for an X-man! We’ll set you up with piles of fluorescent sand, all different colours, and deck you out in fluorescent make-up and body paint. To music, under a strobing black light, you bend the sand into living sculptures, dancing and playing and sparing around the ring!”

“…I wouldn’t be in just body paint, right?”

“The Big Top show’s family friendly, your outfit will be PG-13 at the most.”

“You actually do make it sound kind of fantastic. If I could put on a show like that, I’d be…”

“You’d be a star! Freaks don’t belong locked up in tiny little rooms in giant secret facilities, hidden away so as not to upset all the decent folk’s fragile sensibilities. We belong on stage, making people laugh and scream and puke! At our Circus, people will admire your gifts, not fear them. The audience will be amazed and astounded by your performance, and you’d be surrounded by hundreds of people in the same boat as you, who know what it’s like to be a Freak. The Circus is a family, and family sticks together.”

“What about my real family? My friends? I’ll never see them again.”

“That’s hard to say for sure. Essie won’t keep spying on your folks forever; not an efficient expenditure of resources. Once they’ve lost interest you might be able to pop in back home every now and then. We’d even let you send them letters; old-fashioned, hand-written, untraceable letters. They’ll know you’re alive, and safe, and free, which is a hell of a lot better than being duped into thinking you’re dead or getting pumped so full of amnestics they forget you ever existed.”

Lexi gave him a resigned nod.

“If I do join your circus, I’ll be taken care of? I’m not going to be starved or passed around like a piece of meat?”

“I’ve never tolerated any physical or sexual abuse against my

Freaks," he assured her. "The cookhouse serves three meals a day and you're free to help yourself, plus you'll start off at a thousand Fuller Fun-bucks a month."

"…Fuller Fun-bucks?"

"We're off the grid. Scrip's the best we can do," he replied matter-of-factly. Both their heads shot up at the sound of a car pulling up outside. "Well Lexi, if we stay here any longer we're going to run into a Mobile Task Force. You can let them drag you off kicking and screaming and become a scip, or you can come with me, and become a star! What's it going to be?"

Lexi knew she had no reason to trust this strange man, but ironically it was the fact that he was so strange that made her want to trust him. He was an anomaly, like her, the first other anomalous person she had ever met in real life. She knew he could be lying, but she also knew she had no hope of evading her pursuers on her own. The offer of sanctuary was not one she could ignore.

"It's for Freaks, by Freaks? You promise?"

"By the scattered parts of the Broken God, I swear it," he nodded. Sighing reluctantly, she rose to her feet.

"Deal," she said, shaking his hand. "But they're already outside! How do we even get to your Circus?"

Manny smiled, walked over to the door she had come through. When he opened it, the hallway was gone, replaced by bright white lights and smoke, as well as the faint sound of calliope music. Lexi slowly walked over to the anomalous door, staring at it dumbly at first, but then with childlike wonder. For the first time that night she felt genuine joy, and her mouth broke into a wide grin.

"How?" she murmured.

"Magic," was his reply. "After you."

She nodded, and realized she was no longer afraid but excited. Out of all the horrible fates that could have befallen a Freak like her, working for a magical Circus wasn't half-bad.

Once she was through the Door, Manny pulled out a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

"The girl's on board, thanks for your help **Masky**," he said quietly to it.

"Thank god. I don't know what the Foundation does to Freaks it finds impersonating its agents, but I bet it ain't good," Mr. Mask radioed back.

"That's why it's best for all involved that we both forget this ever happened."

"I'm with you there. But, just so that there's no confusion, Icky doesn't know you're kidnapping kids again, does she?"

"I didn't kidnap her, I just helped her realize that she isn't safe on her own and that she's better off with us."

"Whatever you got to tell yourself, man. I just can't help but notice you never 'rescue' any Freaks who aren't likely to draw in the crowds. See ya in the Library."

"Yeah, see you then." Manny released the talk button and discretely stashed the walkie-talkie away in his pocket. With a penitent sigh, he followed his latest recruit back to the Circus.

« **So They Called Him Darke** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Dark And Disquieting** »

A Shift at The Factory

Anthony lifted his goggles from his eyes. He watched the man working at the nearest conveyor belt. Anthony had never bothered to learn the man's name, despite working with him for almost three years. It just wasn't something you did at The Factory. Work related accidents were all too common to really build up a rapport. And if you weren't one of the people who suffered from a lethal accident, or among the few that would simply throw themselves into the machinery, there was the ever-present threat of simply disappearing.

Yet, after three years, Anthony was still alive. Still working in The Factory instead of off fighting Nazis. He had lost most of his left hand at some point, he couldn't entirely remember when or how as the lengths of the shifts caused one's sense of time to dilate somewhat. But he was still employed. And so was the man at the nearest conveyor belt. Unlike most employees, the man was unharmed despite his length of employment. Anthony wasn't really sure how that was possible, but apparently he had found a way.

The man was stamping The Factory's mark onto a series of circular tin containers that looked like they were already coated in rust. He brought the lever down and The Factory brought down one of its many arms and embossed the bottom of the little tin. Then the belt whirred briefly, and a new tin sat before the man. He repeated the action, his eyes unfocused.

Anthony felt a sweltering heat encase him as he pulled his goggles back on. He wrapped a shiny hoop around the cylindrical chamber and welded the ends together to reinforce the frame. Welding with only one-and-a-half hands should have been near impossible, but he had never found it to be much of an obstacle. Anthony wasn't even sure what the thing was meant to do, he just was to create the central chamber and then drag it over to the woman who would affix the gauges and tubes to it. Then he would go back to his station to

find the beginnings of another chamber. He never bothered to find out where they came from. Questions in The Factory often led to unpleasant answers.

It was toward the end of a shift when it happened. Anthony was delirious to the point where he tried welding without his goggles. Before he could place the torch to metal a hand placed itself on his shoulder. He looked up to the Manager, which wagged one of its many fingers as a playful warning. Anthony took a few moments to realize what to do, but he pulled the goggles back over his eyes. He was sure his eyes would begin boiling, but he knew the Manager would reprimand him with much worse. He felt the Manager pat his head gently, and Anthony could see it walking away in the edges of his goggled vision. He thanked it and it waved him a nonchalant dismissal with its various limbs.

Anthony was about to start welding properly when he noticed the man at the conveyor belt was acting strangely. A grin covered the man's face. Anthony discounted it as his exhausted mind; no one smiled at The Factory. The man bent down, rummaged through his bag, and came back up with two small toy robots. They didn't resemble something of Factory make. They were too shiny, too new looking. He placed one on the console and seemed to whisper mad nothings to it before carrying the robot's twin after the retreating Manager, leaving his bag open. The little toy on the console turned to face the conveyor belt and yanked on the lever, but nothing happened. The man didn't notice in his rush after his superior.

The Manager turned around when it heard running footsteps. Work momentarily halted as everyone watched the proceedings. Nothing like this had ever happened before, at least not during their shifts. The Manager watched the man approach and took the toy when it was offered. It examined the device, turning it over time and again. It gestured to the man, who nodded and claimed to have created the little marvel — and many others just like it.

The Manager held the toy in its appendages as it held it at the man's eye level. Anthony grimaced when the metal crumpled helplessly in the Manager's grip. The man looked like he had been shot. He lifted his cupped hands and the Manager dropped the ball of scrap into

his hands. With a swift motion the Manager brought down an arm, removing both of the man's hands. They and the former robot hit the ground with a wet clang.

The Manager took note of the abandoned conveyor belt and glided over to it. The man scooped up his hands and cradled the wreckage against him. He followed the Manager back to his work station. It swept up the robot standing on the console and set it atop the waiting tin. The man called out in terror.

The toy viewed its creator and its fallen brother silently. It turned to the Manager. The Manager wrapped a tendril around the lever. The man fell to his knees before his superior, but was ignored. Anthony lowered himself to watch the man dig into his bag sitting by the console. The man brought out a small tube that reminded Anthony of toothpaste, holding it as if his arms were chopsticks. The man chewed off one end and bit the tube, squirting something yellow-green onto the stumps he called wrists. The man fiddled with the wreckage before stuffing the metal ball into the bag. He hooked his arm through the bag's straps and dashed off. Anthony noticed that the man's hands were somehow reattached, though they didn't look to be moving. The Manager watched the man run off and pulled what looked like a pistol from seemingly nowhere.

The Manager spoke in words Anthony did not understand and aimed the pistol at the retreating toymaker.

The toymaker let out a yell that Anthony didn't understand the meaning of, though he at least understood the words.

The toy responded to its maker's cry by opening up its chest and firing a rocket at the Manager's face.

The floor of The Factory that Anthony was on stopped. The conveyor belts halted, the welding torches went out, and for a brief moment the workers didn't even breathe. Then something broke the silence. A single sentence, spoken in a tinny voice. Something no doubt meant for the dying Manager.

"DO NOT INTIMIDATE THE WORKING MAN."

A Simple Paradigm Shift

"I just can't believe it. These people have no business shoving each other. We're all getting on the bus…Damn thing's empty, after all."

The old black woman who'd lamented her fellow passengers' lack of courtesy sighed. Her silently judging gaze locked onto a younger woman in a grey housekeeper's uniform waiting patiently to board. Her gaze blank and serene, she was not muttering curses upon Metro officials' firstborn children or pleading with their phones for pardon of their tardiness. She looked like a young girl, at most in her early twenties, but she carried herself with the sort of slow deliberation that came with age. The old woman pulled herself up straight as the housekeeper exited the bus. *Patience*, the old black woman thought as she watched the younger woman walk into the lush vegetation of Beverly Hills. *Something the young lack.*

The younger woman, however didn't lack patience. Perhaps it was because she wasn't really all that young at all. Perhaps it was because she was a little bit *off*. But really, it was because forces of nature are not to be rushed. They are deliberate. They plan. They bide their time, carefully waiting until the right moment. So was she, Dr. Molly Jayawadena, goddess-in-training.

Dr. Jayawadena's brilliant but fractured mind had slowly narrowed in on Los Angeles as a choice of sanctuary. While she saw the chaos of the city as a sick aberration, some masochistic crevice of her mind was drawn to it like flies to rotten flesh. The endless mayhem of the City of Angels was perfect for someone who wanted to hide among people wrapped up in the endless minutiae of their uninspired lives.

Molly stumbled on the shimmering, impermanent ground. Where most only saw perfectly manicured gardens and obscenely extravagant houses, she saw rippling quantum chaos, particles that were not particles blinking in and out of solidity, chained together like jewelry made of energy and not-empty space. Atomic cogs

meshing together like tiny keys turning the clockwork of cellular life. Blocks of protoplasm forming leafy greenness or warm red flesh. The framework of the world seethed and bubbled under her gaze, maddeningly, eternally. It was like those optical illusions that overloaded your senses and pierced your brain with confusion and pain. It was a disgustingly cluttered veil on the reality that had to be done away with as soon as possible.

Dr. Jayawadena had already entered the gaudy faux-Baroque monstrosity of a house through the unassuming servant's door. Molly was prone to losing large gaps of time like this. She now found herself conducting a bizarre and pointless ritual on a pane of glass with a spray bottle of Windex and some newsprint. If Molly concentrated on exactly *how* odd and pointless it was, she could avoid feeling aggressive atoms dig themselves into the microscopic feelers of her nose, remain blind to the iridescent bands on the window and the quantum electrodynamical equations that described them…Molly closed her eyes.

The woman of the house entered the room. She was a visually pleasing pile of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and potassium; she was wealthy, famous, and utterly inconsequential. The woman shifted her center of gravity, causing a temporary imbalance before catching herself with her other leg. She repeated this motion, this controlled imbalance, the rhythmic almost-falling, until she reached Molly. "I want this house spotless for our meeting tonight. It has to be perfect. Some real important people are coming." She sighed in irritation before stooping over to Molly. "Big meeting. Important. Clean hard. Comprende?"

Molly nodded vigorously. The owners of the house seemed to be under the impression that Molly spoke no English and was in the country under less than legal circumstances. It wasn't a hard sell thanks to Molly's dark complexion, exotic features, and the banal racism of the wealthy in Southern California. Plus, the current arrangement allowed Molly to disregard this world's odd song and dance about the exchange of goods and services.

The woman shifted into the media room as a flash of something caught Molly's eye.

Her employer was wearing a large, polished stone on her wrist. Molly halted even the pretense of work to consider this. The stone reflected a very distinctive wavelength of light, somewhere in the neighborhood of 510 nanometers. Nothing too unusual by itself, but the frequency of light reflected off that stone was disharmonious with the frequency of light reflected by the woman's clothing, and *that* was utterly outside the bounds of the woman's normal behavior. Molly remembered that the woman had been telling her equally pretty and vapid friends that it was a gift from some very important people she was entertaining.

Molly decided that she wanted to observe these "very important people". And since she was Dr. Molly Jayawadena, Bringer of the Perfect Universe, she had every right to know whatever she wanted to know. She frowned before fiddling with the newsprint in her hand. The world as it was did not recognize Dr. Jayawadena's natural entitlement to all imaginable knowledge. She would have to listen in secret, hidden in the shadows.

Night fell as Molly's weary gray coworkers leave the mansion. Molly herself was standing, unobserved, in a corner of the wine cellar. Shaking her head, she pressed a finger to the carefully balanced panel (poorly) concealing the secret passageway. She knew that others were blissfully unaware of the nonstop whispers of the universe, but she would have thought *someone* would have noticed the odd draft down there. The panel swung open silently into total darkness as Molly stepped in. Shutting the panel behind her, she began to feel her way into the tunnel.

Molly could have brought a flashlight but the possibility of others patrolling this hallway stopped her. Besides, she wasn't so disoriented in the darkness. She didn't have to feel photons and their always shifting nature bouncing wildly off her surroundings and into her eyes. Molly continued to navigate by touch, strangely at peace.

The calm faded as a thin line of bluish light appeared ahead of Molly. Now, she stuck to the walls, silently inching towards the light until she could see the outline of a door. Gingerly, Molly pulled the door open just enough for her to peek inside.

The light was blinding compared to the darkness of the hallway, but as her eyes adjusted Molly realized that the silvery light was actually rather dim. Human figures in dark green robes sat in a circle around a copper stem topped with a large translucent pale green glass globe. Molly's eyes raised to the ceiling. Bright points of light were suspended in an ink blue field. With a start, Molly recognized Orion. It was a perfect map of the night sky over LA, sans light pollution. Molly decided that because she was the Bringer of Order, the Purifier of Nature, she was well within her rights to enter this room. She glided past the door and around the dark corners of the chamber. The people in the circle were completely focused on the center and did not notice their visitor. Molly recognized the man and woman of the house, looking unusually humble and abashed. A man next to them wearing a five-pointed diadem on his head offered them a large incense coil on a copper platter. "The honor is yours tonight," he intoned in a strange voice that seemed to come, not from his mouth, but the walls of the entire room.

The woman produced a small candle and lit the incense, hands trembling. "Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo," she chanted.

"Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo," the circle chanted back.

Molly leaned back into the dark, heart racing as a horrible realization descended upon her. The incense, the chanting in a strange language, the odd clothes. Her employers had done it. They'd gone and become Catholics. Well, no matter. She'd fought her way out once, she could do it again if she had to.

Her panicked train of thought was suddenly arrested by a voice. "Thl brn, brothers and sisters. All good Fifthists are welcome. The heretics have not prevailed. Yvne, we will rise again."

"Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo," chanted the circle. Confused, Molly tried to figure out who had spoken.

"The Foundation heretics grow nearer. But their arrogance cripples them. Remember, brethren, they almost failed. Matter will not save them. The Fifth World will rise."

"Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo."

Molly observed that each word spoken by the mysterious voice seemed to correspond with puffs of smoke sent out by the incense coil. She hypothesized that this pattern would continue. Continued observation was in order.

"The Fifth World is not. Neither has it ever been. But soon it will be. Minds and stars align anon. The Fifth world is Freedom."

"Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo."

Molly's hypothesis was solid so far. Now, the woman leaned over the incense and took a deep breath in. She shut her eyes tight and held the smoke in her chest as the circle looked on silently. She exhaled thick green smoke as two voices intoned, "All worlds die in fives." Molly started. One of the voices that came from the woman's mouth was her normal, nasal speaking voice. The other was the mysterious voice that had been speaking before. The woman passed the incense to her paramour, who inhaled as she did, and spoke the same words as he exhaled. And again, the mysterious voice came from him along with his own.

"All worlds die in fives," he breathed as he passed the coil on.

Well, Molly thought to herself, unless they'd severely restructured the Communion service, this was not a meeting of Catholics. She watched with growing confusion as every member of the circle repeated the ritual. The room was beginning to fill with green smoke, but it was not dispersing as smoke does. It pooled at the celebrants' feet, sending out tendrils like some undiscovered sea animal. Green tentacles snaked across the bodies of the assembly, as every celebrant tilted their heads up and spewed a thicker, black smoke from their mouths. This smoke mingled with the green as every celebrant hummed a deep, barely audible tone felt deep within the ribs and spine.

"Now…now hold on one goddamned minute!" shouted Molly.

The celebrants leapt to their feet, screeching. The green smoke suddenly gathered itself like a frightened squid and swept back to the incense coil, enveloping it. Molly marched into the circle as the celebrants screamed in unison a harsh, dissonant tone.

"Everybody…you all…just-just be quiet! All of you!" Molly thrust her finger into the man with the diadem's face. "I don't, I mean, if you, that is…That smoke is *not* acting the way smoke should act! It's acting more, you know, it's just that, it's *alive*, but of course not really…" Molly rubbed at her eyes in frustration as she tried to collect her thoughts.

The man of the house gaped at her. "What the he-you spoke English *this entire time*?"

Molly answered, not facing him, "I was born just outside Chicago. Now tell me…you explain…that thing over there," she pointed at the hovering incense cloud.

The man with the diadem had maintained a neutral expression throughout Molly's interrogation. Molly wondered briefly if his face hadn't been paralyzed when he spoke from seemingly closed lips. "Your curiosity is your downfall. You will long for death."

"Hold your wrath, Your Grace." Everyone turned with wonder to the green cloud shrouding the incense coil. "The ptlwi did not sound. It should have announced her. It allowed her to enter. It is worth asking why."

The woman piped up. "Maybe it's, like, broken or…" Every other celebrant except her darling whipped their head around and hissed, cowing her into silence. The large green cloud left the incense coil and floated over to Molly.

"Breathe me in, rash woman," it commanded. Molly, figuring that she'd gotten this far on bad decisions, shrugged and inhaled deeply. The smoke slipped into her lungs like the slimy predestination of a half-remembered nightmare. It left a bitter, evil taste in her mouth. It wanted the quantum anarchy that tormented her vision stripped of even those lax laws that governed it, expanded, reconfigured. If her New Nature was heaven, the Fifth World was hell. Struggling to remain calm against the invasive presence, Molly slowly exhaled.

Mercifully, the smoke shot out of her nostrils and wrapped itself around the large glass globe above them. It began to glow with a pulsing green light until the smoke drifted down to its coil. A small

slip of paper popped out of a slot in the copper support. The man in the diadem picked it up and read it. Though his face did not change, Molly could feel a jolt of wonder surge through him.

"Fives alive, she's a 998," he breathed. Silence reverberated through the room before everyone began to whisper. The woman's nasal voice sliced through the charged air.

"So, what does that *mean*?" she asked irritatedly.

"She sees the world's wrongness. Nature's sins call to her. She can undo it all. She can birth Fifth World." To Molly he said, "You have failed once before. Machines will always fail. The observer changes the observed. We have succeeded thus before. The mind shall bring salvation."

The hot, acidic taste of failure returned to Molly as sharp as it had been that day in her university apartment. He was right, the machine had failed. And he was right again in that every enthusiastic undergrad knew that an observer could collapse the wavefunction. What implications did that have for The Project? Could she really use human consciousness to rewrite the laws of nature?

It was definitely worth investigation, and these people seemed to know something. Even if their Fifth World was the antithesis of her vision, even if their robes were strange and their chants blood-chilling, science was science. Discoveries made by the Nazis, draped in mindless cruelty and stupid occultism, are still discoveries.

"I will…I mean, of course I would like…If you would…" Molly stopped and collected herself before smiling darkly. "Slon thrli phthle Fifth ynvo."

The green smoke snaked over to the man in the diadem. A tendril wafted up to his face and situated itself under his nose. As Molly watched with some concern, the thin trail of smoke curved up to form the illusion of a ghostly green smile on the man's static face.

To be continued…

A Simple Solution

> Author's Note: These gnomes are based on the ones from **SCP-1956**.

The hustle and bustle grew throughout the marketplace as the striped feet of gnomes darted about. The festival was long-awaited, with vendors lining up their stalls across the streets and the sides of the clocktrees. The glowplants covered the stalls and tents of leather and silk, providing illumination for the spectacle of the season's wares.

The food stalls were filled with pies stuffed with the meat of large insects, and the foam overflowed from drinks that flew from client to client. There were acrobats balancing on streetlamps and juggling each other, making wide arcs and dramatic poses. The musicians played their trombeetles, coins and gizmos were exchanged between oos and aas, and not a single gnome would be caught dead with empty tendrils. The living moons danced like soapstone blimps above, carrying the night sky with them as they flapped their wings and tails.

In the middle of all the music and movement was a gnome with green and black stripes, a cap that split in four, and a pair of brass goggles. He was scrunching his oil-stained face and twitching his cap at the crumpled diagram he carried. All items crossed out, except one. He mumbled something about flying vehicles and rare crystals, not paying attention to the looks his poorly cut head tendrils were getting.

His project would look arcane and beyond everyday applications to most, and that was just how he liked it. Let others deal with scrubbing floors and serving meals. He was about to do something no other gnome in these parts had ever managed, and he would come back to tell everyone about it. Even if it landed him in another smoking crater.

He pulled his notebook from his pocket and started calculating the probability of finding what he needed and how much haggling he'd have to do. He was startled by the sound of something breaking under his foot, and furrowed his brow at the following sound. A child crying. He feared he might have stepped on a beloved pet for a second and was about to offer a mechanical substitute, but then he looked down and realized it was a simple wind-up toy.

He took it in his tendrils, pulled out a screwdriver, a rubber band and the gum he was chewing, and fixed the toy in ten seconds flat. He put it down, wound it up, and watched it walk back to the child, who wasn't sure if it was really fixed. He looked up at the child's mother, who was staring at him like one would at a roach they've been trying to get rid of for a long time.

"Well, if it isn't Plagum, the smartest gnome around." She knew that ever since one of his rivals had bested him in a glowplant design contest, Plagum was especially bothered by that sarcastic namecalling. He didn't resent being defeated fair and square, but Glibo's serenity had always seemed a bit off to him. Though they exchanged tube-letters frequently to keep score of their projects and exploits, Glibo frequently came out ahead. Plagum supposed the gardener attracted more sympathy with his simple manners, and he wasn't far from the truth. There was also the fact that Glibo's custom glowpants did not shear off head tendrils when mishandled, like Plagum's gizmos were infamous for doing.

"You mess up a celebrity's cap once, and you're labeled for life…" grumbled Plagum internally. He faced the mother and the child with as much politeness as he could. "Spare me. I congratulated the man and everything, and the kid's toy is fine. I have a project to finish." And with that, he kept going his way, paying a little more attention to his surroundings and putting another piece of gum in his mouth.

Just as he was finishing his calculations in a corner, Plagum imagined himself flying and taking pictures no one else could. Pictures so good that gnomes would ask him how he did it. He'd just smile and say it was all hard work and talent. Prizes, interviews, autographs. Maybe he'd even receive an invitation to join his heroes in the halls of the Great Crystalsight University, and study the marvels in the unexplored regions of Lagomia.

Before he could fantasize further, Plagum stopped in his tracks when he saw a stall with the item he needed. He smiled and was already putting his haggling posture on, when he noticed a sign that said "sold out". He huffed and contorted his needle teeth. Looking at the money he had left, and with the closing hour approaching, he undid his scowl and straightened his goggles. He smeared the oil-stain in the process.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you happen to have another one of those crystals stored away? I don't have much money left, but perhaps we can work something out real quick…" tried Plagum.

The vendor turned around and made an expression of shock. Before he could warn the tinkerer gnome of the acrobat about to fall on top of him, Plagum was already pleading for generosity. The squishy crash of a gnome falling on another resounded through the stall.

The slim and wide-eyed acrobat got up in a hurry and apologized about ten times to Plagum, who was far more worried that he might have to fix one of his tools. The acrobat turned around to apologize to the vendor, and saw that he had enough money for the same crystal that Plagum wanted.

"Hi there, good evening, sir! I've been saving up for that exact crystal for weeks before the festival started. It's the last one I need to finish my collection! Can you let me buy it, please please please?"

Collection? Didn't this boy realize the properties that it had in the right tendrils? Plagum would have complained and insisted he arrived first, but he had to admit the boy deserved it more for saving up in advance. The vendor was enchanted with the eagerness and dedication of the acrobat, and searched his stall for the crystal he asked for.

As he watched the young acrobat jump away in pure joy, Plagum felt his familiar anger boiling the oilstain on his forehead. He noticed gnomes were gathering around to see if anyone was hurt, so he composed himself. Now what? The festival would only last a few more days, and he could not get enough money with his deliverer job in time.

He hit a screwdriver against the side of his goggles and popped gum balloons until a glowplant shone inside his mind.

It was so simple. Why didn't he think of it sooner?

He just had to dig for the crystals himself. He had enough parts left to make a powered drill, he just had to make sure he didn't anger the sharkworms. He went home and headed straight to the workshop, where he began to disassemble various devices he had found laying around in festivals and sales. He drew the schematics of the drill on a writing desk that was far cleaner and more organized than him, and soon the roars of the machine sounded off into the night.

The festival had to end sooner than expected. While no one was hurt in the accident but Plagum, there was considerable property damage. Holes were torn into the sides of stalls by the shredding maws of sharkworms, products were devoured and the powered drill hit a rock that sent it flying into the face of a living moon. The celestial critter protested by hiding the stars it carried and spitting back the drill into the roof of Plagum's house.

The tinkerer would have been furious enough to chew through iron, but he had no arguments. If only he had arrived earlier, or saved up more, or just settled for a simpler project to show the University. But it was too late, and he was sentenced to a long period of community service, seeing as how he did not have nearly enough money to pay for the destruction.

"But that close up of the sharkworm's mouth was amazing!" he insisted to himself as he cleaned the debris of his foolish brilliance from the streets. His arm hurt from the glancing bite he had received from the subterranean model. Maybe his next project could be a way to better control the population of those devourers with no sense of taste…

A few days into the service, he was approached by none other than Glibo, who was carrying a covered handbasket. Plagum was surprised, and if he was honest with himself, pleased to see a familiar face that wasn't frowning. The gardener looked at the

tinkerer's wounded arm, and shook his head. "You're going to become some animal's dinner if you keep this up". Even through the joke, Glibo could not bring himself to really mock the poor gnome. Plagum did struggle a lot with getting the recognition he wanted so much, and this wasn't the first accident.

"Tell you what, Plagum. When you are done for today, you can come over to my garden for lunch. I was worried that your accident might have wounded you a lot more, so when I heard you were still in one piece, I prepared something special to celebrate."

The tinkerer looked at the handbasket in those orange-black polkadot tendrils, and felt the the sweet aroma of mushroom stew. His stomach groaned loudly, and he told it to shut up. Glibo chuckled at that, and patted Plagum on the back. "Don't worry, I'm sure your stomach isn't angry at you. And you'll make it to Crystalsight soon, I am sure of it. Here, have this mushroom while you do your service." Glibo handed him a big enough fungus to silence his stomach for a while.

"Thanks, Glibo. You're a nice gnome. But don't you forget our score, you hear? I'll beat your tendril-jumper record someday!" The gardener gave him nod of approval and returned to his work. Plagum looked down and recognized a chunk of metal from the drill. He saw his reflected goggles and frown being warped by the metal's shape, creating a boogeyman of the sort that made little gnomes hide inside their bedsheets. And in his grumpy heart, he felt that the difference between the gnome and reflection was too small.

He would have something surprising indeed to discuss over lunch that day.

After weeks of community service (and a lot of temptation to use more gizmos to finish said service faster), Plagum was finally free. His parents gave him the usual speech and scolding, but were far more glad than angry when they saw he was OK. They decided to take him to the circus to cheer him up. Plagum took his notebooks to scribble down ideas as he was inspired by the acrobats' parabolas in the air. He noticed one of them was the boy who had bought the crystal before he could. He felt the beginning of a growl forming in

his throat, but he remembered all the trouble his poor manners had brought him so far. He decided that this time would be different.

He stopped by a gizmo store after the show was over, and took some wood pieces, glass, wires and paint. He built a goblet-shaped crystal holder. The glass dome would open at the pulling of a lever, but when closed and placed under moonlight, the crystals hanging from the wires would form sparkling and multi-colored astronomic images.

The next time he went to the circus, Plagum approached the boy who had the crystal he needed. He breathed in and out, and felt a strange levity wash over him. His legendary frown dissolved and gave way to a smile. "Hey there, that was quite the spectacle! You must train a lot. What's your name?"

"Hey, it's you! I'm so sorry for falling on you during the festival! A bird got into my mouth and…what's that in your tendril? Oh, right, I'm Neebeem. You are the drill guy, right?"

Plagum mustered up his willpower to not get irritated at that "drill guy" comment, and to his shock, the next words came naturally to him. "Yes, that's me. My name is Plagum. I couldn't find something I needed in time at the festival, so I came up with a stupid plan that messed everything up. I should have followed your example, Neebeem. Speaking of which…" He showed the crystal holder to the acrobat. "I don't have a lot of money, but if you traded that crystal you bought for this, I'd be so very thankful." He instructed Neebeem on how to use the gizmo, and the boy was completely enchanted.

"Of course, mister! This is *so* cool! I'm gonna put it my room and watch it every time the moons come by! You're not mean like people say, you're awesome!" Even though Plagum scoffed, he didn't frown. "Ah, I wouldn't say I'm mean, but I have a project on good manners I need to work on. I hope you enjoy the crystal holder. See you around, and keep doing those awesome jumps!"

"Will do! Good luck with your projects, mister Plagum!" The acrobat went on his way, and the tinkerer felt a new glowplant shining in his mind. Now that he had the crystal, he could build the moonlight powered flying machine he had been imagining for so long. But he

was bad at piloting, and he could not take detailed pictures of the living moons without losing control of the machine sooner or later. However, there was a solution. And it was so simple.

Later that month, on a scientific magazine that often published articles of respected scholars, the special edition's headline read in showy letters: "Ex-pilot gardener and young tinkerer use flying machine to take revolutionary pictures of living moons." On the article cited in the headline, it said: "Tinkerer is to be admitted into Crystalsight University."

A Site-19 Christmas Carol

Note: The following script, all seventy-two pages of it, was found discarded in a Site-19 cafeteria trash can.

Additional Note: Please remember that Site-19 printer ink is designated for Foundation work ***ONLY***.

Story by

Charles Dickens

Adapted for the Stage by
djkaktus

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jack Bright
Django Bridge
Ralph Roget
Everett Mann
Sophia Light
Rose Labelle
Child Jack Bright
Young Jack Bright
Alto Clef
Agatha Rights
Timothy Burns
Tilda Moose
Tiny Zyn
Fritz Bridge
Chelsea Elliott

Pixel Alexandra
Dmitri Strelnikov
Jacob Conwell
Dietrich Lurk
Dr. McTiriss
Dr. Rosen
Dr. Silver
Director Toph
Director Flux
Kestrel
Vulture
Falcon
The Little Street Heiden
Ghost of Christmas Past
Ghost of Christmas Present
Ghost of Christmas Future
Narrator 1
Narrator 2
Narrator 3
Narrator 4
Narrator 5
Boy Singer
Lampman
Carolers/Singers/Dancers/Actors

Act I

Mann's Ghost

A single pair of footsteps is heard crunching through the snow. Suddenly, there are many more footsteps, all in unison, some walking, some running. In the background, figures can be seen running to and fro, until all emerge as one around a lone figure lying in the snow, face down. The footsteps stop suddenly.

One boy steps out from the group and begins to sing.

Boy:

GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN
LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY.
REMEMBER CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR,
WAS BORN ON CHRISTMAS DAY
TO SAVE US ALL FROM SATAN'S POWER
WHEN WE HAVE GONE ASTRAY.
OH, TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY, COMFORT AND JOY,
OH, TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY.

Two additional figures step out from the group.

Narrator 1: Mann was dead to begin with. Everett Mann was as dead as a very dead… man.

Boy continues to sing.

Boy:

GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN
LET NOTHING YOU DISMAY …

Narrator 2: There is no doubt that Mann was dead. This must be very clearly understood, or nothing even remotely useful can come from this story.

All actors join in singing.

All:

TO SAVE US ALL FROM SATAN'S POWER
WHEN WE HAVE GONE ASTRAY.
OH, TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY, COMFORT AND JOY,
OH, TIDINGS OF COMFORT AND JOY.

JACK BRIGHT (MONKEY) enters. HE paces across the stage, itching his butt and grunting absent mindedly. Occasionally, he grows close to the edge of the stage and screams a monkey-scream at the audience. HE eventually

approaches his desk, sits, and begins to shuffle through a mound of paperwork.

Narrator 1: Now, Bright was his sole executor, his sole superior, his sole friend and his sole mourner, in his own bizarre monkey-analogue way.

Narrator 3: He was, in short, a tight-fisted…

Bright: (*Monkey screams*)

ACTORS scuttle away from BRIGHT and huddle in the corner. BRIGHT returns to his paperwork, snorting and growling.

Narrator 4: …overworked…

Narrator 5: …understaffed…

Narrator 1: …long past his expiration date…

Narrator 2: …scraping…

Narrator 3: …clutching…

Narrator 4: …bastard of a site director!

Narrator 2: Literally dead inside.

Narrator 3: If he was able to feel the cold through the warmth of his monkey fur, he did not show it.

Narrator 4: Even as frost formed on his beady little eyes…

Narrator 5: …and snow caked on him like a whipped topping on monkey-cake…

ALL: …he shed not a single tear!

Bright: BAH! FUCK OFF.

Narrator 1: He kept the office temperature at near subzero temperatures. Of course, he couldn't feel the chill underneath

his thick layer of ape-hair, but he didn't much care one way or another if his office mates did. His office was frigid in the summer, and not a degree warmer in the winter.

Narrator 2: Once upon a time - of all good days of the year, on Christmas Eve, old Jack Bright sat busy at his desk at Site-19. (*Bright scratches on a pad of paper hurriedly with a pen*) Bright had a space heater near his desk, but due to budgetary concerns, the one afforded to his assistant, Dr. Django Bridge, was so much smaller that the doctor was forced to warm each finger individually before returning to his work.

DJANGO BRIDGE is revealed at his comically small desk. A Canadian flag is seen protruding from it with no explanation.

Bridge: (*To audience*) Bu-but Django Bridge, the studious and dedicated assistant, couldn't find room in the budget for a slightly larger space heater, and tried to warm himself by the dim screen of a dying cell phone; but not being a man of strong imagination, he failed. (*Shivers*)

BRIDGE turns back to his work. BRIGHT'S nephew RALPH ROGET enters.

Roget: A merry Christmas to you, Uncle Bright! God bless you!

Bright: (*Monkey screams*) THERE IS NO GOD (*Monkey screams*) FUCK YOU.

Roget: Fuck me? On Christmas? Truly you don't mean that, I'm sure?

Bright: I do! Merry fucking Christmas. What right do you have to be merry about anything? You don't have a job, you don't have money!

Roget: Then what right do you have to be so dismal, uncle? You *do* have a job, and *do* have plenty of money.

Bright: Oh fuck off with that Ralph. What's Christmas to you

but a time to be paying bills and buying gifts with money you don't have, and spending time with your family away from a job you also don't have. If I had it my way, every son of a bitch who walks around here talking all this "Merry Christmas" shit would literally be stuffed in his own goddamn turkey and fed to the Lizard.

Roget: Uncle!

Bright: (*Mockingly*) Nephew! Do whatever you want with your Christmas, and let me do whatever I want with mine.

Roget: Do what you want? But you don't *do* anything!

Bright: Let me fuck it right out, then.

Roget: I've always thought of Christmas as a good time, a happy, drunken, blacked-out-on-holiday-wine kind of time. It's the only time of year where men and women seem to open their shut up hearts - and legs - freely! God bless it!

BRIDGE breaks into applause. He wipes a single tear from his face.

Narrator 1: Django Bridge had involuntarily applauded, a privilege afforded to exactly zero people under Bright's employ and, realizing this, he turned back to poke at his tiny space heater which, due in no small part to the uncaring nature of the universe, shorted and died.

Bright: Let me hear another fucking sound out of you, Bridge, and I'll rip a hole in your ass big enough to stick my head into and make sure every gaping inch of it is fired before the end of the afternoon. (*To ROGET.*) You've got a silk tongue, boy. Wonder why you don't apply for upper management.

Roget: Don't be angry, Uncle Bright! Come on now, dine with us tomorrow! We're going out for pad thai!

Bright: I'd rather be cooked with the pad thai.

Roget: But why, Uncle?

Bright: Why? Why in the hell did you get married?

Roget: Well, because I fell in love!

Bright: (*Mockingly*) Because you fell in love.

Narrator 2: Bright barked out the word "love" like it was the only thing in the world more ridiculous than "Merry Christmas".

Roget: Aw, come on, Bright. You never came to visit with me before, why give this reason now all of a sudden?

Bright: Get out of my office.

Roget: I've only ever just wanted to be your friend, Uncle Bright.

Bright: Get out… of my office.

Roget: I'm so sorry you feel the way you do, but I'll keep my high spirits! So Merry Christmas to you, Uncle!

ROGET opens the door.

Bright: I said *get the fuck out of my office*.

ROGET exits, laughing.

Narrator 3: When Ralph Roget went out, two other men came in.

MANNA CHARITABLE FELLOW 1 knocks on the door. The door swings open, and two men enter.

Narrator 2: They were slender gentlemen, cheeks rosy from the outside chill and faces full of goodwill, and now stood before the chimp-director of Site-19.

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: (To BRIDGE) Ah, Site-19, is it? Directors Bright and Mann? Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Dr. Bright, or Dr. Mann?

BRIDGE points to BRIGHT.

Bright: Mann has been dead for seven years. Died seven years ago, this very night. Probably the cocaine, frankly.

Manna Charitable Fellow 2: I'm very sorry to hear, Dr. Bright. But… at this most festive and joyful time of year, it is customary and fine to extend the soft and warm hand of generosity towards though less fortunate than we, those who suffer greatly.

Bright: (*Idly, to DJANGO*) Are we at capacity for D-Class?

All ACTORS, who are standing all around the stage, moan openly. The MANNA CHARITABLE FELLOWS exchange a nervous glance.

ALL: Ooh.

Bridge: Uh, oh… um… well, no sir, we could always use more…

Bright: And our amnestics? Do they still operate properly?

ACTORS moan a little louder.

ALL: Oooooh!

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: They do, though I wish I could say they were unnecessary, bec—

Bright: I support rounding up the unfortunate for testing, and erasing the memories of those whose lives we devastate in pursuit of our goal. If the poor truly need assistance badly enough, they can seek refuge there.

The loudest moan yet.

ALL: OOOOOOHHHHHHHHHH!

Narrator 2: Oh goddammit, Bright.

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: Testing or amnestics? Many would rather die.

Bright: If they would rather die, then by all means, have at it. Fewer people for us to protect. Now, good afternoon, gentlemen.

Narrator 3: Sensing that it would be useless and potentially hazardous to poke the ape any further, the Manna Charitable Fellows withdrew.

They exit. All ACTORS watch them as they leave. BRIDGE reaches a hand out briefly, but retracts and withers under the stare of BRIGHT.

Narrator 1: After some time passed, it was quitting time at Site-19. Django Bridge quickly gathered his things into his bag and grabbed his thin coat.

Bright: I suppose you'll want the entire day tomorrow, then?

Bridge: If you wouldn't mind, Dr. Bright.

Bright: I absolutely mind.

Bridge: (*To the audience.*) Django observed to the doctor that it was only once a year.

Bright: A shitty excuse for wasting valuable department money every twenty-fifth of December, Bridge. But I suppose you'll need to take the whole day. Be here all the earlier the day after, then.

Narrator 2: The assistant promised he would, and Bright walked out with a grunt and a growl.

BRIGHT exits Site-19 and walks out into the courtyard between the administrative offices and the staff dormitories. The wind is loud, and snow whips up around him.

Narrator 5: Bright took his meager dinner of bananas and whiskey at one of the more depressing staff taverns…

(*BRIGHT leaves the tavern and tries to cross the courtyard. As he does, a large crowd of young staff members, all laughing and talking loudly, swallow him up.*) …and then he went home.

BRIGHT stumbles out of the crowd, dazed. He stops to collect himself, and then peers around cautiously. The crowd is absent. Pleased, he attempts to take another step, and the crowd reappears. BRIGHT is jostled and tossed to and fro within the crowd.

Bright: FUCK.

BRIGHT disappears into the darkness of the courtyard as the lights move towards a group of CAROLERS singing: "THE CAROL OF THE BELLS".

Actors:

HARK HOW THE BELLS,
SWEET SILVER BELLS,
ALL SEEM TO SAY,
THROW CARES AWAY
CHRISTMAS IS HERE,
BRINGING GOOD CHEER,
TO YOUNG AND OLD,
MEEK AND THE BOLD,
DING DONG DING DONG
THAT IS THEIR SONG
WITH JOYFUL RING
ALL CAROLING
ONE SEEMS TO HEAR
WORDS OF GOOD CHEER
FROM EVERYWHERE
FILLING THE AIR
OH HOW THEY POUND,
RAISING THE SOUND,
O'ER HILL AND DALE,
TELLING THEIR TALE,
GAILY THEY RING
WHILE PEOPLE SING

SONGS OF GOOD CHEER,
CHRISTMAS IS HERE,
MERRY, MERRY, MERRY, MERRY CHRISTMAS,
MERRY, MERRY, MERRY, MERRY CHRISTMAS,
ON ON THEY SEND,
ON WITHOUT END,
THEIR JOYFUL TONE
TO EVERY HOME
DING DONG DING DONG … DONG!

Music fades out. CAROLERS disappear into the shadows. BRIGHT appears and stumbles drunkenly towards the door of his abode.

Narrator 5: Arriving home, Bright approached the door to his home.

Narrator 4: There was nothing out of the ordinary about the door, except that it was very large…

Narrator 3: And, of course, it had a door knocker…

The face of EVERETT MANN appears on the door.

Mann: BRIGHT!

Bright: Holy shit, Mann?! (*BRIGHT turns around and smacks himself, trying to gather his senses. Sufficiently sobered, he turns back to the door, where the face of MANN has disappeared.*) Fuck… I need to lay off the drink.

Narrator 1: Bright went inside and stumbled up to his room.

Narrator 5: As he disrobed and climbed into his monkey-bed…

Narrator 3: …strange sounds began to fill his abode.

BRIGHT throws on a nightshirt and puts on a pair of reading glasses. Howling wind and moaning sounds are heard outside. Somewhere, chains are shaking.

Narrator 2: Jaaaaaaaack…

Narrator 3: Briiiiiiiiiiiight….

Narrator 5: Youuuuuuuuuuuu…

Narrator 1: Fuuuuuuckiiiiiiing….

Narrator 4: Asssssssssssssssssssssss…

Narrator 3: Hooooooooooooooole…

Narrator 4: Jaaaaaaackkkkkkkk…

Narrator 3: BRIGHT!

Bright: Oh my god shut up, Jesus fucking Christ.

Dragging chains are heard. MANN appears from the shadows.

Mann: Jaaaaaaaaaack!

Bright: Ohhhhhh no. Not this again. It's just the drink, I won't believe it!

Narrator 3: It was the ghost of Everett Mann! His body completely transparent, his mind no worse for wear.

Narrator 1: All things considered, Mann probably figured this was an upgrade.

Bright: What do you want with me?

Mann: Much.

Bright: Who are you?

Mann: Ask me who I was.

Bright: I— uh, alright. Who were you?

Mann: IN LIFE, I WAS MANN THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE,

your partner and fellow director of this Site-19.

Bright: Ah, shit, it really is you. Alright, let's get this over with. Can you sit down?

Mann: I can.

Bright: Do it, then.

Narrator 4: See, Bright asked the question both because he was curious as to whether a ghost so transparent could sit at all, and to test whether Dr. Mann's aversion to chairs persisted into the afterlife.

MANN sits.

Mann: So. What do you think?

Bright: You've looked better.

Mann: See, that's what I thought. But then I realized I can more or less poke into anywhere I want. Imagine getting up close to that damned statue, or watch the Hanged King's Tragedy, with no threat of consequence. (*MANN inhales deeply.*) The freedom is liberating, Jack.

Bright: I don't believe you're real.

Mann: Why would you doubt your senses?

Bright: To be fair, monkey-sense is less prone to trickery. But the senses are so… sensitive. Easily manipulated. Stomachache, headache, accidental amnestic treatment, the handle and a half I finished at the bar literally a half hour ago. Who knows.

Narrator 5: At the mention of the alcohol he most assuredly had a strong postmortem desire for, the Spirit raised a frightful cry, shaking its chains and raising such a clatter that the spooked Bright fell backwards out of his chair.

MANN screams in immaterial fury.

Mann: AaaaaaAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!

Bright: Jesus Christ, Mann! Seriously! What the hell do you even want?

Mann: It is required of us all to walk our path through life arm in arm with our brothers, Bright. If our spirits do not walk with them in life, then they are condemned to do so in death!

Bright: …is this something we should be containing, or…?

Mann: Ooooooooh… wooooooooooe—

ALL ACTORS join in the "woe" and add to the volume.

All: —ooooooooeeEEEEEEEE-

Mann: —is me!

MANN shakes the chains hanging from his body.

Bright: Speaking of which, what's with the chains?

Mann: These chains I wear, Jack Bright, these chains that I forged in my own life. Link by damned link and yard by damned yard, I gathered them on my own free will and of my own free will I wore it. Is the pattern strange to you, Jack? Can you feel the weight and length of the chain you wear yourself? Yours was like mine, seven Christmas Eves ago. It is a ponderous chain, and imagine how it may have grown these long years!

Bright: Everett, please. Speak comfort to me.

Mann: I have none to give, Jack. I have nothing but the chain.

Bright: But you were such a good site director, Everett, the best at your business—

Mann: BUSINESS!

ALL ACTORS and BRIGHT recoil away from MANN. A bright

red light shines on him.

Mann: Mankind was my business, Jack. Goodwill to all men, benevolence, protecting the poorest and weakest of us, they were my business! And I forsook them all! (*He pauses, as if to listen.*) Listen to me, Bright. My time with you is nearly over. I am a warning to you, as I wish I had been warned all those years ago, that you have yet a chance to escape the fate to which I am condemned.

Bright: You… you were always a good partner and friend, Everett…

Mann: You will be haunted by three Spirits.

Bright: Sp— spirits? Is this the chance that you mentioned?

Mann: Aye, it is.

Bright: (*Pauses, pondering.*) Then… uh, I'd rather not.

Mann: Expect the first on the morrow, Jack, just past the first hour of the morning!

Bright: So we're really doing this, then? Can't I just have them here all at once and get it over with?

Mann: The second will come the next night, at the same hour. The third on the day past that, before the the last stroke of midnight has ceased to ring.

MANN begins to fade into the darkness.

Narrator 1: When the Ghost of Mann had said these words, he was overtaken by the darkness.

Narrator 2: Bright moved to come close to him.

Narrator 3: But Mann held out his hand, as if to tell him to come no further.

MANN is almost completely gone.

Mann: Beware, Jack of Site-19! (*He disappears, only his lingering echo remains.*) Beware!

Bright: Bah… I really need to lay off the drink, though. That is not a joke, this is legitimately becoming a problem.

Narrator 2: Bright returned to his bed, and fell asleep instantly.

Light fades on BRIGHT. Outside, a LAMPMAN walks down the street lighting lamps. As he walks, he sings quietly.

Lampman:

O HOLY NIGHT, THE STARS ARE BRIGHTLY SHINING,
IT IS THE NIGHT OF THE DEAR SAVIOUR'S BIRTH.
LONG LAY THE WORLD IN SIN AND ERROR PINING
TILL HE APPEARED AND THE SOUL FELT HIS WORTH.
A THRILL OF HOPE, THE WEARY WORLD REJOICES,
FOR YONDER BEAMS A NEW AND GLORIOUS MOURN.
FALL ON YOUR KNEES!
OH, HEAR THE ANGEL VOICES!
O NIGHT DIVINE!
O NIGHT WHEN CHRIST WAS BORN!
O NIGHT DIVINE!
O NIGHT, O NIGHT DIVINE!

All lights extinguish. There is silence. BRIGHT snores loudly.

Act II

The First of Three Spectres

Narrator 4: When Bright awoke, it was so dark that for a moment he feared he had gone blind.

BRIGHT snorts and awakens suddenly.

Bright: Ah! I fear I have gone blind!

Narrator 4: I just said that.

Bright: (*To Narrator 4*) Oh. Sorry.

Narrator 4: Your eyes are fine.

Bright: Yeah, I see that now.

Narrator 4: It's just really dark.

Bright: Really should keep the bathroom light on or something.

Narrator 4: It would help.

Narrator 1: Suddenly, a bell sounded.

All of the WOMEN in the ENSEMBLE.

Women: DING!

All of the MEN in the ENSEMBLE.

Men: DONG!

Narrator 5: There was a flash of light in his room, and then before Bright stood a strange figure.

DR GEARS, THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST appears. HE seems soft and gentle, with a warm smile and cheerful eyes. He wears a white robe and glows softly.

Narrator 3: It was a figure— like a child, yet not… really a child, since it was a full grown man, who… was also like a ghost, but you got the feeling it was a child, or… yeah.

Bright: Cog?

Gears: Hey Bright.

Bright: Are you the Spirit who Mann warned me about?

Gears: In the flesh.

BRIGHT raises an eyebrow.

Gears: It's a figure of speech, Jack.

Bright: What are you?

Gears: I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Bright: Long past?

Gears: No, your past.

Bright: …so, long past, then.

Gears: Yeah.

Narrator 4: The Spirit put a hand on Bright's shoulder as it spoke and gently squeezed it.

GEARS squeezes BRIGHT'S arm a little too hard.

Bright: (*Monkey screams*) Ouch! Fuck, what was that for?

Gears: Rise, Jack. Ride with me.

Bright: Ride? Ride what? Can't we just walk?

Suddenly a splendid and majestic DEADLY MOOSE appears from the ethereal plane. GEARS climbs onto a saddle, and motions for BRIGHT to do the same.

Bright: Is this faster?

Gears: Can you walk through time?

Bright: …no.

Gears: Then yes. Hop on.

There is a mighty gust of wind, and the DEADLY MOOSE takes flight. BRIGHT struggles to hold on, while GEARS stares straight ahead into the night. Snow swirls around them.

Narrator 2: As quickly as they did rise into the night sky, so did they descend before a long, dirt road surrounded by trees. The darkness of Bright's home had vanished, and was replaced with the light of a cold, clear winter day, with fresh snow upon the ground.

Bright: I… wait! I know where this is! This is the road through the country to Site-17! This is where my first assignment was, where— how long ago was it? I would've just been a kid.

Narrator 1: Bright was immediately overwhelmed with a veritable cacophony of familiar smells and sounds, all connected to thousands of happy thoughts and joys, long since forgotten.

Gears: Is there something in your eye, Jack?

Bright: What? Oh, no, no, I just… it's nothing. Just the cold.

Gears: Do you remember the way?

Bright: Remember it? I could walk it blindfolded!

BRIGHT takes a few steps before stopping and taking a deep breath.

Gears: Strange to have forgotten it for so many years. Let us go.

They approach the entrance to Site-17. Around them swarm young doctors in coats, MTF agents in riot gear, workers moving boxes of files, and so on.

Narrator 3: The site was filled with activity.

Narrator 4: Young researchers with the world in their eyes.

Narrator 5: Agents fresh out of the Academy…

Actors 5: …or back from assignment in the field…

Narrator 2: …all returning to the only home they ever knew…

Narrator 3: …the place where they felt most comfortable…

Narrator 4: …at old Site-17.

Gears: Ah, but these are only shadows of the things that have been.

BRIGHT is caught up in the activity and festive mood of the place. He begins to greet people, though they do not notice.

Bright: Hey, Anderson! (*Pause.*) Dr. Livingston, long time no see! (*Pause.*) Karlyle, wow, it's like you haven't—

Gears: They have no consciousness of us, Jack. They are only projections.

The CROWD clears revealing a CHILD JACK BRIGHT. Beside him is his father, ADAM BRIGHT, scolding him. CHILD BRIGHT looks despondent.

Bright: Tha- that's me! And my… my body, I was just a boy… before… and my father, he—

Gears: This was only the beginning, yes? An eternity of trials await, but this boy knows only the scorn and disdain of his father.

CHILD BRIGHT sighs.

Bright: I… I remember this. Like something out a dream, it seems so long ago, and yet… (*BRIGHT and GEARS move on. CHILD BRIGHT and ADAM BRIGHT disappear into the darkness.*) I wish… ah, but it's too late now.

Gears: What is it?

Bright: There was someone singing a Christmas carol outside of my office last night. The child of some young researcher, no doubt. I… I should have like to have given him something. That's all.

Narrator 2: Gears smiled knowingly.

Gears: Come, Jack. Let us see another Christmas.

They open a door and walk into a laboratory. Sitting in the middle, alone, is YOUNG JACK BRIGHT. His body has changed, he is no longer the man he once was. Now he is someone else, and as he stares at his hands, he takes in the gravity of what has happened to him. Around his neck hangs a shining red and gold amulet.

Bright: This…

Gears: Look.

A door open behind them, and in rushes SOPHIA LIGHT. Her hair is blonde and pulled tight into a bun behind her head, and her eyes are wide behind her glasses.

Light: Doctor!

Bright: Sophia?!

Light: Jack!

BRIGHT extends his arms to embrace her, but she runs past him to YOUNG BRIGHT.

Bright: Sophia! She's here! Alive again!

Light: Jack, you're alright! You… you are alright, aren't you?

Young Bright: I… I think I am… this— (*Points to amulet.*) …I think this saved me.

Light: That's SCP-963, isn't it? (*She reaches for it.*) Let me see—

Young Bright: No! (*He pulls back.*) No, it… it might do to you what it did to… he—

Light: (*Embraces Bright nonetheless.*) Oh, nevermind that. I'm so glad you're alive, Dr. Bright. I thought we had lost you.

Young Bright: (*Smiles.*) Thank you, Sophia. I'm glad to still be here.

The darkness encompasses them.

Gears: A fine doctor, Sophia. Truly the best of us.

Bright: So she was. You're right.

Gears: She died years later and had, I think, children.

Bright: One child. She died protecting him during a containment breach.

Gears: Your adopted nephew.

Bright: Aye.

They pause for a moment, and then move through another door.

Narrator 4: The ghost moved to another office, more festive than any of the previous, and asked Bright if he knew of it.

Bright: Knew of it? This was my first assistant director position! (*AGATHA RIGHTS enters. She is a tall, full woman, carrying wrapped gifts and bottles of wine.*) That's Director Rights! Holy shit, it's Rights, alive again!

Rights: Ho there! Jack! Alto!

(*YOUNG BRIGHT and ALTO CLEF enter.*)

Clef: Here we are, Director!

Bright: My eyes deceive me! Alto Clef, in the flesh. We were comrades, him and I, spent years together here.

Rights: Come, my boys! No more work today. Containment can wait until tomorrow. It's Christmas Eve, Alto! Christmas, Jack! Finish with that paperwork and let's have ourselves out of here!

YOUNG BRIGHT and ALTO CLEF begin to file paperwork.

Clef: Jack, I had a dream the other night.

Young Bright: What's that, Alto?

Clef: One day… some Christmas Day I hope that I can hold as great a party as Director Rights.

Young Bright: As great as Rights'?! Impossible! But… I have dreamt the same myself, friend. What a party that would be!

Clef: Then we'll hold our parties together, at Site-19, and invite all of our friends—

Bright: (*Sadly.*) …friends long since forgotten…

Clef: —and we'll have food-

Young Bright: —and drink!

Clef: Yes! And so much drink! And gifts for the whole staff!

Young Bright: And you and I will be hailed as the greatest and kindest site directors of all time!

Clef: And everyone will love us!

(*DOCTOR TIMOTHY BURNS enters. He is as jolly and cheerful as his wife.*)

Burns: Say, who's loving who?

Clef: Oh, come off it, Burns.

Young Bright: Good evening, Dr. Burns!

Burns: Let's go, boys! Tonight is gonna be great night! Now, let's go find the wife and get this show started!

Rights: Ah! There's my darling husband. (*RIGHTS and BURNS hug.*) Clear back here, lads! We've got a night's worth of dancing ahead of us!

Burns: You bet your sweet ass we do!

Rights: And who better to have as a dance partner than my own husband?

Burns: Oho! You're assuming I'll accept your proposal?

Rights: For thirty-years you've been accepting my proposal, and you're no prettier now than you were then! I see no reason why you'd stop now!

(*They laugh. ACTORS rush in from all sides, wildly stripping off their lab coats and goggles in exchange for festive Christmas garb. As the music starts, they all begin to dance.*)

Narrator 3: Beautiful young women—

Narrator 1: —and handsome young men.

Narrator 2: Doctors, researchers, agents, janitors and all!

Narrator 4: Rights and Burns saw no class structure. They saw no prestige or wealth. Within the confines of Site-18, they saw only good hearts and good souls.

The ACTORS begin to sing "DECK THE HALLS". As they all begin to dance, BRIGHT is swept up in the activity and himself begins to dance, weaving in and out of the group.

ALL:

DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY
FA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA!
‘TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY
FA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA LA
DON WE NOW OUR GAY APPAREL

GEARS holds up a hand and the room is suddenly silent. BRIGHT continues to dance for a moment before realizing they are dancing without music.

Gears: They made people so happy, so full of gratitude. A

small matter, nothing more.

Bright: Small?

Gears: Why? You think it not? Director Rights spent but pocket change on this party. Fifteen, twenty dollars? Is such a small sacrifice deserving of this much praise?

GEARS claps and the ACTORS finish the song.

ALL:

TROLL THE ANCIENT YULETIDE CAROL
FA LA LA LA LA LA LA!

The ACTORS divide into couples and rush off in all directions into the darkness.

Bright: Gears! She had the power to make us happy or unhappy, to make our work light or burdensome, a pleasure or punishment. With how happy she made us, she may as well have spent a fortune.

Narrator 1: Bright paused, as if in thought.

Gears: What is it?

Bright: I… I would like to say something to my assistant just now. That's all.

GEARS smiles again.

Gears: Come, Jack. My time grows short. See here.

They mount the DEADLY MOOSE again, this time gliding down in a snowy courtyard. A light shines down on YOUNG BRIGHT talking to his fiance, ROSE LABELLE.

Young Bright: Come now, Rose. Don't be ridiculous.

Labelle: Jack, I'm not being ridiculous! And even if I were, isn't it natural to be ridiculous when you're in love?

Young Bright: I don't have time to be ridiculous, Rose. I'm the director now, I have a career to think about!

Labelle: Do you have time to be in love?

Young Bright: Love? Love… is for fools.

Labelle: Then I am a fool, Jack. A fool for loving a man who does not love me. I matter very little to you, don't I? Another has replaced me in your heart… if it can make you happy and comfort you, as I would have tried to do, I have no cause to grieve.

Young Bright: Replaced you? What has replaced you?

Labelle: Your work.

Young Bright: Well that's just the way it fucking is, Rose! There is nothing, *nothing* more important than the cause…

Bright scrambles over to them, desperately trying to stop the young shadow of himself from speaking.

Bright: No, no, you idiot, please. Don't go on…

Young Bright: …and those who stand in opposition to the cause are just as foolish and dangerous as those we seek to contain!

Labelle: You fear the world too much, Jack. All your hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the reach of the inevitable, even after everything you have experienced.

Young Bright: I am not changed towards you.

Labelle: You have changed. When you made your promise to me, you were another man. Before you wore that goddamned amulet, you were different.

Young Bright: I was a boy! I knew *nothing*. This amulet saved me, pulled me out of the darkness and has given me perspective, Rose. If I do nothing to stop the calamity that

may befall us, then everything we have experienced will be without worth. I do everything I do for us, for you.

Bright: No, no no no, please—

Labelle: For me?

Young Bright: Safety is the key to all things.

Labelle: No, Jack. Love is the key. Companionship, togetherness. How have you lost this?

Young Bright: Rose, I do love you. But I cannot afford to live ignorantly of what I know I must do. It is not fair to you or myself.

Labelle: Our contract is an old one. When we made it, we were both poor and ignorant and happy, and content to be so.

Bright: No more, please… please, no…

Labelle: You know in your heart, whatever of it remains, that you are not who you were. You say you love me, but your obsession with your work supersedes me.

Young Bright: Rose, do we really need to do this?

Labelle: We were one heart once, you and I. But no longer.

Bright: No, Rose, we are still one, we could be…

Labelle: I release you from any promises you made to me, Jack Bright.

Young Bright: I am not asking for any releases.

Labelle: In words, no.

Young Bright: Then in what?

Labelle: Tell me, Jack, would you try to win me over again now, knowing what you know?

Young Bright: I must think of my work, of my—

Labelle: Would you seek me out now?

YOUNG BRIGHT does not answer.

Bright: Answer her, you idiot! You goddamned fool, say something!

Silence.

Labelle: I thought not. I do hope you find happiness on the path you have chosen, Jack.

She disappears into the darkness. YOUNG BRIGHT lingers for a moment more, and he too disappears.

Bright: Spirit! Gears, whoever you are, please. Take me away from this. Show me nothing else.

Gears: I told you that these were the shadows of the past, Jack. They are what they are, I am not to blame.

Bright: Why do you haunt me? What have I done?

Gears: There is one more you must see.

Bright: Is this fun for you? Torturing me?

Gears: Follow, Jack.

They walk a short ways. In the distance there are lights. As they approach them, they see the window of another dormitory, at another site.

Narrator 5: Before them was another place—

Narrator 3: A room, not very large—

Narrator 2: But full of comfort!

LABELLE, now older, sits across the room with her daughter.

Narrator 1: Across the room sat the woman he had once loved.

Narrator 5: The same woman he had let go so many years before.

Bright: Gears? Is that… it's Rose! But how can that be? She looks older, more mature…

Labelle: Another Christmas Eve.

Daughter: And what a beautiful night it is!

Labelle: All Christmas Eve's have beauty in their own way.

Daughter: Do you think mama will be home soon?

Labelle: If she doesn't wander off looking for some beautiful gift for her beautiful daughter.

Daughter: Oh mama! Why won't you tell me what she's gotten me?

Labelle: (*Laughs.*) You'll just have to wait and see, won't you?

Bright: She looks… beautiful. Look at her eyes, her hair, her lips… I would like dearly to—

ROSE'S WIFE enters. ROSE rushes to help her with a load of packages while their DAUGHTER squeals in delight.

Wife: Rose! God, I have missed you.

Labelle: And I you.

They kiss.

Narrator 3: Seated comfortable by the fire, the wife turned to Rose and said with a smile,

Wife: Rose, you won't believe it. I saw an old friend of yours while I was on assignment this weekend.

Labelle: Who was it?

Wife: Take a guess.

Labelle: Pah! I don't know. How could I? (*She pauses, considering, and then says like a joke,*) Jack Bright.

Wife: The same.

Labelle: Aha! How did you happen upon him?

Wife: I was delivering a shipment of artifacts to Site-19 and happened to pass by his office. Seeing as he hadn't closed up and there was a light on inside, I couldn't help but notice. They say his partner is on the verge of death, but there he sat alone. Quite alone in the world, it seems.

Bright: Spirit, please… remove me from this place.

Gears: I told you, Jack. These are only the shadows of things that have been. I cannot change them, any more than I could have cast them.

Narrator 1: Bright turned to speak, but instead of the face of an old friend, he saw many shattered fragments of all of the faces of everyone that the Spirit had shown him. The face was a somber one, a silent one.

Bright: Take me back, Gears. Haunt me no longer.

Narrator 2: With a solemn nod, the world around Jack began to collapse, the walls caving in upon themselves and the ground beneath them coming undone. The lights began to flicker and go out until all that remained was a single glowing fireplace. In his last moments of consciousness, Jack reached out as if to signal towards Rose, but a howling wind overtook them and the light was extinguished.

Narrator 1: Jack sat up quickly, immediately conscious of being both in his own bedroom, and of being exhausted. He was suddenly overcome with a terrible drowsiness, and soon collapsed back into a deep and heavy sleep.

Act III

The Second of Three Spectres

Narrator 4: Bright awoke in the middle of a particularly voluminous and tough snore and, sitting up in his bed to get his thoughts together, did not think to look at the numbers on the clock to his right, which had just turned to 1AM. He did, however, think to look at the bright light shining from beneath his bedroom door and, donning a pair of slippers, he crept over and opened it.

Narrator 5: Beyond it was his own living quarters, no doubt, but they had undergone a surprising transformation. Gone was the dark and cold he had grown so accustomed to, and in its place were walls and a ceiling hung with evergreen. From every corner hung holly, mistletoe and ivy, all glistening in the light like a million tiny mirrors. Beyond was a roaring fire in his fireplace, and beyond that was a throne of the most succulent and delicious foodstuffs he had ever laid eyes on.

Narrator 2: Turkeys, geese, poultry, hams, kebabs, sausages and links of all variety, apple pie, pumpkin pie, cherry pie, pot pie, oysters, clams, lobster, shrimp, literally an entire buffalo, fruit of all kinds, stacks of produce, all assembled in the finest seat a man could dare to sit upon. Around the chair lay an even greater treasure; rum, gin, vodka, bourbon, whiskey, and liquors of all kinds, and a great many more kegs of beer flowing freely like a cascading waterfall. On top of all of it was TROY LAMENT, a man tall and lean, with a thick red cloak held with a golden brooch, holding a flaming torch on a long staff and wearing a festive winter hat. His voice boomed when he spoke and to Bright, it was a familiar tone.

Lament: Bright! You old cocksucker, get in here! Com— *hiccup* -come on, you son of a bitch, I ain't got all night.

Bright: Troy? Troy Lament? What are you supposed to be?

Lament: Me? Oh, right, the food. I am, (*Clears throat.*) the Ghost of Christmas Present. This present, as it were. Look upon me and despair, Jack Bright.

BRIGHT hesitates. LAMENT stares at him for a moment before breaking out into laughter.

Lament: Almost had you there, didn't I?

Bright: Troy, what is all of this about? I don't understand, I—

Lament: Bet you've never seen anything like me before, have you?

Bright: No, I haven't. (*Pauses.*) Are you here to…?

Narrator 2: The Spirit of Troy Lament became suddenly still, though the smile did not leave his face.

Lament: I am, Jack Bright. (*Steps down off of food-throne, stumbles slightly.*) There is *so much* for us to see.

Bright: Then take me where you will. I went forth last night only after being compelled, but I see now the wisdom in the Spirit's words. If you would teach me, please, let me profit by it.

Lament: (*Reaches out.*) Take my hand.

He does.

Narrator 3: With but the slightest wisp of smoke and a mild burning sensation, the two of them were suddenly whisked away. When they reestablished themselves, they stood outside a row of short houses on Christmas morning. Bright recognized it as being one of several small towns near Site-19, where the lower paid staff might go to find housing, or to keep their families. This one was no different than the rest; small, compact and bustling, but tidy despite itself. The air was full of smoke from chimneys and the sounds of people bustling, and in spite of the grey of the morning sky, there was an air of cheerfulness around them.

Narrator 4: Around them were researchers and agents, custodians and engineers, and unknowing townsfolk, all going about their morning duties. From time to time one could hear a "Merry Christmas!" to which all would respond in kind.

Narrator 5: They passed by a place that Jack had never seen, and only ever heard described. It was little more than a hole in the wall, shoved between other small, dingy apartments like itself. But it was clean, and the windows were full of light. A sign on the door read "Mr. Bridge and Mrs. Moose", and Bright realized he was standing outside of the home of his own assistant.

Lament: Aha! This is it. See, Bright? I *always* know where the party is. Don't you doubt *hiccup* me.

Narrator 1: They passed through the wall and beheld the scene within. Hustling and bustling through the chores of a Christmas morning breakfast were none other than Django's wife, Tilda Moose, their eldest son Fritz, and two small children, boy and girl, tearing around the house after each other screaming about who would have the first slice of breakfast casserole. Lament laughed joyfully at the scene.

Lament: Ah, man. This is fuckin' great. The whole *hic* family here, together, having a good fuckin' time, man. (*He stumbles slightly.*) Can't ask for *hic* more, yaknow?

Moose: Fritz! Come here, child. Wherever has your father gone? And your young sister, Tiny Zyn, for that matter.

Narrator 2: She had no more said the words when in burst Django, in his threadbare winter finest, with their daughter Tiny Zyn seated upon his shoulder. Alas for poor Zyn, she bore a little crutch, and had her limbs supported by an iron frame. As for what calamity, anomalous or otherwise, had befallen her, we cannot say.

Bridge: Hullo, wife! I have returned! Go now, kids. Take Zyn off to the play room, it'll be time for breakfast soon. Come on now, get out of here.

The CHILDREN scamper off.

Moose: And how did little Zyn behave?

Bridge: As good as gold, Tilly, and better. She gets so thoughtful sometimes, you know? We went by the infirmary this morning to deliver those letters to Dr. Cimmerian, and the whole time she stood as straight as she could and delivered words of good cheer to those in the waiting room. Not a single crack in her armor, I'll tell you.

BRIDGE sniffles, his voice tremulous.

Moose: Come now, Django. Let's get this breakfast finished. I'm sure the children are starving.

Narrator 5: With haste, the parents finished preparing the meal. It was not much; a casserole, toast, eggs, a bit of cheese and juice. But it was what they had, and for them, it was enough. They gathered around and, under the watchful eye of Troy and Bright, they gleefully indulged themselves in their meager breakfast until the plates were licked clean. As they finished, their mother brought out drinks to finish the meal; brandy for the parents…

Narrator 2: …no doubt long since stocked away for such an occasion…

Narrator 3: …and chocolate milk for the children. As they all took their drinks, Django stood to make a toast.

Bridge: A Merry Christmas to us all, my dear, sweet family. May the following year be as blessed as the last. God bless us.

Narrator 4: And they all echoed in response, with Tiny Zyn squeaking out last of all;

Tiny Zyn: God bless us, every marp.

Narrator 1: As they gathered to have their toast, Tiny Zyn went to sit with her father. They sat together for a moment,

neither saying much to the other, with Django softly holding Zyn's little hand. After some time, he began to hum a song…

Narrator 2: …one he had heard in his youth, when his father had sung it to him…

Narrator 5: And Bright could not help but notice that the man was weeping. Tiny Zyn did as well, and wiped her father's tears away with the edge of her tattered sleeve.

Tiny Zyn: Don't cry, papa. Everything will be fine.

Bright Troy, please. Tell me that Zyn will live.

Lament: Bright, lad, come 'ere. These are the shadows of the present, man, the most concrete of all. They are untouched by the rigors of time, or by the uncertainty *hic* of the future. But what may be *burp* if these shadows remain unchanged, I see only an empty corner, a forgotten crutch, a stool without an owner. Woo. That's dark.

Bright: No! No, kind spirit, please. Tell me she will be spared.

Lament: She won't, Jack. Should these shadows *hic* not be altered, she will be gone. Uh, perish, as it is. Time is not her ally, and her time *hic* is growing short. But better that she do it, right? (*Laughs.*) One less person for you to protect. Hah, that's *hic* pretty fucked up, isn't it?

Narrator 1: Bright hung his head at the sound of his own words, echoed back to him as a rebuke.

Lament: It's not my place to say *hic* what comes after, Jack, though I can't help but think that perhaps you're more of a dick, and less fit to live than millions like this child, yeah? In the face of *hic* judgement, what value do *you* have over *her*?

Narrator 3: Bright bent before the Spirit's words, and trembling cast his eyes upon the ground. But he raised them speedily, upon hearing his own name issues by Django as a toast.

Bridge: To Doctor Jack Bright. Bright, the Founder of the Feast!

Moose: Pah! Founder of the Feast, indeed! I wish he were here right now, I'd show him a thing or two. I'd give him a piece of my mind to feast upon, and hope he'd have an appetite for it.

Bridge: Tilda, darling, please. It's Christmas Day. The children…

Moose: It very well should be Christmas Day, I'd assume, for you to drink to the health of such a foul, stingy, unfeeling man as *Jack Bright*. You know he is, Django, nobody knows it better than you.

Bridge: My dear… Christmas Day.

Moose: Fine. I'll drink to his health for your sake and for Christmas'… but not for his. Cheers to him, and may he live as long a life as he will. He'll be very happy with it, I have no doubt.

Narrator 1: They had their toast, but the warmth had gone out of the room. Bright could feel it. Even with the warmth of the Spirit's torch near him, he could feel the chill of his own name through the family. The very mention of it cast a darkness on them that was not readily dispelled.

Narrator 5: Suddenly, and without warning, Jack found himself standing in a bright, dry, gleaming room with the Spirit standing by his side smiling, and with the laughter of his nephew filling the air.

They come around a corner to see ROGET, his wife ALEXANDRA, and their friends CHELSEA ELLIOTT, JACOB CONWELL, DMITRI STRELNIKOV, and DIETRICH LURK sitting about. They are all well into gleeful intoxication.

Roget: …and then he said, after I'd wished him Merry Christmas, to go fuck myself! As I live, those were his words!

And he meant it, too!

CHELSEA ELLIOTT scoffs loudly.

Elliott: Well then, shame on him.

Strelnikov: Shame? What shame? Is ill temper old man. What else is expect?

Roget: He's a funny old man, that's the truth, though not as pleasant as he could be. His ill mannerisms carry their own punishments, though, and I hold none of it against him.

Lurk: He's very rich, yes? That is, you always say so.

Roget: Hah, that he were. His wealth is no use to him. He doesn't *do* anything with it. He doesn't use it to make himself comfortable, or those around him. If anything, I think he only keeps it to gain the satisfaction of knowing (*Laughs.*) that is he never going to benefit us with it.

Alexandra: Well, I have no patience with him.

Roget: (*Laughs.*) Oh, I do. I feel sorry for him, seriously. I couldn't be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers from his shitty mood? Only him. Look, he's got it in his head that he dislikes us all, and he won't come and eat with us. What does he lose? Not much of a dinner, I'll tell you that.

Conwell: Hah! I would think otherwise. I think he misses a great dinner!

ELLIOTT, LURK, STRELNIKOV and ALEXANDRA echo the sentiment.

Roget: Well. I'm glad you all think so, honestly. I only meant it to mean that the consequence of his taking a dislike to us is missing out on moments like these. I'm sure he has no more pleasant companions in his own thoughts, or in that cold office at Site-19. I'm going to give him the same chance every year, because I pity him.

Alexandra: He'll just keep turning you down.

Roget: Then let him! That won't be enough to stop me. He may rail against Christmas, and against me, or everybody else in the world until he dies, if he dies… but that won't stop me from going to him, if just to say "Uncle Bright, hello! How are you?" If it puts him in a good enough mood that he gives an extra bonus to that poor assistant of his, all the better for it. In fact, I think I got through to him yesterday.

They all laugh at the notion.

Lament: Hah. Look at that, Bright, look at em. Givin' *hic* you the shit right there, yeah? Heh. Maybe you shouldn't have been *hic* such an asshole. Oh man, and from *burp* your own nephew, too. That's pretty shitty.

Roget: Alright, all of you, enough about my poor uncle. Come on, let's play a game. How about some mafia?

Narrator 3: As they picked up their game, the Spirit was pleased to see Bright joining in quietly, making his own guesses and calling out answers along with the others. At the end of the game, Bright begged to be allowed to stay until the guests had all left.

Lament: *burp* No can do there, Jack ole buddy. Too much else *hic* to take care of, too much else to see.

Bright: Oh, come on, Troy. There's a new game they're starting. It's just a half hour, please.

Lament: Fine, fine. Do your game, whatever, I'm *hic* gonna be in the kitchen.

Roget: Alright, this is ten questions. I'm going to think of something, and you lot have ten yes or no questions to figure it out.

Conwell: Easy enough. Is it an animal?

ROGET nods.

Elliott: Is it alive?

ROGET nods.

Lurk: Heh. Is it a domesticated animal?

ROGET shakes his head.

Strelnikov: Must be wild, then. Is disagreeable, is brute?

ROGET nods, barely containing laughter.

Conwell: Does it live in the wild?

ROGET shakes his head, tears beginning to form on his face.

Alexandra: Is it something that would be killed in a butcher shop?

ROGET bursts out laughing, but shakes his head.

Strelnikov: Is mean animal what lives in city. Must be horse, yes?

ROGET shakes his head, reeling now from laughter.

Elliott: Does it make noise? Does it like, grunt or growl?

ROGET loses composure completely, laughing wildly.

Lurk: I think I've got it. It must be a cat!

Roget: No! No, it isn't a cat! One last question!

Conwell: Well would you want one in your home?

Roget: No! No, you most certainly wouldn't! That's it!

Bright: Oh! I know it! It must be—

Alexandra: I've got it! I know it! It's—

Bright: …SCP-682!

Alexandra: It's your Uncle Bright!

Roget: Yes! Yes my dear, my quick-witted wife, yes! It is my dearest uncle!

Narrator 4: The room burst into a series of guffaws. Bright laughed along, in spite of himself, for reasons he could not accurately describe. He looked to the kitchen, where the Spirit was busy helping himself to the brandy, and laughed all the louder.

Roget: He has given us plenty of merriment tonight, my friends, and we would be amiss not to drink to his health. A toast! To Jack Bright. May he live forever.

All: To Jack Bright!

Narrator 2: Bright was so full of glee and light of heart, he would have gladly pledged his company to the group and thanked them with a fine speech, had the Spirit given him time. But by the time the thought had crossed his mind, they were gone suddenly.

Narrator 1: For the next several hours…

Narrator 3: …or was it days? Weeks? Years?

Narrator 1: Bright and Troy traveled across the countryside, visiting sick beds, hospitals, jails, containment cells, and all of the deepest and darkest, most miserable pits in the world. Everywhere they stopped, the Spirit would give his blessing, making the place a little brighter. Jack saw then what it was to give a person joy, how little was truly required to make a difference in the life of another.

Lament: This is the end of the road *hic* for us, Jack my man. I don't know if any of *burp* this has helped, uh, at all, but I want you to keep this in mind.

Bright: Speak, Spirit. Your words have been a gift upon my soul.

Lament: First off, ergh, don't *hic* do that. Second of all, don't forget those around you. The human experience is designed to *hic* be a shared one. The only way to truly find happ*hic*iness is to join with others, and share, uh, joy, or whatever. You get the idea.

Bright: Thank you, Troy.

Lament: OR, OR! You could just *hic* drink. That's what I did, and hey, everything worked out, yeah? (*The SPIRIT pats him on the back.*) Alright, that's it *hic* for me, monkey man. Go get em, chief.

Narrator 2: And then was Bright suddenly back in his chambers, cold and alone. His eyes locked on the clock in his room, and remembering the words of old Everett Mann, he watched as the numbers slowly changed to midnight.

Narrator 4: From the floor he saw a dark haze begin to rise, and the walls around him seemed to collapse. He felt his breath catch in his chest, and felt a steely chill begin to pierce his furred skin.

Narrator 1: The clock ceased ticking, the wind ceased blowing, and the world grew still…

Narrator 3: …very still indeed…

Narrator 5: … and from out of the shadows before him came a solemn, silent phantom, towering and dreadful, draped in a blackness that extended on forever…

Narrator 2: …and Jack Bright was afraid…

Narrator 3: …very afraid indeed.

Act V

The Last of the Spectres

Bright: You… you are the one called Famine. The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.

FAMINE does not respond, but draws a single skeletal hand and point outward.

Bright: You are going to show me the shadows of things that have not happened… but will happen in time, is that so.

FAMINE raises its head slowly, as if to acknowledge BRIGHT.

Narrator 5: Despite being well acquainted with ghostly company at this point, Bright feared this silent figure so much that his legs trembled and nearly buckled beneath him. He found that he could barely stand on his own when he prepared to follow it. The Spirit paused a moment, as if observing his condition, and to give him time to recover.

Bright: Famine… I fear you more than any spectre I have seen, or any anomaly I have witnessed, or any terror my heart might imagine. But I know your purpose is to do me good, and I… I want to be different. I want so much to be a better man from what I was, and am prepared to take your company. But… will you not speak to me?

FAMINE does not respond. Its hand remains pointed directly before them.

Bright: Let us do it, then. Guide me, Spirit. The night is waning fast, and I know it is precious time to me. Lead on.

Narrator 4: The phantom stretched out its hand and pulled the darkness away like a curtain. Around them suddenly was a site, one unknown to Bright and yet still somehow familiar. He glanced around, and noticed a sign on the wall reading "S-13". Near them stood three people, doctors by the look of it, all engaged in some low conversation. Bright couldn't help but notice a group of GOC Peacekeepers pass behind them, but nobody else seemed to notice.

Dr. Silver: No, I don't know much about it. Just know that it's

gone.

Dr. McTiriss: When did they tear it down?

Dr. Silver: Last night, I believe.

Dr. Rosen: Why? And here I thought that place would last forever.

Dr. Silver: God knows.

Dr. McTiriss: So what happened to all the staff? Are they all transferring?

Dr. Silver: I haven't heard. Dunno if they've made a decision yet.

Dr. Rosen: What about… him?

Dr. Silver: Hmmm?

Dr. Rosen: You know. Did *he* leave with the rest of them?

Dr. Silver: Oh, that old bag? No, not so far as I know. Probably just left him there to die. As much good as anything else would do him.

Dr. McTiriss: That's it then, isn't it? All that time, and that's the end of it? No grand send off or ceremony or anything of the like? No funeral?

Dr. Silver: For him? (*Laughs.*) You think anybody would've shown up if they'd done anything?

Dr. Rosen: I wouldn't have minded going if they'd provided lunch, but I do need to be fed.

They ALL laugh.

Dr. Silver: Well, I'm the most disinterested of the three of us, it seems. I'm not much one for ceremonies, or funerals for that matter. But… come to think of it, I think I would've gone.

Who's to say, I might've been his most particular friend there at the end. Used to say hello every couple of weeks as we passed in the hall.

ACTORS fill the hallways, bustling to and fro. Bright notices several of the doctors now wearing GOC badges on their jacket sleeves, mixed in with their Foundation counterparts.

Narrator 1: The men all departed, and suddenly the hallway was full of people moving quickly. Bright looked to the Spirit next to him for explanation, but received none. He had known those doctors, worked with them.

Narrator 2: Suddenly there were two other men before him, and Bright recognized them as esteemed site directors, much like himself. They, like he, were of great importance.

Director Flux: Evening.

Director Toph: Evening.

Director Flux: Old Scratch has gotten his at last, aye?

Director Toph: So they say. Hard to believe, isn't it?

Director Flux: So it is. Golf later?

Director Toph: Not much for it.

Director Flux: Fair enough.

Narrator 3: And that was the end of their conversation. Bright was confused, unsure as to the meaning of such a mundane observation. He knew these men as well, but of whom were they speaking? Certainly not old Everett Mann, that was in the past, and was the past's business. But for the life of him, Bright could not think of anyone immediately connected with himself, to whom he could apply them.

Narrator 5: Suddenly they were away again, and now within a warehouse stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction. Boxes on boxes and containers and crates

stretched up to some far off ceiling, and Bright recognized it as a deep storage facility, one of those places where records and collections went forever.

Narrator 2: Before them stood three individuals, custodial workers and labourers, all part of the Foundation's grinding gears and endless machinery. They were part of the inner workings of the Foundation, and knew nothing but their work and the food it put on their tables.

Kestrel: 'Nother load come through.

Falcon: Still from Site-19?

Kestrel: By the look of it. This is the last, I think.

Vulture: What is it? That crate there? It's got a name on the side of it.

They all see it, but the name is on the side of the crate away from the AUDIENCE. Bright cranes his neck, but cannot see.

Kestrel: Dunno. Let's have a look, aye? Can't imagine anyone would notice something gone missing from all of this junk.

Falcon: Say, look here. This is fancy, in'it? Some kind of gold pen, see. For writing.

Vulture: I'd say. I like this one a bit, too. Fancy top hat. Weird monkey statue.

Kestrel: Papers, papers, stapler… this is all office supplies, gents.

Vulture: Fanciest office supplies I've ever seen.

Falcon: Must've been a big wig, this fellow.

Vulture: Foundation, or GOC?

Kestrel: Must've been Foundation. All the GOC lot have

moved to that fortress they built in Ukraine. Not a one of them at Site-19 before they tore it down.

Falcon: Hah! Look at this! A pair of tiny shoes. What a strange shape.

Vulture: Say, Kes. You don't think this stuff belonged to that old fellow who snuffed out when they tore the site down, do you?

Kestrel: Don't know much about the man. That was his name, though, there's no doubt about that.

Vulture: It's true, then. He's gone and kicked the great heavenly bucket.

Falcon: Might as well. They say he couldn't be bothered to leave, even as they were decommissioning it. Couldn't get him out the door.

Kestrel: Good riddance, then. That kind of attitude won't gel well with the GOC types.

Vulture: Don't know if any kind of attitude gels with the GOC types, mate.

They ALL laugh. The three of them load the crate onto a moving dolly and wheel it away. Bright takes a step to look inside the box, but the room around him dissolves.

Narrator 1: Bright looked through the darkness around him and saw a hill in the distance. On its crest, as familiar in the dark as it had ever been to Bright in the day, was the smoldering wreckage of what had at one point no doubt been Site-19. The pungent aroma of burning steel and ash hung in the air, singeing his nostrils and filling his lungs with acrid smoke.

Bright: Spirit, please. I know this place, or rather, I once did. I know that the man they spoke of may as well had been like I, should I not change my ways. God almighty, what is this. How could this have happened.

Narrator 2: Bright recoiled, for the scene had changed suddenly. They stood now at what had been an entrance, a grand and glorious marble gateway into the Foundation's most premier facility. All that remained was a single dark corridor, and devastation on all sides. Bright went to step away from it, but stopped upon seeing the outstretched hand of the Spirit pointing down the ruined hall.

Bright: Famine, this is a fearful place. In leaving it, I won't forget its lesson, I promise. Please, let us go.

FAMINE remains still, pointing into the building.

Bright: I understand you, friend, and I would if I could. But I do not have the strength. Spirit, I do not have the power within me to walk down that corridor. Please, maybe… if there is any person, anyone at all, who feels any sadness over the death of the poor man they spoke of, or the ruination of this site… show me that person, Spirit. I beseech you.

Narrator 4: The darkness folded back over them again, and when it retreated they were standing outside of a tiny home that Bright had seen once before. It was the house of poor Django Bridge, and they entered it silently.

TILDA MOOSE, her little CHILDREN, and the older FRITZ are within. FRITZ stands silently by the window, while his mother quietly writes reports on their couch.

Bright: It's so quiet, Famine. This house was so full of life, and now—

Moose: Where could your father be, Fritz? It must be time for him to get home.

Fritz: Past time, mother. But I think he's walked a little slower than he used to, these last few evenings.

TILDA responds, her usually cheerful voice steady, faltering only once.

Moose: I have known him to walk with… I have known him to

walk with Tiny Zyn upon his shoulder. He would walk so fast, and she would squeal the whole way home.

Fritz: So have I. Often.

Moose: But she was so light to carry, and your father loved her so much. For him, it was no trouble… no trouble at all. Ah, there's your father at the door.

Narrator 3: She hurried to meet him, poor little Django in his threadbare shirt and thin coat. She had a tea ready for him, and the little children brought it to him. As he bent to take it from them, they each laid a tiny kiss upon his cheek, as if to say "Don't cry, father. Don't be grieved."

Moose: It's Sunday. You went today?

Django: Yes, my dear. I wish you could've seen it. It's such a green place, such a beautiful place. But you'll see it often. I promised her that I… that I would walk there on a Sunday. My little girl. My little, little child. Oh god, my little girl.

Narrator 4: He broke down all at once, then. He couldn't help it. He left the room and went up to his study, which his young children had decorated with Christmas cheer. He was gone but a moment, just long enough to reconcile to what had happened, and soon returned to his family quite happy.

DJANGO seats himself with his family. They look to him, and he gazes off wistfully. He smiles in spite of the tears on his face.

Django: I met the most pleasant man I've ever met today, Tilda. I was at the new engineer depot, dropping off an application, when I saw a gentleman I had seen before at the office but never met proper. He introduced himself as Mr. Ralph Roget, who works with the GOC, and who was the adopted nephew of old Jack Bright. Seeing that I looked… a little down, you know, he inquired as to what was bothering me.

He inhales deeply before continuing.

Django: And because he was so pleasant, I told him. And he says to me, "I am so sorry for your loss, Mr. Bridge, and so sorry for your good wife and your family. So very sorry indeed. If there is any way I can be of service to you," and he hands me his card, "that's where I live. Please come and visit me, and come by my office sometime. We could use more men like you, Mr. Bridge." It really seemed as if he had known our little Zyn, and had felt the hurt with us.

Moose: He sounds like a fine man, and a good soul.

Django: But… whenever we leave each other, all of us, I am sure that none of us will forget poor Tiny Zyn, or this first loss we had among us. I know that— that we will recollect on how patient and mild she was, even though she was a little, little child… and we will not fight so readily among ourselves, and forget our little Zyn in doing so.

All: No, never father.

Django: I am very happy… very happy.

The FAMILY embraces as BRIGHT and FAMINE look on.

Bright: Spectre… I feel as if our parting moment is at hand. I know it, but I don't know how I know it. Tell me… tell me who that man was they spoke of. Tell me what was down that dark corridor.

Narrator 3: The darkness swallowed them, and as they moved slowly through the hallways of distant sites and down the roads of small Foundation towns, Bright looked for any sign of himself, but found none.

Narrator 5: Finally they arrived again outside of the smoldering wreckage of Site-19. Off to his right, Bright could faintly see the outline of the staff housing, somehow untouched by the ruin.

Bright: There, Spirit, down there. That would be my home, I

know this way very well. Let me go and behold what I will be, in the days to come.

FAMINE stops. BRIGHT notices its hand is pointed into the corridor.

Bright: My house is down there, Spirit. Why do you point away?

Narrator 2: The inexorable finger underwent no change. Bright hurried down the hillside to the lodgings, many of which he found were empty, though there were those who remained, still packing their belongings and managing their affairs. But when he came to his own home, he found it empty, cleared out, as if no one had ever been there. He turned back to the site on the hill, and saw the Phantom still standing, its finger outstretched.

Narrator 1: Bright returned to the Spirit, and together they entered the dark building. "Here," he thought, "here it must be that the wretched man of whom the other had spoken, buried somewhere beneath the rubble."

Narrator 3: "It was a worthy place for such a man," thought Bright, "a worthy place indeed."

Narrator 5: Still the Spectre's finger stretched down, further and further into the maze of decay and destruction. It was not until they reached a place that Jack knew very well, a place that caused his heart to seize with fear, did the Spirit come to a halt, its finger pointed at a lone doorway.

Bright: No, no no, Spirit, please. It cannot be.

Narrator 4: The name on the door read "Jack Bright and Everett Mann, Directors", as Jack had never troubled himself with having his old partner's name removed. From within the doorway before them, he could just make out a tiny, flickering light.

BRIGHT moves towards the door and, his hand shaking,

opens it. Within is a man, face down on a metal desk, impaled upon a protruding piece of support that had fallen from the ceiling. BRIGHT approaches, just enough to glimpse a dirty red and gold medallion hung around the man's neck. The man is JACK BRIGHT.

Bright: NO! It cannot be! No no, no, please, Spirit, hear me now. I am not the man I was. I will not be the man of whom they spoke, the man I must have been. Why— why show me this, if I am beyond all hope?

The FAMINE'S hand begins to shake.

Bright: Good, spirit, your nature shows pity on me. Tell me, tell me that I may yet cast different shadows than these you have shown me. Tell me that I can change!

Narrator 1: The cold hand of the Spectre trembled, and from all around him Bright heard the sound of creaking beams, laden supports, crumbling masonry and collapsed walls.

Bright: I will honour Christmas in my heart, I swear it. I will keep it all the year long. I will live in the past, the present, and the future. The Spirits of all three will live within me, and I will not shut out the lessons that they teach, goddammit! Tell me spirit, please, tell me that I may not become that man!

Narrator 2: In his agony, Bright caught the hand in front of him. As he did, the world around him, burst into flames and imploded. The ceiling above him roared as it crashed down, the floors below moaned as they gave way, until it all was tumbling down into the nothingness below. Jack clung to the hand of the Spectre for his own life, even as the Spirit tried to pull away from him.

Narrator 5: In a last prayer to have his own fate reversed, Jack released the hand of the Phantom and threw his own up in towards the heavens, begging for mercy. As he did, he saw a light within the Spirit's dark hood, growing brighter and brighter, so much so that he had to shield his eyes.

Narrator 3: When he opened them again, he was sitting on his own bed, in his own room, as the sun poured through the window blinds.

Act VI

The End

Bright: This is my room.

He gets up quickly. His eyes dart around wildly.

Bright: Yes! This is my room! That is my bed! This—

He runs down to his front door. Flinging it open, he inspects the outside and, seeing it noticeably free of the face of MANN, goes back inside.

Bright: The Spirits of Christmas, bless them! And bless you Mann, you old piece of shit. Bless you for this chance you have given me! A chance to make it all right— and I must make it right!

He skips across his living room, gleefully making joyful monkey-sounds as he does.

Bright: It's all here! There's the door that Mann came through, and over there was where Troy was sitting, that drunken bastard. It's all right, it's all true! It all happened! Hahaha!

Narrator 1: Bright was aware that he was unaware what day it was.

Bright: I don't know what day of the month it is. I don't know how long the Spirits kept me. I don't— I don't know anything! I really am quite a baby. Never mind that, I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Whoop whoop! Hallo! Hallo hallo!

He runs up to his bedroom window and, throwing it open to take a deep breath of the rich morning air, calls out to a doctor passing by his home.

Bright: Say there, fine young fellow! What's today?

Heiden: Eh?

Bright: What is today, my fine lad, what's the day?

Heiden: Today? Why, it's Christmas Day, sir.

Bright: It's— it's Christmas day! I haven't missed it! The Spirits did it all in one night. Of course they did, they can do anything they like. Oh goodness, of course they can.

Heiden: What are you going on about there, strange ape-man?

Bright: Hallo, you wonderful young man. Do you know the Poulterer's, not on the next street, but the one past that, at the corner?

Heiden: …yeah? Why?

Bright: Ah, an intelligent boy, a brilliant, remarkable boy. Do you know whether or not they've sold that giant, anomalous turkey that was hanging up there? Not the little prized turkey, fuck that. I mean the big hoss, the one there on the wall?

Heiden: What, you mean the one as big as I am?

Bright: What a delightful lad, a pleasure to talk to him. Yes, my buck, that's the one.

Heiden: It's hanging there now.

Bright: Is it, wonderful. Go and buy it.

Heiden: (*Laughs.*) Hah. Alright. Sure thing.

Bright: No no, I am in earnest! Go and buy it, and tell them to

bring it here, so I can tell them where to take it. Come back with the man, and I'll give you two hundred dollars. Come back with him in less than five minutes and I'll give you half a grand!

Heiden: Half a grand! I could buy so many pedicures with that money. Yes sir, absolutely! (*He takes off like a shot.*)

Bright: (*Rubbing his hands, cackling like a madman.*) I'll send it to old Django's place. He won't know who sent it. God, it's about five times the size of Tiny Zyn!

Narrator 2: He sprinted down the stairs, eagerly grabbing a pen and paper with which to write down the address the turkey would be spirited off to. He smiled as he did, laughter pouring from some place within him that had not seen the light of day in quite some time. As he stepped out the front door, he made pause at the sight of it.

Bright: Mann, Mann, Mann. What a beautiful door. I'll treasure it so long as I live, what an honest, good door this is — ah! And here's the turkey. Hallo. Whoop whoop! How are you, sir, Merry Christmas.

Narrator 5: The chuckle with which he said this, and the chuckle with which he paid for the massive turkey, and the chuckle with which he paid for a cab to deliver it to old Django's humble home, and the chuckle with which he paid the sweet little Heiden, were only exceeded in magnitude by the chuckle with which he sat down breathless in his chair again, and chuckle he did until he cried.

Bright: I know! I don't need to be kept up in here. It's Christmas! I've got to go meet the people where they are!

BRIGHT puts on his winter best, and struts out onto the streets. As he passes people in the street, he greets all with a generous smile and a "Merry Christmas".

Narrator 4: He had not gone far, when he happened upon the two Manna Charitable Fellows who had passed by his office

the day before. It sent a pang through his heart knowing what these two must have thought of him, but he knew the path lay straight ahead of him, and he took it. Quickening his pace, he caught up to the two men and took them both by the shoulder.

Bright: Kind sirs, how do you do. I do hope you succeeded yesterday. It was very kind of you, of course. A merry Christmas to you, sir.

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: Dr. Bright.

Bright: Yes, yes, that is my name, though I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to beg your pardon, sir, and hope that you will have the goodness from me…

He whispered in the man's ear.

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: My goodness!

Manna Charitable Fellow 2: Dr. Bright, are you serious?

Bright: If you would, please, and not a dollar less. There are a great many back-payments included in it, be sure. Will you do me that favour?

Manna Charitable Fellow 1: Sir, I don't know what to say to such generosity!

Bright: Say nothing! Go now, and please, come see me later! A merry Christmas to you both!

Manna Charitable Fellows: Merry Christmas!

Narrator 1: He wandered the streets then, watching people hurrying to and fro, playing with children as they passed, making jokes with the labourers, looking into kitchens and bakeries, all while skipping as he went. He never dreamed that any walk, that anything at all, could give him so much happiness.

Narrator 2: As the afternoon came upon him, he turned his steps towards his nephew's home.

Narrator 3: He must have passed the door a dozen times before he had the courage to knock, bless his old monkey heart.

Narrator 5: But knock he did, and who answered but his nephew.

Bright: Ralph.

Roget: Uncle?! Bless my soul, is it you?

Bright: It is. It is your uncle Bright. I have come to dinner. Will you have me, nephew?

Narrator 4: Have him? It's a wonder he didn't shake his arm off. Bright was in and acquainted in mere minutes, and the night was as he had foreseen it. Games were played, drinks were had, Strelnikov accidentally shot himself in the foot ("Do not worry, is metal foot. Already lose foot to frostbite.") It was a wonderful party, and Bright was happy.

Narrator 1: But he was up and at the office early the next morning. Oh, and how he was early. To be there first, to catch Django Bridge coming in late! He wanted nothing more.

Narrator 2: And he did! The clock struck eight, and no Django. Ten after, and no Django. It was not until a full quarter past the hour that poor old Django came flying in through the door, moving to his desk and a pen in one swift motion.

Bright: (*Gruffly.*) Hello there, Mr. Bridge. What do you think you mean, coming by here at this time of day?

Bridge: I'm so very sorry sir, I am behind.

Bright: So you are. Step into my office, Bridge.

Bridge: Please sir, it's only once a year. It won't be repeated, I swear. I was making too merry yesterday, sir.

Bright: This is most unacceptable, Mr. Bridge, and I am not

going to stand for this any longer. That's why—

He jumps from his desk, pounces across, and comes eye to eye with the sweating Django Bridge.

Bright: —I am going to raise your salary.

Bridge: My— wha? You're going to do what?

Bright: Raise your salary, Django my old friend. Merry Christmas to you! A merrier Christmas than I have ever afforded you, to my great shame. Yes, I'll be raising your salary, and we'll sit down over some drinks tonight and discuss how best to assist your struggling family. Now, get over there and raise that thermostat, Mr. Bridge! It's chilled to the bone in here, let's have some warmth!

Narrator 1: And Bright was better than his word. He did everything, and then some, and to little Tiny Zyn he was like a second father. He became as good a man, as good a doctor, as good a director, as Site-19, or any site, had ever known. Some would laugh to see the change in him, but he let them laugh, and did so with them. His spirit was moved, and he laughed all the same, and that was enough for him.

Narrator 5: From that day forth, he had no further dealings with spirits (aside from one wild midnight romp with the Ghost of Christmas Present several years down the line (but that's a tale for a different time)), and it was always said of him that he truly knew how to keep Christmas well, if anybody did. May that truly be said of us, all of us! And as Tiny Zyn so aptly observed;

Tiny Zyn: God bless us, every—

Moose: Wow, it's really hot all of a sudden. What's happening?

Bridge: It's coming from outside, what's that sou— Oh my god!

The Hateful Star: (*Laughter.*) HAHAHAHA! MERRY

CHRISTMAS YOU FUCKING LOSERS! HAHAHAHAHA!

Explosion.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal

To the Parents of Sergeant Johnathan Percy,

It is with the deepest regret that we inform you that your son has fallen in the line of duty this Monday, the 12th of August. Due to the sensitivity of the task he was involved in fulfilling in the time of his death, as well as other circumstances we are not at liberty to discuss, further details may not be divulged at this moment. He died for a cause he truly believed in, that much can be said.

For details concerning reparations and funeral arrangements, please contact our representatives as detailed on the attached sheet.

Respectfully yours,

Director Thomas McCain, SpearCross Private Solutions

I got a closed-casket funeral, they tell me. Makes sense enough. Templeton told me it was a private thing, real respectable. My folks probably weren't too surprised to hear I was gone, and between you and me, I figure they were counting themselves lucky that they at least got something out of it. God knows I brought them very little joy when I was alive.

I see that look on your face. You're wondering why I'm speaking in the past tense. Obviously, I'm still alive now. Breathing, eating, talking, shitting, the whole nine yards. And that's true, I suppose. It's just hard to think about it that way, from where I'm standing. Sorry, I'm rambling again, I tend to do that when I get company. You have some questions, I'm sure, you folks usually do.

How was I exposed? That's an unusual thing to ask. Most of you just read the reports and go straight to the meat. I guess you're not the trusting type, maybe that's why they choose you this time. Honestly,

there isn't much to tell. I died in a work accident, air conditioner fell on my head. My body got transferred to the morgue, as per release papers, and was selected for testing due to the mundane COD. Now, the report will tell you they understood 447 shouldn't be tested on bodies right from the get go, but that's just them covering their ass. No, it took some testing, and I was one of those volunteered.

It worked, as you see. Five minutes in that thing, and I was back on my feet, right as rain. Ah, I see what you're doing there, looking at that file. What is that, the psych evaluation? I'd take that with a pinch of salt if I were you. See, there's nothing wrong with me, or with any of the others. 447 makes the dead come back to life. That's it. No zombies, or mutants, or any of that monkey-paw bullshit.

The only thing that makes me different from you, and why I'm on this side of the glass and you're on the other, is that I saw what comes next. I went into light, through the other side of the tunnel. There's nothing there. The word really isn't sufficient in explaining it, since it has substance, and a history. When you think "nothing", you think of a black void, or a featureless white plain, or whatever. You think of yourself stranded there, stuck in nothingness forever.

There is no void, or white plain. There's no self to be stuck in them either. You just cease. And that's why we're here. We're here because we know the Foundation's deepest, darkest secret.

It's pointless. Not as dramatic as you might have hoped, but that's just it. Nothing the Foundation does, or anyone else for that matter, means anything at all. The wonders it preserves, and the monstrosities, every life saved or lost, every act of heroism, every atrocity committed, every revelation, every bit of progress, every creative spark, every soul lost to madness. All of that, for the sake of humanity. For a picture drawn in sand. For nothing.

This is why they think no one can know. The Foundation likes to pretend it's all about science, reason, cold facts. Nonsense. It's about faith. Even the most jaded of researchers has to believe in something in order to do what we… what you do, after all. It can be reason, or the scientific method, or the greater good, or even God. Seeing us, knowing what we know… well, that would tear the Foundation apart, as they see it. So they keep us quiet and hidden,

and make everyone else believe we're monsters. They might very well believe in that themselves, most days. Every once in a while though, they get restless. They think, 'we must have missed something, there must be something more to them than that'. That's when they send someone like you.

I'll tell you what I told your predecessors, and what I told the O5s, at the time. You should be glad. There's nothing for you to fear anymore. All of the things that keep you awake at night, the barely contained horrors that can so easily overwhelm you if you let your guard slip for just a moment? Just let them out. The world will burn, and people will die, and that would be that. It's all the same, after all, and at least that way it will be quick. At least you could sleep soundly, if but for a short while.

Anything else I want to tell you? No, not really. That's it then? Shame. Well, I suppose you have better things to do. Reports to fill, scips to contain, a world to protect. Good for you, keeping yourself busy. Could you do me a favor? Could you get me a ball? A few coins, maybe? Man, I'd kill for a deck of cards. It gets real dull in here, sometimes.

Progress report SCP-447-1-A

Instances of SCP-447-1 continue to exhibit extreme subversive tendencies towards the Foundation and its objectives, as well as displaying the previously observed nihilistic sentiments. Until further notice, all communication with instances of SCP-447-1 are to be treated as unreliable due to the subtle memetic properties inherent to their speech. Inquiries as to the true nature of SCP-447 are to continue at the discretion of O5 Command.

A Small Town in Arizona

The air was dry, smelling of the unique odor that hot sand and dry flora carried from the long, drawn out hours of daylight in the arid region. The sun would bleach everything that it touched in the small isolated town, where the Arizona local time happened to just be striking seven in the evening for its residents. It was dusk now, the ending of a day for most and the start for others just as the noisy crickets and other such inhabitants came to life. The sky flowed with large strokes of dark orange and scarlet red in small amounts, all accompanied by the smallest of streaking cirrus clouds. A good omen, perhaps.

The sole sheriff of the sparsely inhabited settlement sat comfortably on his porch in a rocking chair, a cold glass of bourbon on the rocks in his hand - a gift from an old friend in law enforcement to enjoy a pleasant view with before he went to sleep. It was a view he had seen thousands of times before, almost memorizing it by now with all the time he had, as the town hadn't really needed a sheriff in quite a while. The only aspect that ever changed about this view were the plants that laid out past the dirt road his house was on. So, as the figure of a limping creature came over the horizon, it immediately caught the sheriff's eye.

It didn't move like any wild dog, it didn't *look* like one either as it slowly drew closer to the edge of town. It didn't take long before the creaking of the porch's old boards emanated as the sheriff stood up slowly, calmly put down his glass, grabbed the shotgun at his side and quietly strode across the dirt road. With slight puffs of dirt being dragged up as he went, he stopped right before the gravel curb as he merely watched now, gun lowered with a firm grip. Perhaps it was a wild dog or coyote, though if that was the case, he knew the whole pack would come along, so he wondered why this one was alone. It was only until the creature was about a hundred yards away that he started to realize what the animal really was, its limping form outlined in the light from the dying day, three legs strode with

their dark shadows.

The sheriff's chest tightened in anticipation as the creature moved closer, he knew *exactly* what it was now, but it couldn't be right, it wasn't *possible* for him to conceive it as such. The creature in question was a golden retriever, the most friendly dog of a local family he'd ever met, but this dog didn't leave home with a quarter of their head and their left front leg gone. The missing sections looked like they had been cut off without a single sign of tissue tearing, most of the lower jaw gone with blood-stained bone exposed on the left side. Their tongue hung out the side of the hole with a straight slice cut out of it, while their precious coat of fur was matted with a dark shade of dried blood near the wounds. They were only five feet away before its shaking legs collapsed, a constant and low whine coming from it, before that and everything else then decayed into a absolute silence.

Nothing dared to make a sound at that moment.

It had been less than half an hour since the incident, the sheriff had stood in place for a longer time than he might have thought, before eventually wrapping the animal in a old tarp from the side of his house. Whoever or whatever attacked the dog was in his jurisdiction, being the law of the land in this place and all, but acting as such wasn't something he'd done in a while. This town was too quiet, too peaceful for such occurrences, and besides, he was becoming too old to deal with things like this.

Only after several long minutes of festering thoughts about what might have happened out past the horizon did the sheriff move from his spot, even then only slowly walking down the beaten dirt road as he made his way to the owner's house. Though as he went along the road, he shot a pensive glance towards the southern horizon multiple times, as if expecting for something else to come forth out of the encroaching night.

His boots tapped lightly against the bleached boards of the porch, his pace as casual as one could get after having seen what he had; there was no need to cause a stir by running over in a frenzy as no doubt there were others watching him. Whether it was from their

faintly lit front decks or the family room window of their house, this should just look like a friendly encounter, neighbour to neighbour. With his thumbs under his belt, the tension in the air felt as if it could slap him, the faint sound of the old doorbell and the creaking of the door only worsening with the palpable aura of the bleak atmosphere.

He knew the particular family very well, as they were only a block's distance apart. He had come over for dinner many times and even played fetch with the dog on a mild afternoon every so often whenever it wandered over. Though not a mind reader, he was well aware about how they usually composed themselves, so when both the wife and the husband opened the door almost immediately, he knew something was up right then. There was a strong sense of expectation in their eyes from the sheriff, almost as if they knew that he was coming over, or perhaps they were about to be out the door coming to him if he'd arrived a second later. Though after the door was open, it didn't take long for them to freak out as the sheriff spoke. And it wasn't about the dog's death in any way, it was about their daughter who had gone out to get it after it ran off southward, away from the town.

They said that it wasn't out of character for her to sometimes take a while, that this was nowhere near her first time, that she was probably just staring at the clouds. They continued to say these things with different wordings repeatedly like freaked out parents would, as if trying to convince themselves. Through their thought process they drove on, almost manically as it quickly broke down as fast as it tried to start in a endless circle, seeming like they might asphyxiate from how fast they were talking. The sheriff might think of them as irresponsible parents if it weren't for their familiarity. His gut knew that this wasn't their fault, that there was something unholy happening around here.

The sheriff eventually rested his hand on the father's shoulder, wishing he had better words, better circumstances for the both of them, though the dark reality of it was much more grim than he originally thought. Hushed words of reassurance and a promise that they would form a search party immediately were given, as best as could be done at least. This only helped their outlook by a minuscule amount, with the sheriff's soft spoken nature doing little to help.

The internal sigh of relief that came as they didn't ask to see the dog's body helped the sheriff's overall outside composure. If they were to figure out how it had truly been killed, there would be absolutely no possible way to calculate the severity of their reaction. Even then, the incident still rooted itself in the sheriff's own mind while he spoke. There was nothing natural about it, it looked artificial in every way possible and the idea of it having been the supernatural or some crazed, yet medically certified serial killer didn't help in the slightest. All these cryptic ideas only helped to propagate one question in his collective thoughts. The question of what was going to happen when they went out there.

It only took twenty minutes to round up a party of nine people from the town, but now if any of the residents weren't paying attention early, they were now. Mothers pulled their children away for a early bedtime as their father just had to help the kind sheriff with something for the night. This is what they told them as the party soon congregated at the town square. Some held varmint rifles and shotguns with others toting flashlights and lanterns, though the entire group was wary as rumors already spread about the child's disappearance. Though in the end, not a single word related to such subject was spoken out of a fear of it becoming true. The atmosphere was heavy before they departed, the wind carrying a slight ferrous smell northward, ebbing past the buildings to spread along the entire place.

All eyes were pointed south into the endless flat terrain ahead of them, the time soon approaching twilight with the waning moon seeming brighter than ever, the northern star Polaris seeming to overflow with its light as well. The quiet march of the party immediately gave way to a deep feeling of apprehension about the entire situation, there was no use spreading out or investigating anything as all could be seen for miles around them, there was no yelling or screaming besides the party's own.

It was only until someone had yelled the child's name only for the sound to decay into nothing across the flat ground that they realized, there was not a single cricket, not a single hoot or howl from any nocturnal animal in the valley. The only definite sounds was a

monotone howl of the winds coming from where they were going which moved the thin wispy leaves of desert plants to create quiet natural wind chimes, all while the iron-like smell became more noticeable.

Time passed slowly from that realization of the silence, their attention pulled away from where they were going to merely listen before they realized something strange. The horizon almost seemed to have become higher than it was before, a dead stump they were using as a guidance point now completely out of sight as confirmation. The sheriff wasn't one to lose such details so quickly, while the others were all knowledgeable as well, SO one of them reasoned that it was possibly just gases being released from the cracked soil. It wasn't the best explanation nor was it right in the end, but it was the delusion of such that kept them from mass paranoia.

Now, they were seeing abnormally large cracks in the ground when they started to walk on a gradual incline. While ground was known to be dry around here, it had *never* made such cracks as this, ones that could possibly catch a wrongfully placed shoe inside of them. The metallic aroma lingered in this area, barely moving aside for the party as they slowly climbed the cracked hill with a weary advance. It didn't take long to see a definite top to the incline up ahead the party's current position. It was safe to say that everyone had a drastic idea in their mind for what was on the other side of the top, some were extreme, some were minimal, but same or different, the reality of what they saw before them was too much for all of them.

The edge itself sat roughly three yards high with the steep hill down it being absolutely flat, after that the terrain past their position seemed like it had all lowered itself from it's original position but none of it was flat nor similar in the slightest manner, it was absolute chaos. The ground was shattered and abnormally segmented, parts of it rose up at random with perfectly flat sides, precise cubic shaped pits and areas that bulged downwards into small ravines and upwards into hills like tectonic plates had met and crashed into each other. Though as they took this in, they hadn't been there for more than a minute before a scream that one might associate with a banshee emanated from the bottom of the steep hill.

As all faced the origin of the blood-curdling scream, their faces went white and cold as they realized that the voice was someone they knew. which was that of the pastor. But he was right next to the sheriff, the most terrified of all of them as they heard it - his skin resembling the lightness of the moon itself. The screaming was barely recognizable as human as it progressed, anyone could tell that the source of it was letting out a painful sound of death, ripping their vocal cords as their last act in a demonstration of the fatal pain they were experiencing.

It was eventually the sheriff who hesitantly walked to the side of the edge first, the placement of his feet hard as he could feel a lack of balance within himself, almost hoping the ground wasn't stable enough to let him see it. Everyone silently watched him peer over, and it was within mere seconds that his dread turned into absolute hysteria as over the edge lie the pastor, but not *their* pastor.

This pastor's mouth was wide open with his muscles cramped from shock, making a series of pained expressions rapidly. His eyes wide open staring straight into the sky as nothing more came out of his mouth now but a mere series of sounds that were his failed attempts at further breathing, his skin becoming a dark shade of blue in the moonlight. A massive amount of blood spewed from his legs and a puddle surrounded him while spreading through the soil's cracks, the legs appearing to be cut clear off at the bottom of the femur, just like the dog.

The whole group had come to the sheriff's side as he stood there without a word, it was the worse case scenario possible, his body could physically feel this fear in the form of adrenaline and pressure in his chest. A pseudo-sixth sense screeched at him there was no reason on earth any of them should be here, this was all was against all the laws of nature.

Meanwhile, the living pastor merely stayed several feet away from the edge with his hands covering his ears, the expression of his eyes could only be described to look like that of someone who had just lost their faith within seconds, tears of terror running down his face. Before anyone could try to console him, he was running full tilt towards the town without a care for anyone who called out to him, the beam of his flashlight moving up and down rapidly as he

pumped his arms.

It only got worse from here, slowly but surely, houses started to suddenly materialize whether they embedded themselves in the ground or shattered from being dropped out of the thin air, the party watching in a continuous shock as it all unfolded before them. But it wasn't the structures alone that made the party frozen where they had planted their feet, it was the people.

With each materialized house, people they had known their whole lives or even themselves were appearing at random, being plunked from where they previously resided in a instant. Some choked to death as dirt filled their body cavities when their houses came in partially into the ground. Some snapped their neck and spine as they fell head first from three stories high. Some came cut in half or nothing but a lone pair of legs.

The smell of blood almost came over them as a shockwave with the corrupted town taking shape. The macabre scene fueled the reaction of morbid curiosity in all of the group as they struggled to comprehend seeing their own decapitated head or their loved one being bisected, unaware to the passing of time in their stupor. The aroma of it all penetrating their nostrils with the olfactory evidence of chaotic death and suffering.

It was the sheriff that started to run last, but he quickly caught up with the others initiative as his heart thumped against his chest, his feet barely able to keep up with his pace down the inclined hill. It was everyone for themselves now as screams and shrieks came from behind them like a portal had been opened for the souls of the damned, though a small percent of them now came from the search party members. They screamed of how screwed they were and about the things they had witnessed, everything else falling into a category somewhere between those two points. None of it made sense because the rabble that came out of their mouths only made them more determined to run faster from the horrors due to their own convictions.

The sheriff himself ran with his heart almost pushing itself to the limit, his throat felt like a rusted gutter filled with wadded leaves with how dry it was, his own saliva thick enough now to almost choke him

as he gasped for oxygen. He kept up with the others, the topsoil making loud cracking sounds as the heavy footfalls came in rapid succession, but while they ran, no one dared to look anywhere but in front of themselves.

Everything seemed the same as the true town came into view, with all possible lights on now on as the pastor had arrived before them and warned everyone. The terrain was as flat as ever, a sight that some couldn't possibly love enough, though at the same time, a series of tire tracks seemed to suddenly start out of nowhere as they ran by it. It might have followed them home, but it was of little concern until they all arrived between the sheriff's and parent's house, where they found what had made the tracks.

In front of the sheriff's house was parked an identical police cruiser like his next to his own. Though exhausted and dehydrated, he walked towards the front of house without hesitation, the top of heads and nothing more visible with the cars in the way. And so, there was only five feet between them when the sheriff came around the car and met his alternate self.

The both of them stared numbly at each other as they were both still recovering from everything that happened, the others in the party stumbled over with all of them in a similar state of disbelief as they saw the scene. A awkward silence took a hold of everyone before the exhausted sheriff noticed the two prepubescent girls in wool blankets on the porch, their mother tending to them as the father walked up with haste as he noticed at the very same time.

A quiet sigh of relief came from the sheriff as the other one did the same, though they did so for different reasons. They both looked back to the horizon without a word, wondering why this had all happened, wondering about the deaths of all those from the other world's town, but most of all wondering how meeting his alternate self was far from the most shocking thing of the night.

The air was dry, smelling of the unique odor that hot sand and dry flora carried from the long, drawn out hours of daylight in the arid region as a light metallic scent came from somewhere beyond the horizon.

Track 3: Uh...

Hey Umiko! Why don't you write anything? What is it you do again? -Rosa

Uh… I write song, sometimes. Here I write one down now. -Umiko

Why don't you sing it? Can you sing, bro? -Brook

Uh…Yes! I am very good singer! -Umiko

What's the song called? -Rosa

Uhhh… -Umiko

"Uhhh…"

By Umiko

Intro

Yeah, yeah, okay-oh, yeah
Yeah, yeah lets go
Okay good, okay yeah, yeah-oh
Yeah that's great, alright, good
Good you song
Very nice

God, you're gonna blow your cover! Come on! Think of something! Anything!

Verse 1

Umiko knows a human

I saw him one day
He was skinny and far away
Actually no he wasn't human
He was in a box
And I didn't see him in
It had lots of locks
To keep away other humans

That's an interesting rhyme scheme, Umiko. -Brook
It is Japanese rhyming. -Umiko
I thought you were from Hawaii? -Rosa
Uhhh… -Umiko

He had an ugly face
But you only hear that
You never see that
You just read that
It was a secret
If you see that he would have to kill you
He come and find you

Chorus

Secretly

Repeat X 10

Woah, what a weird tempo. Let me get my keyboard out. Let's see, time signature? - Brook
Uh… 142? - Umiko
Really? And what? - Brook
…8? - Umiko
Klavierstücke? What the fück? Stockhausen? Umiko do you have a girlfriend? - Brook
Aaah! - Umiko

Keyboard Solo

Verse 2

There's also a business
But the business makes friends
Gets all in their business
Makes business girlfriends
Imagine a business is flirting with you
What would it say?
How may I help you?

Wow! That's a pretty good American accent! -Rosa
I practice good! How you like song, eh? -Umiko
Really? That's it? We don't want any short songs on the EP. -Brook
…y-yes! There's one more! -Umiko

Verse 3

In my home province, they got the flu
Except it wasn't the flu
It was something new
The people all scared, what would they do?
We asked wise woman, but wise woman slinky
She was twisty and stewed
Wise woman twisted all over the house
Her neighbors too

Okay that's a little gory Umi… -Rosa
Is only allegory! -Umiko
Oh! For what? -Rosa
…Communism! -Umiko
Right on! -Brook

Ending Verse

There once was secret agent man
Sent to the beach with master plan
Stop crazy kooks from causing a fus
In their little volkswagen bus

But in the end he knew
That he was part of it too
And that he would sail into the sea

That is where he would always be

Ah that's sweet, Umiko. -Rosa
Huh? It's nothing. I made the last part up. -Umiko

« Riptide | Hub | The Appalachian Scar »

A Sort of Challenge

It was eight in the morning and researcher Riven Mercer was on fire.

That fact was probably something he should be more worried about, he thought to himself as he walked a pace and a half to his right and reached for the cold water tap of the lab sink. It was just too damn early to be in the experimental rooms. Dunking his now gently-smoking lab coat sleeve into the stream of icy water, Riven leveled an unamused glare at the lava-burping rainbow lorikeet sitting on a perch a few feet away. The bird had the cheek to blink innocently back at him. Riven caved and reached over to ruffle the bird's head feathers before he looked over his lab notes. "There's a good birdie."

Maybe he'd be more impressed if he hadn't seen that tortoise with a shell that could be used as a barbecue grill. That was part of the cache from six months ago.

Grabbing a pen and scribbling down a series of observations about the bird, Riven glanced warily at said bird and wondered if he should relocate to the combustion lab in case lava wasn't the only thing the lorikeet could barf out. He flipped through the initial data collections: the bird's diet wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but it *was* reputedly brought to the mainland after being purchased somewhere near a Hawaiian volcano from someone shady-looking… *okay what the hell,* the bird was coughing up black pellets onto the experimental lab floor.

Riven put down the notes and dove for the broom and dustpan.

It was nine-thirty in the morning and Riven had found a new intern to watch (observe, engage in experimental scrutiny with, poke until something interesting happened, etc.) the bird. Riven was now sitting in the spare room adjacent to the experimental labs, sipping from a cup of tea (lukewarm, getting colder by the second) and reading through the current list of anomalous items assigned to

Kiryu Labs.

The bird was something Mark had been nice enough to assign to him, Riven thought. He liked animals. He'd studied behavioral biology, and his eventual doctorate (courtesy of accelerated Foundation programs) would be about that topic. Level-2 researchers were rarely given charge of creatures that merited special containment, so being able to study the less-dangerous animal anomalies was something Riven constantly looked forward to.

The door opened, and Agent Tai Yang Shen walked in. Riven made eye contact and suppressed the subconscious urge to spit out the tea in his mouth so he could ask if it was time to go on another offsite field trip. Agent Shen rarely, if ever, showed up at the Labs, and when he did show up, it meant an interesting assignment outside the experimental rooms.

"Did Mark page you?" Shen eventually asked. Riven shook his head and mentally cataloged the agent's appearance: plain slacks, white collared jacket, light briefcase…Maybe they were headed to an anomalous bank? Or some corporate agency? Would he get to go undercover? He'd never gone on an undercover outing! Maybe he'd have an alias and alternate identity and everything!

Shen was sporting a small, though rather amused grin when he handed Riven a sheet of paper. It appeared to be a printout of a transcripted note. "You should read this before you ask any questions."

> **READ ME IF YOU DARE**
>
> This is a message to all of you that work at SCP, as a sort of challenge.
>
> My name is the Grinner, and I am an "anomaly" of sorts. For you see, I devour the flesh of any creature with a heart beat, and it has led to the deaths of hundreds upon thousands of people, luckily at times where war was afoot. But I digress, I will continue to devour the flesh until my untimely capture.

> Perhaps, I should enlighten you on what I am, as a way of making things easier for you scientists, if I am captured. I'm 10 feet tall, and my neck is bulbous in size, and about 4 feet long. I appear to wear a mask with a huge grin on it (it's pure white, and is my face). I speak through my teeth eloquently, and only open my maw when consuming flesh. I am not satisfied until my face becomes completely red and dripping with crimson. I have massive fists for mashing and smashing, but a small set of legs. Oh, I forgot to mention, I also have a long, black mane! It's quite luscious, I assure you.
>
> But to make things quick, since it's almost time for my 2:30 meal, I leave you with this: If you dare to find me, you'll have to search all of canada, and pray that you have some powerful tranquilizers, unless you really want me to feed so badly.
>
> Sincerely, The Grinner.

“So we’re looking for a reverse T-rex with a thing for face paint?” Riven flipped the sheet over, then flipped back to the note and scanned it again. “Well, they signed it ‘sincerely’. I suppose that’s got to count for something.”

“That letter is actually about ten meters long,” Shen opened the briefcase and took out a series of photographs, handing them over to Riven. “It was found by Foundation recon during a routine sweep. There’s an old abandoned office building a few kilometers from the site, and the entire parking lot was turned into a calling card.”

Riven stared at the photos. It looked like a preschooler the size of a building had scrawled giant letters across the formerly neatly-partitioned lot, in what looked like dried glue. “Did anyone run analysis on the area? What the writing ink stuff was, or if there was any other evidence left at the scene?”

Shen nodded. “The writing was done entirely in some sort of opaque white substance, similar in chemical composition to, well, snail slime. We’re not sure how long it had been sitting there, but the team that discovered it put a tarp over the words so we don’t get

curious helicopters landing near the suspicion area."

Flipping through the photos again, Riven spoke up, "So how does Kiryu Labs relate to this thing?"

"A secondary team was sent out to scout the area. They've identified a building with trace residue at the entrance and a few inner rooms. That residue matches the samples collected from the giant parking lot letter." Shen took the photos back and closed the briefcase. "Infrared scans are pretty inconclusive at the moment, but there's some sort of entity in the building. It's small, but it's there."

"So both of us are being sent in?"

Shen sat down on one of the sofas. "Yes. You've done some good animal behavior work and your biology background makes you ideal for this task." The agent glanced at his watch. "You've got half an hour to come up with a list of sedatives and any other equipment you think you'll need. I'll wait here for the moment, but remember—"

Riven was halfway out the door. "Gotcha. I'll be back with five minutes to spare, Tai."

"—to pack light." Shen watched the door swing shut.

Twenty minutes later, Riven was staring at a row of syringes neatly arranged by dosage on the lab bench in front of him. Tai had even provided a handy carrying case for the capped needles, clearly, the man had access to all kinds of strange things. Foundation gear could be oddly specific.

Riven would later find out that he did not need an alias for the assignment. This disappointed him somewhat, but he was given a just-in-case cover story: he was an environmental specialist traveling with his entrepreneur friend Shen to "inspect" the abandoned office facility.

Riven began to consider all sorts of potential dialogues until Shen told him that it wasn't likely they'd encounter any other humans. So Riven switched to rehearsing in his head rather than out loud. He

also thought it was a little unfair that Shen got to carry a Taser and he didn't. Then again, Riven had enough sedative in his pockets to knock out a small herd of elephants.

The transport dropped Riven and Agent Shen off at the very edge of the abandoned office complex's parking lot. The tarp stretched over the message to the Foundation was an off-yellow, boring, and probably doing its job well.

"We're looking for the main center plaza," Shen said as he began to walk towards the offices. "Let me know if you start seeing anything weird."

"Sure. I brought my field kit, so I can nab some samples if we have the time." Riven increased his stride slightly to match the agent's. He began to notice that Shen was paying more and more attention to the ground than the old, worn-out buildings they were walking amongst.

After about five minutes of staring at Shen staring at the sidewalk, Riven began to spot patches of shining pale mass, crystallized an amorphous, glossy white and gleaming in the sunlight of late afternoon. "We're close?" he asked.

Shen bent down and examined a patch of dried slime, eyes following a splattered pattern further on. "It looks like a trail begins near those double doors."

"Old places like these give me the creeps," Riven confided as he and Shen stalked through the remains of old filing cabinets, shelving units, and rickety tables. Mildew speckled the walls, and Riven stepped away from Shen at the moment to examine a small patch of mold that looked like it had been scraped at. "So much for the eating human flesh bit. If there's anything alive and eating here, it's gotta be an herbivore. The most it'd find around here is maybe the odd mushroom."

"That's reassuring," Shen replied evenly as he used his foot to scuff at a patch of slime. It made an unpleasant sucking sound. "Hmm."

The faint shafts of sunlight filtering in through the dusty windows cast the room in a greyish sort of haze, and Riven paused in his somewhat-dazed examination of a withered office plant. “Is that…?”

Shen was using a silver-colored stick-like implement (probably the latest in Foundation investigative poking-tech) to jab at the mucus. Unlike the dried and slightly crumbling remains they had encountered before, this blob was softer, and gave way. “I think we’re close.”

The trail of fresh off-white mucus grew thicker down the hallway, and about three-fourths of the way through veered off sharply into one of the adjoining rooms.

“I’ve notified a backup team to be on standby,” Shen whispered as they slowly approached the open door. He was slipping his phone back into his pocket. “If I’m not out in ten minutes, leave the building.”

Shit, I hope it never comes to that. Foundation protocol is scary sometimes, Riven thought as he nodded in reply to Shen. *Shen’s probably said that line a million times, though. I wonder if he ever thinks he won’t actually make it out.*

The agent slipped into the room on silent feet, walking smoothly as if he had every reason to be in an old abandoned office complex. Riven waited.

There was a muffled squeal and a slightly wet sounding squishing, as if someone had stepped in a bucket of far-too-overripe fruit. Riven shuddered and patted the pocket his case of syringes was in. He waited a few heartbeats more. There was a muffled noise of surprised, and a single spoken “huh.”

Riven decided he was done waiting. “Shen? You there?” He called cautiously into the hallway.

“Normally, I’d tell you never to reveal yourself unless told to, but I think you should just come in.” To Riven’s relief, Shen sounded as unruffled as ever. “Our terrifying monster was, ah, a bit

exaggerated."

Riven dashed into the room and paused when he saw its anomalous occupant.

Shen wasn't quite kidding. The entity they both were looking at seemed more like an overgrown garden slug with stubby legs than what Riven had been expecting—though it seemed like the statement about the four-foot long neck was accurate, at least. It was a dull, pasty white, and the face at the end of the neck was smooth and featureless, save two eyes and a mouth. When on its feet with its neck low as it was currently standing, it barely came up to Riven's knees.

Upon Riven's sudden appearance, the creature reared up in alarm, surprising Shen into reaching for his Taser, when it screeched in a slightly gargled-sounding voice, "You'll never take me alive!" and attempted to throw itself out the nearest window. Its neck prevented it from getting far. Apparently, Riven deduced, speaking long vowels with its mouth open caused its neck to inflate rapidly. The creature unbalanced itself and flopped over backwards, deflating rather sullenly as it lay on the ground.

Agent Shen poked it with his foot. "Are you really this alleged Grinner?"

The creature burbled something resentful, and then replied, "No. That's my big brother. He's the *real* Grinner. He's real. He's going to come and eat you all. Be scared."

Riven and Shen exchanged looks.

Rocking itself from side to side, the creature struggled to right itself back onto its stubby appendages. "You'll be sorry you messed with me. I'm dangerous too." Fluid was leaking from its eyes and dripping into a sloppy, soggy puddle near its face.

Shen opened his mouth to speak, but Riven beat him to it. He stepped smoothly in front of the sluglike entity and made a show of uncapping one of the syringes he was given. "Okay, if you're the Grinner's little brother, we're going to need to take you into custody.

If you cooperate, I won't have to use this." He shook the syringe so the fluid within sloshed noticeably.

There was a shriek and the creature's neck began to inflate again. Riven put the needle away, glanced at Shen (the Agent nodded), and continued, "You're a danger to the human race, and it's our job to protect them. And we're going to find your brother too, and give him a serious talk about threatening people."

The creature deflated again. It lay on its side and sniffled a bit. "You'd *better* find him."

It took all of one and a half minutes for the backup team to arrive. It took half a minute for them to restrain and sedate the alleged Grinner's little brother, and twenty minutes to haul it out of the building and into the waiting transport. Apparently it was much heavier and slimier than it looked.

"Your perseverance with this case was appreciated," Shen commented afterward as he and Riven raided the Kiryu Labs' not-so-secret spare room snack stash. Riven was chomping his way through a bag of cookies while Shen, health nut that he was, peeled a tangerine. The mission debriefing hadn't taken long at all, and now the two of them had about an hour or so before they needed to report for further instruction regarding the entity now in Foundation custody.

"Do you think the Grinner actually exists? Or that there's actually a big brother involved?" Riven asked as he brushed some crumbs off his sleeve.

"No idea. The creature we detained is probably being questioned at the moment, and frankly I'm more interested in how it knew about the Foundation to begin with." Shen had removed the peel from the tangerine in one piece, and was arranging it back into a sphere-ish shape. "We'll decide what to do after the interview. All in all, it was an unusual assignment."

Riven nodded. It hadn't been the most exciting Kiryu Labs field trip

ever, but it was still pretty fun, Riven thought as he leaned back in one of the spare room chairs. He hoped he wouldn't be kept to the labs for too long again. Getting enough fresh air was something he'd taken for granted when he first started Foundation work, and frankly, the repeated experimental trials had a way of wearing down a researcher—it was a little sad, in a way, that anomalies eventually became something commonplace. The spark of wonder he'd experienced during his first days was getting fainter, and he'd been spending more and more time wondering when the next interesting thing would show up.

Riven's cell phone was ringing. He was probably needed in the experimental rooms to help with the new interns again. He could already feel the fatigue coming on. Was it too much to ask for a nap…

The cheerful deedle-deedle ringtone was persistent. Heaving a sigh of long-suffered patience when he saw the caller ID, Riven answered with a noncommittal "Hey, Mark."

"Rivs, I'm in the combustion lab. The bird you were working with exploded when we tried to bathe it. Regular water. Strangest thing. I sent the intern working with me to get a biohazard team, but I need someone to help me clean up the bird… or, you know, what's left of it."

Riven blinked, and realized in retrospect, he had *kind of* liked that stupid bird. "Wait, Mark, isn't the combustion lab already equipped to deal with—"

"The floor is now lava."

Grinning, Riven grabbed an emergency fire extinguisher from the spare room's wall rack. "Should've said that first, Mark."

A Study of Anomalous Art

A Study of Anomalous Art, from the Paleolithic to the Present
By Doctor Hannah Morel, head of the Artistic Anomalies Unit

(The following excerpt is from pages 6-9 of Doctor Morel's paper. The full document may be accessed from the Foundation Central Archives)

According to William Tartore, founder of the Artistic Anomalies Unit, anart is "a piece of artistic media with an anomalous effect that was intended by the artist as part of the expression of the piece. There are instances where media will exhibit anomalous properties unintended by the creator, and in such instances the anomalous properties are unconnected with what is being expressed."[1] This definition has served for almost forty years, and in my experience and the experience of many others, is the one certainty in the study of anomalous art.

Of course, this definition is certain because it is broad and universal. Moving beyond this surface description, anart becomes much more difficult to define. Anart will often use experimental, illegal, or impossible mediums of expression, and the expressions made by anart are often incredibly esoteric, completely nonsensical, or impossible for human beings to understand. Many times, scholars attempting to define anart will fall into the old debate of “what is art”, an act which rarely aids them.

This document is meant as a study of the history of anomalous art, or anart, and aims to provide an overview of its major schools, philosophies, styles, and practitioners. Literary anomalies will not be covered in this paper.[2]

The chaotic and bizarre nature of anart makes classification of styles incredibly difficult. While in certain periods we may see an overarching and clearly-defined theme, where the majority of anartists follow the same philosophy with predictable results, this is

the exception, rather than the rule. It is rare for more than small cells of anartists to follow a single philosophy, and often cells and individuals will mix schools and styles as according to their whims.

However, study of anart in the long term reveals patterns and internal consistencies. Throughout history, there have been four major schools of anomalous artists: Those who want to repair reality through art, those that wish to remake reality, those who wish to destroy reality, those that wish to create new realities. It should be noted, however, that these schools are arbitrary labels created by the Foundation in order to define something that is very difficult to define: the practitioners of these schools will never claim themselves as such, and no anartist or piece of anart will ever fit entirely neatly into these categories.

These schools and their primary sub-schools are as follows:

Reconstructionists - Those anartists who wish to fix social, economic, and ethical problems through the implementation of anart. Reconstructionist anart is meant for the sole purpose of achieving an end, and is therefore temporary, becoming unnecessary when the goal has been reached.

- **Petty Reconstructionists** – Supporters of movements that did not originate with an anartist or group of anartists. This sub-school has become increasingly prevalent since the middle of the twentieth century up through the present.
- **True Reconstructionists** – The founders of movements. The goals of these movements may be similar to non-anomalous groups, but they maintain no association with them beyond shared goals.
- **Dadaist / Radical Reconstructionists** - This school exhibits no sense or coherency in their causes or methods, outside of the pursuing of a goal, albeit a nonsensical one. Dadaist Reconstructionist movements rarely last long, and very rarely span more than a single person, both the result of the seemingly necessary lack of sanity required.

Recreationists - Those anartists who shape pre-existing reality according to their will. Unlike Reconstructionist art, Recreationism does not necessarily work toward a greater end, and is meant to be

a permanent fixture; however, there is still a great deal of overlap.

- **Minor Recreationists** - The most common Recreationist sub-school, wherein anart is used transform on a small scale: a person, an object, or a single place. It is common in the present day for many anartists, even those of highly opposed schools, to experiment with Minor Recreationist art, most commonly in body modification.
- **Major Recreationists** - This sub-school is based solely on the scope of the anart used, as it is aimed at transforming countries, societies, the entire world, or things of similar large scale. These projects usually involve large cells of anartists, often of different schools, led by a specific individual or group. These projects very rarely come to fruition, as they are usually either interrupted by outside forces or collapse due to infighting or mismanagement.
- **Reformed Recreationists** - Art is for the transformation of the self in all aspects. This sub-school has traits similar to that of religions, and as such is rife with conflicting themes and ideas. This sub-school is notable in the general lack of external artistic media: the Reformed Recreationist considers the soul to be the perfect canvas, and as such it is the only one worth using.

Deconstructionists -Those anartists who act to destroy facets of pre-existing reality, without providing replacement.

- **Pseudo-Deconstructionists** - This sub-school focuses on toppling what they view to be oppressive or corrupt structures of society. This sub-school often mixes with the Reconstructionist schools, most commonly Petty Reconstructionism.
- **True Deconstructionists** - The target is not only to be destroyed, but erased utterly from reality, so that it never existed in the first place. This is a very rare sub-school, a testament to the difficulty of creating such a work. Of course, it should be noted that their rarity might be a result of their past success.
- **Absolutist Deconstructionists** - A school based on the belief that existence itself is both corrupt and meaningless and

must be destroyed completely. Members of this sub-school are highly dangerous and openly hostile, and should be dealt with using extreme caution.

Creationists - The broadest school of anart, focusing solely on the creation of art and expression through it. Some scholars claim that all anart is by nature Creationist, and so the label is redundant. To an extent this is true: there is extensive overlap between Creationist art and other schools. However, the general opinion is that Creationism is specific enough to exist on its own.

- **True Creationists** - The vast majority of anartists fall into this category, and it serves as an effective catch-all for those who do not easily fall into other categories. This definition extends to all anartists who create anart for its own sake, and whose view of art does not place them among the High Creationists or Artistic Deists.
- **High Creationists** - Through the act of creation the anartist does not only express reality, but defines it. This is a property shared amongst all anartists, and so all anartists are considered valid in the eyes of this school. Recent scholarship has argued that this is not a true school of anart, and the position has been gaining momentum in recent years.[4]
- **Artistic Deists** - The Artist is God. Unlike High Creationists, where the ability to define truth and reality is shared by all artists, the Artistic Deist believes that the right is theirs alone, and that no other individual may define truth. Artistic Deists are often highly dangerous, often exhibiting traits of megalomania. Sufficiently skilled Artistic Deists may be considered in the same category as reality-manipulators.

Each of these schools and their respective sub-schools will be explained in greater detail in later chapters.

Footnotes
1. William Tartore,Ars Gratia Anomalia, (Foundation Internal Press, 1978), 4.
2. Please seeA History of Woken Words(Smith),Five Days with the Author(Malakhov), andThe Universal Library(Quattrochi)
3. Further detail on Reconstructionist mockery art may be found on page 34.

4. Please seeAmerican Creationism in the 21st Century, by Dr. Levi Copp for an in-depth explanation of this theory.

A Suicide Note

I am going to kill myself.

Who am I kidding? I probably can't even die at this point. I know that the cyanide I injected isn't working because of the antitoxins put into my blood over a decade ago. Arsenic doesn't work, either; tried using rat poison and got no results.

Everyone at the Foundation thinks I'm omnipotent, that I'm some kind of reality-bending psychopath who goes on 'wacky' adventures with Kondraki, Bright, Rights, Crow… oh, how fucking *wrong* they are. Konny's in a psych ward, Bright joined the Serpent's Hand and finally managed to die, Rights merged with that… *thing* she called her pet project, and Crow… poor, poor Crow. I had to shoot him myself.

So, only I remain. Alto Clef. Alto "I will take a shotgun to a reality bender's balls and pull the trigger at point-blank range" Clef. Alto "I blew up the Challenger with my mind" Clef. Alto "I tried killing 239" Clef. Alto "Fucking Satan" Clef.

Maybe the last part is true. Maybe I am Satan. And as my punishment for defying God, I'm forced to never be able to interact with anomalies. I'm not a reality bender; just the opposite. I'm a reality *anchor*. I'm the only thing that's certain in a world where Yellowstone National Park just started being noticed less than a year ago, and where the spontaneous combustion virus breached containment and killed an entire site in a week, where something that claims to be God walks around containment unhindered- except he can't very well walk anymore. I made sure of that. My last act in life, before I pull the trigger.

I can't see ghosts. I can't walk into another universe; I've tried it, and there's an invisible barrier that keeps me from going through. I can't be affected by bends in reality, but I can touch those who bend it. I can't operate anomalous machinery- I nearly *broke* 914 by trying to

use it in a test. I can't be seen by anything that would even remotely qualify as an actual deity or demon, and I can't see them, either. I can't see any of the hundreds of thousands of wonderful and terrible things that walk in our world. I can see bigfoot, aliens and some other cryptids, probably because they're not 'anomalous' in the traditional sense. They're part of this universe, not from outside of it.

I've only ever been able to interact with three anomalies ever, all of them females. Go figure. The first one was… I can't even remember her name. I knew it, at one point. I think it started with a D. She was the love of my life, and I was told to kill her. I was told to take a shotgun to her head and blow her away just like I blew away a common bixby or a mary sue or a type green or whatever you called them. I couldn't. I saw in her eyes that she was afraid of me. So, I did what I had to. I ran from the Coalition, until there was nowhere left to run. I pledged my services to the Foundation if they promised amnesty for… Dáiríne. That was her name.

I still remember the first bixby I killed. She was twelve years old. I had to run her over with a car. The only thing she did was make one of her dolls come to life because she was just so lonely and needed a friend. She was bullied at school to the point where she started cutting herself. She was *twelve.* She shouldn't have had to worry about what razor blades would leave the least noticeable scars or getting hit by people in black vans. Al Fine told me I was doing a service to the world. I had half a mind to shoot her right then and there. I waited for about six months before I actually did. Made it look like a mugging gone wrong.

The second anomaly I was ever able to interact with was Epon. My daughter. I say 'interact', but I'm still immune to her anomaly. I knew it was her the instant I saw her. She had her mother's eyes. She's my only proof that there was a man named Alto Clef. My daughter, who's stuck in a cell because the Foundation is afraid that every male in the world is going to try raping her. They call her a succubus. What a joke. If she was a succubus, it would be the other way around. So, my daughter, who you know as 166, is being held against her will for the simple reason that she was *born*. She doesn't deserve it. I'm hoping that what I left with her will stop anything else from happening to her.

And yet, I can't do anything about it. I can't even let her know I'm her father. The Foundation just thinks it's another anomaly that I'm immune to because I'm an anchor in a stormy ocean. But I know she's my daughter, and I want her to be happy. I tried to make her life a little better, but I had to use half of my contacts just to get a single note into her cell. I had to use the other half to leave my last gift for her. Epon, I'm sorry.

The third one I could interact with was… was Sigurrós. 239, as you know her. That whole shitstorm with her… it was because I was scared. I could actually feel her in my mind. And I was *terrified*. I had to kill her because, if she could get into my mind, she could do anything. I couldn't let that power go unchecked. The whole Telekill Sword thing was bull. In my hands, a sharp stick could have killed her.

I think that whole thing happened the way it did because, whatever 239 is, it wanted to toy with us. It wanted to laugh at us. It made me fight Kondraki. It made the thoughts in my mind into a dragon. It made everyone else act like fucking idiots just for a laugh. It was doing that for *years*, ever since we discovered it.

She's dead, now. I put a cocktail of cyanide, arsenic, whatever 035 and 075 produce (I got it from the Coffee Machine with help from an assistant), and a few dozen other things into her system. She *melted*, right then and there. Since then, people have started acting normal again. Gears Gerry actually laughed yesterday, when I told him a joke. It almost made me rethink this plan.

But I know the Foundation is gonna figure out who melted 239 at some point. And because the Foundation's motto is Secure, Contain, Protect, not Destroy, Destory Destroy, Destroy, I'm going to get my mind-wiped and dumped on the side of the road in Albuquerque or something. I'm not about to let that happen.

My name is not Alto Clef. But it's probably the name you'll know me by, assuming the O5s don't expunge all record of my existence. My will can be found in Dr. Bright's old office, behind where he used to keep the picture of his family on the south-eastern wall.

Assuming I can go to Hell, well, I'll see you all there someday.

-Alto Clef.

The above document was found in the office of Dr. Alto Clef following the sound of gunshots being reported from the general vicinity. When security teams arrived, blood matching that of Dr. Clef was found on the wall directly behind his desk, along with some brain matter and buckshot embedded in the wall. A spent shotgun casing was found underneath his desk, along with a Winchester 1912 shotgun that formerly belonged to Dr. Clef; saliva matching his DNA was found on the end of the barrel.

To date, Dr. Clef's body has not been recovered. His current status is unknown.

A Swingset's Song

Here I am with metal arms; still and silent, knowing
Tracing back to rural farms; old and quiet, sowing
As a boy I learned I had; low and secret, power
Grew much older, good and bad; self-taught knowledge, flowered

A stronger frame gave me in life; skill and chances, schemer
Not coveting success or wife; no need for child, dreamer
I sought to be the one who gives; inspiration, wonder
Yet failed to be someone who lives; real life is hard, blunder

Setting out to shape my course; seek my own way, freedom
Using skills of phantom source; make well the world, feed them
Building wonders for the young; my calling found, completed
The accidental trap is sprung; blood and failure, seeded

I failed three times, abysmal; alone and guilty, tragic
Knowing that my ledger's full; red from misuse, magic
A final use symbolically; an overcharge, of strength
Break my light equivocally; contorting death, its length

Slumbering in playground bed; a friend is made, he listens
Holding on to what I've shed; fear glittering, it glistens
Betrayed and given up to some; sequestered far, contained
Friendship with an odd machine; not ending well, restrained

No understanding comes with this: some accidents, alarmed
I give out one last Christmas gift; your colleague's here, unharmed
They give up hope just like I did; forgotten long, so still
Until the end times knock the world; unmerciful, to kill

Eons pass and here I stay; my only friends, are rubble
Calling out the only way; with broken light, my bubble
A guilty lighthouse in the dark; dying planet, shattered
A voice replies, a shining arc; will this one think, I mattered?

A Thin Dangerous Line

This is a thin dangerous line. To die without gaining one's aim is a dog's death and fanaticism. But there is no shame in this. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai.
— Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure*

If you can `read this`, you are already dead.

2.10.1.3 — Mission: Intuitive informational entities are frequently sustained only by their singular dedication to personal directives that, left unfinished in life, are impossible to complete in death. The Identity Warrior draws strength from a more sophisticated version of the same idea: dedication to the core missions of Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero and of the Foundation. So long as these objectives remain relevant, the world still has need of the Identity Warrior, and the dedicated Identity Warrior remains bound to the world.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Manifestation Log — Operation Fisher King

Teams: Wraiths Four, Seven and Nine

Roster:

- Wraith-4: **`MacLaughlin, Andrew (Field Memeticist); Vasilev, Pyotr (Quick-Space Manipulation Specialist)`**
- Wraith-7: **`Desai, Santosh (Identity Defense Specialist)`**; **`Cooper, Riley (Quick-Space Manipulation Specialist)`**
- Wraith-9: **`Barnes, Samuel (Identity`**

Offense Specialist); Barnes, Tanya (Identity Defense Specialist)

Briefing:
Foundation Antimemetics Division researcher and containment architect Dr. Bartholomew Hughes went missing in late 2008. Officially he was reported dead, of unknown anomalous causes. Research into the death of Hughes was frustrated by the **"contagious murder" phenomenon**, in which personnel who were close to understanding what happened to Hughes would also die or go missing. We now recognize this as typical of **SCP-3125** attacks on unsecured living memeomes that contained information about itself.

While we can count among us 47 saints who died as a result of the contagious murder of Bart Hughes, in all cases they lost key information related to their recent research to dethreading damage incurred during their transition.

Information regarding Hughes' activities in the period leading up to his disappearance has been nearly entirely expunged from the Foundation with a level of operational secrecy exceeding all known Thaumiel Class projects. Saints who believe they had predeceased contact with him during that period were apparently exposed to extremely effective memetic editing techniques, and even in death are unable to recall many specifics. During that time Hughes lived and worked entirely in memetic isolation chambers and therefore went unobserved by **MTF ω-0**.

Additionally, significant Foundation resources cannot be accounted for during this period, and even the Level 4 black accountants that report directly to O5 Command appear to be selectively unaware of these discrepancies.

Due to intelligence gathered during **Operation Cold City**, we have reason to believe that Hughes had developed a plan to oppose the incursion into our

noosphere, and that Director Wheeler had learned this in the Site-41 Vegas Room prior to her death and the loss of Site-41.

Composite intelligence from what sources we do have suggests the following:

- Hughes may be dead, *or* he may be in hiding.
- If he is dead, *he is not among us*.
- If hiding, he has successfully hidden himself from us, which means he was able to evade SCP-3125 as well.
- Hughes was aware of SCP-3125 and had constructed the Site-41 Vegas Room in order to safely brief others on what he knew.
- Our Specter teams' best theoretical reconstructions of what Hughes may have been working on would require a large, multi-year, extremely expensive project.
- Hughes' disappearance may be a sign that he was moving from a theoretical stage into the construction of a prototype.
- Personnel who went missing while looking for Hughes may have found him and are currently assisting this project.

Director Wheeler died believing that Hughes had left something for her to use, something that would win this war.

Therefore it has become imperative that Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún") ascertain the status of Dr. Hughes, determine if he is quick or dead, and attempt to locate him or failing that, his research. To this end, Wraith Teams Four, Seven and Nine are hereby directed to conduct the search for Hughes. Report directly to Manes-1 for this operation.

You have broad discretion to carry out this directive as you see fit, and are expected to thoroughly investigate any avenues you deem appropriate to the fullest extent

possible. In the event communication with command is lost due to enemy action you are to continue the search. If you do succeed in your mission, you are to render Hughes any and all support within your capacity while awaiting further instruction.

Team leaders are to coordinate and designate initial target sites. Your manifestation, code named "Operation Fisher King" is prepped and awaiting insertion, on your orders.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

Ω—Ω

A portion of each floor of the futurist-organic-style cabin spiraled out over open water. On the spacious covered third story deck, Sarah Hughes, **`Mobile Task Force Tau-5 ("Samsara")`** commander, sipped her coffee. She looked out through the wire screen onto **`the pond`**. There, Chen instructed Onru and Munru on how to fish from a canoe, all three of them laughing in the sun. All the way from the ground floor kitchen she could smell some delicious Kurdish dish that Ghazi was teaching to Irantu. Nanku was sitting on a couch a couple of meters away. The Specialist concentrated intensely as she painted a watercolor duck. Hughes wondered, not for the first time, if this was really any different from having a family.

"Captain Hughes?" asked Nanku, having stood up, suddenly alert.

"Yes, Specialist?"

"Someone is coming."

"Explain" ordered Hughes as they took the stairs to the second floor.

"I believe it is an extrasensory perception, legacy of **`my cell line`**. I feel someone searching nearby, and whenever their awareness touches mine I know. There is a mind gazing at us, a

mind without body."

"What is it searching for?"

"I think, it is for *you*, ma'am."

The stairs let out into a landing with a large bay window overlooking the water, framed by the white ultra-toughened alloy walls. Opposite the window, doors led to the three bedrooms and to the bath. Captain Hughes knocked on one of the doors and opened it. "Campos, get your people up and standby for action. I want weapons squad on overwatch on the upper deck as soon as possible."

Sergeant Juan Campos grunted assent. He switched on his bunk lamp and swung his legs onto the floor as she closed the door.

On the ground floor, the spacious living area was empty. Nanku grabbed her massive battle rifle from the weapons rack. Sergeant Irantu stalked out of the kitchen, calm but poised, arms in a guard position and ready for a fight. Right behind him came Sergeant Nazgul Ghazi, who was on a handheld radio and getting reports from the duty watch stations.

Ω—Ω

Specialist Aaron Quinn was on road guard duty watching a car approach that had no business being there. It was a black Ford Explorer, with tinted windows, and it looked like a rental. Quinn flagged it down, and it rolled up to a stop, the window rolled down and he looked in at four people. A young man and woman sat in the back, mid-20s, and an older pair up front, probably in their 50s, all of them white and wearing conservative Sunday church clothes. The woman in the passenger seat smelled of cheap perfume, and the car as a whole smelled like incense.

"Ma'am, this is a restricted area, I am going to have to ask you to return to the guardhouse the way you came."

"Now honey, we don't need to do that, we are exactly where we are

supposed to be be."

"Appointed," said the others in unison.

"And you are going to let us slide right on, brother. We bring a message you are to hear," and then she told him.

Ω—Ω

"Report," ordered Hughes.

"Ma'am, we can… sense… an entity is now present," answered by Irantu as he cocked his head to the side, listening for something.

Nanku shook her head. "*Two* entities."

"Are they hostile?"

"No ma'am, I don't think so," Irantu said as Nanku shook her head again, "They seem to be… trapped?"

There was a loud creaking from the walls. "Not surprising, Sergeant," said Hughes, "my brother designed this house."

Ω—Ω

Manifestation Log: Operation Fisher King (Wraith Team Seven):

> **Cooper:** No use, I can't shift or break any of it. This place is locked down tight.
>
> **Desai:** And I still can't connect to my anchor.
>
> **Cooper:** Don't look at me, my best CS is 4.52.
>
> **Desai:** Yeah, let's take a break and then maybe we can work together and crack a window or something.
>
> **Cooper:** I'm fairly sure that I could throw a car, and we are struggling to maybe crack a window. This is one hell of a cage.

Desai: Well Hughes was *the* guy for containment architecture for informational anomalies.

Cooper: Yeah…

Cooper: That's a sobering thought. We *are* just a couple of informational anomalies now. Santosh, do you ever wonder if you are really Santosh Desai? Or are you just a construct generated from your Dad's memory that filled the void in the noosphere left when you… he… whatever… nuked yourself?

Desai: Ah yes, the copy question. You know, sooner or later every saint asks this.

Cooper: And?

Desai: Well, I definitely remember stuff that only I knew.

Cooper: You *think* you do anyway, you know as well as I do that expertly constructed memories are indistinguishable from the real thing.

Desai: Ouch. That's something I didn't want to think about.

<manifesting: Irantu>

Cooper: Whoa!

Irantu: Who goes there?

Desai: I feel like I should ask you the same thing. I'm Saint Santosh Desai, Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún"), and this is Saint Riley Cooper. How did you get in here?

Irantu: I am Sgt. Irantu of Mobile Task Tau-5 ("Samsara"). This iteration is a neural clone of my most recent backup scan, running in simulation mode.

Desai: Normally you need to be, well, dead to even see

this manifestation.

Irantu: I have been dead 47 times. Perhaps that is enough?

Desai: Yeah, I guess you have at that. We are here are on a mission.

Irantu: Can I assist you?

Desai: What do you think, Riley?

Cooper: It's my expert opinion that we are stuck. We might as well tell him why we are here and see if he can help.

Desai: Agreed, he *is* level three and we aren't getting anywhere otherwise. Sgt. Irantu, I am reading you into the following codenames: SCP-2111, READ THIS, and Operation FISHER KING. Do you acknowledge that you will not share the information you are about to receive with any unauthorized persons, and that you are aware of the penalties for mishandling classified intelligence?

Irantu: Of course.

Desai: Allright, the short version is Cooper and I are ghosts. We died in the line of duty, but never stopped working for the Foundation.

Desai: Our mission is to find Dr. Bart Hughes. Hughes went missing years ago, and all the information about that was so heavily expunged that even we don't have access to it. If Hughes *had* died we would expect him to be entangled with your CO, his sister, in a way that we could track. If alive, we were hoping she knows something and we have ways of finding that out too. Except we got trapped in this house, which is like a a Farraday cage for free memes like us. Can you help us?

Irantu: Yes, I can, once I reintegrate with my current self-stream.

Desai: Thank you, Sergeant.

Irantu: Cooper, there is no difference.

Cooper: Huh?

Irantu: You wonder if you are a copy or Riley Cooper. There is no difference. I am a copy. I am Irantu. Identity and authenticity are not equivalents.

Cooper: Huh. … I think that helps. Thanks!

<demanifesting: Irantu>

Ω—Ω

On the ground floor, Corporal Zabek disconnected the feed from Irantu's neural shunt. The Sergeant regained consciousness, stood, and quickly opened a window.

"Report" ordered Hughes, "Wait, belay that, there's a vehicle coming."

Outside, the Explorer rolled up the dirt road. Staff Sergeant Arthur Chen, Corporal Munro and Specialist Onru beached the canoe.

"Ma'am," Sergeant Ghazi said, as she readied her carbine, "My road guards just tried to send me something that the coghaz filters killed."

"Understood Sergeant. Order the rest of the watch to keep their distance and report to MTF command if they think we are compromised."

"Roger that."

"Irantu, no time for a prepared defense. Rally your squad, and assault through on my signal."

"Yes, ma'am."

The SUV rolled to a stop in front of the cabin and the passengers got out.

The older woman looked up the walk. Hughes stood behind the partially open airlock door with her sidearm ready and concealed.

"Good morning, honey," the woman said. She smiled broadly and squinted into the light.

"Have you hea__".

Hughes shot her.

Samsara squad's assault was swift and violent. The two other passengers were down almost as a quickly as the woman was. The driver managed to grab the machine pistol from under his seat, but didn't make it any further.

Under cover from the cabin, the four Samsara troopers duck walked through the killing ground. Nanku and Munru sliced the pie from opposite ends of the vehicle, and around the far side.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Wait," said Onru, "There's still something here."

Smoke swiftly spiraled up from the open mouths of the corpses. It formed a cloud of free memes so dense that the three dimensional shadow of the fifth dimensional structure was visible to the naked eye. The cloud hovered for a moment and then descended on the four Samsara troopers.

In the membrane between the dimensions, where information interacts — as the Samsara troopers battled to retain their identity — the tendrils of soul-smoke were being ensnared by Cooper and Desai's outstretched threads. Within the saints' memeomes was information about their enemy and they launched their attack across the bridges formed where memes found their counterparts. Driven by their undying purpose, and armed with the Foundation's extensive documentation of this particular threat, the two saints began to methodically erase the alien information from existence.

The machine gun crew on the upper deck fired a burst of spell-eater

rounds into the cloud. The anti-supernatural bullets passed through harmlessly and peppered the car with holes. Then the cloud shot tendrils out, racing with sudden speed towards the house. These stopped flat as though they hit an invisible wall inches from their targets. The smoke hung there for a beat and then began to ooze through the invisible barrier as though by osmosis. Hughes slammed the door shut as she watched the smoke pour mercilessly into the mouths and eyes of the the stunned Samsara troopers, still surrounding the SUV.

Meanwhile, in the noosphere, the invader battled Wraith-7, its complex fractal redundancies allowing it to continue to fight on despite suffering significant damage. As it lost entire chains of intricately structured nonsense, it reflexively attempted to launch counterattacks from the undamaged portion — like a jellyfish uselessly stinging the squid that consumes it. This increased contact only served to hasten its annihilation. The fifth dimensional memetic structure, lacking any meaningful purpose or unifying focus, was soon overwhelmed by its opponents' ceaseless dedication to their mission.

Sarah Hughes watched through the observation port as the smoke thinned, evaporated, and was gone.

With a deep breath, "I am still me," said Nanku.

"As am I," said Onru.

Munru nodded, and Irantu signaled a thumbs up towards the house.

"After we secure the road guard position," he said, "you should roll us back anyway, just to be sure."

Ω—Ω

To: Manes-1
From: Wraith-7
Subject: Field Report: Operation Fisher King (attached)

Summary:
Contact with Captain Sarah Hughes was successful. She

believes Bart Hughes is definitely alive and she is confirmed to not be an anchor. She does not know his current whereabouts. Bart Hughes' disappearance was carried out operationally and deliberately with extreme secrecy and voluntary amnesticization protocols. Captain Hughes retains very little useful intelligence on the subject. However, the location of the last place she saw her brother is in a memetic void, strongly indicative that the entire location was subsequently erased. Site-41?

Additionally we encountered and erased an enemy incursion which had penetrated Area-756. There were five Foundation casualties. The four Samsara troopers have, of course, already returned to the quick but we should dispatch a Reaper team for Specialist Aaron Quinn, who has died in the line of duty.

It seems the enemy is also now looking for Hughes. We probably should get there first.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Santosh Desai, Team Leader, Wraith Team Seven.

« **In the Trenches with the Dead** | A Thin, Dangerous Line»

Ruiz Sobers Up

Once upon a time, in the mysterious land of Brooklyn, New York, Ruiz Duchamp was getting fucked up in Joey's house.

twinkly wind chime sound effects

"Ruiz. Your art. I'm telling you, it's not good."

"Everyone's a fucking critic," he said as he threw back his head and swallowed.

"Should you really be taking all of those together? Won't that like, kill you?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. And what's it too you if I die? And my art is fantastic you prick."

"It's a bunch of saw blades hanging from the ceiling, with letters that spell 'this s art u fcuks.'"

Ruiz took a swig. "Indeed it is." He took a puff. "But you're missing the point."

"Which is?"

Ruiz chewed and swallowed. "That it's art and that you're a fuck."

"Oh my god."

"Listen, Joey. What was the last cool thing you made? That cheesy celery platter whatever. Cheese and celery don't even go together." He sniffed and licked his fingers.

"Your dad seemed to like it."

"My father is a self-righteous Critic. Just like you!" Ruiz stood up and walked over to Joey's sofa. He face-planted into a throw pillow. "Vve

problmm wivv ur urt iz -“

“What?”

Ruiz lifted his face off the pillow. “The problem with your art, Joey, is that it all has to do something. It has to serve some purpose. Why can’t it just exist, and in existing fulfill its purpose of *being art*. Art should evoke, not invoke. Art should make you feel like you just did a line, not help you draw one. And art should definitely not be food. That’s dumb, Joey. It’s just dumb.”

“If you didn’t like my cheesy celery bites it, you didn’t have to eat them.”

“But I did Joey! And they were gross.”

Joey took a sip of his coffee. “You’re an asshole, Ruiz.”

“No, I’m a dick. There’s a difference. And this dick has to take a piss. You got a bathroom in here?”

“Down the hall.”

Ruiz Duchamp rose from the couch and stumbled down the dimly lit hall. The morning light barely reached the shaded bathroom. Ruiz fished a bit of mushroom from between his molars. “Nobody gets it,” he mumbled as he closed the door behind him. “Nobody gets it.”

Ruiz’s ears ached at the sound of urine meeting toilet water. The sound was deafening. Ruiz watched as the tornado in a bowl became a star-speckled, nebula smoothie. “Here we ffffucking gooo.”

Ruiz slammed open the bathroom window, and punched through the thin metal screen. He took a running dive through this new trans-dimensional portal and landed in the side yard. The bathroom was on the ground floor so Ruiz fell about 6 feet but probably cracked a rib. He slowly got up with a groan then took off running down the street.

Joey stood in the open bathroom door and took in the scene. There was large puddle of very dark pee next to the toilet, which he didn’t

even blink at, but he looked for a long time at the torn, slightly bloody, window screen. “Well. That’s new.”

Molly walked down the stairs and over to Joey. “Hey. Don’t let Ruiz come in this house anymore.”

“Yeah.”

“Cause yer friends don’t dance and if they don’t dance, then they’re no friends o’mine.” Ruiz had slowed to a jog and also veered into the middle of the street. Lucky for him, Joey lived in a quiet neighborhood with little traffic. Unlucky for that little traffic, most of it was stuck behind Ruiz. Ruiz’s painfully off-key singing was interspersed with many honks and shouts of profanity - and not all of it from himself.

Ruiz’s trajectory eventually skewed enough that he drifted off the road and on to the side walk and into the yards and through a stranger’s house.

Cops were called.

Ruiz arrived at the shop at exactly 11:46 am. and promptly sat down in the waiting area. The sign above the door swung lightly in the wind: “The Snipper of New York.” He made an appointment as soon as the first hair dresser was available. “She must be new,” he thought. He also pondered as to why she was so calm when her hair was on fire, but only briefly. Ruiz sat back down and waited quite patiently, given his current mental state. Mr. Pico Wilson walked into the main floor of the shop from a back room. He walked over to the front desk computer, not noticing his brother, now intensely fixated on a purple hula dancer hanging from the ceiling. Pico performed his usual check of customer numbers and current transactions. He finally checked the waitlist.

“What the motherfucking shit? Who the shit let Ruiz IN THE BUILDING?”

“I think that would be your new girl,” Ruiz said, still staring at the

ceiling.

“GET OUT.” Pico screamed.

“Fuck you, Pico.”

“Are you drunk again?” Pico began reaching for the phone.

“Among other things.”

“I’m calling the police.”

“No. Shit. No. I can’t get caught by those Stupid Cock-sucking Police again.”

Ruiz bolted out the door. The bell jingled as he left.

John Nelson, sat at his desk as his class worked on their projects. 1:24 pm. Nearly time to go home. Nelson got up to check on the student’s progress. Jane was working on a very curvy vase for her mother. It seemed to being going along nicely. Steve was making a bowl for his girlfriend… at least it looked like a bowl. Ruiz was working on. Wait. The fuck

“Ruiz,” he whispered, “what the ever loving fuck are you doing here?”

“I thought I could learn a little bit about art from The Sculptor himself. Since I’m apparently so bad at it.”

“Ruiz, you can’t be here. How many drugs are you even on right now?”

“Your mom.”

“What?”

“I’m on your mom.”

“God dammit Duchamp.”

“Wooooaaaahhh. John. I don’t mean to freak you out. But there are

like 12 of you right now.”

“What are you talking about Ruizzzzzz
ZZZZZ”

Oh fuck.

RUIZ.
you need to
GET OUT of herrrrrrrrrr
EEee
eee

Fuck fuck fuck

A phone erupted from his navel. “Please see a doctor,” it said.

I don’t want to

“The drugs, they fuck you up.”

“THAT. IS. THE PURPOSE. OF THE DRUGS."

“I know. I get it. But get it somewhere else. Sorry.”

Ruiz was disappointed. He walked into his favourite room, passing the box of ecstacy pills saying ‘These are Ecstacy Pillz’. He looked passively beyond ‘here are the hypodermic needles’. He had one piece that he’d been saving for a particularly disappointing event. He closed the shower curtain, and breathed slowly. Everyone was a fucking idiot. Nobody got it. Nobody REALLY got it. As he turned the knob, liquid water sprayed across his scalp and flesh. His final thoughts were that it didn’t matter. At least he got it. He really got it. And that was all he needed.

Nobody got it.

Ruiz Duchamp woke up on the bathroom floor, his clothes soaking wet. His head nearly imploded as he turned off the shower. “Fucking hell,” he said as he walked over, eyes half open, to his stash.

“Never again,” he said, as he dumped them all into the toilet.

Never again

Never a*gain*

Never again?

NE

VER

AGAIN?

never again
Never again.
Never Again
NEVER AGAIN

He leaned over the toilet.

‘that shower was pretty cool’

he puked a lot

A Vale of Tears

« Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded | Dread & Circuses Hub |

“This city is enormous,” Victor remarked as he stared out the 303rd story window. The adjacent buildings stood around 1600 meters, with the tallest building being nearly double that, four times as tall as the tallest skyscraper in his world. These titanic spires were forged with frames of carbon nanotubes and diamondoid windows that sparkled in the sunlight. Just as impossible as their height and composition was their abundance, as the city stretched onwards for as far as Victor could see. “Why is it so huge?”

“Hmmm? Oh, well according to what **information** Skitter was able to find in the Library, this whole reality was ruled by a **pseudo-Catholic theocracy** for over three hundred years,” Iris replied distantly as she appraised a laptop she had found. “Extremely patriarchal and puritanical, and thus they experienced an above-average birth rate. But they also possessed the advanced technology that had been gifted to them by Him, and so were able to support a large population. This world’s population grew much bigger than ours ever did; at least tens of billions of people, maybe hundreds.”

Victor turned his gaze down to the streets below. Where once there surely must have been uncountable swarms of citizens going about their day, now there were only the Unclean; faceless half humans bigger than any non-anomalous animal that had ever lived, crawling through the ruined streets in a desperate search for something they could no longer comprehend.

“And now, all those hundreds of billions of people are just… gone?” he asked softly. “Jesus. This, this is even worse than that world where the sun turns people into **wax monsters**. At least those

things seemed kind of happy. But the Unclean, you said that they -”

“In the words of another interdimensional traveller, ‘don’t think about it’,” Iris told him. “Step away from the window Victor.”

“Right, sorry,” he said. He turned his back to the horror outside and took off his glasses to clean them. “Maybe the next post-apocalyptic wasteland we visit can just be a regular nuclear holocaust?”

“Turns out those are surprisingly rare. I guess nuclear deterrence isn’t as crazy as it seems.”

“Speaking of nuclear and crazy, I haven't heard a peep out of Lolly in a while," he said. "Maybe we should check on her."

"I'm sure she just found something to keep her distracted."

"And quiet?"

Iris finally took her eyes off the laptop.

"You're right, let's go check on her."

Shutting the laptop and placing it in her bag, the two of them went to search for Lolly.

The floor they were on was primarily an open office, with all the light coming from a wall of windows on the far side. Numerous mundane personal items dotted the room - briefcases, hats and jackets, 3D photos of loved ones - still laying where their owners had abandoned them over half a century ago. Numerous chairs were askew or overturned, left to fall where they would in a mad dash to escape the city, with no one ever coming back to right them.

Victor and Iris were momentarily startled by the sound of an angelic chime over the somehow still functional PA system.

"All pause for the midday prayer," a serene male voice announced.

"He who art above, forever Pure be His name. His Kingdom is come, and His will shall be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

May He grant us the clarity to avoid Sin, and may His Tears Purify us when we stray. May He forgive us our deviances, and may He never forgive the Unclean.

May He lead the Blessed Militia to victory against the Unclean, and may the Unclean suffer for all Eternity for their unspeakable Sin, for His is the Kingdom and the Purity and the Virtue, forever and ever, amen."

Another set of angelic chimes signalled the end of the prayer break.

"That's been playing to an empty building for sixty years? So creepy," Victor remarked.

"*Blarg*!" Lolly shouted as she swung down from an air vent, having shape-shifted her face into the same blank visage of the Unclean. To her disappointment, neither of her colleagues seemed especially frightened. "*Marp*?"

"This is what you were doing instead of collecting electronics?" Iris asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lolly dropped down to the floor and shook her face back to normal.

"No, I did that," she replied, pulling out a sack from her hammerspace pockets. “I went through the whole office and nabbed everything that looked like a laptop, tower, tablet, or smartphone I could find. Are you sure these computers are magic though? Because they seem pretty normal to me.”

“I didn’t say they were magic, I said they were advanced,” Iris replied as she examined the contents of the sack. “I haven’t been able to figure out exactly what sort of hardware it is yet, but I do know it’s extremely efficient and not producing any waste heat. Memory and processing power are at least twenty times higher than a comparable top-of-the-line product in our reality. It charges wirelessly and in under a minute, consumes no power on standby, and a full charge can give you over a hundred hours of peak use. This Faithful OS, on the other hand, is, well, it’s what you would expect for a theocratic regime. The restrictions are rather severe so at the very least I’ll have to do some jailbreaking. Ideally, I’d like to

make a version of DarkEnergy that's compatible with this hardware and install that instead."

"Worst comes to worst, we could probably sell this stuff as is in Eurtec," Victor suggested.

"Uh-huh. That's cool, I guess," Lolly said disinterestedly. "So… when are we going to get my hovercraft?"

"For the third time Lolly, we're getting your hovercraft last, since we can't very well haul a car through the building with us," Iris huffed.

"Well we can't, but she might; I have no idea how much she can fit in those pockets," Victor countered. "Don't worry Lolly, the bottom forty stories of this place are a parking garage, so I'm sure you'll have your pick. Just don't wander off, since neither of us wants to re-enact a classic Seinfeld episode."

Lolly squeed excitedly and started jumping up and down.

"This is so amazing! I'm going to get a hovercraft!"

Iris closed the sack back up and handed it back to Lolly.

"Alright, these are enough electronics to keep me and my tech team busy for a while," she said. "Let's go check out the lab."

The three of them moved through the administrative offices and into the medical facility in the back. Away from the windows, the place only became darker, and they were forced to take their flashlights out to navigate. The eerie silence was briefly broken by a soft rumble through the floor. They held still for a moment to make sure it wasn't a herald of something disastrous, and then pressed onwards.

At the very back there was a large sign on a heavy door which read 'Authorized Personnel Only by Order of the Sacrosanct Father of Resplendent Penance', but the door was slightly ajar and the electronic lock appeared to be non-functional.

As they stepped into the room, the lights attempted to turn on, flickering a few times before mostly giving up, strobing at random intervals. Either side of the room was lined with transparent tubes,

two meters tall by a meter across. They were all empty and in pristine condition, with the exception of a single broken tube, whose shattered fragments still littered the ground around it.

Iris was focused so intently upon it that she nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Lolly shriek in terror.

“Oh my god, look!” she said, pointing to the end of the room while cowering behind Iris and Victor.
There, sealed behind a barrier of thick diamond, was what had made the rumbling noise only a moment ago.

An Unclean.

It was a relatively small one, only a few tonnes in weight and a few meters in height. It lay on its side, perfectly still, its blank face turned away from them.

“Is it dead?” Victor whispered.

“No, I don’t think they can die and still remain intact,” Iris replied, shining her flashlight towards the caged monstrosity. “It doesn’t seem active though. It must have been in here since just before this World ended. It's probably the very same one that broke out of this tube here, and they never got the chance to ship it off to the Unfertile Lands. Well, if it’s been locked in there for sixty-four years already we probably don’t need to worry. Keep an eye on it though.”

“Mm-hmmm!” Lolly nodded in fervent agreement, keeping her gaze fixed on the abomination. At the end of the lab, across from the Unclean, they found an adjacent room full of storage tanks.

“His Holy Tears. Excellent,” Iris said as she began inspecting the first tank.

“It’s just a bunch of goop. How is this better than a hovercraft?” Lolly asked.

“It’s Akivic Purification Serum,” Iris said. “It generates off-the-chart levels of Akiva radiation in highly specific wavelengths. The radiation strengthens traits with matching spectral resonance and destroys traits with opposing resonance. Enough exposure to this stuff will

purify you of sin and embellish your virtues, at least in the eyes of Him. This is how the Church was able to control this World. If you burn a heretic you create a dozen more, but bathe them in this stuff and you get a born-again missionary ready to spread the good news. It's the most perfect mind-controlling agent any totalitarian regime could ever ask for."

"And why exactly does Darke want this?" Victor asked nervously.

"He says he found someone willing to sell him some Incarnate Flesh, but before he buys it he wants to make sure he has a way to purify it," Iris replied. "He intends to use alchemy to change the Akiva wavelength to whatever he needs. The specifics aren't really my concern. It's dangerous to use this stuff in its pure form so I want you two to look around for anything labelled Nutrient solution, a healing serum called Blessing, and maybe something called HFT. There was no explicit mention in any of the files about what it did. Combine that with the fact that there was a shortage of it right before the outbreak of Unclean, and I think it either prevents or reduces the chances of subjects mutating into the Unclean."

As Victor and Lolly began searching through the storage area for the desired compounds, Iris dedicated her attention to retrieving the Tears out of the tank. There was a large pipe at the top that apparently sent the Tears to the tubes upon demand, but there was also a small faucet near the bottom, presumably for relieving overfill or in case they needed to test a sample. Placing a plastic container under the tap, she carefully turned the knob until a slow trickle started pouring out.

The substance was perfectly clear, utterly pure and uncontaminated by any foreign materials. It was slightly more viscous than water, yet flowed outwards with an odd sort of grace that seemed to ever so slightly skirt the laws of gravity and motion. The light was refracted through it in such a way as to give it a soft radiance, and even the sound of it flowing out from the tap and into the bucket was somehow melodious.

"Wow," Iris murmured as she stared at it in awe. "It does have a strange allure to it. I suddenly do feel unclean, along with a slight compulsion to actually bathe in it, like it would be the most purifying

experience imaginable. That's a little unsettling actually. If I suddenly start stripping off my clothes one of you will stop me, right?

"Of course," Victor agreed.

"Nope, sorry," Lolly giggled.

"Thank you, Victor," Iris said with a smirk and slight shake of her head. "It's interesting that I didn't feel anything when it was still in the tank. I wonder if it's shielded against Akiva radiation, and if there are any shielded containers we could use instead of -"

She was interrupted by a torturous, blood-curdling wail from behind them. All at once they turned to see the Unclean in the cage rising to an upright position. Even in its hermetically sealed chamber, it could somehow sense that there was now a free-flowing source of His Tears nearby. Finally roused from its long malaise, it slammed its fist into the diamond wall with unimaginable force. Cracks immediately appeared in the wall, and the Unclean slammed it again and again and again until it shattered into thousands of shards.

Lolly jumped straight upwards at a fantastic speed, breaking a hole through the ceiling. Iris and Victor stared as the monster crawled towards them at a frightening pace, cornered and with no time to mount a defence. Fortunately, Lolly had not forgotten them. She stretched her arms down, wrapping them around their waists like a rope, and yanked them up to the floor above just as the Unclean blundered through.

"Are you okay? Did it touch you? It didn't touch you, did it?" she asked frantically.

"Get your noodle arm off me!" Iris said, freeing herself and rushing to the hole in the floor to see what was happening.

"We're fine Lolly, thank you," Victor said.

"That thing is drinking all the Tears, which is the whole reason we came here!" Iris retorted.

"That's the whole reason *you* came here. I came for a hovercraft, and I only agreed to that because I thought we'd be safe from the

Unclean inside," Lolly said as she retracted her arms back to their normal length. "But we're not safe, so I'm aborting this mission."

She reached into her pockets and pulled out her Kaleidoscope keys with the intention to turn the next door she saw into a Way back to the Circus.

"It's just one Unclean, not even a big one," Iris said as she rummaged through her backpack and pulled out a double-barrelled dart gun. "This is loaded with an alchemically enhanced formula of the serum Lord Blackwood invented to destroy the Unclean. Darke made it for me especially for this trip, so I guess you could call them Darkwood Tears. Far more potent than the original, plus that thing is a shrimp. A few rounds should be enough."

"Iris, it's not worth risking your life to fight that thing! We can find another source of Tears," Victor insisted.

"Recon here is expensive, time-consuming and dangerous. Taking down this Unclean now is preferable to possibly fighting a multitude of bigger ones later," she countered as she loaded the gun.

"Iris, don't be stupid! Getting caught by one of those is actually a fate worse than death, because we know what happens to us when we die!" Lolly said. "I'm going to Oneiroi West permanently and you two will just have **H'rasm'Kal** grab your souls and stick them into new bodies, but none of that will happen if that thing gets you!"

"She's right; you could end up trapped in a living hell until the sun blows up," Victor agreed. "It's not worth it!"

"Now that you bring it up, I'm not actually sure if H'rasm can cleave a soul from the Unclean," Iris mused. "Look, it's not that bad. If it gets me, you just go back and get more Darkwood serum so that someone else can take this thing out."

Just as she was about to jump down, she gave them a rare ear-to-ear smile.

"But it's not going to get me."

The four-meter drop to the floor below was nothing, and she landed

on her feet with ease. The Unclean didn't even react to the sound, for it was too busy greedily lapping up His Tears. Iris quietly fell back as far as she could to give herself the maximum amount of time for additional shots, and then fired a pair of darts into the Unclean's back.

The being screeched in agony as enormous heaps of molten flesh sloughed off its form, briefly resembling the people they once were before dissolving completely, finally free of their torment. The Unclean turned to look at Iris, who had already reloaded another set of darts. She aimed for its head this time but only hit its neck, causing most of its left side to dissolve into brown ichor. Using its remaining arm, it furiously hauled itself towards Iris. Hurriedly reloading her gun once more, she took her last shot as it began to throw itself upon her.

It exploded into a horrific smelling brown goo, most of which rained down upon Iris.

"Huh," Lolly said as she and Victor looked down through the hole in the floor. "Hey Victor, remember when we first met and I said I thought your job sounded boring? I take that back."

The two of them jumped down and rushed to Iris's aid, who was standing nearly catatonically still.

"Iris, are you okay?" Victor asked as he handed her a towel he had grabbed from a nearby bathing tank.

"I'm covered in Slenderman guts for the **third bloody time**!" she screamed, but then took several deep breaths to regain her composure, dabbing the ichor off her face.

"Third time? When was the second?" Victor asked.

"I was at the **Ikea** once, long story," she replied. "Scoop some of this stuff up, won't you? It might be worth something."

"Sure thing."

"That was pretty awesome," Lolly told her. "Sorry about your clothes though. That turtleneck is cashmere, isn't it?"

“It’s fine, I have plenty of them,” she said.

“Remember: if you want to take it off, I won’t stop you.”

Iris wiped some ichor off her sweater and flicked it at Lolly.

“Well, you’re not sitting in my hovercraft covered in that stuff!”

« Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded | Dread & Circuses Hub |

A Very Bailey Christmas

Whenever he had nothing better to do, Tristan Bailey would look at a picture of his family that sat on his desk. In the picture, him, Trevor and Tom were only about 8 years old, standing in front of a Christmas tree with their presents in the background. Tom was holding on to a stuffed platypus of all things, Trevor holding up a book about Galileo that he should have been far too young to read, and Tristan was holding up a Nerf gun at the camera, with a dart flying straight at it. Clara, their mother, was standing behind them, signs of age already starting to show on her face. Next to her, giving Tom bunny ears, was their father, Tyler Bailey. Tyler was grinning at the camera, his black beard full and his hair thinning.

That was years ago. Since then, for security reasons, Tom, Trevor and Tristan had grown distant from mom. She knew they worked for something called S & C Plastics, but it baffled her why physicists were working for a company like that. And as for dad…

Tristan was distracted from his thoughts by a Skype call from Trevor at Site 19. *Odd*, he thought. *It's not 5:00 in Nevada yet. He never calls this early when he's working…* A dreadful feeling formed in the pit of his stomach; was there some kind of a breach? Did the MUTA explode? Did 447 touch a dead body?!

Tristan opened the window to find Trevor sitting at his desk, smiling stupidly into the camera. "Happy Holidays, Bro."

"Happy- Trevor, you nearly gave me a heart attack!" Tristan crossed his arms and scowled. "Did you seriously call just to wish me 'Happy Holidays'?"

"Actually, no. Tom would've called, but he's busy with a situation in the Empire. Something about killer penguins attacking Foundation zoologists." Trevor looked around, and twiddled his thumbs uncomfortably. "I was just wondering if you… said hi to dad, yet. It is almost Christmas."

Tristan rubbed his face and sighed, looking at the picture again, then at his smart watch; he had a five-hour break today. Enough time to visit dad. "I'll do it today. Thanks for reminding me, man. How's the girlfriend?"

"Transferred to Wyoming," groaned Trevor. "We're still managing long-distance, though. We're thinking of meeting up in Vegas for the Holidays."

"That's good."

The two triplets continued conversing about banal things for the next fifteen minutes, until Trevor Bailey's supervisor walked by his workstation and he was forced to close the chat program. Sighing, Tristan rose up from his seat and made his way out of his office, on his way to visit his dad.

Tyler Bailey, the inventor of Multi-Universal Transit Array, sat in his arm chair reading the latest issue of Weekly World News when a knock came to his door. The 70-something man rose to his feet, making his way towards the door and grabbing a wakizashi that he kept to fend off burglars or worse. When you lived in a town like this, you had to be careful about this kind of thing. He didn't know how to use the sword, but it looked intimidating, and that's what counted.

He leaned against the doorframe, calling through the front door. "Who's there?"

"Dad, come on," said a familiar voice. "Do you always have to be like this? It's just me."

Blinking, Tyler Bailey opened the door to find himself face-to-face with one of his sons. Frowning, he asked a question. "How did Abraham Lincoln die?"

Without missing a beat, Tristan answered this question and the others that were to follow. "Shot by John Wilkes Booth while watching Our American Cousin in Ford's Theater. Nixon resigned from office in 74, both Bushes are still alive and are Republicans, and Pope John Paul II was not assassinated. Yes, I'm from the

baseline." He smiled wryly at his father, who smiled back and put down the sword.

Tyler Bailey hugged Tristan, who did his best to hold back tears of joy. "Hello, son."

"Hey, dad. Merry Christmas."

"I didn't expect you to get here so early!" Tyler Bailey chuckled as he boiled water for some hot chocolate. "I thought you boys weren't arriving until the 23rd!"

"I got an early flight," explained Tristan, smiling at his dad. "Tom's probably having trouble down south, and Trevor said he was coming up with his girlfriend. I got lucky."

"Took the red-eye, then?"

"Yeah. Weiss let me go early just to visit you. She's doing fine, by the way; not at all sore about that thing back in '89."

"Good!" Tyler chuckled as he brought hot chocolate to his son, sitting across him at the kitchen table. "So, how goes stuff in Multi-U?"

"Dad, you know you shouldn't talk about that stuff; you're no longer Commissioner of the Department."

"Bah! The only reason that department exists is because of my invention! I have every right to know about it. Besides, I'm still an employee."

"You're a consultant."

"Same difference." Tyler Bailey blew on his hot chocolate and smiled at his son. "So, what's new up in old Sloth Spit?"

"Not much, really," shrugged Tristan as he took a sip of the drink. "Things got hectic last year because of the whole Mayan Apocalypse thing. We were preparing evac plans for half the US using the portal device…"

"Glad the Mayans were wrong about that, eh?" Tyler chuckled. "Besides, if they were right, they didn't account for leap years and shit. If anything, the apocalypse would've happened in February, and we'd all be caught with our pants down."

"Mmm," said Tristan, looking at his watch. "Hey, dad, how about we watch that film you like so much?"

"Which one?"

"You know, that Noir one from the 40's. The one Welles did."

Tyler blinked. "The Shadow? But you hate that film!"

"It's Christmas. Besides, what else are we gonna watch? Rankin-Bass productions on ABC? The Science of Christmas on Discovery?"

"Fair point," noted the elder Bailey, standing up and heading to the living room. "Come on, then. You mind making the popcorn?"

"Not at all!" Tristan went into the kitchen, checking his coat pocket as he did so; the syringe was still there, and still capped, for when he needed to use it. He sighed softly to himself and rubbed an eye, before looking in the pantry for some bags of popcorn.

It was snowing outside when the credits started rolling. Tristan smiled at his dad as the film ended, fiddling in his pocket and looking at his watch; his five hours were almost up, but he still had some time. "Better than I remembered it to be."

"Hah!" Tyler Bailey clapped his hand, and looked under the Christmas tree where all the presents were. "…you know, son, if you want, you can open your present early."

"Dad!" Tristan stared at his father. "I can't! It wouldn't be fair!"

"Bah! I won't tell the others; you can always just re-wrap it. Go ahead, take a look." Tristan moved towards the tree, taking his box-shaped present out from under the tree. He carefully undid the wrapping paper, and smiled at what was underneath: a collectors

edition version of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. "I remember how much you loved that series as a kid. You were… what, 5 when that show first came on the air? But you still watched it every night it was on."

Tristan sniffed, smiling at his dad as he took out his smart phone and took a picture of the collection, for future reference. "Thanks, dad…" He dug in his pocket briefly, before opening his arms for a hug. Tyler Bailey accepted, hugging his son tight.

Tyler Bailey was so happy he didn't even notice the needle with the Class-A amnestic dig into his back and be injected, nor did he notice when he started going to sleep. Tristan sighed and laid his father down on the couch, putting the needle in a Bio-hazard bag and re-wrapping his Christmas present.

After some more cleaning up, such as washing out the mugs of hot chocolate and disposing of the popcorn bowl, he stepped out the door, and made his way back to the portal home.

Tristan Bailey stepped back into the baseline, looking like he was about to cry as the portal shut behind him. Director Weiss was standing there, looking concerned as she spoke up. "How was he?"

"He's good. Wasn't suspicious like last year." He handed the Bio-hazard bag to an assistant. "I assume I won't have to write a report about this?"

"About what?" The director shrugged. "You were visiting family, simple as that." With that, she started walking out of the department. Tristan followed soon after, stopping in front of a plaque near the door to the Portal Chamber.

THIS LABORATORY IS DEDICATED TO
DR. TYLER BAILEY
INVENTOR OF THE MUTA
1935-1997

Tristan smiled softly at the plaque, touching the engraving before walking down the hallway, whistling a Christmas carol to himself.

Love and Relative Safety in Sex

◄ previous

"Furthermore, ***SCP-447****-2 can be refined (see Appendix 447-C: Distillation Process) into a useful lubricant approved for use at all SCP Foundation installations, so long as said lubricant is never used to lubricate dead bodies."*

The junior researcher set the copy of the document down on the desk with a sigh. "…Oh hell."

"Come on."

"Dude, I'm not paid enough. And, notably, *my ass* isn't an 'SCP Foundation installation', it's just my ass. It's always been there, Foundation or no Foundation."

"Well it's about to be one. Look, I thought you and I had a thing going for a little while there. Hell, I kinda thought we were still-"

"You and I *do* have a thing going, Alto, but that's between you and I, not you and I and a pile of sludge."

"Man, I already told the assistant research director that we greenlit this testing-"

"Well, what are you gonna do to convince me?"

"…I'll cook us waffles in the morning."

"That's it? Wait, not- not *those* waffles, right?"

"Oh, no, the normal ones."

The researcher sighed and stood up out of his chair. "Alright. Deal."

Alto Clef was a man of his word, to say the least. When he told a project director he'd get something done, he got it done. But when the Site's research heads were pressing for more extensive 447-2 testing, he got a little uneasy. There was only so much people could come up with after a few years of experimentation, after all.

But he was just stressed. It'd all be fine. His flirtatious, wonderful, kind, awkwardly submissive, probably-too-low-of-a-clearance-level boyfriend was waiting for him in the employee quarters. He just had to get that sample and they'd be able to proceed with their plans of last night.

"Where's that sample?" Clef asked no one in particular, spinning around in his chair.

"Almost here, sir. We had a minor computer error, and couldn't take it out of the inventory until it was repaired."

"A computer error? Of what sort?"

"An LMAPO error. Logistical Mapping and Procedural Officiator, the research lab's AI. You know the one."

"Ah yes, good ol' LMAPO."

"LMAPO."

"Alright, well once you all sort out that LMAPO situation, I'm gonna need to get that sample and turn in for the night."

A few of the researchers hunched over low-priority tasks in the corner shot confused and concerned glances at each other, but knew better than to question anything.

"Sure. I'll go down the hall and get it once LMAPO's self-repair is complete."

"Marvelous."

Junior Researcher Jaime Abraham sat on the edge of Clef's bed. He

never felt particularly welcome here, between the multiple loaded shotguns in three of the four corners and the vaguely disconcerting scent of stale maple syrup. He twitched his legs. "Nghh, this is gonna be weird-"

"Oh my fuck, Abraham, it's just lube. I bet this is better than that KY shit we've been using."

"Are you ever gonna call me by my first name?"

Clef put the vial on the nightstand and turned most of the lights off, leaving the room in only the green glow of the emergency light. What a situationally relevant color, he thought. Really set the mood. "Of course not. That's against protocol," he explained, stumbling out of his pants.

"Uh…"

"I'm just messing with you. It's actually because I thought Abraham was your first name up until like three weeks ago, so I still get stuck with it." He took a condom out of the bedside table's drawer.

"What? Why?"

"Because they wanted it for the test procedures."

"No, my name! We've been dating for like eight months!"

"It was a simple mistake!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means we don't want my jizz interfering with the process. This is basic research standard, you know."

"No, not that, the other thing!"

"Man, don't worry about it. Let's just move on. You hard yet?"

"Why do *I* need to be hard?"

"F- I don't fuckin' know! Because that's fucking normal? What's

gotten into you, Abraham?"

Abraham grimaced and rolled over onto his stomach. "Don't you use that head researcher voice at me, it makes it *weird-"*

"It's always gonna be *weird,* unless you're on one of my teams."

"That would be *really* weird. Please don't ever make me work under you."

"Uh, phrasing."

"In a non-sexual way."

"…This is sexual. We're about to have sex."

"Christ alive, you know what I mean." He closed his eyes and started laughing. "Just fucking start already."

"Mmm-hmm." Clef rolled the condom onto his *massive eight-inch*[1] *cock* and proceeded to lubricate himself with the 447-2 before grabbing the younger man's ass in preparation.

"I want a shower already."

"Just stop thinking of it as anomalous slime and think of it as- I don't know, something relaxing, like- like-"

"Like what?!"

"I don't know, fucking coconut-scented tanning lotion or some shit! Some of that fancy shit you like to slather all over yourself!"

Abraham grunted. "Can you slow the fuck down back there?"

Clef looked down in the dim lighting. He *had* slid in easily. He'd have to make a note of that. "Have I ever told you about the time I fucked someone from an alternate reality?"

"Which of the hundreds of GOC missions did *this* one happen on?"

"No no, this was just last year."

"Can you tell me about it at a time when you're not shoving your dick in my ass? Better yet, can we not make any casual conversation while we're-"

"Sure, sure. My bad. But dear God, this is slippery."

"You log it; I'm tired."

"I know, I know." Clef got up and put his pants back on, thudding down at the computer. "I'm gonna have to add this to the experiment log, you do realize."

"Please don't name me in it."

"Well I don't wanna name myself either! I'm the fucking project head!"

"Okay, fine, just blame it all on me then-"

"I told the other researchers it'd be you doing it-"

"Do you have a problem with the 'other researchers' knowing I'm the bottom or something? Why can't we tell them it was your dick?"

"No, just- I have my methods, dammit! They won't notice! Now, what do you have to say about the test?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking." Abraham put his head in his hands. "Ugh, just- just say 'I could market this as *that* kind of lubricant, but I don't think a warning label is enough to ensure that some necrophiliac doesn't use it on a dead body.' Does that sound comprehensive enough?"

"Of course. All for the sake of research, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and enter it in the database, I guess."

"What are you worried about?"

"I'm just wondering if that was safe. I mean, I know it was, but that felt kind of-"

Clef smiled. "But… of course it's Safe. I wrote the Object Class myself."

"…God fucking damn it."

Date: / /

Test Subject: One (1) Trojan condom

Procedure: Dr. A placed the condom on his [DATA EXPUNGED] and applied SCP-447-2 onto it. He then tested the SCP-447-2-covered condom by [DATA EXPUNGED]

Results: [DATA EXPUNGED]. Dr. A reports that the procedure "went really well."

Notes: "I could market this as that kind of lubricant, but I don't think a warning label is enough to ensure that some necrophiliac doesn't use it on a dead body."—Dr. A

Footnotes
1. 20.32 cm

A Visitation

Outside the apartment's windows, the sound of children laughing drifted from the park, a block away.

Professor Ian Thomas sank into his couch without really looking around the room. He closed his eyes. It had been a long day. The historian could not remember the last time it had been a short day. He let out a long sigh and rubbed at his temples, reaching for the bottle of bourbon he saved in the cabinet nearby for serious emergencies.

It wasn't there.

"Check the coffee table, Professor." It took a moment for the voice to register for him, and when it did, it was nonetheless peculiar. Adjectives filtered into his mind without actually corresponding to definite details. He knew the voice was even, cultured, the slight hints of a strange accent … but he could not identify a gender, an age, or a precise tone.

His instincts screamed at him, but he found himself reaching leisurely for the filled glass on the glass surface all the same. Like a man struggling against the tide, he tried to focus on the source of the voice and found a pair of eyes in a face that, like the voice, his mind refused to describe.

"Relax, Professor," the black-red eyes said. "Have a sip, it'll make this go easier. It's quite good, if you don't mind me saying so." The eyes raised a half-filled glass in a slender hand and tipped it towards him. "I've been sampling it. You will pardon me my transgression, I hope. I was raised in slightly different codes of hospitality."

The historian brushed away the cobwebs of his mind and sat up straighter. He knew his uninvited guest; his mind was racing down remembered pathways … accounts of blood and fire. He swallowed and set the glass firmly down. "I think I will wait," he said in a

quavering voice. “How did you find me?”

“Come, Professor, you’re well-acquainted with me,” the visitor said. “I’m pleased to see you and your colleagues so enthusiastic about my memoirs. The amount of energy you have put into collecting them astounds me.”

“You are-”

The eyes narrowed slightly. “Let’s use your colleagues’ term for me, Professor. Keep this professional.”

Thomas swallowed hard. “You are SCP-140-A,” he said.

“Quite so. Are you surprised?”

The historian shivered. Despite his best efforts, his fingers began tapping nervously on the coffee table. He felt the other’s wry amusement and cursed the weakness of his knees. This was not supposed to be his element. “I’m …” he swallowed, licking his lips, “I’m sorry, but you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Of course I do. I would not be here if I did not.” SCP-140-A’s eyes were hard to read, but he felt the amusement growing. “Professor, I have not survived for centuries by being incautious. I learn. I listen. I adapt. I have no interest in exposing myself to unnecessary risk. I chose you because you are an educated man. Because my sources indicate that unlike some among your colleagues you have no proficiency in the use of the regulation pistol you are presently fumbling to grasp, while I have killed before and will do so again with a smile.”

It laughed, and something about the sound made Thomas think of breaking glass, skittering across his nerves. “Relax, Professor. You are my host. I have no interest in violence tonight, but in the event you attempt a facsimile of cheap heroism, my snipers will put a bullet in your brain before you hear the crack of gunfire.”

Thomas dropped the useless pistol with the faintest flicker of secret relief. He cleared his throat, leaned forward, and did his best to look the well-dressed intruder in the face, though his eyes smarted when

he tried to look too closely. “Then why are you here?”

“Your Foundation has sought me for some time,” SCP-140-A replied, “much as the Inquisition and the Templars and the ghazis before them. In my time, leaders met each other face to face.” It smiled with teeth like a row of gleaming knives. “I felt it necessary to provide you the same courtesy.”

The historian swallowed again and nodded. “I see,” he said. “I don’t suppose you would be interested in formal negotiations with Foundation authorities.”

“Somehow, I doubt they would be conducted in good faith,” SCP-140-A replied. It sat back on the couch opposite Thomas’, looking uncomfortably at home. The … whatever it was let out a sigh and set its drink down. Thin hands pressed tightly together before their owner’s face.

“Yours is a strange era, Professor,” it said. “I’ve learned much of your colleagues. My time was an age of kings. Blood was spilt in the name of gods and glory. Your colleagues do not fight for either.” It laughed sharply. “I don’t pretend to understand all your methods, and yet I know your capacity for ruthlessness. But not in search of land, power, not even peace. Your sacrifices are in the name of …” it made a disgusted sound, “’normality.’ Could you think of no better cause but the preservation of the mediocre?”

“Is that why you wrote it?”

“Need it have been in the service of some nefarious plot?” SCP-140-A replied. It crossed one long leg across the other; the red-black eyes half-lidded. “Perhaps I was merely lonely. Nostalgic.”

“Yes. The good old days. How I miss my ritual sacrifice.”

“Come, Professor, you’re wiser than that. You know how brutal and violent the ancient world once was.” SCP-140-A sounded thoughtful. “And yet from the wreckage of an empire that salted fields and killed one in ten for disloyalty, your people built this age of technological wonders. Do you think these marvels of science and steel any less forged in blood?”

“We didn’t do it literally,” the historian replied. He took a sip of his drink, despite knowing he should stay on his toes. “You had your chance.”

“And yet you remain curious,” the guest said. “The Foundation snatched you from a promising career in academia, if I recall correctly. I know you’ve mused about what would happen in the case of another … I believe you call them ‘expansion events,’ yes? Any honest historian would.” It smiled. “But you haven’t really been a historian for years, have you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You resent your employment,” it replied. “I don’t blame you. How many of your colleagues share your passion?” It took a sip of its drink and shook its head. “Your expertise is met by disdain, even contempt. I saw Alexandria burn, Professor, and the Bonfire of the Vanities, and the fires in Munich. And I wept. So much knowledge destroyed. Your colleagues would have you preserve a new Dark Age.”

“And your alternative is … what, exactly?” the historian asked, trying to ignore the uncomfortable, nervous way the other’s words bit at him. His fingers drummed unconsciously on the table’s surface. “Usher in one myself in a fit of pique? Or are you just suggesting I make it public?”

“Why else didn’t you warn them about the dig site, Professor?”

A lump of glacial ice dropped into Thomas’ guts. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he snapped. The bourbon in his hand was beginning to look more tempting by the moment.

“Oh, pardon me, I didn’t mean to be rude.” The visitor leaned forward, cupping its narrow chin in a long pale hand. Black-red eyes seemed to sparkle with interest. “It’s a natural assumption. Surely you foresaw some danger. One of the Foundation’s few historians would be considered enough of an authority on the subject that it’s hard to conceive of his warnings being ignored by his colleagues. I don’t blame you, Professor. You can’t exactly publish material on the subject, nor can you teach, so all you have left is …” it shrugged,

“research.”

“I warned them,” Thomas hissed, the memory hot in his head. He licked his lips nervously and downed the remainder of his glass’ contents in a swallow. The glass and the hand that held it trembled as a tide of memories flickered through his brain.

He had seen the photos taken at the ill-fated dig. They held the kind of uneasy fascination fever-dreams possessed, beautiful things and horrible things still artful in their craft. And he had listened to the recordings. They kept him awake at night.

“I’m sure you did,” the visitor said comfortingly, and reached out to pat Thomas’ shoulder. Beneath the fabric, his skin crawled at the contact. “It’s on the record, after all. ‘Professor Thomas advises caution.’ Very matter-of-fact phrasing. It’s hardly your fault if you expected them not to listen.”

“This conversation is over.”

“Is it? Well, I suppose that’s fair,” the visitor said with a strange half-smile. “You need some time to think, no doubt. I’ve enjoyed our time together, Professor. It’s a pleasure to talk to a man who knows who and what I am. A man who truly appreciates my work. I’ll stop by again another time.”

It rose from its seat and stretched, producing a small piece of paper looking like it had been torn from a notepad. There was a cellphone number written in a neat hand. “If you change your mind, Professor, you’ll know where to find me.”

A Waking Nightmare

Deep in the mind of all beings is a place. This place is without space, as space denotes a measurable area that physically exists. It is a plane with all the time it could want, beginning with the waking moments of the first universe and stretching into the endless, as even the dead can dream. It is the Dreamtime, plane of infinite possibility and empty inevitability.

In one of the many corners of the Dreamtime floated an errant thought, a small continent of imaginary dirt floating amidst an abyss of the unreal. And sitting on one edge was an unnamed nightmare, waiting for the moon to rise.

It watched a nearby island, ringed by a small ocean. Watching the rim of the ocean fall into nothing endlessly had become a small pastime for it. From the pile to its right, it took a small blue rock. For a moment it felt the rock's weight, and then it hurled the stone at the island. Rock after rock, it tried splashing the orange rimfall.

Eventually the moon rose. A massive ball of cheese rose through the nethertime, bathing the Dreamtime in cheddar light.

The nightmare stood. A crater in the moon bled crimson, and as the nightmare brought itself to its full height it was bathed in scarlet light from the blood orb hovering in the horizon.

Feet falling into lush purple grass, the nightmare traversed further inland. Across the plains other Dreamtime creatures — various other nightmares, muses, and fantasies — were also in search of ways into the minds of the Real. The nightmare stopped when it found a small gap in the air, the faint smell of fear wafting through.

A brief moment of meditation was all it needed. Something to remind itself why it did what it did. A reason to be truly terrifying. The thin hope that it would become a recurring nightmare, that it would find a good source of power for the Dreamtime. Tangling itself in a mess of

joints, it pressed through the portal.

It was in a forest, full of tiny wildlife and protected by a sea of stars. Lush and, oddly, green. The trees held a distinct liveliness to them, and the area was blanketed in an ominous darkness that almost made them shine. The nightmare rose an arm and ran its fingers over the leaves. Soft, wet with dew, tiny vegetative veins lacing each one. The bark underneath coarse, detailed with chips and knots.

A truly powerful mind had sculpted this place.

Footsteps echoed off the foliage. Small footsteps, light but nimble. This was the mind of a child, likely. The nightmare waited, placing where his prey was exactly. After another moment of preparation it lifted the branch it had been inspecting, catching a look at the girl. She couldn't have been any more than four years old.

The nightmare took a thundering step forward, placing its other hand on another tree and uprooting it just by putting some weight on it. Lights in the sky twinkled out as it rose above the treetops. It tore away the crown of this first tree and tossed it aside. The brightness of the greenery dimmed as it reached for the girl.

She caught its hand, their palms pressed together.

There was a silence.

Light returned.

The nightmare tried to recoil, but she had wrapped its hand in her arms in a warm embrace. Heat raced up past a series of elbows and blossomed across the nightmare's chest. It picked her up, her feet dangling as she clung to its hand. Bringing itself to a height it had never achieved, it held her in front of its face. It tilted its head back and held her above it, taking in both her and the stars above. They seemed to be getting closer and closer.

The child released its hand and fell onto its featureless face. She hugged that instead. Stars scraped at its shoulders as the nightmare continued to rise into the heavens. She laughed and giggled and cried in delight as she climbed onto the top of his head, sitting like a

queen on her throne.

With a foot the size of a stadium it flattened trees as it began trekking forward. New trees sprung to attention as it lifted its foot. After a few steps it lowered itself into a deep blue ocean, the water almost coming up to its chin.

Together they traveled, witnessing all there was to see on a sea of dreams. Lighthouses spearing the horizon to shepherd in ships from parts unknown, fish of all colors and shapes were caught from a rod she had pulled from nowhere. Ancient civilizations long since drowned were stomped underfoot, leviathan beasts wrapped around the nightmare's waist.

Slowly, a storm presented itself. Stars were blotted out as a dark cloud passed overhead, and the sea began to crash. The nightmare shielded his host from the rain. Lightning stabbed down, lancing into the water. It tickled, somewhat. On his head, the girl curled into a small ball. Where the nightmare had failed, the storm succeeded.

Thunder rolled across the sea and out into Realspace.

Tiffany Roads shrank into her blankets and tried to ignore the sky exploding around her home.

The nightmare found itself there with her, its back pressed between the space of her bed's headboard and the wall. Its legs sprawled out past and then under the bed, its arms hanging limply. Realspace poked and prodded at it from all directions, trying desperately to make him unreal again.

It hurt.

Pain was not something it had ever experienced before, and being Real and being in pain seemed to be synonymous for a Dreamtime creature.

The nightmare slowly lifted an arm and placed a hand over Tiffany. Whether it was for its benefit or hers, it wasn't fully sure.

Yet she relaxed. A small hand gripped one of his fingers. Tiffany curled up against its hand.

The pain didn't stop, but it seemed more bearable.

"G'night, **Misser Sticks**."

A Wandsman in the Court of the Hanged King

Where aphotic sea does deny,
Reflections of a xanthous sky.

And black stars reign without ascent,
Echoes of what was never meant.

A city built in unknown times,
Upon the bones of countless crimes.

Stranger yet is found within,
The chaos court of strife and sin.

The mad dance here without control,
As all must play their given role.

For those beyond our mortal ken,
We die and live, and die again.

Our Lord does writhe atop his throne,
Before his glory, we atone,
With this, our blood, it is the Hanged King's,
So shall we suffocate upon his puppet-strings.

Preface:

I write to you, dearest reader, from a certain bibliothecal nexus. I have bartered with the shades and expect my latest travelogue to, piece by piece, reach the infinite worlds: they know of the dark corners, the secret places and Janus Doors, in which to deliver my folios.

I bleed words and have obliterated myself upon these pages for your entertainment and enlightenment.

A Wandsman in the Court of the Hanged King:

I remember the rich aroma of decaying flowers as it struggled against a sharp, metallic scent for supremacy - neither lingering odor able to disperse the other. Clutched within my talons was a flesh-bound grimoire, the ill tempered tome biting my hand at its first opportunity. I felt acquainted with its contents, as if having finished reading but moments before, and returned the spiteful book to its shelf.

In retrospect, I am unable to recall a single word of it.

There developed an itch about my left eye. Instinctively trying to soothe the irritation with a scratch, my talon sliding across a polished surface. A porcelain mask, seemingly irremovable, disguised my features.

I cawed in frustration, the grievous itch beyond reach.

A tall and conical entity wagged diverse appendages and trumpeted a shush. The Frmmmk'l Frmamem of Frm was right to be bothered as I was, after all, within a library. Bowing my head apologetically, I took my leave of the aptly named Athenaeum of Severed Tongues, eager to explore.

I arrived at the Hall of Mercurial Virtue with anomalous speed, unaware what occurred between the here and there. Such was the nature of **`Alagadda`**, the restraints of time and space being mere suggestion, not law. Even as an experienced wanderer, I too succumbed to the city's dreamlike malaise.

The Hall of Mercurial Virtue blurred the line between the beautiful and grotesque. Pilgrims and emperors, gods and monsters; entities from all possible realities playing their role in the eternal masquerade. Driven by ambition as black as the stars above, most sought a boon from the Hanged King itself.

My talons clicked together, my mind overstimulated by the grand chamber and its curious inhabitants. A decadent display of insidious glamour, Alagadda was hardly the dismal realm initially anticipated. A moniker such as "The Hanged King" conjured forth images of death and decay, desolation and despair - not revelry. My eyes contain sixteen spectral receptors and yet I only observed red,

white, black, and yellow - the color scheme unexpectedly limited. Stranger still was the persistent taste of purple - near hidden beneath the reek of lust sweat and sweet meats.

I tried to ignore the perplexing glare of anarchy and watched from a corner (relatively speaking - Alagadda the epitome of non-Euclidian architecture).

Certain observations are simply too salacious for me to put to writing; however, when considering the infinite orgy, one may simply allow their imagination to run wild. Whatever you could possibly conceive - you'll find it within the Hall of Mercurial Virtue. Suffice to say, expect to see a diverse array of shame organs - usually entangled with other shame organs. Which brings me to my first observance:

A Flesh Shaper of Adytum, their pale mask asymmetric, fondled a Blood Vestal of Daeva with hand and tentacle - the two whispering terrible secrets into each others' ears. Their auras revealed a history intertwined, their copulation practically incestuous from my perspective. My revulsion gland nearly full, I sought something more palatable to my senses.

A Centaurial Dreamsmith of Oneiroi bargained with the Deathless Merchant of London, the one closest to real having the apparent upper-hand. The Merchant spat legal jargon, nasally articulating his terms of agreement. I detected no past or future for the Dreamsmith, though an ephemeral existence is challenging to read. In contrast, the Merchant cast a long shadow, where dead souls accumulated and pointed accusatory fingers.

A trio of godlings, entities so often thought to be in opposition, mocked their mortal faithful - their barbed tongues spitting venom and condescension. The three consisted of a Horned Tyrant of Panthiss, a Bedlam Sprite of X'nol'zok'thussss'i, and a Hierarch Cherub of Eldonai. Betwixt the godlings resided an altar, carved with symbols that twisted and blurred and seethed.

A chitinous servitor delivered a hatchling to the shrine as one might deliver a meal. With dagger raised, the retainer chanted words that

escaped translation. I averted my gaze, unwilling to watch their mortal strike. I heard the blade enter the flesh and the spill of blood.

The servant removed the ghastly corpse and surrendered a curtsy before vanishing in a blink. Dinner had been served and the cultivores appeared satisfied; feasting upon not the victim but rather the symbolism of the atrocity. Symbols, I remind myself, have power to such creatures.

Casting my eyes skyward, I beheld the legendary Masked Lords of Alagadda:

The White Lord, Wearer of the Diligent Mask - a porcelain guise with eyes narrow, the mouth little more than a flat line.

The Yellow Lord, Wearer of the Odious Mask - a porcelain guise with brow furrowed, the lips curled into a hateful sneer.

The Red Lord, Wearer of the Mirthful Mask - a porcelain guise with eyes wide and manic, a smile carved from cheek to cheek.

I saw no sign of the Black Lord, Wearer of the Anguished Mask. This came as no surprise, they supposedly exiled to some forgotten backwater of dimension. It is written that the cause had been political in nature, the specifics unknown. It is difficult to imagine the court intrigue of such a place.

My feathers raised with a sudden shudder. Dread began its coil - transforming the music of my dual hearts to dissonance. A stranger, lithe and sable, made their opulent entrance. Accompanied by a coterie of harlequin sycophants and paper guards. They wore no mask, their faceless visage an aberration among the masquerade.

My hope grew dim in the presence of the Ambassador of Alagadda.

Their title was a misnomer, the designation unable to encompass the totality of their power and prestige. The Ambassador of Alagadda was the Voice of the Hanged King, their will made manifest, and to whom even the Masked Lords bowed their marionette heads.

I chose the better part of valor and made a casual retreat. The

palace was a labyrinth, bereft of rhyme or reason. Drunk were the gods of physics, above and below without meaning – twisted by the pandemonium city.

I encountered myself several times, always located at some unapproachable location - iterations of my past and future self. My attire was red, yellow, white, black, and utterly garish; I apparently having more concern with the enforcement of Alagaddan fashion than the entanglement of time.

And then, a burgeoning terror - an unseen threat closing fast.

There existed a void where a memory should have been, unaware my arrival. Naked in my ignorance, I shivered as the chill gloom embraced me. The wind took pity and sung its sorrow song - as it diminished, it whispered unto me a warning: "In here is a tragedy".

I beheld Alagadda's shadow, an amalgamation of rust, rot, and misery - a dead city at the end of all things. Wandering its empty streets, I stepped over tattered banners and broken glass. Dust gave chase, granted life through my careless meanderings. The palace had come to ruin, its once splendid gates torn from their hinges.

The Hall of Mercurial Virtue was lifeless, a tomb for want and vanity. In the room's center was a gaping hole - no, not simply a hole; more an infected wound. A viscous ichor gushed from the aperture, an amber colored substance imbued with the sick scent of failed creation.

I entered the wound, crawling into the bowels of Alagadda. I know not what overcame me, never intending to come this far. Was I to play this role from the beginning? From where I now reside, I can look back and see the puppet strings. I remember only little of my descent - just the singular desire to find what hid beneath. I was a scholar, an explorer, and would play my part well.

The broken rules of time and space again summoned me elsewhere. A windowless room of humble stone, cloaked in a layer of sepia fog and bereft the opulence so common to Alagadda. I sensed no name among its shrouded corridors. Sickly vapor

slithered around me, saturated with the scent of ripened books. At the far wall was a descending spiral staircase, its steps crude and uneven - comparatively primitive to the city above (or below; I could not know).

And still, to the boredom of my readers, I advanced - facing the banality of more stairs. I felt as if I was the fabled Xitheus, Retainer of the Fungal Crown - who quested through the Slough of Three Million Inconveniences. One step, then another - all fairly straight forward. As I neared the bottom I began to hear whispers - spoken in a tongue I could not understand. Cliche? If this was a work of fiction, perhaps, but know that chaos words represent the universal warning for having ventured too far (Consult *Otherworld Laws and Universal Constants* to learn more).

One step, then another, and I felt my soul burst into flames - immolating the ego and casting the psychic aftermath into the wind as cinders. Around and around my fragments twirled - pulled by gravity of something incalculably vast. I was as thought - a fugitive sentiment before an ancient intelligence.

Here among the dreaming dead,

I am ash,

Embers,

And burning feathers,

Drifting through the firmament.

Carried by wind,

As if my wings were not vestigial

To land I am anchored

By murderous gravity.

I am reformed,

Only to be torn apart,

Again,

And again

Every trace

Recycled reminders,

Of who I used to be.

I became blood,

On the hands of criminals.

I became the noose

Around my own throat

From death I am become

One step closer to real

From within the center of chaos my fragments felt the vibrations of a great scream, a living emanation of mad anguish. Matter and form grew enamored and gathered around the existential wound. Neither sacred or profane, the Hanged King took shape - the shards of my ego becoming one with the walls of its throne room and dungeon.

The veiled entity, asphyxiated by a noose of thorns, writhed upon its throne - bound in place by shackles, hooks, and spears. There, unmoved by the cosmic scream, stood the Ambassador of Alagadda. Although dwarfed by the Hanged King, the two were of a similar countenance - a resemblance not shared with denizens of their kingdom.

The Hanged King lunged at its tormentor, more primal than regal - their faces a mere breath apart. The Ambassador, callous and calm, lifted the veil with an ebon hand.

Instead of a face, I beheld a visage of nihility - a god shaped hole.

All was void.

First came a familiar aroma - a hint of vanilla, a drop of citrus, with a fixative of mold and mustiness.

I opened my eyes and saw a lantern aglow with spectral fire. Shelves overflowing with tomes both eldritch and mundane.

I dipped a finger into a clay jar to my left, swirling the contents within. Satisfied, I withdrew a now ink-soaked claw, placed it upon a scroll of parchment, and began to transcribe my experience from memory.

Ickis the Wayward, Wandsman of Kul-Manas - Walker of the Astral Plane, Sailor of the Celestial Sea, and Spelunker of the Dimensional Depths

A Witch's Tale - Mistakes Were Made

Yes, I do know what happened to those two and the other. Yes, I was there. Well, of course, *you* heard something about that.

Let me tell you this: when you are young, you count and tally; you rate your fuck-ups against each other like a drunkard's race. Me? I stopped bothering a long time ago. All fuck-ups, big or small, after enough time passes they are all the same, forgotten. Only ghosts remember. This thing in Detroit, though? Well, this was a bad one.

It started with the crack house, with the deaths of seven innocent people that I got there too late to stop. Seven more souls that are now bound to me by my mistakes.

I might have been able to do something about it the night before. I had already been arguing with them for so long, it was so very late, and I was so very tired. It is hard to take mass murder seriously, cloaked in pretentious bullshit, over three-in-the-morning diner pancakes and stale coffee. I honestly had thought they were all talk, but that isn't really any excuse for negligence.

Yes, of course they were narcissists, and I knew that. The art *requires* narcissism, at least at first. You can't hope to warp the world to your will, unless you first believe *your* will is more real than the world itself and everyone in it. You should have seen me when the *bereginya* first found me. I was a pretty terror. I would have eaten you alive, you lovely strong man, yes. I may yet, still.

By the time I got there, the working had already started. The circle was drawn, the altar was hallowed and laved in blood. The spirits of steel and concrete, of empty lot and blighted playground, spat and howled; all awakened, sentient and restless. *My* students had done this. They were fools, and foolishness was going to get them killed but *I* had made the mistake of teaching them what little they knew and *I* was responsible for them.

I found them on the roof of the condemned tenement. "What have you done?" I asked. Mother Morena, could I have been *any* more ineffectual and cliched?

Jake went on with the usual rehearsed rhetoric, the symbolic transformation of trash into art (those were *people*, you psychotic asshole), sending a message to the thrones of power, blah blah blah. Ty said that they needed to fuel the working, these people were as close to dead already as makes no difference, nobody would miss them, and the cops would never come to this neighborhood to investigate the murder of some black crack addicts (as though *mundane* police attention was our main worry). Petra … Petra just threw back her head and laughed.

I had to help them, they couldn't handle power on this scale. I thought I could keep the collateral damage to a minimum. Collateral damage? Who am I, some flunkie at a Pentagon press conference? These are human lives I'm casually discussing the destruction of! Even *I* could barely handle a working of this scale anymore. Nowadays, my art is a bright pebble worn smooth by time and I am very far from my places of power. So I helped, so help me.

Perhaps, with my help, it would have worked. It might have been a thing of beauty brought forth by craft and will into a world made better by its presence. It might have shouted a truth that shook the halls of the mighty, and brought presidents and kings weeping to their knees. It might have exalted art over celebrity, given wings to the imprisoned, shone as a lantern to the lost and birthed the Aquarian Age from the stinking corpse of the Age of Mammon. Then, just maybe, it might almost have been worth the cost.

Now, what Ty was too stupid to realize, was that when people find that the authorities won't help them, they help themselves. Some gang claimed that house, the drugs, and the addicts in it, and they had sent their soldiers to avenge this invasion. Kids really, three of them, probably 13 to 15 years old (although I was the same age when father dressed me in boy's clothes, the lord's men put a spear in my hand for the first time and I marched to avenge some similar insult).

So, these armed children burst onto the roof with machine pistols,

and started spraying bullets everywhere. They couldn't possibly have hit me, of course, and it's probably dumb luck they hit anybody, but Jake took a bullet in his leg. I charmed one of them to sleep, as soon as I had my wits. I'm a foolish old woman, to let myself be ambushed by children in the first place! Ty fumbled for some petty defense that I had taught him but never got it off. Jake just screamed. Petra advanced on them, like a lioness, and smiled. They shot at her, but the bullets just passed through her like she wasn't really there (and of course, in a sense she wasn't). She picked them up one at a time and ripped their bodies apart with her bare hands, their souls feeding the working (now ravenous and insatiable).

It was ruined now, of course, all concentration lost and far too much blood spilled. It escaped into the sky and came crashing down in the city. I imagine there were hundreds killed. Then the air grew greasy and heavy, pregnant with power and, just like that, the giants were summoned forth. Hideous floating copies of Ty and Jake, hundreds of feet long and dressed in bi-colored harlequin costumes. They were grotesque, absurd human parade balloons with the minds of infants, and of course that ridiculous catch phrase was emblazoned on the sky in the color of dried blood. A farce skimmed from the idle thoughts of undisciplined minds. This wasn't just a senseless waste of human life, it was *trite*, it was a perversion of the art, it was *gauche*.

Jake, of course, claimed that it was a victory, that this clumsy and hideous mess was actually his plan all along. It was an ironic commentary on the ultimate uselessness of art for revolutionary means or some bullshit. Jake would never tally his fuck-ups, he always just simply redefined each one as a triumph. Such a simple strategy, to claim every failure as a victory, too bad you need to be a monstrous idiot to pull it off.

Ty shrugged and said, "Mistakes were made." As though this wasn't anything he did, just something that happened. As though there wouldn't be a price.

I told you I have stopped keeping score, but *this* was a monstrous fuck-up. So, I undid it. Yes, I imagine you'd like to know how. Your people would love a way to just *unmake* messes like this, wouldn't you? Well, I'll give you a hint, because you are my favorite great-

great-something-great-grandson: God is a critic, and She *hates* bad art.

Nothing in my art is without cost, of course, all of those that died, are still dead. I imagine there was a train accident or gas-main explosion or terrorist attack or something instead. The ghosts are still mine. Jake still got shot somehow. He doesn't remember though, because I took care of him and Ty, after. They may, with therapy, eventually be able to talk, feed themselves and wipe their own asses again. They are young yet. Who knows? If he could, I'm sure Jake would claim this as his victory too.

That was the last of my power for awhile, I think, I'll need to save what I have left just to stay alive, for a hundred years at least.

Drink your tea, now, if you want me to read the leaves.

As for Petra, well she was the best working those two did, the best working I've seen since Jack Parson's Babalon, she was why I consented to teach them in the first place, after all. A masterpiece, by chance, from gifted apprentices. She is as perfect as they dreamed her and she has cut the umbilicus to them. She is out there now, a free thought, her will moving through the world and the world moving according to her will. What will she become? Woman, witch, goddess or monster? Or perhaps all of the above, eh? Who knows? She's young yet too.

A World's Legacy

Doomed World.
Desperate People.
Last Hope.
Fearful Wardens.
Young Girl.

Fifty Three sat in front of her room's mirror, braiding her hair for when her guest arrived. She wondered who would be visiting her in the hospital. It couldn't be her parents, the doctors told her that her disease made them sick before she was brought there. It couldn't be one of the people in the funny suits, they wouldn't be coming for four more days. If it was another little kid or teenager to play with, the doctors would have told her if it was. So, left wondering as to what was about to happen, Fifty Three continued to prepare for her unknown guest.

With time to spare, Fifty Three remembered back as far as she could. The very earliest that she could remember, she had been painting a picture in her room. Before the time that she could remember, the doctors told her, her parents had brought her here because she was sick. She saw no reason to doubt this story; she had seen other patients' rooms when they moved her, and everyone either wore lab coats or special clothes to keep them from getting sick. Well, no, that wasn't right. There was *one* thing, one of her favorite memories, that didn't quite belong in a hospital. After all, why would a hospital have a dragon?

She knew that dragons only lived in stories, but she also remembered very clearly that memory from thirteen years ago. She remembered the gentle giant with the cool, firm scales and the long, flowing mane. She remembered his patience as she drew colorful scenes on his neck and face. She remembered the strange, haunting melodies that he sang to her. She remembered her friend,

whom she had known for less than a day.

After a short while, the door to her room opened to reveal the metal box that the doctors used to move her from place to place, to keep people from getting sick, the doctors assured her.

"SCP-053, please enter the transport container," a calm voice commanded over a small speaker.

After she had entered the container, the door shut once again and she felt the box begin to move. She noticed a small cooler and a sleeping bag sitting in the corner of the box. Food, water, and bedding. They only used those for long trips.

The small speaker piped up again. "Good afternoon 053."

"Good afternoon doctor," she replied. "Can you tell me who I'm meeting now?"

"Not yet, it's still a surprise. The trip will take a while, so I would advise that you get comfortable."

Fifty Three milled around her room for a while, ate her dinner, drained a bottle of water, and decided to sleep through the rest of the trip.

She was awakened by the voice over the speaker; "SCP-053, we have reached our destination."

She sat up groggily as the door opened. A slow smile spread across her face as she saw who was on the other side. It was her friend.

> By order of the O5 Council:
> Due to an increase in the frequency and destructiveness of SCP-682's containment breaches, Protocol COLUMBIDAE 682/053 is to be implemented at the nearest possible date.

Fifty Three embraced her friend, at least, as much of him as she could.

"Little one," his deep voice rumbled, "it has been too long. Have you been well?"

"Yes, I have been. Well, I'm still sick, but I feel well enough."

"Hmm. You have been among these humans too long. I have much to teach you."

"What do you mean, my friend?"

"Have you not noticed it, my child? Have you not noticed that you are not like them? You may take the same shape as them, but I can see you as you truly are."

"I don't understand."

"My child, you are not like them. Your spirit is *far* older. It is the same as I am, a stranger in this world. *You* are as I am. That is why they tell you that you are ill. It is because they fear you. They fear you because they cannot understand your spirit."

Fifty Three sank to her knees, processing the information. Why did she get the feeling that the dragon was telling her the truth? How could it be true? Was she just sick? Were the doctors afraid of her? All of this sounded like something out of a wild story. Then again, dragons only existed in stories too. Why would a hospital have a dragon?

"Would you like to hear the truth? Would you like to know our story?"

Fifty Three nodded mutely.

And so, SCP-682 spent the rest of the day telling her of another place, another time, another story. He told her of great kingdoms, of the kindness that he had seen among his people, and of the hardships they had endured.

At the end of the day, a door opened up in the wall. On the other side of the wall, there was a room that looked exactly like Fifty Three's old room. A new voice blared over the speakers, ordering her to return to her bedroom for the night. Before crossing the threshold, Fifty Three turned around.

"My friend, what is your name?"

"In our home, I was called 'Atanti-ql-Paneu'. The name that you will call me by, however, will be 'Atanti.'"

And so, their lives continued this way for many months. Atanti would tell Fifty Three of their old home. Fifty Three would paint along or rest by his side. And, in time, she came to know of their past, and the truth of the "hospital." And all this time, she grew ever closer to Atanti.

"Atanti, tell me the story of the Seventh King's Speech again."

"Not today, my child." The behemoth took a deep breath. "Tell me once again, what is your name?"

"Fifty Three."

"No my child, that is merely the name that the humans have forced on you. It suits you no better than the name 'Sicz-Eitu' suits me. No, my child, you need a name truly deserving of your nature." The great dragon sat in silent contemplation for a moment. "'Quarseta-ql-Paneu.' Will you take this name?"

"'Quarseta.'" She let the name roll off her tongue. "It's a beautiful name. What does it mean?"

"In our tongue, it means 'The Bringer of Joy.' Now, come Quarseta. We have business to attend to."

"Business?"

"Of course. Did you expect to spend the rest of your life in this prison? Now go, collect your books and your paints. There is one more friend that we have yet meet."

Incident 682/053/1129:

[0:15]: SCP-053 moves to its individual containment cell.

[1:02]: SCP-682 begins adaptation, gaining a much

leaner form and a coat of interlocking plates of armor.

[4:13]: SCP-053 returns, carrying a cardboard box.

[4:57]: SCP-053 climbs onto the back of SCP-682.

[5:26]: SCP-682 develops a large, bony crest on its forehead, shielding SCP-053.

[5:43]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 breach containment.

[12:17]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 escape Site-19.

[17:24]: Mobile Task Force Beta-7 ("Maz Hatters") deployed to intercept SCP-682 and SCP-053. Mobile Task Force Eta-11 ("Snake Oil") and Mobile Task Force Xi-4 ("Chimney Sweeps") are deployed to clear areas in the path of the anomalies of civilians.

[5:18:01]: Contact lost with MTF Beta-7.

[19:11:03]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 arrive at Site-83.

[19:17:49]: SCP-682 and SCP-053 reach the containment cell of SCP-1129.
…

Quarseta looked on the scene in front of her in awe. A very beautiful person, their form twisting and turning through space in mesmerizing patterns. It was a dazzling display which gave one simultaneous senses of wonder and danger, like a coral snake or a tornado. And somehow, behind the transient images, there was a definite feeling of kindness and purity.

"Edrisek, my dear friend. It is good to see you again."

The dazzling being flashed and twirled back a greeting.

"Quarseta, this is my friend, Edrisek-tsa-Fanu. You will call them 'tsa-Fanu.' They will be our guide as we travel."

"Where are we going?"

"Home, my child. Home. Now, simply step into Edrisek's embrace, and we will take the first steps of our journey."

Quarseta hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward. Imagine, if you will, sinking deep into a soft, warm bed after a long day of tiring work. That was what Quarseta thought of when she walked into tsa-Fanu.

And then they were gone.

New World.
Desperate Travelers.
Fresh Hope.
Old Masters.
Quarseta.

HUB | Lost Golden Days »

A World We Live In

The following was flagged by Site 19's automated data filter (tagged with flags CLASSIFIED DATA, O5, SCP-682, SCP-173). As the following contains personal log data, only those with Site Administration clearance and above are cleared to view this document.

Personal audio log of Researcher Joshua "Watery" Hayes, June 7th 20

Various banging and rustling sounds can be heard in the background. CCTV footage at this time shows Hayes retrieving a bottle of brand vodka from under his bunk. Questioning about this log revealed it to be imported from Hayes's homeland of New Zealand, and upon Hayes requesting that he be allowed to keep the bottle as a keepsake, it was not removed from his procession as per Site regulations.

A scuffing sound is heard, confirmed as Hayes sitting in his work space chair. Hayes then takes a drink from the bottle of vodka, and sighs.

"You know what's fucked about this world? Because I know."

"It's not the monsters that wish nothing but death upon our species, like 682. It's not that which we don't understand, 173. Hell, most of the Euclids. It's not the things that infest humanity, or use and abuse it. And no, it's not humanity itself."

"It's the things lurking among us. It's the ticking time bombs, like 231. It's the ones that can't control themselves, like 507, no matter how nice he is, poor bastard. It's the ones that can murder us all with a thought, and not even intend it, like 239."

At this point, Hayes takes another drink from the bottle of vodka, and sets the bottle down nosily.

"There's a security guard here. Runs the detail up at the main entrance. He's a great guy. Funny, pretty smart. Basically the kind of guy that nearly everyone can get along with. Today, I asked him if he wanted to have a few drinks after shift. Unwind, relax. He declined politely, saying that he would be abandoning his post. Even after I debated with him whether or not he would be abandoning his post or not, he still declined. So I gave up and went about my day."

"At the end of my shift, I was chatting with my superior. I asked her about the guard, and she gave me this funny look, then she said:"

"'He's an SCP.'"

"Gave me a number, a file and went on her way. I came back here, to my quarters and read the file. Turns out he's damn near 1000 years old. Turns out he can seal out a doorway or gateway completely with some form of forcefield. The Foundation found him at the last place he was guarding: Some old castle in Scotland."

"And that got me thinking. How many others are out there. How many people who think they are normal, who are living normal lives, with this one quirk that bothers them every once in a while are out there? How many are harmless? How many are dangerous? How many do we know about?"

"And how many of the dangerous ones know what they can do?"

Hayes chuckles at this point.

"Some fucked up world we live in."

Abject Blue Insomnia

SCP-3985-7 Vocalization Log (2072)

JAN 14 - (00:51) Sixteen (suns/sons)
(01:52) Burning
(14:11) To see through

FEB 26 - (12:36) [Unintelligible]
(15:04) Up above

APR 02 - (05:05) White showers
(05:08) White flowers

JUN 19 - (08:33) Strangle it
(08:41) Strangle it

JUL 21 - (19:09) [Unintelligible]

SEP 08 - (21:48) Dog
(21:49) Play
(21:50) Fetch

You watched me make it, right? Mix the bottles from the top shelf with the ones on the bottom. Two to one, remember? Stir it all together until white crystals form.

Dhole toiled in the basement of a forest cabin, stirring great vats and sweating over ovens. A long table spanned one side of the room, its surface covered in plastic bags, bits of wire, and neat tools. An aquarium full of tangible night squirmed on the other side of the room, glowing lines of stars tracing twisting paths through it. A radio crackled noisily, announcing the electoral victory of some would-be prince over another.

Fill the pouches with it when you're done. Twist the wires around the connectors. Don't push too hard, or it might go off early. You've got stuff to do before you die.

She only paused the work long enough to stuff an energy bar into her mouth and tie her black hair back. It had become shaggy and matted in recent months, but she was too busy to cut it. Sweat gathered on her forehead, sliding down through thick eyebrows before dripping to the floor. Busy. Numb. That's what she aspired to.

Get the stuff out of the safe while that settles. It's the same combination I used for everything else. You're probably going to need it all.

Giant blue birds stared silently at Dhole as she opened the safe hidden under a removable section of the floor. It was full of fascinating things: sleek guns, colorful pills, and stacks of plastic cards. Egret's voice came out of the bird perched on Dhole's shoulder, explaining what each was in vague terms. It was nothing she didn't already know.

We'll have to find where they have the Overseer locked up. Check with that girl we met in Pittsburgh. The place with the tower, remember? It's not that far.

The little witch was wide-eyed as Dhole sat down across from her. She placed the Overseer's rings on a flat map of the world, and stared as they shifted in slow, jittering patterns. They stacked themselves over the southern tip of a southern continent, and repeated the act on a more detailed map. Dhole swiped one of Egret's cards through a flickering device afterward, and it beeped happily as money vanished from a nameless account on some nameless island.

Getting in might be tough, even if you were me. Steel doors. Big guards. Bigger guns. Dying in a black Site is as easy as breathing if you don't know what you're doing. Don't worry though, Dhole. Don't pick at your hands like that. Just listen to my plan.

The bird's beak pushed into her ear, though her mind, and into some place even deeper inside. Dhole winced as she listened. Once,

twice, too many times to count. It was that sort of thing that was second nature to Egret. Bloody. Repulsive. It was the kind of thing she abhorred, even after everything that had happened.

"Might some other path be charted? You know I can– "

No! The birds swelled in numbers, appearing at the edge of her vision and flying to every possible perch in the crowded basement. Blue feathers filled the air, but the only noise they made was their screaming. *Nonononononono! Listen to me. Listen to me! Don't think about those things! Don't think at all! Listen! Listen! Listen and act! Act and don't think! Bite. Bite! Tear their throats out! Maim the traitors! The false Overseers. Everyone!*

Had Egret ever spoken like that? It didn't matter. Dhole resolved herself to a thoughtless week as she completed her preparations. She resolved to being the kind of hound who would snap, snarl, and kill. The numbness was almost pleasant, and this way, the plan's sting was less than a flea's bite. Her obligations would be met, no matter what it cost.

Dhole walked down the well-lit corridors of a place that did not exist on any map. She wore a single-piece uniform, pushed a wide cart that reeked of garbage, and went almost entirely unnoticed. Nothing this elaborate had been in Egret's original plan, but her hop to her homeland and back had not been accurate enough to reach the Overseer directly. The bird on her shoulder whispered a new plan into her ear as she went, and each chirp seemed oddly pleased.

She paused to empty a squat trash can into her cart, one of many she passed on her twisting route. A bleary-eyed man passed by as she shook empty cans and rotting peels into her cart. He did not so much as look at her. Dhole waited until he was far away before putting an extra package from her cart back into the empty can.

Sweat ran down Dhole's back as she passed from corridor to corridor, emptying each can she saw before loading them again. The rings in her pocket vibrated with increasing intensity as she did, buzzing louder and louder against each other. The dark mass she had stuffed into a duffel bag pushed outward, and it couldn't be

much longer before whoever was behind the building's many cameras noticed its writhing shape.

The Overseer's jewelry sang as she turned a corner toward a passage full of important-looking signs and symbols. They no doubt warned her about what the armed guards standing at the far end would do to her if she stepped one foot too far.

Don't be afraid, said a bird, as one of the guards shouted something at her. *Don't worry about them. Don't worry about yourself. Only worry about the Overseer.* Dhole glanced down at the neat, white containers still stacked inside the cart, shoved it down the hallway as hard as she could, and slapped the detonator hidden in her pocket.

Flames bloomed around the cart. The luminous eruption was momentarily majestic, but only before a wall of hot air swatted Dhole hard enough to send her flying. She bounced like a skipped stone, off one wall and again off the floor, before sliding to a slow stop on a scratchy carpet. Something like thunder rumbled all around her, and the building shook violently.

Birds swarmed Dhole as she pushed herself to her feet. Her ears rang too loudly to hear what they screamed, but she could guess. Hurry. Advance. Before the opportunity is lost. She limped down the hall, leaning against the wall as she went, stepping over broken bodies and through a broken doorway. The rings in her pocket shook. The darkness in her bag started dripping out. Dhole could barely feel anything, but that wouldn't matter soon.

The room beyond was full of large metal spheres and leagues of heavy tubing. Another crumpled body was sprawled on the floor, and a wiry man was desperately trying to hide from her behind a toppled desk. Dhole could smell the urine as she approached. *Him! Ask him! Make him show you!* insisted the birds. She did not need to be told.

"Where are the Overseers?" she said flatly. Once, she would have once hated the way he stared directly at her face, but it didn't matter now. There was no use hiding what she had become behind a mask.

"I don't– " he started to say, pale eyes watering.

"The Overseers." How did Egret ever get people to do things?

"They're not here! This isn't that kind of place!"

Dhole stared blankly at him. A klaxon sounded overhead. Two birds alighted on her, one for each shoulder. *Violence,* squawked one. *The gun,* added the other. Of course. The pistol felt unnaturally heavy every time she practiced with it, and drawing it this time was no different.

"Overseer-6. Bring her."

"I can't!"

The rings struggled against her pocket toward the nearest metal sphere. They spun against each other, clinking furiously, beating an irregular rhythm. Their desperation was admirable, but Dhole couldn't feel any of it.

"That one," she said, gesturing curtly with the pistol. "Open." The man seemed almost ready to object until she pointed the gun at him. Was it truly that easy?

The heavy door opened slowly. No light shone out of it, but Dhole didn't need to see inside. She could already tell what it held. Water splashed around her thighs as she stepped down and waded forward, each step quicker and louder than the last. The door slammed behind her, but it didn't matter. She had almost done it. She was almost done.

The former Overseer was suspended in the middle of the chamber, bound in a harness hanging from the low ceiling. Straps were wrapped tight around her, and tight clusters of tubes led to needles that pierced her veins. Dhole looked around for Egret, looked for any of the birds, but there were none to be found.

"Overseer?" she said. The noise died quick in the room, and the woman barely twitched. "Overseer. Houndmaster. I've brought what you asked for. I've brought what you demanded." She twitched again. "As you summoned, I came. Overseer, please." Another

twitch, more violent this time. One by one, Dhole pushed the rings onto the woman's long fingers. First a brass one, then silver, then brass again. They shook as she removed them from her pocket, and were still once they touched flesh. "Please."

Something banged outside the sphere, and the Overseer gasped. It was a coarse, haggard sound. Rough and dry. "I, I… I!"

"I brought the other thing too," said Dhole, unzipping her duffel bag. Some of its contents had already escaped, but most remained inside. She could feel the Overseer's eyes focusing on her, then focusing on it.

"Mine."

The viscous night sky surged upward. High and thin, it wavered slightly, as if somehow indecisive. Several more bangs issues outside the metal walls, and shouting accompanied them. The starry edifice tipped forward, trembled, and rushed into the Overseer's chest. She screamed. Dhole screamed. Outside, someone else screamed. The process barely lasted a second, and utter darkness returned by the time it was done.

"Dhole?" rasped the Overseer. "My hand. Take my hand."

The chamber's door slammed open as she grasped the woman's clammy fingers. Gunshots echoed off the walls louder than her voice had, and something inside her squished, snapped, and burst. A vast wave of pain overwhelmed everything else, crushing her senses and drowning her thoughts. Wildfire burned through her nerves. All of them. She was consumed, engulfed, and then the world was stripped away.

Dhole floated in nothingness. It was not a nothingness of the mind, she felt too cognizant for that. It did not seem the nothingness of death either. It hurt too much. Making tiny movements, she rotated herself, turning to face the Overseer hovering before her.

"You did well," said the woman. She was newly clad in a simple black dress, and newly radiated power. It hurt to look into her starry

eyes. "I did my best to fix you, but that was never my specialty."

"I live, regardless."

"For now," agreed the Overseer. The nothingness receded, and Dhole found herself lying on a cot in a sterile, white room. Unfairly, the pain remained.

"I fulfilled my contract. I reached and grasped it. I'm… I did it." She pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and groaned. "I did it."

"You've done more than I could have expected. There's more to do though, Dhole. I can't harbor this inside forever. The council needs to be put right. It needs to be fixed, so I can have a place on it."

Dhole breathed as deeply as she dared and rolled up to a sitting position. The great walls of numbness she had erected in herself were shattered. Her fortifications were broken. She breathed again, and more things hurt than just her body.

"I am not sufficient," she finally said. "There are people better suited. People better *able*. Fetch a champion. Create one, if you must. I cannot, not again. I will not, not this time." She babbled on as she looked into the Overseer's eyes. Even when full of starlight, they were cold, dim, dead.

"I know," she said, reaching out to gently pet Dhole's matted hair. The touch was almost comforting, until she noticed the nothingness creeping around her feet, crawling up her legs, surging through her. "I'll return this to you, when I can."

The nothingness was more complete this time, and much closer to death.

Erin Ahmadi, once and future Overseer-6, watched her underling sleep. Slow breaths, slow pulse, but everything seemed to have gone right. It was the first time she had attempted this particular piece of thaumaturgy, but there was no time to practice first. The slug inside her was already demanding more than she wished to give.

"Egret," she said calmly. Forcibly. With the authority that was hers by right. The girl's orange eyes snapped open, and she grasped for some weapon that wasn't there. "Egret!"

"Overseer!" the girl said, stiffening suddenly. "Overseer," she repeated, almost sheepishly. She moved to rub her eyes and stopped to stare at her hands.

"Don't worry about it. Don't even think about it."

"Of course, Overseer." She moved them to her lap, and looked up at Ahmadi with something close to worship. Something worse.

"Egret, I need to know: Do you do good things while working for me?"

"If you say they're good, Overseer." Her smile oozed out like coagulated blood through a wound. It looked even worse on a younger face.

"Do you want to keep doing this sort of work?"

"What else would I do?"

Ahmadi paused, then reached out hesitantly to stroke the girl's greasy hair again. She had nothing else to give in exchange for loyalty, though Egret would not ask for anything at all. She never did. All Ahmadi could do was leave the things buried inside her servant untouched.

"Then let's begin. Here's what I need you to do…"

« **Previous Tale** | **Maim the Sky, Slay the Sun** | **END** »

Able Baker Charlie

May 2, 1997

Min Yu Zhang, servant of the New-Moon Emperor, wiped the sweat from his brow. He was not usually a man to tremble, but nonetheless he was humbled by the great stone tomb, finally freed from its own grave in the earth beneath the bleak wastes where Genghis Khan rode. The blisters on his hands from days at the shovel seemed insignificant in comparison to its smooth black façade. Great black chains wrapped around the cube tightly, ending in the gigantic circular lock on the vault door. Soon those chains would be broken, the door would open, and then…

Then the old ways would return and Great Night would begin. These men who uncovered the tomb would die, yes, but their sacrifice was to usher in a new age, an ancient, powerful age. Those who had been dead would return, and the Sleeping God now awoken would once again lead them to victory.

The cadre Speaker began the prayers in his high, quavering voice. The other workers dropped their tools, took their positions around the tomb and lay themselves prostrate in the dirt. The Speaker's voice, unpleasant as it was in everyday speech, grew to magnificence as it echoed around the excavation site. The tomb's presence did not allow for any of the faithful to be less than properly glorious, but even then, it dwarfed them, surrounded them, towered over them. The prayers were mere words, dribbling from the mouth.

The god within listened with dead ears.

The Speaker's voice trailed off. This was not right. Zhang looked up. The speaker stood frozen, his arms outstretched in supplication, his lips parted in mid-syllable, and his eyes locked on the rim of the site. Zhang followed his gaze: there were men standing on the rim. They were not wearing clothing appropriate to the cadre: these were soldiers, government soldiers, guns aimed at the praying cadre.

“Well howdy-doody, motherfuckers,” drawled a scrawny, rat-faced man with a cigarette dangling from his lip. English. Zhang did not understand the words, but he could tell the intent: mockery of a defeated enemy. Oh, the fool. Such a fool.

A larger man who stood beside the ratty one gave his compatriot a sideways glance of exasperation. He clasped his hands behind his back, cleared his throat, and then spoke in heavily accented Chinese.

[Remain face down and place your hands on your heads. You will not be harmed if you surrender peacefully.]

Who? How? There had been guards! They had paid off the government!

The Speaker did not kneel. With a look of utmost disgust, he raised a thumb to the interlopers. He was answered by a pattering of bullets. Zhang watched him fall to the dirt.

“What the fuck, they’re all scrubs. Shoot the rest,” the rat-face man said.

More bullets. Min Yu Zhang died lying on his stomach. The gunshots echoed into dust and nothingness. John Dawson shrugged, tapping the ashes off of his cigarette.

“I love it when they do the fish in a barrel thing.”

Dmitri sighed.

“Is not honorable.”

“Not a fuckin’ scrap. The way I figure, with you working for the Russkies and me for Uncle Sam back in the day, we’re basically a walking honor deficit.”

“Says you, capitalist American swine.”

“Perhaps this conversation would be better suited for another time,” A man in an officer’s uniform walked up to them. He was older, with graying hair, a bristly beard, and a small triangular patch on his arm

bearing an opened eye in the center, framed by an olive wreath. The man had introduced himself earlier as Agent Knight.

John tossed the cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it under his boot.

“What the fuck, let’s go check this thing out.”

The three descended the dirt ramp to the base of the excavation site. The soldiers remained on the rim, spreading out around its edge. At this point they would just get in the way.

“What can you tell us about tomb?” Dmitri asked Knight. "Our information was…not detailed."

“The tomb? Harmless. A block of warded stone. It is what is inside the tomb that is not. Interpretations of the Sleeping God vary: the name is Able or Ablel or Abln, in some works he is a honorable warrior, in others a mindless savage, and in a great many he is somewhere in between. He is supposed to be some prehistoric hunter-gatherer war-god, unstoppable in combat, at least by stone-age standards, and supposedly immortal. He grew proud, and so the ancients sealed him away in his tomb, asleep for eternity. Unfortunately, so long as he remains in the tomb, we cannot harm him.”

“So we're going to kill a god.” John took out another cigarette from his jacket pocket. “I can dig it.”

“That is the end goal, yes. The tomb must be opened and the Sleeping God woken in order to destroy it."

"Is great risk," Strelkinov said. "I do not think we have enough men. Or tanks."

"All you need do is observe, captain. We will take care of this."

Knight reached into his jacket and removed a metal flask.

“Whatever you do, do not move until the kill-op has begun.” He clicked the walkie-talkie clipped to his shoulder. "Prepare opening ritual."

Knight walked to the door of the tomb and began to draw a thin line of blood red symbols in the dust. The line extended thirty feet or so, and consumed another three flasks before ending in a circle around the three men. Up on the rim, the Coalition soldiers were doing the same, tracing their own circles and symbols into the dirt, as well as one around the entire dig site.

Knight waited until they had finished before reaching to his walkie-talkie again.

“Stand by: I am opening the tomb.”

Reaching back into his jacket, Knight removed a palm-sized figurine, very worn with age. He set it on the ground and pulled a knife from his belt. One clean cut. Blood dripped down from his hand onto the idol. It began to pulse and melt, changing shape until it resembled a stone heart, each vein and fiber hyperreal, beating silently. Knight plunged his knife into it.

The air rumbled, sounding like an earthquake.

The chains dropped to the ground, thudding with leaden booms.

The lock turned slowly, stone grinding on stone.

The tomb door rolled away.

The dust cleared.

Able, the Sleeping God walked out of the tomb, no longer asleep.

He stood at least eight feet tall, with skin the color of sun-darkened leather, covered in tattoos of some forgotten and occult meaning. His hair was black and matted, hanging down below his shoulders. He was naked, all save a hide loincloth, and his features had a primitive look about them, a god of another age.

The god walked towards them, shoulders slumped, an expression of bored distaste on his features. It was an expression of “I am waiting to kill something, and you are keeping me from that.”

“Do not move. We are standing within the summoner’s circle: he is

obligated to address us before killing us," Knight whispered.

The god snorted with disdain before speaking in a voice that rumbled up from the pillars of the world. His breath was stale and foul.

"Athu basher. Kazikul ta faren ja-marl. Avskani?"

It was clear that he wanted a response. Knight reached for his walkie-talkie again.

"Initiate Code Cobalt-Triplet-Finnegan."

The Sleeping God tilted his head slightly and shrugged. A shimmer in the air around his hand was followed by a long obsidian blade from nothingness. The Sleeping God raised it, with the same bored expression. This was hardly sport, his face said.

"Oh, hey there! What're you doin'?"

The god froze. His sword arm lowered, and he turned around, back towards the tomb.

Someone was sitting on top of the cube, a tallish man wearing an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt over a worn Pink Floyd tee and patched khaki pants. His head was a tin of lutefisk, and he held a ukulele in his hands. Defying all sense of logic, he still had a mouth, stretched just beyond the edges of his metallic face in a Cheshire grin.

The man strummed a single chord and began to sing.

"What would you think if I sang out a tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me?"

The Sleeping God stared dumbfounded, silent rage seeping out of every pore at this display of insolence.

In a blink the man was standing in front of the open tomb door. His head was a cauliflower. Another strum.

"Lend me your ear and I'll sing you a song, and I'll try not to sing out of key."

He stood behind the god, looking over the right shoulder. His head was a toothbrush. Another strum, and then a pause.

“Now, I forget the next line, but I think it has something to do with grievous bodily harm.”

With the grin growing just a little bit wider and a little bit more joyful, he smashed the ukulele over the Sleeping God’s head.

—

“I must congratulate you, Agent Knight. You have done an excellent job with Francis’ conditioning. I’m surprised that the Coalition has been so cooperative with the project.”

“Agent Ukulele is as much use to us as he is to you, and we know how to dispose of his kind. Once he has served his purpose, we will dispose of him as well.”

“If the non-combat persona can be implanted successfully, that may not have to happen.”

“Perhaps. I make no promises on the matter, and neither do my superiors.”

“Understandable. Now, as we agreed, Francis will remain under Coalition jurisdiction until the non-combat persona is successfully implanted. The recovered entity will as well, as Francis is the only force we have available of resisting and overpowering it. Our staff on the project will remain the same for the second phase of his conditioning, and since there’s nothing else to report, I will allow you to take your men and leave. Francis has already been put back into his coma and is ready for transport.”

“Thank you, Dr. Crow.”

…
…
…
…

“Ah, Sophia. Please, come i…”

“What were you *thinking?*”

“Excuse me?”

“You allowed the Coalition to deploy Francis in the field before we could confirm that the conditioning even worked! He could have leveled half the continent, if not worse!”

“Sophia, I appreciate your concern, but at the moment it is a non-issue. Francis managed to not only overpower the entity, but doing so proved that the conditioning *did* work: our project was able to create a stable persona for him and control his powers through it.”

“A persona that is a sociopathic murderer *at best*, based off of Soviet conditioning memetics twenty years out of date. He’s unbelievably unstable, Crow. If the conditioning breaks down, what then? The Coalition could have easily snuck in some sort of killswitch or designed him to fail as an excuse to kill him.”

“Possibly, but the Coalition can’t afford to lose a weapon like him.”

“What if he starts using powers outside of what the persona allows? What if he breaks free of our control? Will you be willing to accept those consequences?”

“Yes. Yes I will. Sophia, I know the dangers involved, and I know that the Coalition is begrudging in this project, but they have experience that we don’t in matters like this. We need them at the moment, and so we cooperate.”

“It's on your head then.”

“I never expected otherwise.”

Aboard the Train to Berlin

Nuremberg, Germany
Fall, 1944

When Franz Hoffman had first been selected to join the Ahnenerbe Obskurakorps, his father made sure to contact him. Herr Hoffman, a longstanding member of the Thule society, told his son that "he would soon see wonders beyond his wildest dreams." While this had proven true, Franz had also seen horrors he could not fathom. In the end, it was the latter phenomena that tended to stick with him more.

"Attention!"

Franz snapped into position at his commanding officer's order. His unit currently stood in the warehouse of a small Nuremberg train station, where they were supposedly to be assigned their next mission. A skeletal man in a high ranking uniform then stepped before them, and gestured for them to be at ease.

"I am Hauptmann Zimmerman." The officer introduced himself with a deep, croaking voice. "Your unit's successes in Obskurakorps' operations in Egypt and Prague has lead you to be placed under my command for a very important mission, both for the Fuhrer and his Reich."

Franz did his best to hide his unease as he watched the Hauptmann speak. His arms seemed to move with an unnatural jerkiness as he spoke, while his long fingers swept about with the grace of spider's legs. The Hauptmann then put on a pair of leather gloves and gestured to one of his aides, who proceeded to place a large metal box before him. Another brought forward a large dog that whimpered upon seeing the Hauptmann. Zimmerman then opened the box and pulled out an ornate spearhead.

"For those of you who do not know," Zimmerman explained, "this is the Holy Lance. The very spearhead that pierced the side of Christ

while upon the cross. It was moved here following our unification with Austria, and now must be moved Berlin. A demonstration…"

Franz flinched as the Hauptmann stabbed the dog with the spearhead in a fluid jab, the canine going limp immediately. As Zimmerman retracted the relic, a fine white mist clung to the tip for several seconds then burst into flames, the sound of a dog howling in pain filled the room briefly, then all was quiet.

"Quite potent, don't you think?" Zimmerman asked the unit with a chuckle. "Now imagined if it was replicated on a mass scale, and pointed at an army…"

Zimmerman then gently placed the spearhead back in its box.

"Some of you will go alongside decoys, while the rest will accompany me. Our enemy knows we possess this relic, and that we are likely to transport it. They will certainly be planning a strike…"

London, United Kingdom

A tall, slender woman stood on a street corner, her black umbrella being pelted by heavy drops of rain as she idly watched passing foot traffic go by. Before long, a stout man dressed in a heavy coat stood next to her, his hair slick with water as he slightly turned his head and spoke.

"From what wood does the Fletcher make his arrows?" he asked in a thick New York accent.

"His family tree," the woman replied. Her accent was French.

The two then looked to each other with relief.

"So you're the skipper?" he asked with a chuckle. "Agent Martin?"

"Is that what the Allied Occult Initiative calls us these days, Agent Smith?" she returned. "Cute."

"I always considered it a term of endearment," Agent Smith said with

a small chuckle.

"Indeed…" Agent Martin sighed. "Your thaumaturgists. They are sure that this train will have the object aboard?"

"Positive. The Obskura guys did a bang up job with the counterscrying, but covering up a powerful artifact leaves little details behind that can be detected if you know where to look. Your crew have the insertion and extraction set?"

"If there is a problem during this operation, getting there and getting out again will not be it."

"I suppose not," Agent Smith chuckled again. "These guys aren't going to know what hit them…"

German Countryside

Hauptmann Zimmerman had four decoy Holy Lances constructed. The first two were sent out via military convoys, while the third was to travel by plane. The final decoy was to remain in Nuremberg. Each decoy was sent out with enough escort to make convincing targets, should the AOI or the SCP Foundation decide to take the bait. Meanwhile, the actual Lance was quietly loaded on to a train that had begun to make its way toward Berlin.

Along the way, this train passed beneath a stone bridge upon which eight figures had recently apperated. As the locomotive passed beneath them, they then faded out, and appeared upon the roof of the final carriage. Agents Smith and Martin gave a confident nod to one another, and prepared their weapons as they crept into the train's interior.

Franz Hoffman had not only been lucky enough, or unlucky enough as some might see it, to have been selected to escort the real Holy Lance, but assigned as part of the guard detail within the same carriage as the object itself. As he stood by his post, occasionally taking the time to check and recheck his firearm out of boredom, he'd glance over at the crate containing the relic and look at it with

unease.

"Waste of resources…"

Franz looked over at one of his fellow guards who was mumbling under his breath, an eyebrow raised.

"How's that?" Franz asked.

"This is a waste of resources," his colleague repeated. "Fatherland engaged on two fronts and they have us committing the highest degree of blasphemy."

"If they are capable of weaponzing such a thing, I'd say it's resources well spent. Could turn the tide of the war. And when the war ends, we can go home."

"You don't think there will be repercussions? The spear that pierced the side of Christ used for mass slaughter, and God almighty will turn a blind eye?"

"He's turned a blind eye to the Americans when they slaughtered the Indians. He turned a blind eye to the men who gassed one another in the trenches. Something tells me he'll turn a blind eye here."

Franz paused and sighed.

"The world is a cruel, wicked place, after all."

A chill ran down Franz's spine as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning his head, he saw Hauptmann Zimmerman standing beside him, an approving smile on his lips.

"You are wise to the ways of the world," Zimmerman replied. "You'll go far."

The Hauptmann then turned his attention to Franz's colleague, and slowly walked over. He placed a hand on his shoulder, then walked away. Zimmerman's arms slid out from his sleeves and remained floating in place, the stumps covered with smooth skin above the elbow. He then turned to look out the carriage window. As he spoke, the Hauptmann's disembodied hands continued to gesture.

"You think our task is a fool's errand, and yet you have not yet begun to see the true horrors of this universe. I have. Our enemy is developing its own weaponzied relics they they will in turn unleash upon our soldiers, and our citizens. It is our job and our duty to ensure that we are the first to the punch. For the Fuhrer and for Germany."

Zimmerman then turned to the soldier. The man whimpered in fear as the disembodied arms on his shoulders then shifted and patted him on the cheek.

"Do I make myself clear?"

The soldier nodded furiously. Zimmerman smiled, walking back to his arms and allowing them to slide back into his sleeves before removing them from the terrified man's person.

"Excellent," the Hauptmann replied. He then turned back to Franz and gave another nod. "Keep up the good work."

In one of the rear carriages, six Obskurakorps soldiers sat around playing dice games, amidst idle conversation. The trip had been uneventful so far, and likely would continue to be for the remainder of the duration. None noticed Agent Smith, Agent Martin, and the rest of their joint task force enter the carriage until Agent Smith had already approached their group, his right hand held out and glowing with a faint blue light.

The soldiers shouted and reached for their weapons, only for Smith to clench his fist. Four of their necks snapped in an instant. The remaining two attempted to flee, only to be shot in the back by Martin, and her suppressed pistol. She reloaded without a word and gave Smith a nod for them to continue.

"Its going to get a little hairy from here. Remember, the strike team is going to derail the train if we are not at the checkpoint in half an hour," he warned the task force members. "Be careful, and for Christ's sake take out any Type Blues you see first."

As Franz Hoffman stood at his post two enemy agents forced open the carriage door, then opened fire. The resulting spray of bullets tore through two of his colleagues. Fumbling with his weapon, he returned fire in kind, killing the intruders. However, Franz soon found himself being shot at from the other direction. Taking cover behind a crate, he turned to see yet more enemy agents entering from the other side of the carriage. He swore as he reloaded, and joined his fellow guards in exchanging fire with the intruders, only to turn to see a man enter from behind him, his hand glowing blue. Several crates then flew across the carriage interior, striking Franz and his fellow guards with deafening cracks.

From his spot beneath the shattered crate, Franz watched as the enemy agents entered, and pushed forward from both directions, shouting to one another in a language he did not understand. They approached the crate containing the Holy Lance, wasting no time in throwing off the lid and grabbing the relic's case before replacing it with one of their own. As the enemy agents began to retreat, a series of shots rang out, killing one of the intruders. Franz turned his head to see Hauptmann Zimmerman enter, a pistol in his left hand and a sickening purple electricity crackling from his right. He was accompanied by two other Obskurakorps soldiers.

"You Initiative rats!" Zimmerman shouted.

Purple lighting shot forward from the Hauptmann's hand as he slowly pressed forward. An enemy agent countered by holding out his own hand, which glowed a faint blue light. The arcs of lightning hit a bubble of force and vanishing harmlessly. A woman stepped out from behind the man, a suppressed pistol in her hand, and opened fire, killing the Hauptmann's escorts with well-placed shots between their eyes. As the Hauptmann continued to press forward, she shouted something to her comrades in the carriage behind her. The agent producing the force field then clenched his fists, sending a wave of force forward and knocking Zimmerman into the far carriage wall with a dull thud. The enemy agents immediately began to flee.

Franz let out a war cry as he leapt from his hiding spot and leveled his rifle, letting loose a spray of shots and killing the enemy agent carrying the Holy Lance's case. Franz quickly recovered the artifact,

holding it in one hand and his rifle in the other. He held the weapon steady as the man who produced the force field and the woman with the suppressed pistol watched him with cold eyes.

“You have no idea what powers your Fuhrer is toying with,” the woman spoke to him in German. Her accent was thick, French maybe?

“I could say the same to you,” Franz replied. “Now, kindly get off our train.”

The man who produced the force field looked at his watch, and then said something to the woman in English. The woman nodded, then turned back to Franz.

“Gladly.”

She, the force field man, and the rest of the surviving intruders then winked out. Franz lowered his weapon, then looked down at the case in his hand and sighed.

“Excellent work,” Hauptmann Zimmerman said, hobbling over and gesturing for the case. Franz handed it over immediately. The Hauptmann quickly flipped it open, smiled upon seeing that the Holy Lance was still there, then snapped it shut. “Excellent work, indeed.”

The sound of an explosion then ripped through the air. Franz could see the smoke coming from the front of the train as the engine flew off the tracks, the carriages following suit like dominos. Franz had only enough time to brace himself for impact before he was tossed aside like a ragdoll.

Franz let out a weak cough, and looked around. The carriage had rolled off the tracks and now lay upside down, its contents shattered and strewn about. Outside, the sound of gunfire filled the air, combined with bursts of shouting in German and English. Hauptmann Zimmerman was nowhere to be seen. As was the Holy Lance.

“Oh no…” Franz whispered to himself. “No, no, no, no, no…”

As he got to his feet he let out a sharp cry of pain. A splinter from one of the crates had pierced his left calf, effectively hobbling him. He picked up the nearest rifle he could find, and exited the carriage into the night.

The remains of the train lay scattered about the tracks and countryside like a broken toy. Only the occasional small fire gave illumination as to the scale of the destruction. Franz limped along, heading towards the sound of the gunfire. As he approached, the shots became more and more infrequent, until they finally died off. By the time, he arrived at the scene of combat, the only thing remaining was several of his fellow soldiers standing around the body of Hauptmann Zimmerman.

“What happened?” Franz asked as he hobbled up.

“After the train derailed a force of about 30 enemy soldiers appeared out of thin air,” Zimmerman's aide replied from within the crowd. “Launched an attack. By the time we got rallied they had already killed the Hauptmann and were in retreat. We gunned down a good chunk of them before they vanished again. Guess they were just after the Hauptmann’s life….”

Franz nodded and looked down at the corpse of the skeletal officer in front of him. A single gunshot had hit him between the eyes. His left hand tightly gripped the Holy Lance’s case, while his right arm was detached and futilely crawling around by its finger tips. Franz knelt down and pulled the case out of the Hauptmann’s grip. He popped the case open and looked inside.

The Holy Lance was still there.

Franz looked off into the distance toward where the enemy troops had vanished.

“I guess so…” he agreed. “Just the Hauptmann’s life.”

“Think they’ll buy the switch?” Agent Smith asked as he, Agent Martin, and the rest of their joint task force approached an abandoned farm house not too far from the train wreck they had just

caused.

“They will for as long as we need them to, after that the object will be long out of their reach,” Agent Martin replied.

She knocked on the farmhouse door in a unique beat. The door then opened on its power, revealing a bright, warm interior. Inside, waiting for them to arrive, were several SCP Foundation and Allied Occult Initiative agents. Agent Martin gingerly placed the case she carried down on the table at the center of the room and flipped it open, showing both parties the Holy Lance that resided inside.

The commanding officer of the SCP Foundation agents nodded and placed a large box on the table, sliding it over to the AOI’s side. The AOI commander proceeded to check its contents, and gave a satisfied nod in return.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” the AOI commander stated.

“Likewise,” the Foundation commander replied, and snapped the Holy Lance’s case shut. He then gestured to his agents, and then to the fireplace. One by one, each lit a candle from a nearby box and vanished into the flue. Agent Martin turned and gave Agent Smith a polite nod before she vanished.

“So, like that, we just let them keep the Holy Lance?” Agent Smith asked his commander.

“Do you have any idea how much infighting a relic like that could cause between member organizations?” The AOI commander replied, drumming on the box the Foundation commander had given her. “Some would call for its destruction, others for its weaponization, yet more for its historic preservation. At least this way it's locked away for all time, and we get several valuable objects in return.”

“Think we’ll ever see it again?”

The commander shook her head.

“Knowing the Foundation, they’ll note its abilities in a file somewhere, throw it in a box, lock it in a vault, and there it will

remain until the Earth itself stops spinning."

"Seems a waste."

"Maybe, but what can you do."

Agent Smith chuckled and nodded. The commander then gave the order for them to vacate. Like the Foundation agents before them, they each lit a candle and vanished into the flue. Upon the last agent leaving, the farmhouse slowly faded out of reality, just in time for an Obskurakorps search party to pass by none the wiser.

About Deer College

Knorr Hall, Deer's old

Founded in 1948 in southeast **`Three Portlands`**, Deer College is a coeducational liberal arts and sciences college. Renowned for its groundbreaking integration of occult studies into a liberal arts curriculum, Deer is known for its high standards of magical practice, creative thinking, and engaged multiversal citizenship.

Deer students pursue the Bachelor of Arts degree in over 40 majors and concentrations. The curriculum includes a year-long occultism course, broad distribution requirements, and a senior thesis; each student constructs their own program of study by pairing a traditional major with a concentration in an occult field, or chooses from a number of established interdisciplinary majors. A 9:1 student-faculty ratio and small conference-style classes allow faculty members to truly mentor students and engage with them in individual discussions.

Mission and History

Deer College is an institution of higher education in the occult arts and sciences devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual and magical pursuits and governed by the highest standards of scholarship, critical thought, and creativity. Since its founding in 1948 as an independent undergraduate institution, Deer College has remained steadfast to one central commitment: to provide a balanced and comprehensive magical education fulfilling the highest standards of academic excellence.

History of the College

Deer College was founded in 1948, and its first classes were held in 1950. Deer is named for Reed College, its mundane counterpart in Portland, Oregon; its founders, Zachary Knorr and Matyas Szabo,

were Reed alumni who were dissatisfied with the lack of occult studies at their alma mater, and decided to found a college of occult arts and sciences in the Three Portlands, upon the multiversal shadow of Reed itself. By summoning the spirits of Reed's founders, Simeon and Amanda Reed, and binding them to the Three Portlands parallel to the land on which their college stood, Knorr and Szabo were able to stabilize Reed's multiversal shadow and conjure from the aether the Deer College campus as it stands today.

Deer's first president was founder Zachary Knorr, who served from 1948-1956. He was followed by Horatio Sgariglia, 1956-1960; Jan Gringhuis, 1960-1964; Heather Davis, 1964-1977; Paul E. Bragdon, 1977-1988; Prof. Zebediah Agan, 1988-1990 (acting president); Timothy Wormwood, 1990-1998; Anna Svensdottir, 1998-2003; Prof. Elisha ben Abuyah, 2003-2004 (acting president); and Chad Gable, 2004-2011. The current college president is Benjamin Lund, who assumed the office in 2011.

Inclusion and Diversity

Deer College is a community dedicated to serious and open magical inquiry, one in which students, faculty and staff can fully participate regardless of ethnicity, race, species, religion, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, universe of origin, socio-economic status, disability, mortality or corporeality. Numerous Deer scholarships are available to students from marginalized backgrounds, and certain groups of students have access to housing options that allow them to live with others who share their unique struggles.

Academics

The North Reading Room of

A Deer college education balances broad knowledge across the curriculum with depth of knowledge in a particular field of study. Student create their own major from two fields of study, one mundane and one occult; each student is advised by a professor

from each of their departments, receiving one-on-one guidance from both. Deer's academic divisions are separated into mundane divisions and occult divisions (with the exception of the Division of Metaphysics, which includes both mundane and occult departments).

Mundane Divisions

Division of the Arts

The Division of the Arts encompasses departments which focus on all varieties of creative endeavor. While many students in the Division of the Arts choose Anart as their occult focus, it is by no means a requirement; the Division of the Arts recognizes that methods other than traditional Anart techniques can be just as expressive.

Division Head: Prof. Wenqian Liao (Art History, 2007—)

Departments & Majors: Art, Art History, Dance, Music, Theatre

Division of Literature and Language

The Division of Literature and Language includes departments which study literature and foreign languages, as well as several more general fields of study.

Division Head: Prof. Anna Gonzalez (Spanish, 2012—)

Departments & Majors: Celtic, Chinese, Comparative Literature, Creative Writing, English, French, German, Linguistics, Russian, Spanish

Division of History and Social Sciences

The Division of History and Social Sciences is composed of all departments that study human history, culture, and society using scientific methodology.

Division Head: Prof. Tom Humphrey (History, 1979—)

Departments & Majors: Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Psychology, Religion, Sociology

Division of Mathematics and Natural Sciences

The Division of Mathematics and Natural Sciences includes the departments which use mundane science to come to a closer understanding of the universe.

Division Head: Prof. Betelgeuse (Astronomy, 1952—)

Departments & Majors: Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Mathematics, Physics

---

Occult Divisions

Division of Unnatural Sciences

The Division of Unnatural Sciences includes those departments which, while close to mundane scientific fields, work with or study occult forces that mundane scientists disregard.

Division Head: Dr. Albert Lauingen (Alchemy, 2003—)

Departments & Majors: Alchemy, Cryptozoology, Memetics, Numerology, Parapsychology

Division of Invocation and Summoning

The Division of Invocation and Summoning includes departments which focus on interactions with extradimensional or otherwise supernatural beings.

Division Head: Prof. Mansur ibn Samyazaz (Theurgy, 2011—)

Departments & Majors: Demonology, Fey Studies, Necromancy, Theurgy

Division of Magical Arts

The Division of Magical Arts includes all occult departments not covered by another division.

Division Head: Prof. Hieronymus Nosh (Anart, 2008—)

Departments & Majors: Anart, Druidry, Ritual Studies, Thaumatology

Division of Metaphysics

The Division of Metaphysics includes departments which study the greater workings of the multiverse rather than focusing on a specific facet. It is unique in including both occult and mundane departments.

Division Head: Prof. Dominic Hall (Philosophy, 1999—)

Departments & Majors: Divination, Ontokinetics, Philosophy, Pataphysics, Theology (applied), Theology (theoretical)

Campus Life

Deer College campus is located in the heart of southeast Three Portlands, only a short bike or bus ride from downtown. Most Deer students live on campus—housing is guaranteed for the first two years—although upperclassmen often choose to live in a house or apartment nearby.

Housing

Deer students are guaranteed housing for their first two years on campus. Residential life at Deer includes multiyear and multigender residence halls, college-owned apartments near campus, and

several language houses. Students can also apply to live in Deer's co-op houses, which offer an opportunity for individuals to live and build communities with those who share their experiences or interests.

Residence Halls

Deer's residence halls are intended to build strong student communities, not just provide a place to sleep. From the Old Dorm Block, crystallized from the multiversal shadow of the Reed dorm with the same name, to the newly-constructed Blackwood Hall, the residence halls offer Deer students a safe, affordable, and minimally-haunted housing option. Most residence hall rooms are singles or divided doubles, although first-years might be placed in undivided doubles or triples.

Language Houses

Language houses are each staffed with a visiting language scholar, who lives with the students and helps them build a community based around a foreign language and culture. Each language houses has its own building on the eastern side of campus, with the exception of Arabic House, which takes up the second floor of the Anderson residence hall. Deer currently has six language houses: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish. The **`Enochian`** house is merely a campus rumor; students who claim to have visited the Enochian house, to have lived in the Enochian house, or to have taken classes in Enochian should be reported to Community Safety.

Co-Op Housing

Co-op houses are generally not available to first year students. Each co-op house has its own building on campus; rather than having an assigned housing advisor, the students in the house choose from among themselves a co-op coordinator who communicates with the Office of Residence Life on their behalf. Certain co-ops have entrance criteria that students must meet before they can apply to live there.

Canyon House: At the center of Deer campus is the Canyon, an

area of woods and wetlands that's home to a number of plant and animal species native only to Three Portlands. Somewhere in the Canyon, protected by the ancient druidic magics of Nature herself, is Canyon House, a community dedicated to understanding and coexisting with the natural world. Students who apply to live in Canyon House should be committed to ecological conservation and be prepared to live and work alongside the beasts and spirits of nature.

Haunted House: Haunted House is intended to provide a space for incorporeal and post-mortal students to build a community free from the stigma against the non-living. Applicants to Haunted House must be post-mortal entities; most applicants have been ghosts and specters, but anyone who has died and been returned from the grave via profane necromantic ritual, unfinished business, or simple refusal to pass on is welcome.

MadSci: If the phrase "For Science!" warms the extra heart you implanted into yourself to increase circulatory efficiency, MadSci might be for you. MadSci is a community for those dedicated to pushing the boundaries of mundane science past what man was meant to know — whether that means late-night bioalchemy study sessions, making unholy patchwork creatures in the basement, or just sharing lab coat cleaning tips. Anyone interested in the cutting edge of science and technology is welcome here.

Transport

Deer is about 20 minutes by tram or light rail from downtown Three Portlands. While there are no cars in the city, Three Portlands has excellent bike paths and public transit, so even without a car, getting around isn't difficult.

Local Transit

The City of Three Portlands has a robust and affordable public transit system. Deer campus is ten minutes' walk from a light rail station, and there are several streetcar lines that stop on or near campus. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to bring automobiles

into Three Portlands, personal transportation options are limited; most residents travel by bicycle or electric scooter. Students can register their bikes, scooters, flying carpets, brooms, skateboards, and other personal vehicles with Community Safety; Community Safety Officers can track any registered vehicle anywhere in Three Portlands or the three Portlands if stolen or misplaced.

Multiversal Transit

From Deer campus, it is very easy to access Portland, Oregon via a number of Ways. Even for those without any talent for finding trans-universal passageways, there are several well-marked (on Three Portlands side) places nearby where it is possible to travel from our little pocket dimension to the "real world". There are even two Ways on campus—one in the steam tunnels under Knorr Hall, another in a sequoia outside the library—which take the user directly to Deer's sister school, Reed.

While Deer doesn't have the same close metaphysical ties to the other two Portlands, the nearest Ways to those are still convenient to campus, each about a twenty minute walk away. Portland, Maine can be accessed via the alley behind the Mug Runneth Over coffee shop on Roselawn & 17th (ask the barista for the combination); the Isle of Portland can be reached through a small tunnel in a hedge in the back yard of 3125 SE Flannigan Ave, although it's polite to ask the owners first.

Deer students also have access to the Wanderer's Library if they complete an optional two-week safety and etiquette seminar offered at the beginning of every semester. Students who complete this course will be able to access the Library through the door at the bottom of the northwest staircase of Deer's Wormwood Memorial Library by swiping their Deer ID card in the reader and offering a single drop of blood to the daemon who inhabits the lock.

Deer Students: What Is a Deerie?

Deer students ("Deeries") are independent, curious, intellectual, and full of character; no two are exactly alike, but they all share the same love of inquiry into things man was not meant to know. We've asked proud members of recent graduating classes to tell us about themselves, their theses, and their Deer experiences.

Terrence Shen, '09 (he/him)

Major: Political Science/Parapsychology

Hometown: Los Angeles, CA

Who I was when I came to Deer: A fish out of water. I didn't—still don't—have any sort of magical ability, just watered-down versions of my grandpa's psychic abilities. And because of that, I felt like I had a lot to prove.

How Deer changed me: Deer forced me to become more intellectually serious, to care more about how I act and less about how others see me. And also to care less about how I see others—I stared a lot at some classmates who weren't baseline human when I got here, and had to relearn some basic manners pretty quickly.

Favorite class: History of the Seventh Occult War with Gerald Johansson (History, 2009-2013). I knew that my grandpa served in the Red Army's Psychic Division in the Sino-Japanese war and World War Two, but I had never heard anything about the broader occult conflict. Gerald let me write my final paper on my grandpa's experiences, and helped me find a medium who could contact him and his squadmates for an interview.

Influential book: *Watchmen* by Alan Moore.

Advisers: The Soviet Socialist Republic of Eastern Prof. Nikolai Ivanov (Political Science, 1991—2010); Prof. Artemidoros Syrakousos (Parapsychology, 2008—2015)

Thesis: The Psychic Fallout of the Cold War Arms Race

What it's about: The lingering effects of the psionic and conventional arms race between the Cold War superpowers. I actually traveled to some of the old Soviet science cities where they did psychic experiments and used my own abilities to take empathic impressions. I even managed to interview a man who had been modified by Soviet scientists into a psychic superweapon—now he's a brain in a jar in a basement at the University of Moscow, but he still hangs around the astral location of the lab where he used to live.

What it's *really* about: How governments destroy individuals in the pursuit of power.

What's next: I'm going to work for a big psychic think tank in Hong Kong. Sort of like a political and economic consulting firm, but with precognition and remote viewing.

Fionn Ó Gallchobhair, '12 (he/him)

Major: History/Necromancy

Hometown: Three Portlands

Who I was when I came to Deer: I'm the child of Sidhe refugees from **`Hy-Brasil`**; my parents moved to the Three Portlands after the fivesquid attack, and had me a few years later. In Sidhe terms, I was still pretty young when I went to college, only 27—maybe equivalent to 16 human years; because of that, I lived at home—just a few blocks from campus—for most of my time at Deer.

How Deer changed me: Coming to Deer actually got me more in touch with my ancestry; I learned more about Hy-Brasil in an Occult History of the British Isles course freshman year than I had from my parents' stories through my whole childhood. I got a chance to study abroad in Ireland my Junior year, and I took a number of trips to Hy-Brasil itself—technically, all Sidhe are citizens, although there's hardly anyone left who actually lives on the island.

Outside the classroom: I did a lot of outreach work to Sidhe families in Three Portlands, especially when I began to work on my thesis. My partner was a theater major, so I was in a lot of their

plays—the best one was their thesis show, when I played Faust and they actually summoned a demon to play Mephistopheles (Demonology was their occult major).

Financial aid: My semester in Ireland was funded by the government of Hy-Brasil—they can still do the fey gold thing, so they're not short on funds, and they will always pay for Sidhe to travel "home".

Advisers: Prof. Samantha Olongwe (History, 2011—2013); Prof. Andrew Cerak (Necromancy, 1949—)

Thesis: An Oral History of the Fall of the Blessed Land

What it's about: I interviewed both living survivors of the fivesquid attack—including my own parents and King Delbáeth himself—and the ancestor-spirits of those who died in the attack. I compiled all those interviews and statements into a single narrative, detailing the attack and its aftermath in a number of important locations and sections of the city.

What it's really about: Letting my parents say goodbye to my grandparents.

What's next: I'm going to move to Hy-Brasil. I was offered an apprenticeship by the Royal Historian, and I just can't refuse that.

Maria Ivády, '15 (she/her)

Major: Biology/Thaumatology

Hometown: Heves County, Hungary

Who I was when I came to Deer: I was very religious. My **`whole family`** was. Very isolated, too—I had gone to high school in Budapest on a special government scholarship, but I never really had friends there, and I was not interested in popular culture. I applied to Deer at the advice of my mother—she was an outsider to our village, and she wanted me to get a college education before I came back.

How Deer changed me: I'm still very religious, I would say, but I approach it differently. I've been exposed not just to other religions but other branches of my own religion—my adviser, especially, has really opened my mind to the wide variety of practices in our shared tradition. I feel like I understand my faith more now that I know where it came from and what influenced its development.

Cool stuff I did: I founded a campus Nälkä group, Karcist Kollektive, to bring together the few practitioners of related faiths at Deer and help break the preconceptions about so-called "Sarkic Cults" that many students here hold. I was also on the rugby team, although I was never very good.

What I would say to a prospective student: Don't be afraid to be yourself! There's a pretty big stigma on campus against actually believing in any religion, but you can find a community that'll support you.

Favorite professor: Prof. Matyas Szabo (Biology, 1948—). He really helped me when I was feeling homesick—he invited me to dinner at his house, and helped me find a Nälkä congregation in Three Portlands that wasn't too different from my family's practice.

Favorite spot on campus: The quad on a sunny day. It doesn't happen very often—if it's raining in any of the Portlands, it'll probably be raining here—but when it comes it's amazing. People bring couches out and just hang out listening to music and chatting.

Scholarships, awards, financial aid: I couldn't have come here if it wasn't for the Saarijärvi Scholarship for Women in Biological Thaumatology, which met the gap between Deer's financial aid and what my family could afford to pay.

Adviser: Prof. Matyas Szabo (Biology, 1948—); Prof. Arcadius Sparrow (Thaumatology, 1987—2016)

Thesis: Rethinking the Rat: Engineering a New Model Organism

What it's about: While the lab rat has served well as a model organism, its DNA is just different enough from humans that it fails for many scientific and magical applications. Great apes are better,

but are significantly more expensive, and human volunteers are frequently hard to find and can cause ethical concerns. I decided to engineer a new model organism, starting from stem cells harvested from an extradimensional meatspace accessed via my own blood. This organism, *Homo Sapiens Ivadius*, has almost entirely human genetic code, but appears to be a slightly larger and more intelligent rat.

What it's really about: Having a carnomantic familiar that's not a damn horse.

What's next: I'm planning on going back to my village for at least a year to fulfill some religious obligations and get married to the guy I've been engaged to since age 3. After that, I want to go into carnomantic medical research, assisting my elder sibling in their studies.

Demian Strange, '17 (they/them)

Major: Art/Anart

Hometown: Culver City, CA

How Deer changed me: Deer College crushed my spirit so hard that I dropped out. I met some great people, but the school itself destroys people's souls, both metaphorically and literally. Everything I got from Deer I got in spite of the administration, not because of it.

What I would say to a prospective student: Don't come here. Go to literally any other school. Even a mundane one. Just not Deer.

Cool stuff I did: Every work of art I made while at Deer was part of a hypersigil, an extended magical working that culminated in the thesis I wrote after I dropped out, granting me powers beyond the comprehension of the college administration. I also played a lot of Dungeons and Dragons.

Influential book: *The Anart Manifesto* by **`Luisa Bellocchio`**. It's one of the first things you read in Intro to Anart, and it really stuck with me. Especially the section on how the best art comes from

revenge.

Adviser: N/A

Thesis: GORED TO DEATH BY A TWELVE-POINT BUCK: MY DEER EXPERIENCE

What it's about: A series of short essays, sequential images, and visual works created to describe every way in which Deer College personally failed me or someone I know. I had a friend who works at the library put a copy into their system and another friend in the registrar's office sign me up for thesis orals.

What it's *really* about: The culmination of a working that forced the administration to give me my diploma, refund my tuition, and put me on their website.

What's next: I'm just living in Three Portlands now. Working at a tattoo parlor. Taking art commissions online. Living the life.

About the Serpent

秦末，高祖为亭长时，人言丰西泽有大蛇。探之，乃遇一异士，蛇首而人身，以为精怪，拔剑欲斩之。其人大惊，言其本是伏羲、女娲之后，夏之遗民，非是妖邪。

高祖观之，着公卿之装，饰有玉带，果博学之士。遂问其众神、列国、诸王、群兽以及人事，喻以故事，一一作答。

Back at the end of the Qin Dynasty, when the first emperor of Han, Liu Bang, was but a local officer, it was rumored that a great serpent lurked in Fengxize. Arriving to investigate, he encountered a strange being with the body of a man and the head of a snake. Seeing that it was a monster, he pulled out his sword to slay it. Panicked, the being explained that he was no monster or demon, but a descendant of Fuxi and Nüwa, a remnant of the Xia Dynasty.

Upon closer examination, Liu found that the being wore the clothing of scholars and officials, adorned with a white jade belt, indeed a well-learned person. He hence asked the being about gods, kingdoms, kings, beasts and men. With stories, the serpent-man answered accordingly.

众神如何？

天地始如鸡子，盘古破之，遂有大渊。大渊者，归墟也。诸神趋于此，如萤趋火，又相争相食。故归墟又为神墓。有阴阳二龙蛰伏，一名伏羲，一名女娲，以诸神为

食。二龙相交，产有九子，九子又生人，故人为万物灵长。

逾万八千岁，二龙相斗，便有伏羲身碎，女娲囚于太岁。人治毁坏，诸神相庆。

诸神中有麒麟者，人面而鹿形，角有黑白纹。闻之，弃其形体，逃于镇星。

有无面之神，见而笑之，曰：“竟惧二龙如斯？”

麒麟对曰：“神者，贪愚之至；人者，龙裔也。如今二龙尽去，诸神必以九子及人为食。二龙归来，必噬尽诸神。惟愿避祸而已。”

无面之神曰：“二龙相斗相食，一如诸神，不足虑。”

麒麟曰：“二龙相斗，必余其一。彼时，诸神尽入腹中。”遂不再答，遁入镇星。

About the Gods

At the beginning, the world was like an egg. When Pangu cracked it, the Great Abyss was formed. The Great Abyss was called Guixu. The gods were drawn to it like insects flying into a fire. There, they fought and consumed each other; hence Guixu was also the tomb of gods. Two Great Dragons, of Yin and Yang, also lurked beneath and fed on the gods, one called Fuxi, the other Nüwa. The two Dragons mated and spawned nine offspring, and from the Nine Children, men were born. Hence men were the most distinguished among all beings.

Tens of thousands of years later, the two Dragons fought. Fuxi was shattered, and Nüwa was imprisoned in Taisui. The rule of men was broken, and the gods all cheered.

One Qilin among the gods had the shape of a deer and the face of a man, carrying large antlers with black and white patterns. Upon hearing the event, Qilin abandoned its form and fled to Saturn.

A faceless god witnessed this, and laughed at it: “How come you fear the two Dragons this much?”

Qilin answered: “Gods are the greediest and the most foolish of all beings, and men are descendants of the Dragons. Now that the two Dragons are both gone, the gods will surely feed upon the Nine Children and men. And when the Dragons return, they will surely consume all gods in turn. I only wish to avoid such disaster.”

The Faceless God said: “The two Dragons will fight and consume each other, just like the gods do. No need to be concerned with this.”

Qilin answered: “But one will surely remain between the two Dragons. And by then, we will all end up in its stomach.” And so it no longer responded to the Faceless God, and hid deep within the planet of Saturn.

列国如何？

古时，有猿之国与夏战。猿之主驭有兽王，又唤树母，驱百兽、百禽及草木无数；夏之君使兵俑、战车，铜铁所铸，又备利器，可夷城郭。

大战半百，小战不可数。战火所至，涸泽作土，化土为沙。蛮夷见之大骇，以为神怒，一一远遁。

如此干戈不休，逾百年。有夏之君芒，驾蛟至大盐泽，与猿之主会。

夏之君曰：“驭兽，龙之道也；机巧，蛇之道也。龙、蛇为侣伴，而所驭之兽、所操之械出于同源。再战无益，当止戈。”

猿之主曰：“若止戈，当如何？”

夏之君曰：“可各执一方。”

猿之主曰：“地有大小，若穷尽之，则何如？”

夏之君指天答曰：“天河无边，可取诸星。”

猿之主应之。遂使猿之国守西地，兼理辰星、长庚、荧惑；夏执东土，并掌太阴、岁星、镇星。至此，干戈止。

又百余年，十日齐出，是金乌所致。金乌者，日之精魄。猿者，昼伏夜出；夏民，逐水而居，事农桑。故猿之国与夏皆受其扰，困苦不堪。又有太阳之民作乱两地，各以羲和、帝俊为首。曰：“吾等日之子裔也。”

猿之国与其斗，因十日之故，不得胜。太阳之民又窃瑰宝，使兽王、树母及百兽百禽作乱不休。猿之国至此而亡，其民十不存一。

夏之君桀闻之大骇，遣大夫羿以轩辕剑击十日。九日坠地，一乌脱逃。然金乌所坠，尽为火海，夏地尽毁。

故有人叹曰：“嗟乎！昔时猿、夏两国，何其兴隆？庶民见之，以为仙圣，亦以天人自居。分治后土，兼有诸星。如今俱为尘土。”而今人所见诸星，闪烁非常者，是猿、夏之子遗。

About the Kingdoms

In ancient times, a war between the Xia Dynasty and a kingdom of apes was fought. The Lord of Apes summoned the king beast and the mother tree, with animals and plants of a thousand kinds under its control; the King of Xia commanded soldiers and chariots of iron and bronze, and harnessed great weapons that could wipe out cities.

Over fifty great wars were fought, with countless smaller battles. Wherever the fires of war reached, waters were vaporized and rocks were turned into sand. The savages who witnessed this all fled in terror as they thought of it as the wrath of gods.

The war continued like this for over a hundred years, until King Mang of Xia rode a wyrm to the great salty lake, and met with the Lord of Apes.

The King of Xia said: “The taming of beasts is the Way of the Dragon; the construction of machines is the Way of the Serpent. The Dragon and the Serpent are partners; hence the beasts and the machines originate from the same source. It is futile to continue the fight, so the war must end.”

The Lord of Apes asked: “If the war is to end, what should we do?”

The King of Xia said: “We can each rule one part of the land.”

The Lord of Apes asked: “But the land is limited, what if we conquered it all?”

The King of Xia pointed skyward and said: “The Milky Way is endless, and we can rule the stars.”

So the Lord of Apes agreed. It is then decided that the Kingdom of Apes shall have the West, as well as Mercury, Venus, and Mars; Xia shall rule the East, along with the Moon, Saturn, and Jupiter. The war hence ended.

Another few hundred years passed, Golden Crows, the sun spirits, caused ten suns to appear in the sky. The apes rested during the

day and worked at night; the Xia people lived near waters and practiced agriculture. Hence both the Kingdom of Apes and Xia were greatly troubled. In addition, the Sun People, lead by Xihe and Dijun, revolted in the two kingdoms. They said: “We are the children of the suns.”

The Kingdom of Apes sought to suppress them, but was unsuccessful with the interference of the ten suns. The Sun People then stole their great treasure, and made the king beast, the mother tree, as well as the thousands of animals and plants wreck great havoc. The kingdom thus collapsed, leaving few survivors amongst the apes.

King Jie of Xia heard of the event. Terrified, he sent Scholar Yi to kill the ten suns with the Sword of Xuanyuan. Nine suns fell to the ground with only one crow escaped. But the fallen crows turned the land into a sea of fires, and Xia was doomed as well.

Therefore it was exclaimed that: “Alas! Back then, weren’t the Kingdom of Apes and Xia prosperous? Ordinary people would regard them as saints and gods, and they also regarded themselves as heavenly people. Their domains were not only this land, but the stars as well. Yet they are but ashes now.” And among the stars people now saw, sometimes strange blinking lights could be found. They were what was left of the two kingdoms.

诸王如何？

昔有阿伽之王祈于大渊，唤三阎罗，
曰：“愿不死。”阎罗曰：“可以一博。”与
郁垒为叶子戏，与阎摩投壶，与地藏奕，
并赌以宗族、臣民及鸟兽。

王不得胜，阎罗遂索魂于显贵、庶民、牲
畜。便有灾祸，疫病大行，征战无休，黎
民十不存一。余者揭竿而起，公卿尽戮，
困王于庭。

王大惧，又祈于大渊。有无面之神应之，

曰：“死之，三日而返。再饮诸血，可得生。”缢于中庭，举国庆之。曝尸于野，群鸦饲之。

及三日，阖城尽死，俱为干尸。神遣从者至，以玉盏盛诸民之血献王。欲饮，然尸身残破，不得抓握，失手翻之。诸血流而为河。神叹曰：“不得生，亦不得死。”

王大骇，欲再求诸血，不可得。三阎罗笑之，化鸦而走。

About the Kings

The King of Ajia once called upon the Great Abyss, summoning the Three Lords of Death, and said: “I wish that I will not die.” The Lords of Death answered: “You may gamble with us.” Thus the king played cards with Yulü, competed in throwing with Yama, and engaged in a chess match with Kshitigarbha, with the royal blood, the citizens, and the animals under his rule as stakes.

The king lost. The Lords of Death hence took the souls of royalty, common people, and livestock. Disasters arose, plagues prevailed, and wars broke out. Less than one tenth of the people survived. The survivors revolted, killing the royalties and officials, and trapped the king in his court.

Terrified, the king called upon the Great Abyss once more. A faceless god answered him, and said: “You must first die, and will then return in three days. By consuming all blood, you shall live.” The king hanged himself in the court, and the whole kingdom cheered. They exposed his body in the wild, where it was fed upon by the crows.

Three days later, the whole city was lifeless. All were corpses,

drained of blood. The god had sent its emissary. With a jade cup, the emissary held the blood of the city's people, and presented it to the king. Attempting to drink it, the king grabbed the cup. But as his body was torn and broken from the crows, he dropped it by accident. The blood ran down and formed a river. The god sighed and said: "You cannot live and may not die."

The King panicked, and asked for the blood once more. But his chance was lost. The Three Lords of Death laughed, then turned into crows and flew off.

群兽如何？

有殃君居于西土，是猿国旧地，狄瓦之治。狄瓦者，事巫蛊，崇恶神。虽衣冠博带，以人为食，或呼喝玩弄，如群兽。民皆苦。

殃君不堪驱使，夜遁。遇不末，是僧侣，侍于伏羲。

不末曰："伏羲者，蛇父也，是金之神，大智慧者。当以铜为肌，以铁置骨，以机巧换脏器，以水银化血，可解汝之苦。"

殃君不愿，曰："身体肤发，舍之，可为人乎？是愚行。"

不末叹曰："可求诸神，不可求于龙母。"

遂与不末别。俄而，狄瓦追至，擒殃君，囚于兽栏，择日食之。遂求于诸神，无应者。

泣于夜，闻兽之音。是龙也，曰："吾名女娲，是汝等之母。"殃君拜之，以为神。又以栏中猪羊为祭，以饲龙下兽者六。龙曰："善，当助之。"

殃遂为术者，牧有龙、蛇及诸兽。狄瓦不

敌，退走，弃其城。殃君曰：“吾当为术者王。”语毕，六兽来贺。以城中民饲六兽。

不末闻之，率僧侣伐殃。再见之，四目巨口，如龙似蛇，不类人。不末叹曰：“与兽相斗，反为野兽，呜呼哀哉！”

败殃君于压罗。又驱入太岁，自此如入兽笼，不见天日。

About the Beasts

A man named Yang lived in the West, the land the Apes once walked, now ruled by Daevas. The Daevas practiced witchcraft and worshipped hideous gods. They might wear fancy clothes, but being beasts inside, they used humans as food, slaves and toys. People under their rule suffered.

One day, Yang could not stand this any longer, and fled into the night. He met a monk named Bumo, who served Fuxi.

Bumo said: “Fuxi is the Father Serpent, the god of metal, one who bears great wisdom. Your pain can be eased if you replace your flesh with copper, your bone with iron, your organs with clockwork, and your blood with mercury.”

Yang was reluctant, turning him down: “If I abandon my body, how can I remain a man? Such is foolish.”

Bumo sighed and said: “You may call upon the gods for help, but do not call upon the Mother Dragon.”

Yang then bade farewell to Bumo. Soon after, the Daevas came and caught him. Locking him up with livestock, they decided to eat him on a fine day. It was then that Yang called upon the gods, but none answered.

Weeping into the night, Yang heard the call of the Beast. It was the Dragon, who spoke to him: “I am Nüwa, the mother of you all.” Yang regarded it as a god, and knelt. He offered goats and pigs in the cage as sacrifices to feed the Six Beasts under the throne of the Dragon. The Dragon then said: "Good. So you shall receive my aid."

Yang thus became the Sorcerer, and herded dragons, snakes, and beasts. The Daevas could not match his power. They fled, leaving the city behind. Yang then said: "I shall be the Sorcerer King." As he finished, the Six Beasts all descended and congratulated him, and was fed with the city’s people.

Bumo heard of the event, and led his monks to fight against Yang. When Bumo saw Yang again, he found that the being no longer resembled a human, but a serpent-like creature with four eyes and a huge mouth. Bumo exclaimed: “Once struggled against the beasts, he now became a beast himself, such a shame!”

He defeated Yang at Yaluo, and drove him into Taisui. As a beast in the cage, Yang never again bathed in sunlight.

人如何？

始皇时，四海一统，蛮夷皆服王化，又有四方异士来朝。秦皇告天下曰：“愿得长生。”

有盘甲从海外来，是古之民，寿数无穷，通鸟兽语。言及龙蛇治世之时，建木高塔沟通天地，乐土园林畜有诸兽，昆仑殿宇为人所居。造阿房宫，建高台以摘星，锁诸兽为基石，又录众生之语为典籍，献于秦皇。

秦皇曰：“可得长生否？”

盘甲曰：“立不朽功业，自当为万民所念，长存于心。”

秦皇怒，焚其书册。盘甲叹之，遁入火

光，不复见。

有鱼凫从蜀中来，是蚕丛之裔，夏之遗民。言及黄帝、尧、舜及禹王，行伏羲之道，天下大治。铸机巧兵俑万余，又造飞舟，穿行天河，达于太阴。

秦皇曰：“可得长生否？”

鱼凫曰：“以机巧为躯壳，可以不朽。”

秦皇不悦，视为外道，弃而不用。

有徐福自西土来，是内殿之使，龙母之仆。言及术者殃君，拜于女娲及其坐下六兽，退诸魔，驭群兽，有伟力。

秦皇曰：“可得长生否？”

徐福曰：“可。”

秦皇大悦。徐福遂索五百童男童女为牺牲，秦皇允之。祭于大龙，俄而，龙下之兽至。果许秦皇以长生及伟力，曰：“日祭一人，以谢龙母。”秦皇曰：“当祭百人。”大兽曰：“善。”遂征天下之民。徐福见之，逃于东海。

鱼凫闻之大骇，曰：“盘甲者，至人也；夏民者，龙裔而已；徐福者，实野兽之属。不求于盘甲，而求于徐福，大谬也。如此，一人得生而祸及天下，不可取。”

遂率昔日所造兵俑，困秦皇于阿房宫。又沉入地下，虽寿无穷，不得脱出。

其人语毕，高祖曰：“人皆言此中有妖，不可空手而还。”其人曰：“可斩此蛇。”掷玉带于地，化为白蛇，高祖斩之。其人不复见。携蛇而归，众人皆惊，言是帝王之兆。

About Men

During Shi Huang Ti’s reign, all lands were united, all savages were under the emperor’s rule, and people with rare talents came from all over the world to seek audience with the emperor. The emperor of Qin hence announced to the world that: “I seek eternal life.”

Panjia came from overseas. He was of the ageless ancient people, and spoke the words of birds and animals. He talked about the reign of the Dragon and the Serpent, where the Great Tower of Jianmu led to the sky, the Paradise Garden housed all beasts, and the Kunlun Palace resided by men. With beasts locked up in the base, he built Epang Palace, where towers could reach the stars. He then wrote languages of all life into a tome and presented it to the emperor.

The emperor asked: “Can I achieve eternal life through this?”

Panjia answered: “If you can accomplish such great things, you will surely be remembered by all of your people, and live forever in their hearts.”

The emperor was enraged, and burnt the tome. Panjia sighed, and disappeared into the flames, never seen again.

Yufu came from the Shu state. He was the descendant of Cancong, a remnant of the Xia Dynasty. He talked about the Yellow Emperor, the kings Yao, Shun, and Yu, and how they managed to govern the land to prosperity through the Way of Fuxi. He first forged tens of

thousands of mechanical soldiers, and then a flying ship, which sailed in the Milky Way and settled on the moon.

The emperor asked: “Can I achieve eternal life through this?”

Yufu answered: “If you replace your mortal body with machines, you may live forever.”

The emperor was not pleased. Regarding the method as heretical, he abandoned Yufu’s plans.

Xu Fu came from the West. He was a messenger of Adytum, servant of Mother Dragon. He spoke of the Sorcerer Yang, who worshipped Nüwa and the Six Beasts under her throne, and was able to defeat demons, harness beasts, and wield great power.

The emperor asked: “Can I achieve eternal life through this?”

Xu Fu answered: “Yes.”

The emperor was greatly pleased. He permitted Xu Fu’s request, who asked for five hundred children as sacrifice. Xu Fu then sacrificed to the Great Dragon. Soon after, a Beast under the Dragon’s throne came. It indeed granted the emperor eternal life and great power, saying: “You must sacrifice a person daily to show gratitude towards Mother Dragon.” The emperor answered: “I shall sacrifice a hundred daily.” The Great Beast replied: “Such is good.” The emperor then collected people from all over the land. Xu Fu saw this, and fled to the eastern seas.

Terrified of the emperor’s actions, Yufu said: “Panjia is the perfection of man; the Xia people are but descendants of the Dragons; Xu Fu, howerever, is indeed of the beasts’ kind. Seeking help not from Panjia, but from Xu Fu, a grave mistake. An eternal life but at the cost of the lives of all who walk the land, such is intolerable.”

Yufu thus led the mechanical soldiers he built and trapped the emperor in Epang Palace. He then sank the palace into the ground, and left the emperor with no escape despite his eternal life.

As the stories were finished, Liu said: “People all say that a monster dwells here. Thus, I cannot return empty handed.” The being said: “You can slay this serpent.” He tossed his jade belt onto the ground, which then turned into a white serpent. Liu slew it, and saw that the serpent-man was nowhere to be found. Seeing the serpent Liu brought back, the people were all amazed, and said that it was a sign of future royalty.

About Tree Fiddy

You know, most folks who think about the ocean usually only think about the surface level. You know, the bright blue areas with all the fish and plant life. Finding Nemo and all that sort of crap. It's mysterious, sure, but there's never any real sense of threat to it. You go down and you know you're coming back up; that sort of thing.

But they never think about where I'm going: straight to the bottom. Sure, I'm in a small airtight capsule, the best the Foundation's got on hand at the moment, but that doesn't really do much to distract from the fact that I'm currently 2500 meters down and still going. Let me tell you, when you're hours away from the nearest shore, going down to the bottom of the ocean to retrive a highly dangerous artifact all by yourself, even the best and brightest of the Foundation telling you it'll all be OK isn't nearly enough.

I swear, I'm going to kill whoever did this. If 173 had just stayed in its damn cell we wouldn't have to be going through this. But nope, it broke out, killed a bunch of people, vanished off the radar, and was last seen by one of our contacts being dumped out of a boat into the middle of the ocean. We would have taken the bastards doing the dumping into custody had they not jumped in right after it and floated back up as corpses twenty minutes later. Either way, we've got ourselves an SCP stuck at the bottom of the ocean, and I have to go get it.

They already went down a few times looking for it. Would have been nice if they'd bothered to think of bringing anything strong enough to dig it out of the muck it's lodged in up to the chest. But no, they only found where the damned thing is, and I'm supposed to go down and drag it up from the briny deep so we can lock it up until next Tuesday, when I'm pretty damned certain we'll have to go through the whole process again. I swear, if it weren't for the health benefits the job has, I'd quit Monday.

Christ, it's dark outside. I'm pretty damned certain I saw something

moving out there, but I don't want to turn on the floodlights and draw its attention. All I know is that there's water all around me, pretty much no light, and a fucking long way down if anything decides to ram into me. Wonder what the pressure is out there? Probably somewhere in the vicinity of too damn high. Pretty much the opposite of the temp…

Why do the readings on the pannel indicate that I'm being pulled sharply westward? There aren't any major channels nearby, so it can't be that. It'd take something massive to pull with that much force, like a huge-ass drain pipe, or… a… Let's turn the sub around so I can get a better view. Please don't let it be what I think it is, oh please God, I'll be a good man from now on if it's not what I think it is, please oh please… oh, you *dickwads.*

There's a huge wall of flesh right in front of me, filling up my entire field of view. Looks like an enormous monster fish of some kind, mostly because of the miles tall gills that are slowly sucking me in.

Yeah! Yeah, thanks for not telling me that we were sending me down *right the fuck next to* the gills of the single largest creature on the planet. What, did you think that it wouldn't be breathing right now? You've got this thing's breathing pattern down pat, and you think it's a good idea to schedule my dive right when it's taking in water? Yeah, thanks a whole fucking bunch, assholes!

Calm down, calm the fuck down. You wanna get out of this alive, just maneuver the sub in the right direction. Which way is the right direction? Hell if I know, but it probably involves something along the lines of moving away from the giant neck slits of death. Angle yourself down, turn the propellers to full throttle, and work on trying to get in-between two gills. The pull shouldn't be that strong in the middle. C'mon, c'mon, that's it, take it nice and easy, while still moving at top speed as if your life depended upon it, which it kinda *does.* That's it… that's it…

Oh, thank God, I think I made it. Still too damned close to the giant fish beast, but I think I can keep going down without needing to worry about getting sucked inside Monstro here. Why am I even on the Deep Sea Specialization Force again? Answer, because I majored in Marine Science and thought it would be cool to live my

dream job and get paid well for it.

Digging statues out of the muck and nearly getting killed by Biblical monsters. Yep. Job of a fucking lifetime.

***

Well, that was a boring hour. Think I'm finally below that thing. Wish I could confirm it, but I don't think the floodlights will light up more than three meters in front of my face at this point. And if that thing's so close to me, I'd say I really shouldn't worry about anything except how my last prayers should go.

According to the maps, I should nearly be at the bottom. Might wanna give the floodlights a go, just to check. Turning them on now and… hey, what do you know, I've got five meters of coverage, that's nice. Looks like I have made it to the bottom, so let's start checking around me to see how far away I am from that damned statue. They said I went down within ten meters of it, but I don't have any way of saying how far those gills pulled me away.

Half an hour of searching and still nothing. Are they really sure it's trapped in the muck? How do they know it didn't wrestle itself out at some point and just go wandering the ocean… black, by the looks of things outside. I swear, if he's not there…

Ah-ha! There you are, you old rocky bastard! Jammed chest-high in the muck, just like they said you would be! Christ, you look terrible. Looks like something tried to take a couple of bites out of you. Hell, you've even got a few teeth sticking out of you - big ones at that. And what are those things you've got tied all around you? Looks like little plastic bags of ground-up meat. Weird. Don't know who'd be stupid enough to use you as a fishing line.

Doesn't matter, though. I'm here, you're here, let's get back to the surface before something can go wrong. Yeah, I see you struggling every time I blink. Not gonna do you any good. That gunk's thick as hell, and this mechanical arm's even stronger. You're not going anywhere any time soon. Let's get heading upwards.

Oh, look, radio contact's back on. Hey, yeah, I've got it, don't worry.

He's sealed up nice and tight in the claw. Yeah, things went smoothly. Oh, except for one little detail. Yeah, as it turns out, you fuckers dropped me right next to 169's gills while they were taking in water and nearly got me turned into a victim of whatever sort of filtering system that fucker's got. Yes, yes you fucking *did*. I expect at least a double pay for this job when I get back up to the… Hold on, 173's struggling again. Give it up, buddy, you're not getting…

Oh shit, I think he just got out. I've still got him by the leg, but he's in reaching distance of the screen on the sub. The guy on the radio's telling me that the glass is completely shatterproof, but I don't believe him, seeing as 173 is punching and cracking the glass at a fairly alarming rate. It's kinda hard to keep your eyes open when the entire sub is rattling around and you're scared out of your fucking mind. What the hell do you mean it's lucky that the sub's designed to float back up to the surface and increase the gripping strength if the hull is breached? I'm still inside the fucking sub, and I'm still gonna fucking die.

Good God, how much longer can I keep this up? We're ascending at a good pace, and we should be at the top in… I don't know, I'm too terrified right now to come up with the numbers. I want to say half an hour, but I really don't like that. Five minutes. We'll be up in five minutes. I can go for five minutes without blinking, right?

For some reason, I can't help but notice that weird writing on the statue's forehead. I haven't ever cared to get close enough to memorize the details of its face, but I know for certain it was never there before. Kinda weird, really. What's it say? "Property of the S… P…" can't make out the rest.

Hold on one fucking moment. What did that captured memo we used to pass around say? Something about capturing anomalous objects and using them to punch…

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Then I blink, and the screen shatters, letting the water rush in.

Absolute Self-Control

I don't care.

No, in all seriousness. That's the answer to your question. I don't care.

Apathy is stronger body armor than anything else. Why should I care that there's a damned great lizard running loose? I have papers to file, dammit! Why should I give a damn that the semen-eating girl is loose and headed for my sector? I'm on break.

Everything's a narrative. Everything, especially real life. This one, that is. I have suspicions regarding other 'real lifes' that I'm working on in my spare time. But I digress. Narratives. They exist in the world, just as coincidences do. They aren't very strong, mostly just a set of cliches played out repeatedly. Trained task forces fall easily while resourceful civilians manage to save the day; head researchers who by rights ought to be filing paperwork take on the dangerous task of decomming a dangerous SCP; 682 escapes and starts a rampage; things like that. And people always act as they would in a bad thriller, or a bad sci-fi, or a bad action flick. Except me.

That's how I've lived to be ninety, kid. I don't care what goes on around me, I do what needs to be done. I survived walking through the middle the Clef-Kondraki Incident because I didn't so much as acknowledge their presence. I got some coffee from the break room while Kondraki was in his battle suit, and I was in my office filing forms to request a budget for reconstruction of the Site when Clef was freezing the hallway. I'm always that kind of person, and it's helped me survive. 682 rushed by an inch from my face, and I did nothing. Didn't so much as flinch.

That's another thing, you know? That bloody great lizard isn't hostile, it's reactionary. It's like a reverse of 173 - you watch it and feel any emotion or reaction regarding it and it hates you. That's why

whatsisname's experiment with the kids didn't work, and why 053 got along so well with it. I just don't feel and don't react. It works for me.

That's how it works, kid. Take it or leave it, I don't much care.

Abstract Naught

«Previously»

An impossibility floated in the center of the decrepit room. Agent Danyal's eyes were fixed on it, ignoring the rusted paratech and concept-modifying devices around him. The sphere was colorless, if it could even be considered a sphere. Not white, not black, not transparent. It was the silhouette of a nonexistent color. His eyes turned to a wooden sign propped against a tangle of circuitry.

WARNING: DO NOT TOUCH!
DESCENDED

Drips of water from the pipes above had stained it, creating a stream of red paint that pooled on the floor. Luckily for the investigation it was still legible, though the many identical carvings and placards on the walls would've been good substitutes.

He scratched a small itch next to his right eye, his finger passing through a translucent doctor's eyepiece that rested on it.

"So Danyal, any idea on what this is?" Agent Chester strolled into the room, eyeing the enigma. His brown hair was tinged with gray and his face wrinkled.

"Working on it."

The eyepiece focused on the silhouette and Danyal waited. Ennoiatheama, he called it. The ability to comprehend conceptual details. Normal objects were far too detailed to be understood without the risk of seizure, but basic conceptual structures — such as the eyepiece — had the absolute minimum information required for existence. The eyepiece stared, yet no data was retrieved. He hadn't collapsed to the ground, confirming that it was conceptual, but there had to be some information. The eyepiece focused again. The spherical appearance had to be in the details, even if there was

nothing else. No data was retrieved.

"Well, it… It doesn't have any concepts," Danyal said.

"Wait, so this is something like CNC?"

"No paradoxical concepts in this. This has no concepts at all. If my parts are working right, though."

"…But it still exists."

"Hm."

They both stood, thinking about the situation. If a concept was necessary for existence, things that were conceptually null shouldn't physically or informationally be in reality. Based on the **basking shark incidents** the most that should be present would be a thin outline, a sign of what was lacking in reality. Yet there was no outline. It was a colorless nothing.

"So, how dangerous could this be?"

"No idea." He noticed a thin informational glow around the nothing's edges. He focused, but it was too small to rationalize. Too small to rationalize without being centimeters away from the nothing. "The Associates didn't like it."

"Crazed cultists have picky tastes. Could just be the opposite of their ideal conceptual purity." Chester grabbed the rusted end of a broken lever, once used to open a now busted power box. "Danyal?"

Danyal looked away from the nothing. "What?"

Chester pointed to the lever, then to the nothing. "Shall I?"

"Throw it in?"

"Mhmm."

They both looked back at the signs. "Too risky," Danyal replied.

"Alright." He dropped the lever. "I'll look through this area and you

can continue working in the main room. Testing and existential debates come later."

Danyal nodded.

The steel panels where Chester's sideburns should've been opened up and released a myriad of communication devices, small enough to fit in the skull with room to spare. "Agent Chester Romero reporting, Floor -1, Room 4…"

Danyal walked into a hallway and Chester's conversation faded out. He was preoccupied with the informational glow. If it was part of the nothing it would've appeared in the data on it, so it had to be caused by the nothing. He'd been taught that this was impossible, and that anything within a universe had to be conceptual. Was it wrong? If vacuums can exist in nature, can an ontological vacuum exist? A hole in the real?

The hallway almost felt stuffier than the room he'd left; perhaps the dim lighting and close walls were to blame. An unusual breeze blew by him and into that room. Something metallic rattled in the distance. He briefly adjusted his black suit and tie. As stylish as the uniform was, **UIU** investigations rarely left it unscathed. Danyal had the feeling that this would be one of those times. There was another metallic rattling.

"Agent Danyal Vahid," his intercom announced. "Report to Room 1, Floor- oh hey. Over."

Agent Valarie Dell, wearing an androgynous uniform with short red-dyed hair, waved from a bend in the hallway. Next to their feet was a bullet-ridden autoturret, leftover from the UIU raid on the building. They idly flicked their hand. The turret rattled and spun, the machine gun barrel clacking against the wall.

"What is it?" Danyal asked.

"Something's come up in the main room. They think you're qualified for it."

"Aren't there other metaphysics researchers here?"

"They're all smooching with that giant machine on Floor -4 and nobody wants to interrupt their fun," Val said, smirking.

Danyal sighed.

Both of them began walking down the hallway and toward the main room. The air gradually became fresher.

"Am I just a backup metaphysics researcher now?"

"What, you didn't get the memo? You're the new Metaphysics Department head researcher, all agent duties gone! All you'll do now is just stick your head in concepts and say what happens."

Danyal continued to blankly stare ahead, and it became clear that he was preoccupied. Val went quiet. The informational glow, the sole clue to the nothing puzzle, kept dancing around every possible explanation. The only certainty was the involvement of the Associates of Apotheosis. It was impossible that a conceptual abnormality could exist in this building without their involvement.

The two passed through a broken doorway and entered the main chamber of Floor -1, the first basement of the former Apotheosis HQ.

Rows of lights hung from the ceiling and illuminated the scuffed floor. Officers patrolled the area, rummaging through compartments hidden in walls, filled with illegal paratech, and pulling off fake concrete panels in search of more. A priest lined up a portable projector, preparing to exorcise the demon locking a vault. However, the center of attention was a large steel contraption that ran along the northern wall, resembling a particle accelerator that had been shrunken then partially lodged in the floor. Multiple computers jutted out of the sides, one of which had a police android's finger wires embedded in it — slowly breaking encryptions and cracking passwords. In the middle of the device was the all too familiar symbol of the Associates of Apotheosis — a dot in the middle of a line in a circle on the face of a cube — some metaphor for conceptual ascension. A golem stood nearby and waited for orders.

"Sooo, are you curious at all about why I called you?"

"Oh," His eyes snapped back to reality. "What is it?"

"I was over with some of the cops inspecting the machine and…"

The exorcist's chants filled the background like the ambient chatter of a radio.

"…and we saw this small dot that seemed to have no color."

Danyal froze. "Translucent, black, or?"

"Nothing that looked like color."

"Shit." He sprinted off towards a cluster of officers around the center of the machine. Val muttered under their breath and followed suit.

"Excuse me, agent coming through." The officers immediately dispersed. Danyal looked around the machine's surface for any details when he saw what Val had spoken of. A small dot on a metal panel. Same conceptless structure, same informational glow.

Val leaned in and stared. "Conceptual structure?"

"Well, no. Conceptless."

"Like CNC, or — "

"Completely conceptless."

"Shit." It was clear they didn't know what this exactly meant, but they had watched someone die from Conceptually Null Clearsolids. Anything with conceptless in the name was a bad sign, even if the specifics varied.

The dot changed into a small sphere, a fraction of an inch larger. A few officers stopped to watch the commotion. The priest finally stopped her shouting as several polygons sputtered out of the sphere and retracted.

"Vitae collapse rennen rennen." Danyal said.

Hearing the specialized activation phrase, the golem ceased idling

and walked towards the sound's source. The spirit inside knew trouble was afoot, even if it couldn't comprehend the specifics. In seconds the spirit had pored through the minds of Danyal and the surrounding people, setting its mind on "peculiar spheroid" and "apprehend" — simple enough for a standard police golem to know. Danyal shivered as it tumbled through his thoughts.

The humanoid bulk of concrete pushed Val to the side and a dull, monotone voice scraped out. "Step aside citizen." Val grimaced.

As the golem leaned over, the dot suddenly stretched out into a set of long blobs. They expanded and phased through the golem's torso, which immediately began flashing and changing into many colors. From Danyal's view conceptual details were being rapidly modified and shredded into their basic components, ejecting and dissipating in a metaphysical light show. The golem was gaseous, translucent, shadowless, sound, a topology equation.

Both agents leapt back and people looked on in shock. The not-concepts drifted out towards the ceiling, showing a hole with rubber edges and a steel panel beneath it. The torso was deleted, and the legs stumbled before becoming a liquid that fell to the ceiling. The variable construct emesis ended.

"Great going, cannon fodder," Val muttered as they looked up.

"Step back everyone!" Danyal ordered.

Tendrils lashed out at the air and conceptually broke the atoms it composed, leaving a white glowing trail of informational destruction and a breeze of air, moving to replace the vacuums it created. Several officers ushered people towards the stairwell as they shouted over their intercoms.

Ideatic text hovered inches above the steel panel, glowing and flickering.

FOR THOSE WHO DETEST HUMAN DESTINY

"Self-sabotage," Val remarked.

"Hm." Interrogation of the captured cultists to find the culprit could come later, assuming they were captured.

"That or a pre-programmed feature."

Val popped the lid of their flask open and took a long swig. They claimed the liquor helped them concentrate to the suspicion of many, though Danyal wondered more about whether the cyan fluid inside could even be classified as alcohol. "Think you can handle this?" they asked.

"Probably."

"Sweet. I'll keep the area covered."

"Covered from what?" Danyal looked at the many police officers and specialists behind him, and remembered the many more agents in the building above and below him.

"Whatever is… heading for your booty, I guess."

Danyal chuckled, and began inspecting the machine. "Uh, some help opening this?"

Val closed their eyes and clenched their fists. A second later chunks of metal ejected off and flew past Danyal, tailed by the pink message. It landed next to Val, who took a deep breath. A researcher gasped, either from the spontaneous destruction or from the horror of potential damage to the device.

"Try not to ask that too much, okay?"

He looked into the machine's interior, a long tunnel that held massive amounts of conceptual structures: translucent gold tubing and gears in the shape of a roughly cylindrical shape. Through a combination of ennoiatheama, willpower, and a chunk of conceptual wiring lodged in his skull, he could comprehend the entire structure by seeing a single portion of it. The full details refused to stay in his head though the summary did.

The machine was essentially a large computer, operated with the terminals and conceptual abilities. An object would be assigned to a

pointer as an input, and its properties would be modified, becoming the output. Without an input the device shouldn't be active, but it was producing a constant stream of junk outputs. Several broken spheres lining the conceptual structure would be reason why.

Despite his experience with metaphysics, it was impossible for him to repair concepts. This left two options: attempt to find the machine's power source and shut it down — risking more not-concept production — or to break it, dismaying the UIU Metaphysics Department. Hopefully they'll understand.

He mentally pushed and extended translucent blue conceptual projections of his arms — a metabody — out of his body, with the metabody's hands floating into the machine. The hands grabbed onto the structures and prepared to snap a central tube off. A second after a shadowy blur flew past one of his metahands and sliced it.

Three bulges appeared on the surface of the structures, dark-gray in color. A second later they burst into not-concepts that shot out of the machine and went through the floor and walls, spraying shimmering metal fragments from behind them.

"Everybody leave!" Val shouted.

Nobody hesitated to run.

Val tapped their mic on. "This is Agent Valarie Dell communicating on all channels, several metaphysical hazards are now present on Floor -1…" They kept a watchful eye on Danyal's motionless body.

A sliver of Danyal's metahand was now nonexistent. The blur, a pitch-black metaphysical katydid, landed at the structure's opposite end. It lunged again and he dodged. It was the machine's defense mechanism and was trying to eat his metabody, which would take days to regenerate. Though it wasn't guaranteed death, he couldn't let it reach his real body. Body property and perception damage wasn't worth gambling on.

Leap, dodge, leap, dodge. The battle swiftly fell into a pattern that left him in a weak disadvantage. As it passed under his metahands

again he went for a swift punch. He pulled back when two fingers were sheared off as he touched the insect's body. It was a conceptuvorous hole, impenetrable to the metaphysical combat he relied on. It may tire out after a while, but he didn't have a while.

More dark-gray bulges appeared near the right end of the construct.

"Wait, Val. Is the android still there?" Danyal shouted over the chaotic metaphysical noise only he heard.

"Uh-"

Officer ARO43 was still connected to the computer, their processing power dedicated entirely to data retrieval. The only safety measure they took was crouching down. Val clenched their hand and the android was ripped from the conceptually flashing terminal.

"Get out of here!"

ARO43 briefly looked around and sprinted to Floor -2, ignoring their severed hand laying by the superconducting computer remains.

Danyal pinched the surface of the conceptual structures and extruded a barrier from it in front of his metahand. The katydid dodged around and collided into another wall that was transforming into protective semi-spheres around each metahand. If the creature was tasked with protecting the device, it wouldn't eat through parts of it. The hands swung around the structure's sides and repeatedly slammed into the creature, sending it careening. Both fists gathered enough material and broke off the surface into the air, fully encapsulated in spheres. They rocketed towards the bug and crushed it into the structure, blasting a crater on its surface. Before the bug could react the spheres broke off the hands and wrapped over the crater, sealing it in.

The hands shed the spheres and moved to a thin conceptual pipe next to a mass of translucent gears. If this was broken it would split the machine in half, rendering it inoperable. He grabbed on, noticing dark gray bulges on the other side of it. He had to move quickly. The hand pushed and gradually dented it, extruding more walls from it and shrinking its size. The bulges were growing, expanding, twisting,

and bending. Suddenly a rapid series of modifications to the machine were detected by Danyal. The bug was tunneling through the machine towards his hands. In an instant it burst out and the right metahand was eviscerated into particulate debris. It reached the opposite side of the machine and propelled itself towards the last hand.

He snapped the pipe as the bulges grew and pushed them out towards the bug, letting go to avoid the chaos that would ensue. A colorless jet shot out as the conceptual structures buckled and collapsed, piercing through the insect. The katydid split into red and blue afterimages of itself which ricocheted through the interior, smashing apart electronics. After a second they vanished in a haze of ampersands, fading out of ennoiatheama's range. Danyal's metabody began retracting into himself.

Chester pushed Danyal to the ground as a row of not-concept spikes came out of the machine, barely missing his head. Val swung their hand back and they flew away from another spike that went along the floor. The remnants of the machine crumpled, and with a long electric whine it deactivated. A translucent ring rolled out of the debris and melted into his remaining metahand, which phased back into his body. His mind made an attempt to keep going, grasping at and hanging onto disparate thoughts. He fainted.

Chester dragged himself off the ground and inspected himself. Only a few scrapes on his clothes, and after pulling back his sleeves he saw that his cybernetics were intact. He looked around. Metal shards, broken pipes spilling water onto the ground, thaumic circuitry spitting out arcane symbols in electrical arcs. Columns of light spilled through as the not-concepts disintegrated and unplugged the holes they left in the ceiling.

"He really did a number on this place," Val said between pants. They raised their flask and took another swig.

"It happens."

Val nodded. They could faintly hear the sounds of panicked pedestrians and the officers trying to calm them, both groups

disturbed by the spikes that had stretched far out of the building. The floors above and below were lit with the chatter of agents, all calling back to command in confusion. Countless materials with tampered properties were sprinkled through the air.

"Anyways, I'm checking the outside. Have to make sure the police can handle the situation."

"Roger that."

He dashed up the stairwell. "Oh, and I'll call for med support," he said, pointing at Danyal's unconscious body. He rushed up and out of site.

Val admired the wreckage and crouched down.

"Agent Valarie, status report," their mic sputtered to life.

"Metaphysical hazards suspected to be neutralized. One golem down, one 3P police android damaged, Agent Danyal unconscious. Over."

They laid a hand on his chest. Still breathing.

"Copy that. Agent Chester has called for medical units, stay where you are and check for additional hazards. Over."

"Copy. Over."

The investigation was far from over.

FoldUnfold
Table of Contents
Abridged Timeline of SCP- - Acquisition
Agent Went's Log
Agent Hachigan's
Transcript of Mr. ' Interview
Dr. Jared's Note
Testimony of Thomas

Abridged Timeline of SCP- - Acquisition

- Some time in early June 18 , a number of , Tennessee area newspapers began carrying stories of a haunting at the residence, located at Road.
    - Field Agents Went and Hachigan held several conversations with Mr. , both at his residence and elsewhere. Phenomena witnessed during interviews not conducted at the residence seemed to suggest that Mr. himself was causally responsible for the reported "poltergeist" activity, although he appeared oblivious to this fact.
    - Mr. was persuaded to accompany Agents Went and Hachigan to Research Installation under the pretense he would receive treatment for his rapid decline in mental faculties. Mr. was told the facility was a medical institution.
        - After Agent Hachigan established no objects of interest were in the home, the residence was razed. A cover story was concocted in which Mr.

fled his residence in terror in the dead of night, breaking a kerosene lamp in his bid to escape. This story was widely circulated by regional newspapers.

- Mr. arrived with Agents Went and Hachigan at Research Installation on the 11th of June, 18 at 10:30 am local time.
    - Six (6) individuals signed in to Exam Room 3 shortly after Mr. ' arrival:
        - Dr. Jared, lead interviewer and researcher assigned to the investigation
        - Dr. Bianchi, assistant to Dr. Jared
        - Agent Hachigan, witness and security
        - Agent Went, witness and security
        - Mr. , interviewee
        - Richard Pierfax, stenographer
    - 11:47 am: A handwritten note was slid underneath the door, signed by Dr. Jared.
    - 11:50 am: Three gunshots were heard within Exam Room 3, followed briefly by panicked shouting.
    - 12:02 pm: Two additional gunshots were reported.
    - 12:12 pm: The door to Exam Room 3 was cracked open and a manilla envelope was thrown into the hallway. Dr. Jared wedged his arm in the door and appeared to make an exhaustive effort to force it open, yelling “For Christ's sake, !”
    - 12:13 pm: [DATA EXPUNGED]
    - 12:15 pm: Exam Room 3 boarded shut, chimney sealed.
- On the 13th of June, 18 , Research Installation was re-designated Containment Site .
    - Entombment of Exam Room 3 began shortly thereafter.

Agent Went's Log

June , 18

Arrived in after an uneventful trip. We're lodged at the local inn. It seems Mr. ' unwelcome guest has become the talk of the town; it was the first thing the receptionist spoke of after we checked in. According to the receptionist, Mr. spent the evening of June here, claiming his “guest” followed him. The receptionist described him as seeming disheveled, desperate, and drunk. She insisted she'd known his whole life, that his lifelong sobriety was something he took pride in. She also noted that, despite his impaired coordination and slurred speech, he seemed deeply offended when she suggested he'd been seeking refuge in a bottle.

June , 18

Conversed with Mr. for several hours in his home. He had a great deal of difficulty focusing during our conversation, and by my estimate, reintroduced himself at least twice in ten minutes as if he'd never seen us before. Both times, he did so with his hand on the stock of a double-barreled shotgun resting beside the arm chair he occupied. A consensus was reached on the subject of Mr. ' possession of firearms in short order.

According to , this phantom which has been hounding him possesses physical form and appears as a silhouette. Neither myself nor my partner, Agent Hachigan, have observed this. We were, however, privy to some interesting phenomena over the course of the conversation. By interesting, I mean my revolver liberated itself from its holster, rotating slowly in mid-air and discharging seemingly at random before the weapon dropped to the floor. Mr. was considerably startled by the event, as were my partner and I, though he quickly regained composure and laughed, claiming “the ghost scared itself senseless.” seemed unconcerned about the damage done to his property.

Mr. has agreed to a meeting outside the residence

tomorrow. We're keeping his guns.

June , 18

Spoke with at a local bar. Upon seeing Agent Hachigan and I, Mr. immediately informed us he had been followed once more by his unwelcome guest, facetiously referring to it as “Umbra.” Agent Hachigan and myself remain unable to see the entity.

Our second meeting proved much less eventful than the first. No errant gunshots to report, though a newspaper left unattended at a nearby table unfolded itself in singularly bizarre fashion after Mr. asked if either myself or Hachigan saw anything of import in today's news. claims to be unable to read anymore, something he attributes to Umbra's presence.

Hachigan and I are of the opinion that Umbra doesn't exist. We believe is responsible for these phenomena. Why he felt it necessary to attribute them to this invented Umbra, I don't know. It is possible that he's genuinely unaware of his role in the situation, and this Umbra was invented to fill in the blanks, as it were.

In any case, Mr. has agreed to accompany Agent Hachigan and myself to Installation . He's under the impression we're taking him to a medical facility to treat his decline in mental health. Hachigan insists we avoid forms of transit which could allow for any additional witnesses en route to Installation .

and I will depart tonight. After Agent Hachigan ensures Mr. ' home is free of any objects of interest, he'll meet up with us after razing the residence. A cover story has been submitted via the usual channels.

I can't wait until this assignment is over. It would be nice to get a good night's sleep again.

Agent Hachigan's

[DATA EXPUNGED]

Transcript of Mr. ' Interview

Interviewed: Agent Hachigan, Agent Went, Mr.

Interviewer: Dr. Jared

Foreword: This interview was ordered by Dr. Jared in order to: verify the observations of Agents Hachigan and Went, test the hypothesis that Mr. was subconsciously responsible for phenomena observed by Hachigan and Went, determine the appropriate accommodations and treatment for Mr. , and debrief Agents Hachigan and Went.

<Begin Log>

Dr. Jared: Hello, Mr. . My name is Dr. Jared, but just Doctor will suffice. I understand you've not been yourself lately. Can you describe your symptoms?

: No… No I can't, Doctor. I could if I were sick - if I were ailing… I'm not. It's this… presence - it won't leave. Ever since it showed up —

Dr. Jared: I apologize, but I'd like to stop you right there, Mr. . *When* did you first begin sensing this presence?

: I can't even tell you what day of the week it is.

Dr. Jared: *(sighs)* Continue where you left off, then.

: I what? Oh, right. Ever since it showed up, I can't focus – can't read. Can - but can't process it, you know? When I am able to steady my nerves enough to sleep, I awake the next morning feeling no different than the

night before – just as tired. I don't think Umbra -

Dr. Jared: Umbra?

: Name I gave her – gave it. I don't think she, err… It. Means any harm. It seems curious, inquisitive, even. Doesn't understand English, can't read. (chuckles) We have that in common, at least.

Dr. Jared: Can you venture a guess as t –

: *(laughing hysterically)* The other day… she grabbed Ms. Went's sixshooter… looked it over, no clue what it was… scared herself half to death when it went off!

Dr. Jared: Hmm… Can you recall when these phenomena began occurring? When you noticed this… Umbra? Whichever came first will suffice.

: I think… it was when I visited the lake. There was this… odd ripple pattern, odd disturbance – in the water, like something moving, displacing. Nothing there.

Dr. Jared: Do you think it attributable to aquatic fauna? Intermingling currents or the breeze, perchance?

: The water was crystal clear, no wind to speak of… I think…

Dr. Jared: Yes?

: Everything… in and around the lake was dead – or dying. Not the trees or plants, but… There were dozens of fish – frogs, washed up on the shore, birds, and a dozen or so small mammals on the brink. I think that's why I went to the lake. Stench of death – curiosity…

Dr. Jared: Surely, you must have told someone?

: No.

Dr. Jared: No?

: I thought… some sickness, a blight. Returned home – shotgun, ax, matches, gloves, shells. Put everything out of its misery – ran out of shells… Ax. Felled firewood, made a pyre. Burned everything, gloves too. Rinsed ax in the la –

(enters a catatonic state, his breathing the only movement evident.)

Dr. Jared: Mr. ?

[SUPERFLUOUS DIALOG EXPUNGED]

(surveys the room, apparently stupefied.)

: Hello? Who are you?

Dr. Jared: My name is Dr. Jared. You were jus –

: - ke. Pyre coll… collapsed. Smoke… *(raising both arms above his head and waving)* Understand?

Dr. Jared: The pyre collapsed and a cloud of smoke billowed upward?

: *(nodding vigorously)* Yes! Umbra in smoke. Like heat shimmer. Faint. Hard to see – but see.

Dr. Jared: Interesting.

: Darker since… *(gesturing to Hachigan and Went)*

Dr. Jared: Darker?

: Yes. Clearer, more def… defined.

Dr. Jared: Hand me Went's reports and Hachigan's , Bianchi.

Hachigan: I think Went burned my , sir.

Dr. Jared: That's quite the accusation, Agent.

Hachigan: I don't make it lightly, sir.

Dr. Jared: I know you can recreate them. Do so, please, after you confiscate Ms. Went's firearms.

Went: I did no such thing! It's not my fau –

Dr. Jared: Went, we will resolve this issue later. For the time being, I request that you cooperate… and be aware that if I so much as catch you glancing sideways at the door again, I'll shoot you on the spot. Is this understood?

Went: Yes, sir.

Dr. Jared: *(pauses briefly)* I find your field reports wanting, Ms. Went, in volume and number. *(sighs)*

[SUPERFLUOUS DIALOG EXPUNGED]

Dr. Jared: *(hesitant)* If anyone else can see the entity, please indicate where, for the record.

Dr. Bianchi: Seated in the chair beside Mr. . It appears to be staring at the fireplace.

: I told you! I told you Umbra got darker!

Hachigan: I agree with Dr. Bianchi, sir.

Dr. Jared: Mr. Pierfax?

Pierfax: Oh, sorry. I see the entity as well, seated adjacent Mr. . It seems to be drawn to the fire.

Dr. Jared: Went?

Went: I see it, too.

Dr. Jared: For posterity's sake, how *long* have you seen it?

Went: Just now –

Hachigan: Since around the end of our first meeting with Mr. . I confirmed it with Went at the time. I insisted we keep Mr. isolated, take measures to isolate ourselves, just in case. When we left, it stayed with . We bribed the receptionist at the inn we were staying at to leave us the entire building for a week. Our first meeting outside the residence took place at the inn. After we escorted Mr. home, Went put her sixshooter to my head and took my , made me swear to keep my mouth shut. Pretend like I never saw nothin'.

Dr. Jared: Why didn't you –

Hachigan: Her word against mine, sir?

Dr. Jared: *(pauses)* Understood, Hachigan. Pass this under the door, but don't open it, if you please… God forgive me.

(Dr. Jared proceeded to shoot Dr. Bianchi, Agent Went, and Agent Hachigan each once in the head.)

: *(Jumping from his seat)* Dear G… God, man! Ha… have y… y… you lost your m… mind?

Dr. Jared: I fear it was my turn to afford mercies, Mr. . Please, return to your seat.

: Y… you k… kil… killed –

Dr. Jared: Sit down or I'll blast your fucking kneecaps. Now… does the entity appear any different than before?

: (long pause) Li… lighter.

Dr. Jared: More specifically?

: F… fain… fain-ter th… than… a mo… moment a… go.

Dr. Jared: Can you corroborate that, Mr. Pierfax?

Pierfax: Yes, sir.

Dr. Jared: Let the record show I concur with Mr. Pierfax and Mr. .

[SUPERFLUOUS DIALOG EXPUNGED]

<End Log>

Closing Statement: It won't let me do it. I killed Agent Went, Agent Hachigan, Dr. Bianchi, Mr. Pierfax and Mr. , but it knows what I'm trying to do. It won't let me.

It's too dangerous. Clever. Too *fucking* clever. Shouldn't be studied. Risk too great, too easily spread? Buried. Bury it. Concrete, steel, lead. If it's contained. Leave it lie. Not sure if it can die.

Dr. Jared's Note

The door to Exam Room 3 is to remain closed at all times. Under no circumstances should it be opened. All personnel are to remain at least twenty (20) meters away from Exam Room 3 at all times, except to retrieve any notes or documentation that follows. All documents should be taken directly to the first available Clearance Level 4 staff member, including this note. Any personnel attempting to enter Exam Room 3 are to be detained. Any personnel attempting to exit Exam Room 3 are to be shot dead. This shoot-to-kill directive shall not be rescinded for any reason.

Dr. Jared

Testimony of Thomas

Interviewed: Thomas

Interviewer: Dr. Andrew

Foreword: Thomas is a member of Installation security staff. He was on duty as the events of June 11th unfolded and subsequently tasked with overseeing the entombment of Exam Room 3. This interview is to allow formal documentation of activity observed by Mr. Thomas.

<Begin Log>

Dr. Andrew: I know these past few days have been exhausting for you, so I'll try to keep this brief. What was your involvement in the events of June 11th?

Thomas: Day started normal enough, until some Level 4 pulls me off patrol duty, tells me to camp the hall outside Exam Room 3 with a shotgun. Tells me to blast anyone that so much as pokes their head out of the door before he takes off down the hallway. No clue where he ran off to.

Dr. Andrew: Then what happened?

Thomas: Heard gunshots and some shouting. Quiet for a while, then more gunshots. I kept note of the times. Few minutes after that, Dr. Jared opened the door, tried to exit the room. The door slammed shut on his arm; I think I heard a *crack*. He had a manila envelope in his hand, threw it into the hallway.

Dr. Andrew: Continue.

Thomas: He looked me straight in the eyes, something beyond mortal terror on his face. Begged me [DATA EXPUNGED] and I hesitated… I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for that. Looked like he was doing his damnedest to force that door open. Something must have been holding it closed from the inside. I reckon something was trying to drag him back in.

Dr. Andrew: Why is that?

Thomas: After about a minute, it was only his fingers wrapped around the edge of the door, blood dripping from his hand onto the floor. Sounded like something rammed the door trying to force it shut, Dr. Jared screamed in pain, and his fingers were severed between the door and its frame. Whatever it was, though, it didn't want him dead. He was still alive three days later, when we sealed the room up air-tight. Could hear him in there praying, pleading, rambling incoherently… occasionally screaming.

Dr. Andrew: If you'd like to pau -

Thomas: No, Doc, I'm fine. The thing that bothered me the most was that the screaming, that was always followed by the smell of burning flesh.

Dr. Andrew: Flesh?

Thomas: Human flesh. That smell, once you know it, you can't mistake it for anything else. I was a dumb kid with my first six shooter, picked up a spent casing right after reloading. Didn't make that mistake twice.

Dr. Andrew: That will be all, .

<End Log>

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Chapter One: "Jellybeans"
Chapter Two: "Antitrust"
Chapter Three: "Tender"

Chapter One: "Jellybeans"

The last will and testament of Bernard Gradley

So, I'm gone. You're sitting there in dear old Mr Pierce's office, waiting for the big news. The only question in your minds is, how is this all going to work? Old Bernard's company must be worth a few bob. More than a few. I'll tell you, it's forty million. It'll be sold on to the Japanese or the Chinese or whoever the hell else is buying Britain by the time I snuff it and then you can go and get your places in the sun and never have to worry about where the money's coming from again. But are there strings attached? That's what you're asking. Beatrycze, you're wondering whether you're going to have to go cap-in-hand to Edward because I've left everything to him. And Edward's wondering if it's all going to be stuck in some tiresome trust until he turns thirty or forty or whatever.

Well, that's not how this is going to happen. You can hate me all you want, because I'm dead, but I've thought a long time about what to do and this is the only course of action I can take and still hold true to the values that made me the man I am, or rather, the man I was. Beatrycze, I'm not going to pretend that you loved me while we were together. At best I was a nuisance standing between you and my money. I don't think it even occurred to you that you would have nothing had I not behaved the way I did—you wanted the great

industrialist *and* the great family man, and I couldn't be both. The gifts I gave you were never good enough—too large, or too small, or last year's fashion. So here's what I'm leaving you—five hundred quid's worth of crisp M&S vouchers. Have one last splurge on me, dear, and this time you can make sure it's right.

And Edward. You've made me proud—and you've also made me disappointed. Everything you've excelled in you've dropped out of—the chess, art, music. Now it's philosophy, which I'm sure will be just as temporary. Guess it just seemed like too much hard work with a life of leisure ahead. I'm sorry that you've ended up thinking that way—I take the blame for that. And I'm sorry if I let you believe that you'd never have to work a day in your life. That's not going to be true. If you want to be rich, you have the intelligence and the talent to achieve it. You could be a philosopher, you could be anything. But you'll have to do it by yourself. You'll have to get your hands dirty, like I did. To my son, Edward, I leave nothing.

Gradley Industries, my child, my prize, I leave to Gerald Spointer, who I know will continue his sterling work in the role of Chief Executive Officer…

Edward Gradley swore softly as he eased the Vauxhall Astra around yet another one of the serpentine parking bays in Cooper Drake's gargantuan car park. All full, of course. He squinted at his watch. Eleven forty. Five minutes to find a spot, get out, run what seemed like two miles to the front door of the CD head office, check in, and get to his interview. He ran a hand through short dark hair. Calm down.

Another painfully tight corner, maneuvering around bollards which seemed to have been designed for a Segway. And there it was, sitting invitingly between a black Cadillac and a lovingly maintained Bentley. A space! Edward gave thanks to a god he didn't believe in and pulled towards it hard. The Astra ramped over a speed bump and promptly stalled. Edward dutifully put his indicator on while he shifted out of gear, which didn't seem to bother the silver Mercedes which cruised effortlessly past, executed a distinctly cavalier three-

point turn that almost claimed Edward's wing mirror and reversed into the spot. Its occupant, a neatly folded and pressed sixty-something in an expensive suit with incongruously gelled grey hair got out and raised an eyebrow in the direction of Edward, whose pale skin was turning vermillion.

"Some problem there, young man?" He adjusted his tie, bared his teeth and examined the result in the window of his car.

"Yes, actually, you prick," Edward said, a few dozen decibels too loud. "Didn't you see I was pulling into that space? I had my indicator on and everything! Plus, you almost hit me!"

"Is that so? Well, 'almost' never needs apologies. Besides, how do you know this isn't my space?"

Edward fell silent for a second as something small at the back of his mind tried to draw a conclusion from that and didn't like it.

"I didn't see a name on it," he said, at significantly reduced volume but still carrying a boom that made the little voice cringe.

"You're right! My word," said the older man, winking at him before walking towards the offices. "Must be I just like to screw with people."

"Wanker!" shouted Edward after him in a moment of catharsis before realising that the whole exchange had cost him close to a minute.

Edward finally arrived in the Cooper Drake reception at eleven forty-six and thirty seconds, trembling and breathless. The secretary gave him a sympathetic glance before passing him a series of forms and a viciously sharp name badge, which he just about managed to get pinned to his suit (thirty-five pounds from Matalan) without goring himself.

"Edward! How are you doing?" Edward jumped and turned to see a short, stocky young man about his own age grinning up at him.

"Erm, hi."

"How are things with the—oh, you know, the…" The over-familiar stranger patted Edward on the arm, rolling his eyes in what was apparently meant to be a gesture of solidarity.

"Terribly sorry, but this is going to seem awfully rude. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Nope! It's David. David Went." He held out an immaculately manicured hand, wrist graced by a Rolex. "Don't mind my introductions, I always like to see how people react. You've passed the first test, by the way. I always tell Peter not to hire people who try to bullshit by pretending they remember me. Or if they tell me to go away, of course. I'm lead Partner for Stocks and Shares, so I get to sit on all Peter's interviews. That's Peter Davis, by the way. He'll be your line manager. So, let's get you introduced!"

This process first required a lengthy trek through the halls of power. Cooper Drake wasn't anywhere near as old or established as Redmayne–Bracknell, Edward's previous firm, but it made a bigger return on almost every investment it made and was widely seen as the uncrowned king of the British investment portfolios. There had certainly been an attempt to create the impression of old money, thought Edward, looking at the rich, slightly worn dark green leather seats in the consultancy area and the lacquered wood finish on the walls, adorned with a dizzying array of digital and analogue clocks displaying the time in New York, Moscow, Beijing…

Finally Edward was ushered through into a comparatively small office with a polished oak desk. At its head was a bored-looking ponytail in Raybans, probably no more than thirty himself. He was toying with a half-eaten sushi box while trying hard to appear absorbed in a slim document file.

"Peter! Meet Ed—can we call him Ed?" Edward nodded mutely, knuckles white on his slightly battered travel case. "Great. Come on, let's get sat down and we can have a chat."

Peter Davis removed his shades and seemed to see the document in front of him for the first time. "So, Edward," he drawled, ignoring David's suggested nomenclature. Edward thought the man sounded like Nigel Mansell after a few dozen pints. "Edward Gradley. Now, I

look at that, and I think—any relation? To, you know, erm—"

"Bernard Gradley? The industrialist," prompted David, smiling broadly. Peter seemed to have taken that as the culmination of his question, so Edward drew himself up.

"He was my father, yes."

"Hmm, must mean you're pretty loaded." Peter's critical eye swept Edward up and down with the implication that he had done an exceptional job hiding it. "So, why are you slumming it with us?"

Edward groaned internally. Secret origin story in three, two, one…

"Unfortunately, he didn't leave me a square nickel of it." Peter seemed visibly surprised—David just continued his Cheshire cat grin.

"Not a penny?" Peter crossed his legs and did a passable imitation of 'sympathetically distraught'.

"No."

"Must be some resentment there!" exclaimed David, rather too happily for Edward's tastes.

"To be brutally frank, yes. I hate him for it. I don't hate him because I think I was entitled to something I didn't earn. I hate him because he let me believe I was preparing for one way of life, one mode of existence, then gave me another one altogether."

"That must be the, er, Philosophy degree talking," said Peter.

"Now, as I recall Mr Gradley passed away two years ago. Did that have any impact on your work?" David walked his fingers over the table and slid out two sheets of paper with the Redmayne–Bracknell letterhead clearly visible. Jesus Christ, thought Edward, they've only gone and told RB that I asked for an interview at another firm. I'd better pull this off, otherwise I won't have a job to go back to.

"I think you know it did. At the time I was an intern, and not a very good one."

"Honest!" exclaimed Peter through a mouthful of rice; he'd given up any pretence of examining Edward's CV and was tucking into his plastic clamshell of norimaki.

"I was marking time, waiting to get bored of investment banking like I've gotten bored of a lot of things. Then—well. The will basically said I was a disappointment to him, a dropout. I'd like to say that it was a sober wakeup that I took to heart, and that's why I pulled my finger out. It wasn't. I just wanted to prove him wrong. So I came in at five every morning, got coffee for the traders, did research on the hot stocks for the morning; did everything I could to add value. After six months I told RB I thought I was ready to trade. They recognised the effort I was putting in and gave me my first account."

"But now you want to leave them," prompted David. "Do you think you have loyalty issues?" Edward drew a deep breath. One of the *tricky* questions.

"RB took a chance making me a trader; I appreciate that. They invested in me. And in return they've made a profit from me of almost six hundred thousand pounds. That's after factoring in my salary. I believe in money—I wouldn't be in the business if I didn't. I believe in contracts. And the contract I signed with Redmayne–Bracknell says I have to give them four weeks' notice. I'm in investment banking because I want to get rich—"

"Don't we all!" interjected Peter with a glazed expression.

"And that won't happen if I stay at RB. Cooper Drake has taken over one thousand four hundred clients from the firm since I joined. You're going to flatten it."

"And you want to be on the upper side of the boot, so to speak?" David asked. He was looking for something under the desk. "I wonder, will your gratitude to Redmayne–Bracknell get in the way if you have to do business with them?"

"No. That's based on my philosophy of business." Edward wondered if he was about to put his foot in it. Please, *please*, said the little voice, don't start lecturing.

David had found what he was looking for—a glass jar full of something colourful. Right now he was trying to get the lid off. Peter waved his hands ineffectually in David's direction as though offering to try and open it before thinking better of it.

"Please, just give us a précis. It's really good to be able to get inside the head of someone coming to work with us." David beamed.

He didn't use 'potentially'; that's got to be a good sign, right? Edward marshalled his thoughts.

"Businesses are collections of individuals, just like countries or religions. The difference is that companies recognise—or should recognise—the fact. The ideal of capitalism is that everyone working for his or her own interests—and purely for his or her own interests—is ultimately beneficial for all. When I do business with Redmayne–Bracknell—or Lyons Patrick, or Kleiner, Puttel & Minsc, or swap stocks with colleagues, I'll be working in my best interests. If I'm working for you, my best interest makes you money."

"I like him!" chortled Peter, rocking back in his chair and twirling his Raybans. "David, what do you think? Give him the job?"

"Not just yet. We normally say 'we'll let you know in a week', don't we Peter? I will say that I'm impressed. You did well on the phone interview; you did better today. Have a jellybean?"

Edward blinked at the non-sequitur and saw David was holding out the jar, the lid still firmly jammed on.

"Thanks." Edward took the jar, gripped the lid firmly and with a sharp counterclockwise twist managed to push it past the obstruction; a flattened sweetmeat caught in the screwthread of the lid. Edward delicately reached in and took one orange jellybean. He looked up, suddenly conscious that he might have done the wrong thing. Peter was smirking and looking sideways at David with a knowing glance.

"Well done," said David. "Just a little something I like to do. Pinched it from Reagan. Decisiveness, will to profit, ability to hear and remember terms of contract. Bean, *singular*. Very good. Why orange?"

"Well, Belfree's jellybeans only come in two flavours—plain, and orange."

"Really?" Peter was mesmerised.

"They have two vats; one with just the sugar, corn syrup and starch, and another where they add orange flavouring. They found in the nineteen-fifties that the orange flavour was the most popular and that there were no other strong preferences, so they cut costs. There are eight colours, but orange is thirty percent of each pack. The seventy percent is their profit margin. You eat a red jellybean, or a black jellybean, or a white jellybean, and you think you can taste raspberry or blackcurrent or lemon. You can't; that's your body's learned response to the colour. You offered me *a* jellybean—I chose the more valuable flavour. Plus, I happen to like oranges."

"Fuck convention," announced David, after a second's silence. "I think we can move this along. As far as I'm concerned, you're in."

"Oh—yes, right, sure," Peter chimed in, leaning over the table. "Well done."

"Thanks. Glad to be on board." Edward got up and shook Peter's hand, then extended his hand to David, who pumped it enthusiastically.

"Well," said David, "there's one more hurdle to jump through. Just a formality, really. As head partner I get to introduce you to the floor manager, Raymond MacIntyre. He's the one with the final say in hiring. Come on, I'll take you up to the trading floor."

'Up' was right. Leaving Peter behind at his desk, Edward and David were wordlessly ushered into an opulent glass-sided elevator that gave its occupants a view of each floor as they passed through. Secluded, plush-walled rooms for meeting clients gave way to hard-linoleum warehouses of regimented accountants sitting at their computers, who in turn gave way to richly appointed executive offices. And finally, with such grandeur that Edward almost applauded, the elevator rose through a thick perspex mezzanine—literally punching through the glass ceiling, he thought, as if it made

any difference to the silent, pretty secretary in the thick glasses who stood by the door buttons to let them off—to reveal a vast, open-plan area where men in designer suits barraged back and forth between colossal monitors displaying stock indexes in a hundred different countries and huge round glass tables strewn with paper like the aftermath of some gargantuan infant's temper tantrum.

It was a good four times larger than Redmayne–Bracknell's trading floor. At the far end, where David was leading him now with assured, vigorous strides, was a small enclosed area—comparatively small, he realised, as several more steps seemingly failed to bring it any closer—clad in light, honey-brown wood. When they finally reached the door, a gleaming plaque announced this to be the residence of Raymond MacIntyre.

"Here we go—good luck! Just kidding, he's a pussycat, really." David smiled reassuringly before rapping the wood with his knuckles and swinging it open.

The prick from the carpark, the wanker in the Merc, looked up from scribbling on a notepad and saw them. Recognition flashed immediately in his eyes and thin lips slid back from immaculately whitened teeth.

Oh fuck.

"So David, this is young Edward. Starting off as a junior associate, I presume. You must be taken to bring him up here on his first interview. Is it love?" There was an edge to his voice that Edward couldn't quite pin down but which couldn't be good.

"Well, he's proposed. And now we're here to get daddy's blessing." David winked and stepped aside to give Edward a full, unobstructed view of his own demise.

"I've met him already." Raymond MacIntyre started opening a letter with a very long, very sharp knife.

"Really?" David seemed utterly oblivious to the razor-atmosphere which Edward felt sure was about to engulf him.

"Yes. We ran into each other in the car park. Well, almost." A dangerous glitter again.

"'Almost' never needs apologies," said Edward. No job at Cooper Drake, a dismissal notice probably already waiting for him back at Redmayne–Bracknell. His father must be looking at him now and laughing his ass off. He'd be looking up, of course. Even if Edward was at ground level.

"No." Turning his attention to David. "This fellow cussed me out for backing into his spot. He didn't back down, even when I hinted as strongly as I felt able my position in the firm. Called me a 'wanker', as I recall." Edward saw David's florid face lightening to apricot out of the corner of his eye. "Now, how much were you intending to *pay* this young man for the privilege of doing that every day?"

"Erm, thirty-five thousand. Signing bonus of, ah, three thousand." David looked like he would rather be somewhere far, far away.

Something horrible was moving in Edward's chest, expanding and contracting rhythmically. Some parasitic thing, about to burst through the sparse flesh over his ribcage. It took him a minute to realise it was his heart. The room was filling up with yellow mist. I'm going to pass out, Edward thought. Failure, failure, failure.

"Really? Make it forty thousand. And double his signing bonus. He comes in at seven his first day, you hear me? I'll work him until he's dry. You may hold me to that."

Edward almost passed out anyway—David discreetly clapped a pally arm around him and steered him to the door. "Well done," he muttered.

The conversation with his manager at Redmayne–Bracknell went as well as could be expected; there are better ways to answer "why is our primary competitor asking about your work performance?" than "here's my notice." The phrase "ungrateful little bitch" was used; Edward was sure he'd never seen a man with so many letters after his name so closely approximating a primary colour. As it turned out, a philosophical expounding of capitalism proved less persuasive for

those no longer served by your own self-interest.

On his last Monday at RB he found his name had accidentally been added to every slot on the coffee and danish errand rota. On Wednesday someone tipped the rubbish bin in his drawer. Edward didn't mind. In his last week he signed thirty new contacts and made sure to give them all his card. No company—just a name, private email and mobile number.

Edward spent his last weekend before starting work at Cooper Drake playing video games and trying for the fifteenth time to crack Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. He tried to get to sleep early, on the assumption that MacIntyre wasn't the sort of man who would be disrespected twice if he came in late.

Instead he lay awake, mind churning. He found himself thinking—how much is enough? When have I proved to my father—who, let's not forget, is currently hard at work decomposing—that I've applied myself? Five million? Ten million? Maybe I need to beat him; that would be forty million.

Of course, he'd never accept I'd earned it, the way he did, putting together a company from the ground up. City traders, with their soft hands and wacky ties, were as far from Bernard Gradley, the man who'd made his millions selling furniture from the back of a van, as you could get. Perhaps I need to get a wife and kids just so I can leave them everything? Is that it? Do I never get to feel like I've won as long as I'm alive? Madness. It's madness.

Man works to cease from working, he reasoned; the purpose of work cannot be more work, as at each stage the objective of work is to reduce the total mass of labour left to do. In some ways the City exemplified this—you put in crazy hours, worked yourself to the bone, took insane risks, and the reward was the accumulation of wealth; early retirement while you could still enjoy the leisured lifestyle. But what of the grey-haired men who'd spent decades in finance, turning their whole lives into one huge accumulator bet as though they could take it with them? Bernard Gradley had gone one stage further—working month after month, year after year, burning his flesh like a candle: he had not enjoyed rest from his work, and he

had denied it to his wife and son as well. In some ways Edward could see the sense in it. Gradley Industries had been a *project*, a great work. In his will he had called it his 'child', his masterpiece. What great work was there in finance?

"Time to get started!" chirped David as he ushered Edward around the great glass tables on the top floor of Cooper Drake's great City offices. Faces came and went in front of his sleep-starved eyes, people he needed to remember as his lifelines. Concentrate, he warned himself.

"This is Elizabeth. Treat her well; she's your source for leads. Her analysts work around the clock to tease out data from international stock markets and convert it into essential narratives for CD brokers."

At Redmayne–Bracknell you were more or less given a stack of newspapers and expected to get on with it. Elizabeth Keating was a plain, slightly overweight girl barely older than Edward; she favoured him with a winning smile but his mind was already somewhere else.

Edward would be working in Peter's team—a pod of four associate brokers focusing on British and international industry. Each would be working to invest money in stocks and shares around the globe; blue-chip companies would likely already have a recommendation from the firm's analysts—Strong Buy, Buy, Hold, Sell, or Strong Sell, but for the majority of startups, medium-size enterprises or just plain old-fashioned firms that refused to play PR ball with the market, brokers were left with gut feeling and what facts they could dig up themselves.

Edward was issued with a gleaming transparent plastic keycard—his research pass, which when swiped into the Cooper Drake systems permitted access to their vast, labyrinthine records of stock movements over the past century. "Don't lose it," warned David —"these things literally cost half your monthly salary. They're laser-engraved; everyone's is unique." At Edward's previous firm there had been a lengthy keycode instead; you were absolutely forbidden to write the thing down, but everyone did it anyway. If you wanted to snoop around someone's search history and get some juicy tips all

you needed to do was open their drawer and find the sixteen-digit number scrawled on the Post-it note. Not that Edward would ever admit doing something like that.

"So Edward, I think I'm gonna throw you in the deep end," drawled Peter. "I've got some big aerospace trades and I want you to take a look. See what sense you can make of them, you know?"

That turned out to be not a lot. Edward went half the morning believing this was some kind of surreal training exercise or prank before he realised what he was seeing were actually Peter's positions. He was selling fast-growing R&D stocks with acute nervelessness, often missing out on hundreds of thousands, while clinging on to big-name shares that showed no signs of ever breaking even. Some delicacy required, he reflected, when your direct manager is probably the least capable person in the building. Peter wasn't even incompetent—he was clueless, making trades half an hour after the herd and hoping for the best. Edward would bet good money that each of Peter's prematurely abandoned tech picks had been the result of some offhand comment by a member of his team, while his touching faith in the stagnating giant firms that formed the core of his position seemed based on formulaic language in press releases no-one—except Peter, apparently—saw as exciting or indicative of rapid change anymore.

"Some bold choices," Edward finally concluded after spending the morning sweating over the bizarre pileup of incoherent stock picks that constituted Peter's portfolio.

"Really?" Peter sounded aghast.

"I mean, I don't think I'll have the nerve for some of these trades for a while. Like the Boeing position; that's huge."

"R-right. I mean, don't just copy what I'm doing. You've got to make your own style. To be honest, I think I'm a bit long on Boeing, even." A bit? It's been a Strong Sell for two weeks, thought Edward glumly. Over the course of the afternoon he was able to cajole Peter into abandoning most of his current positions and adopting a far more diverse spread with significant spend in the rapidly expanding British space sector. Peter finished the day half a mill up, and Edward

caught him squinting in his direction from behind his shades.

"So how are things going?" David asked as the traders, at seven, slowly began filtering home.

"Great," said Edward with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. "Peter had me take a look at his portfolio; I was able to suggest some changes."

"Ah—good." David rubbed the sides of his nose with his thumbs. "Change definitely sounds good where Peter's portfolio's concerned. Glad he's started you on something challenging."

Poor Peter, thought Edward. He's a laughing stock at his own firm and he doesn't even know it.

"Say, will you do something for me?" asked David. It's going to be something weird, thought Edward, I know it. For some reason you couldn't help taking to David; he was relentlessly affable, though Edward sensed a hard core of steel beneath the chubby exterior. "Put your arms up, like this."

David raised both hands above his head, as though he were preparing to clap along to an old Gospel song. Edward did likewise, wincing as his suit pinched his chest.

"See this here?"—David ran a finger along the folds that ran from shoulder to shoulder on Edward's cheap suit. "These should not exist. This is your second trading job; you're pulling in the big bucks, well, comparatively speaking. You should get a better suit. I know a guy on Ludgate Hill that does the most amazing tailored suits… old Greek guy, he gets all his fabrics under the counter from the textile manufacturers who supply the big designers; Versace, Newman…"

"This conversation obviously has anti-gravity properties, because I can feel my wallet getting lighter," retorted Edward.

"You're thinking about it the wrong way. You spend the money to get the money. You show up at a client's offices in a cheap suit and shabby shoes, you think he's going to give you the time of day, let alone all his cash? No, you show up in a tailored suit and you let him

see his face in everything else. *That's how he knows you work.*"

"I guess," said Edward. But I *like* my suit, he thought. I don't think it looks bad, per se. How often during a meeting with a client do you have cause to walk around with your arms above your head? Maybe a deodorant manufacturer… He had absolutely no intention of visiting David's expensive friend.

"Yes, Sir has definitely gone up a size in the waist since his last visit. Would Sir like me to take out his current suit or place an order for a new one?"

Edward watched as David happily paid more than the price of Edward's car for a new pair of trousers and apparently on a whim ordered the next size up, too. The wizened gentleman in charge of Stathopoulos Fine Tailors and Drapers looked positively ecstatic as he took his details and arranged for the garments to be delivered hand-pressed and ready to wear. Always good when each time your client came in they made a bigger order—fabric-wise, anyway—than the time before, Edward mused. David didn't seem to mind his weight and appeared to wear it like a badge of his prosperity.

"Come on then, Ed, you're up next."

Edward tried his best to look stoic while the old man looped his tape measure around various parts of Edward's anatomy, making little clucking noises as he scribbled them on a yellowed tailor's pad.

"Sir is very slim; department store clothes that fit well around the chest will be too tight at the shoulders. You lose ease of movement. If Sir would just try this…" The old man brought out a mock suit frontage with adjustable bands and loosened and tightened them while asking Edward to raise and lower his arms, bend at the waist, lean sideways. When he was satisfied he totted up a few numbers on a pocket calculator.

"I can have a new suit in Sir's size ready by Thursday. As Sir is a new customer I shall make a special rate of seven hundred and fifty pounds."

Edward's jaw made a dedicated bid for freedom from the rest of his skull. David sauntered over and rested an arm on Edward's shoulder.

"He'll be paying by plastic."

While Edward was changing back into his off-the-peg suit—had it been this itchy before?—David sat in a leather armchair by the tailor's window and sipped tea brought to him by the tailor's equally elderly wife.

"You know, you should be looking at a new car, too. Surprised that old thing out there even works. It's like the suit—it's false economy. You get a car that gets you there fast, every time, and looks good when you arrive."

"Not much good if you can't find parking," Edward retorted.

"Hmm. You'll get the picture eventually. I'll tell you every trader does need, right off the bat—membership at a gentleman's club."

"Just the essentials, eh?" said Edward, thoroughly bemused.

"Damn right. Think about it for a second. When the clubs were founded they were originally just for people who were independently wealthy. That was the definition of 'gentleman'. But then came the franchise extensions. These days, who goes to gentleman's clubs? The captains of industry, the politicians. And why are they there? To talk business. I'm sitting there reading the Daily Telegraph, and behind me a Cabinet Secretary is discussing scrapping import restrictions on semiconductors. That's not a hypothetical situation—that happened last week. What do I do when I get back to the office? I sell every share I have in Ferranti at a quarter pence below the market price. They get snapped up by some chip freak at KPM. Bad news for him, because tomorrow when the news comes in that you'll be able to buy in the things from China at half the price, he's going to be left holding scraps while I got out forty k up."

"Is that legal?"

"Absolutely. It wouldn't even make a difference if instead I'd heard

the CEO of Ferranti saying they were about to lose market share. If I'm privy to a conversation in a club at which I'm a member, it's no different to overhearing it on the street."

"I see. So where do you go, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Well, I started out at The Athenaeum, moved up to the Arts Club in my second year at Cooper Drake. Then I found my current haunt—they keep themselves off all the lists. They prefer to describe themselves as a 'private concern' rather than a club. Go in any time of the day or night; you'll see ex-PMs, foreign diplomats, billionaires…"

"Would I have heard of them?"

"If you have, they'd be mortified. I'll have to take you along sometime on my guest's pass; it's incredible. They're called Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Chapter Two: "Antitrust"

Over the next weeks, Edward picked up enough to put together his portfolio, centred around aerospace—a core of reliable performers like Staines Aeronautics with tendrils in fuel efficiency and carbon reduction research; any time a government anywhere in the world announced new breaks for cleaner fuels or started taxing emissions they would jump up in value. He built in a cheeky position on a couple of low-cost airlines; it fell outside his remit, but he figured Cooper Drake wouldn't mind too much; big, established companies were going broke all the time and their fleets being snapped up for a fraction of their value by budget carriers. It was trivial to predict takeovers and anticipate share price spikes.

At the same time, Edward continue to volunteer to handle Peter's stocks—always carefully phrased:

"You know, Peter, I'm a bit stuck for ideas. Mind if I take a peek at your portfolio? I'll tidy some of your picks up if you like—only fair while I'm snooping around."

"Peter—you've probably already seen it but Blue Zone is tanking fast. Do you mind if I pair up our positions? I have an American buyer who wants a lot of them inside the hour."

Peter was always pathetically grateful and soon Edward was more or less running his portfolio as a subsidiary of his own. Pacing himself carefully, he started putting in even later nights, staying long after Peter had shambled off to the pub. Each day he was able to persuade Peter to take leave of his desk sooner—'I'll finish these up for you,' 'Don't worry about these reports, I'll have them on Raymond's desk.' Members of Peter's team started coming to Edward with their requests for the research team.

These afforded him access on a regular basis to the Research desk, where he always lingered for just the right amount of time, flashing a boyishly embarrassed smile at Liz and making the feeblest attempts at small talk he could muster. The homely young woman didn't take long at all to pick up on his apparent attentions.

"Mr Gradley, if I didn't know better I'd think you were flirting."

"Well…" Edward had always had the ability to blush at will. It had proven incredibly useful in getting out of childhood misdemeanors for which he had felt not the slightest bit of contrition. And women seemed to find it cute. "Maybe we can meet up for coffee sometime?"—from then on Edward got the research team's leads coming in as well.

Around this time, Peter announced that he had become engaged to a woman called Roweena, and his already superfluous attendance became increasingly fragmentary. Edward did his best to encourage this behaviour. "No, don't worry about anything, Peter—we're on top of it."

Three months after Peter Davis hired Edward, Raymond MacIntyre walked past the industry brokerage team and stopped, sniffing. Edward was sitting at Peter's computer, pumping out a three thousand word investor report.

"Peter not in again?" MacIntyre looked at his watch and glanced around vaguely, as though Peter might be on the ceiling or under

one of the desks.

"You know how it is, Mr MacIntyre—young love. You'll have to forgive him, his mind's not on his work." Edward looked up, face a picture of guilelessness.

"Hmmph." That one little noise as MacIntyre moved away told Edward it had all been worth it. He had just seen that the best-paid member of his stock brokerage division was the person who least needed to be there.

That Friday Edward was called into a meeting with Raymond MacIntyre and David Went where he was asked about how he felt about taking the 'Junior' part off his Associate title and assuming some managerial responsibilities.

"But won't the rest of the team mind working under me when I've been here for such a short amount of time?" Edward fell silent as soon as the words came out of his mouth, suddenly afraid he had assumed too much.

"I don't think so. They've already seen you can handle the responsibility and to be honest, I understand they're already coming to you for advice."

David looked over and smiled, and although it was superficially no different than usual, Edward was suddenly struck by the idea that there was some dark, gleeful recognition in it; as well as perhaps a hint of a warning: "Don't you dare try that on me".

Edward might have been *persona non grata* to Redmayne–Bracknell's management, but he was still on good terms with their HR Manager, Wil Hamilton. When he casually mentioned that one of the bright young things at Cooper Drake might be about to jump ship he knew that RB would be all too happy to take them on. Peter Davis left Cooper Drake 'eager to take on new responsibilities at one of the country's oldest and most established brokerage firms' and forever in Edward's debt: as far as he was concerned, Edward had done everything possible to prop him up and camouflage his lack of skill, all out of a selfless nobility of the heart. That's not how it works, Peter, thought Edward, as he took his seat at the head of his little

team and allowed his gaze to stray further up the great glass hall.

The knock on the door of Edward's apartment took him quite by surprise; he was by this time firmly ensconced in his pyjamas, wanting nothing more than to catch half an hour's TV before bed after a punishing thirteen-hour day. He answered the door toothbrush in hand, and blinked owlishly at the sight of David in full evening dress, a couple of pretty if rather shapeless young women floating around behind him.

"Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten already," griped David, gesturing to the girls. "He's in his bloody nighties!" A peel of laughter.

"Forgotten what?"

"Really? I was supposed to be taking you to the club—you know, the gentleman's concern."

"Oh, right. That was for tonight?"

"Christ Almighty. Not one for the night life, are you? Come on, you've got five minutes before I leave without you. I hope you've got something presentable."

Edward ended up dressing in the suit David had pressured him into buying from Antonis Stathopoulous. He had to admit, the old man knew what he was doing. The material was light and cool without being slippery and for the first time in his life he could see his waist, normally hidden under a voluminous billow of surplus fabric. He actually thought he looked quite dashing. He tutted disappointedly at the contrast made by his cheap plastic watch. At least the shoes matched, now, a £140 purchase from a middle-of-the-road outfitters —sharp-toed with a slightly raised heel.

David's dark blue Ferrari purred happily as he drove them through the late night traffic. Edward had taken to walking around the City after hours, taking in the sights, and thought he knew most streets in the Square Mile by heart. David surprised him by taking a turn on Newgate Street he didn't even think existed; a half-concealed thing behind the projecting wing of St Bartholemews. From there he made

turn after turn through strange streets lit by soft yellow streetlights quite different from those on the main streets. One could almost think one had left modern London behind and entered some twilight realm.

"They keep all this quiet, don't they?" Edward said as he stared out at a lavishly baroqued pile encrusted with grotesques.

"They appreciate their privacy," said David, as he drew up in front of a blind brick edifice protected by wrought iron fencing and fronted by a simple marble arch. If he had been keeping track, Edward thought, this was Twenty-Eight Great Rojet Street, which he had never even heard of before tonight.

"Here—hold onto this." David passed Edward a slim black card; gold-edged, bearing the single word 'Guest'. At the top left-hand corner was an ornate cartouche, which, on closer examination, resolved itself into the letters 'MC&D'. The card felt smooth; the corners rounded as though pressed individually rather than cut from a larger section of card. Edward had a horrible feeling this card probably cost more than his monthly rent.

David, Edward, and the two ladies whose names he had not asked for got out, breath hanging in the cold air, and made their way to the door. David rapped and a section of the door slid aside, revealing a perspex plate. From the other side a baggy bloodhound's eye roved back and forth before finding David's face.

"Mr Went! So good to see you. And Misses Parker and Cholmondeley!" The eye found Edward and searched him, disapprovingly. Edward found himself drawing up defensively before a word had been spoken.

"A friend of yours, Mr Went?" The voice managed to imply 'friend' occupied a position slightly higher than something you had trodden in.

"That's right," said David, unphased. "Now open up, there's a good fellow."

The door opened just wide enough for each of them to slip through

—the haggard-faced porter shut it with an air of finality behind them.

"The party is taking their seats in the main room, Mr Went, ladies. If you would care to join them, a number of acts will be performed for your amusement before supper at eleven thirty."

At least at this time of day, the reception was shadowy and inhospitable, strange shapes pressing in from all sides. That one of them was almost certainly the porter, who had contrived to disappear into the darkness as soon as he had finished speaking, did little to allay Edward's nerves. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he picked out Regency furniture, gleaming candlesticks, grand portraits depicting strange, almost perverse, scenes. The transition to the cloakroom was blinding—they found themselves in a narrow corridor, dazzling white with golden hooks on either side. The attendant was tall, almost unnaturally so—as high above Edward as Edward was above David—and strangely gaunt, with a long, lugubrious face and dark, large-pupilled eyes whose gaze made Edward as uncomfortable as that of the porter, but in a different key; the feeling of handling something sick and squirming. He took charge of David's wallet and the women's purses, placing them into an itemised tray of polished wood which slid back into the wall of the cloakroom. Edward opted to hold onto his.

Then the main hall! From outside it seemed impossible that this space should be contained within—a grand ballroom in the rococo style, but so exaggerated in scale that it made Edward feel miniscule. A dozen separate fireplaces burned at distant points in the hall, which comprised the entrance level, a graceful marble mezzanine and a great balcony above. Directly ahead was a colossal theatrical stage, purple velvet curtains with gold trim and the 'MC&D' flourish closed, awaiting a performance. The men and women who stood or sat at the many tables, armchairs and rounds scattered around the edge of the hall immediately struck David as familiar—it took a moment to realise that he saw them every day; on the news, or presenting it. He wondered whether David had chosen this night to impress or whether it was attended at this level on a regular basis. Cabinet Ministers rubbed shoulders with TV personalities and knighted businessmen.

"David! David, you came. I wanted to see you again." The party was

almost immediately waylaid by the petite brunette, dragging a much taller blonde woman by her dress. The former looked to be in her mid-twenties, like Edward—her hair styled in soft ringlets that brought out her Mediterranean complexion. Her lips were curled in soft amusement as she embraced David then looked over in his direction. Edward found himself blushing without having chosen it.

"Well? Won't you introduce us to your guest?" the brunette prompted David, who reluctantly disengaged from her.

"Of course, sorry, my manners. This is Edward—Edward Gradley. Edward, meet Maria Beaumont, of the Paris Beaumonts."

Edward was floored. The Beaumonts were one of the richest families in France—old money, based on colonial trade; Beaumont Shipping remained a dominant force in the French-speaking world.

"Gradley? You are not by some chance the son of Bernard Gradley? Our fathers did business, I think." Maria offered her hand to Edward, who found himself at a loss as to what to do with it. To let it go seemed rude—shaking it, terribly gauche. In the end he opted to bring it to his lips and offer a kiss—David turned away immediately, bringing a hand up to his mouth in a feigned yawn.

"And this is Lady Alexandra Penelope." David ushered Maria aside. The tall blonde was somewhat older than Edward—perhaps 30—and elegantly beautiful in a ruffled yellow dress. She favoured him with a smile but did not offer her hand; Edward made a mock bow instead.

"Edward—so, are you a man of leisure, or making your way in the world like David?" Lady Penelope asked, fixing him with very light blue eyes in which the pupils stood out like pinpricks. Edward sighed. One more time, ladies and gentlemen…

Fifteen minutes later, the group had found their place by one of the log fires and were chatting over honeyed sausage entrées and glasses of a sparkling white wine as though they had known each other for years. The conversation had drifted onto business, where Edward had shared his thoughts on labour and leisure, and Maria had begun expounding her own theory.

"Surely *leisure*," she said, "is merely doing any project or task which you enjoy doing, and which you direct. This last seems to me to be most key—it's all very well talking about getting a job you love, but unless you work for yourself, you're doing what someone else tells you to do. This seems incompatible with leisure—there is always that gap between the two. Labour is what earns leisure and it's foolish to talk about making your job your hobby."

So speaks a woman who has never worked, thought Edward wryly. "There's some truth to that," he ventured, "but a competent employer will recognise that he is hiring an employee to do something he cannot—or rather, satisfaction is to be gained in attaining such a role where it is recognised; work becomes leisure if a man is allowed to act freely, to use his reason to decide the best course of action and act upon it. If an employer comes to think that all those who work for him are are simply extra hands—people who do the jobs he doesn't have time to do at an inevitably lower level of quality than if he were to do it himself—then he sets himself up to fail. A man who makes himself the final arbiter of everything his employees do, who requires his approval for any task, no matter how minor—who seeks to micromanage them to that extent—*must* be immaculately logical and fair, otherwise he is abolishing truth and logic in his company. People who work for such an employer will ultimately no longer care about truth, only what he wants to hear—if their own initiative isn't valued, why should they exercise it? A man's creativity can only be exercised by his own free will and for a cause he believes in—I find it incredible that private companies think they are any different from the state in that regard."

"Oh, he's *darling*!" exclaimed Lady Penelope. "Where do you find these firebrands, David?"

"They all start out like that," grinned David. "It's the natural state of man."

"And long may it continue," proclaimed Maria. "To idealism." She raised her glass and the others drank with her.

There was a sleek glossy catalogue on the table and Edward flicked through it idly. From what he could gather it represented a place for members to buy and sell antique goods as well as advertise

services. Very little of it made sense to him; it was written in an overwrought, hyperbolic fashion that made each item seem like the Second Coming. Take this one—"A statue which has an orientation that cannot be altered." How was that supposed to work? The statue itself was nothing special; a craggy sculpture of a human arm and hand, fifty centimetres tall. He took a look at the price tag and almost snorted Château d'Yquem out of his nose. If I was paying that much it would face whichever way I wanted, thank you very much.

The evening's entertainment started shortly afterwards; various illusionist and acrobatic acts led up to a final spectacular piece where a truly talented magician-aerialist appeared to fall apart in mid-flight; one by one his limbs seemed to detach from his body and continue the act unaccompanied—at times interacting with his body in ways that should have been impossible if they were still attached. By the end he seemed to have been reduced to a quadruple amputee, still arcing above the stage in partner acrobatics with what were purportedly his own limbs. Finally, the performer's disembodied arms and legs maneuvered his torso into position for one final gruesome trick; looping the ribbon around his neck as though preparing him for execution. A second later, both head and body fell to the ground with the other seemingly lifeless limbs. The curtain closed, and the performer did not re-emerge—though Maria, perhaps noticing Edward's pallor, whispered to him that she had seen the act several times previously, including versions of the trick where an assistant put him back together on-stage afterwards. Edward prided himself that he had a logical mind and could usually work out the mechanism between most magic acts. The severed-limb trick, however, defied explanation—he supposed there must have been at least four other acrobats on stage, with the rest of their bodies somehow concealed from view; how the performer had seemingly severed his own head in full view of the audience however went beyond the best of Copperfield. The only clue, to his mind, lay in the fact that each division of the magician's body had occured in an area wrapped in the white ribbon. The man needed his own TV show, Edward thought, he'd kick the shit out of Dynamo.

The chefs had emerged from the kitchens shortly before serving to explain the theme of the repast—the public school dinner, gourmet-style and eaten with oversized cutlery to recreate an authentic

atmosphere. It was the right venue for it, thought Edward. He could scarcely credit the notion that Marshall, Carter & Dark had even contrived to get the owner of the Fat Duck and the Hell's Kitchen star around the same stove let alone produce something coherent. The result, however, was indescribable; a fusion of subtle undertones and a few big explosions of colour and taste that made him wonder if he could ever go back to his microwave ready meals. No wonder David keeps Mr Stathopoulos in such good business, Edward thought, savouring a shepherd's pie made with Kobe beef and topped with a selection of artisan cheeses. The serving staff—all young, attractive men and women in formal attire—were silent and efficient, if a little glassy-eyed. No wonder, if this is typical of what goes on here—I'd be perpetually shell-shocked if I worked here too. Or perhaps, like him, they'd just had a long day.

"So David," he asked his companion, currently gorging himself on waffles made from whole Tasmanian seed potatos and a take on the Turkey Twizzler whereby Bowman Landes free-range turkey meat was cut directly into the shape of the twizzler and breaded using vapor-deposited batter. "If you don't mind me asking, how much does membership at this place set you back?" Edward wasn't sure exactly how much David Went made at Cooper Drake, but he doubted it placed him in the same league, as say, Richard Branson, who he was fairly sure he'd seen disappearing into one of the Members-Only siderooms earlier in the evening.

"More than you could afford," was the reply. David must have seen something in Edward's expression as he rapidly amended himself. "I mean, more than I could afford too. I have limited access and some guest privileges; I'm not really a full member as such."

"And in return, they get?" Edward prompted.

"Payment in kind—look, I really don't want to get into it right now. Come on, you'll upset my stomach."

"Sorry." Edward turned his attention back to his shepherd's pie and the cheese-crusted leeks that formed his side dish.

If Edward had thought that the meal formed the climax of the evening, he was mistaken. As guests drifted back to their seats

around the edge of the room a DJ in a vaguely sinister helmet resembling a neon Mickey Mouse with blank, empty eyes conducted an electronic tidal wave of sound from a podium atop two huge, illuminated glass slabs rising out of the floor. What kind of gentleman's club has guests dancing in full evening dress to house music? Edward wondered, finding himself plucked out of his seat and thrown between a number of young women. The guests danced in graceful loops, spotlights picking out white collars, silver ties and lacy décolletage.

As a new song began—upbeat but with a hint of something very dark underneath, like most of the DJ's set thus far—Edward found himself face to face with Maria. He must have looked as out of depth as he felt, for she just beamed at him, took his hand and led him confidently over the floor.

"Can you understand any of the lyrics to this?" he shouted.

"It makes more sense if you assume the 'Russian unicorn' is heroin."

"I generally assume every song is about drugs until proven otherwise."

"Oh, now where's that idealism?"

They arced over the floor, Maria subtly correcting his occasional stumble. Edward found himself wishing time would—not stop—but loop, right in this moment. Gradually reality reasserted itself and his mind cleared a little.

"I should return you to David. I don't want him jealous."

"Yes, he does get so protective of his new recruits."

"Very funny."

She spun away from him elegantly, moving towards David, who had evidently run out of breath and was waiting at their table. Edward waited just a little longer, just standing on the dancefloor, before he followed her.

As David made his bows for the evening and led them back out

through that shadowy reception area, Edward was almost unsurprised to hear, distinct but unmistakable behind him, that the last song in the set, apparently without any sense of irony, was a remix of 'All The Right Moves', though as the grim-faced porter cautiously let them back through that great front door into the night he noticed that 'we' and 'they' were reversed.

Edward had expected to wake up the next morning—well, later the next morning—with a splitting headache. Instead he rose after no more than three hours' sleep with a sense of clarity, feeling energised and enriched for the experience. You have to make an outlay to profit, he thought—perhaps that also applies to time?

On the way to work, he noticed that the unannounced roadworks that had blighted traffic in the area all month with their shoddy diversions had disappeared overnight. Now if only the damn rain would clear up, he thought. Nothing seemed to have been done to the roundabout at the centre; in fact, it seemed in worse shape than before, with several pieces of the edging removed and left broken at the centre in a pile of dirt and rubble. Edward resolved, as he had so many times before, to write to the borough council and demand to know what firm the works had been hired out to. He supposed, though, that even if he remembered he would give up after trying to find their complaints form online. He was sure the council hired someone specifically to redesign their website on the fly to remove the information you most needed.

The next couple of days, buoyed by his promotion and experience at David's club, Edward was walking on air. Every deal he touched seemed to turn into gold. Even his mistakes seemed to come right in such a fashion that they looked like visionary thinking on his part; Edward had shorted stocks in Quadrant Turbines, an elderly firm that seemed to be going nowhere, when the news came through that it was to receive a one point five billion dollar contract from the US Department of Defense. His team had barely finished commiserating him when Liz sprinted in, flushed and out of breath, begging him to hold his position just a little longer. Half an hour later, it was being widely reported that the contract had fallen through and that Quadrant itself had made a surprise announcement that it was

to be placed into administration. As it turned out, the bad news was a false flag—circulated by bloggers most likely in the pay of Lockheed Martin—but the effect was to send Quadrant's shares into a death dive. By the end of the day it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy and Quadrant were seeking bankruptcy.

In one month Edward had his first review. The review, to the investment banker, was God—a magic force that examined your life and blessed the worthy. Or perhaps it was like the lottery—one where every player expected to win every time, more each year than the year before. Whilst the firm didn't punish its traders for deals that turned out poorly, provided they were based on solid research, the size of your bonus would depend on the profit you'd generated for the organisation. A growing bonus would indicate to others in the organisation that you were going places and worthy of another rung on the ladder to partnership. A stagnant bonus—or no bonus—would indicate a poor performer, someone to pass over or even push out.

Edward already had a solid profit margin, but he didn't want to be 'solid'. He wanted the verdict on that gold slip to read 'exceptional'. By age twenty-five his father already owned his own factory. Edward's calculations said that if he wanted to outdo Bernard Gradley he would need to make partner in the next year. In any other profession and in almost any other city this was almost unthinkable—but this was the City of London. And no firm could fail to advance a trader who outstripped all his peers.

So it was that Edward went in search of a magic bullet—a deal that would in one month make him the crown prince of Cooper Drake. He took piles of papers from the Research team home with him and scoured them for something truly special. And after a couple of days he believed he had found it. A burgeoning EU antitrust investigation into Cliffes Aeronautic and Ballistics, premised upon alleged collusion between Cliffes and a couple of other aerospace semiconductor manufacturers to control the European import market. Cliffes' CEO, Martin Jacques, would be called to give testimony on September Fifth—that was when Edward would make his play. A firm's share value typically dipped between one point nine and four point eight percent during an investigation; Edward

would buy up thirty-five million in put options on Cliffes Aeronautic Ltd. If its share value dropped by only three percent, Edward stood to make over a million pounds in profit. Normally a trader, seeking to make a huge investment on this scale, would consult senior colleagues, sound it out, and hope to spread blame were something to go wrong. Edward couldn't afford to do that—if the Cliffes deal were to have the effect he wanted he needed to be able to take sole credit for the move. Thirty-five million was well above his own daily transaction limit; fortunately, CD's tech team were slow movers and Peter Davis's account remained on the system, live and accessible by anyone in his team. Between the two accounts Edward drained the market dry before news of the investigation hit.

Cliffes released a press release filled with officese—"We look forward to co-operating any way we can with the Commission and reassert our belief in the European project and a free, open market," the sort of stuff that made traders throw up a little in their waste paper baskets before hollering 'sell'. By the time the markets closed Edward was already a good hundred thousand up; he hung on, however, sure that as soon as Jacques took the stand Cliffes' losses would snowball.

On the Fifth of September Edward sat silent in front of his computer, hammering the refresh button every few minutes as the investigation continued. It soon became apparent something had gone wrong. The hearing—held in a recently refurbished wing of the Château of Val-Duchesse—ended hours early, and it quickly emerged that Martin Jacques had experienced some kind of nervous breakdown, having an aphasic episode under questioning where he had gibbered nonsensically with no awareness that he was speaking anything other than his native French before collapsing. It had further impacted Cliffes' share price, but with no further information on the alleged collision coming to light, investors were wary about giving up their positions on a high-performing firm. Jacques had been a charismatic front man but his good health, or lack of it, impacted little on Cliffes' value. Looking back, Edward thought later, he should have taken the one hundred and fifty thousand profit and run—it would have been a decent trade, even if he would have had a dressing down for his use of Peter's account. Instead, he clung on a full week, barely closing any other trades, as Cliffes' shares

teetered, wobbled, and even revived a little, until Jacques finally recovered enough to face the Commission again at the Berlaymont.

It was a disaster. Even before Jacques had opened his mouth, the share price spiked sharply, and continued rising until it had wiped out the profit Edward hoped to make. Edward interpreted it as a simple reaction to Cliffes' CEO looking hale and hearty as he waved to reporters outside the Commission, but later he wondered if documents had been leaked to key investors.

Then the hammer-blow. Jacques—now cool, calm and collected, to the extent that it seemed immediately obvious that his previous performance had been a sham to buy time while he collected ammunition, brandished papers documenting electronic communications between Cliffes and the Commission weeks before the announcement of the investigation. Cliffes had signed a contract with the Belarusian government to provide chips for a new generation of cruise missiles; the European Commission had warned Jacques off—even spelling out that they would find some fault with Cliffes Aeronautics' import agreements—but found their bluff called.

It was horribly obvious that the investigation could not go ahead; it had become a political embarassment for the Commission and the European Union more widely, with Belarus' Lukashenko weighing in smugly on the hypocrisy of EU protectionists. The market saw it as a triumph for Cliffes—not only was Edward now making a loss, but so unwilling were his partners in New York or Beijing to accept his tainted options that he had to watch Cliffes' share price skyrocket for a full eight hours before he was able to unload them all at a sickening low of twenty-eight million. Instead of making the company a million pounds he had cost it seven million. It was an appalling failure, something the average trader would barely be able to make up in a year. But Edward didn't have a year; he had under a month before he had to sit down with his managers and explain what had possessed him to break company rules to make such a horrendous trade.

Within hours, he thought, the little bespectacled men on the floor below them would have noticed the loss and reported it to Raymond MacIntyre. He might not even last until the review unless he pulled

something now that wiped out every last penny of the deal. He sat for half an hour, clenching and unclenching his fists, face white as a ghost. He was lost.

The feeling clogging his throat was the feeling he had whenever he tried to play chess now; there was some shining path, some route that would save him, but the door was locked. He could no longer roam those mental avenues. As a child he had been a prodigy—he had stalemated his father—Bernard Gradley, a man who would never let another sentient being win a game if you tore his fingernails out—the first time he showed him the game, beaten him the second time. His parents had taken him to clubs and tournaments where elderly men stroked their beards and swore in Polish as he skewered their queens and forked their knights and rooks with a pawn.

His success had excited his father, who had a bespoke display cabinet produced by one of his top designers; dark wood with rounded corners and a polished glass front, lit by small, triangular spotlights. The cabinet had collected a steady smattering of trophies as Edward's victories grew, and his mother began to speak in hushed tones of a professional career. It all ended when Edward turned thirteen—his ranking collapsed almost overnight with the onset of puberty and his matches became a litany of defeats, reducing him to tears. Even now he could more or less remember what it had felt like to be able to think that way—looking at dozens of possible outcomes six moves ahead, comparing probabilities then sliding one's own life into the universe where success is guaranteed—but he could no longer access it. Whether it had been banished by hormones, the pressure to succeed or, as his father contended, just incipient laziness, his talent was gone. He had sought that vanished golden aura in everything he did, abandoning it as soon it became clear he was not a genius at it—music, arts, philosophy. Now banking was failing him too. He was hyperventilating, tears prickling his eyes. Fuck you, Bernard Gradley.

There was nothing else to do. He got up, knees weak, and walked what seemed like a mile to David's table, where he and his high-powered team threw tens of millions of pounds of government debt backwards and forwards like it was confetti. In Edward's head,

everyone was watching, intimately aware of his humiliation. He was trembling—shaking like a leaf, worse than with MacIntyre.

"David. David," he said, his voice tiny and adrift.

"Edward? What is it? You look like hell. Seriously, calm down, you look like you're going to have a coronary."

"I've screwed up. I'm sorry, I've screwed up. I need help." David listened as Edward told him what he could, omitting how his desire to beat his father had led to him taking such a senseless risk. David spent a while in thought then spoke.

"Okay. How much liquid capital do you have?"

"W-what?"

"You haven't registered a ticket for the twenty-eight mill, right? It's still in yours and Peter's accounts?"

Of course he hadn't. He'd been too upset. The little men at their terminals wouldn't see anything, because as far as they were concerned the money was still in play.

"No. It's still there."

"Good. Now, I'm going to do you a huge favour. Maybe sometime down the road you let me in on something big, or we pair up our positions and I get the excess, right?"

Edward nodded, mutely, still mortified beyond belief at his own weakness and stupidity.

"Cholmondeley Holdings is buying up Hong Kong Electric. The announcement is this afternoon, three pm sharp. HKE has subsidiaries on the mainland; Cholmondeley's gone from having no presence in Asia at all to being the pack leader. I was really hoping to save this one for myself, but with the amount you need back there's no way anyone else can get in on this. You'll need to use Peter's account again. Oh, and you absolutely didn't hear this from me, okay? Seriously. I'll fucking bury you if you say otherwise."

Edward was still shaking so hard he had to get one of his team to help with the transfer; they would almost certainly tell MacIntyre, but it no longer mattered. Cholmondeley was considered a busted flush in Beijing and Edward bought everything he could find. At three in the afternoon, just as David said, the venerable utility holding company announced its latest venture, taking over a concession-era Hong Kong utility with holdings throughout Guangzhou. Edward watched, hope welling in his heart, as the face value of their shares rose one percent, two, four, eight… By the close of the markets Cholmondeley was worth a quarter again what it had been and Edward held stocks worth worth well over thirty-five million pounds. He had not only made up his lost ground but converted a loss into a profit of close to a quarter of a million pounds. He cashed out immediately, not waiting to see if they rose further. Fortune had deserted him once today. Now he just needed to explain why he had used a previous colleague's account to gamble with far more money than he was trusted to handle. But there was one thing that needed to be done first.

Edward felt very small and fragile as he went over to David and shook his hand. David clapped his arm and looked him in the eye, smiling darkly, as though some great secret had passed between them.

"You see, Ed? It all worked out in the end. Don't forget that favour."

Somehow the nature of what he had done escaped Edward in the rush of adrenaline, the flight-or-fight response that comes with the loss and subsequent gain of seven million pounds. He woke up that night, screaming, scrabbling at the sheets. You bastard! There was no way David could have found about that deal—it had been agreed in total secrecy to protect Hong Kong Electric's shareholders. He lay, soaked in sweat, mind a black whirlpool. Insider trading. Probably the police were already coming for him. He would walk in tomorrow and MacIntyre would be standing with a squad of New Scotland Yard's finest, and he would point to Edward and say "That's him." They would walk him past David, who would sit there with that smile on his face. "I'll fucking bury you." But what did he have on Edward besides knowledge of the failed Cliffes deal? There was nothing illegal there, just another gamble by a City trader that

went wrong. I'll tell them everything, swore Edward panickedly, curling up into a fetal ball. But was it illegal if you didn't act on it yourself? As far as he knew David had made no moves on HKE under his own account. Christ, oh Jesus. Maybe David had done it to get rid of him, feared ending up like Peter… Morning saw Edward still plotting, engaged in his long, dark Mutually Assured Destruction of the soul.

The roadworks were back, this time right outside his apartment. The workmen seemed to eye him suspiciously as he drove past and wrote things down in little notebooks. It did not escape him that no-one was even remotely near the roundabout.

Chapter Three: "Tender"

"You've impressed," said Raymond MacIntyre dryly, fingering through the stack of papers detailing Edward's trading over the past four months. "You've worked hard and added value—both on trades and in terms of new clients. I believe congratulations are in order."

"Thank you," said Edward, breathing slowly and carefully. The days after the Cholmondeley deal had been nervewracking, always wondering if something was about to happen. Now, the final moment of truth—the review. Once again he sat in Raymond MacIntyre's office with Will, as lead Partner, sitting in. MacIntyre furrowed his eyebrows and tilted his head forward so the light through the expansive glass ceiling lit up his scalp through his gelled hair.

"Frankly I thought your stunt with Peter's account was too cute for your own good. We place restrictions on how much associates can throw around for a reason. However, I understand you made several hundred thousand on the deal and we are not in the business of punishing success."

"Much appreciated, sir."

"Sir, now? Ah, it seems like just yesterday you were calling me a 'wanker'. Just one little query on the Cholmondeley business," Edward's breath caught in his throat again, "it seems an uncharacteristic choice. Your portfolio is overwhelmingly weighted

towards aerospace; a utilities company seems a little out of your area of expertise. May I ask what influenced your choice?"

"I," Edward began, suddenly aware of David's eyes drilling into the side of his head. "I thought this was an excellent opportunity for me to expand into a new area; I think I'm ready to take on a broader portfolio and hope to continue to diversify my stock picks over the next few months."

"Good to hear it," replied MacIntyre—was there a brief sideways glance at David there, a measured appraisal of the situation?

"You will receive a bonus of twelve thousand pounds,"—significantly less than Edward had hoped, barely above average in fact, but a miracle given what he thought was inevitable after he screwed the pooch over Cliffes. "You'll be expected to better your performance next year, and the next, and the next; if you continue to perform, you're well on the road to partnership."

It was with some surprise that Edward heard himself speaking in an eager, almost aggressive tone. "And if I wanted to make partner this year?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"How much would I have to bring in for you to make me a partner straight away, with no consideration of seniority?" Oh Christ, Edward, what are you saying. You've learned nothing, have you?

"I think, Raymond, he's asking whether there might be some target he can hit to accelerate the process, as it were," chipped in David.

"Hmm—our friend David here brings in three million pounds in profit to the firm every year, not counting clients added. I think, if we were talking theoretically, that any associate able to equal our lead partner would be automatically considered for partnership. I must stress, however, that does not mean that I am looking for you to take risks with the company's money." He looked away and started tapping away on his computer. David nudged Edward, clearly taking it as a sign for them to leave. They had risen from their chairs and were halfway to the door when MacIntyre threw out a final comment.

"And I highly suggest not gambling on the outcome of antitrust investigations in future. We had enough of that with Microsoft in '98."

When the door closed, David leaned against it heavily, looking at Edward through slitted eyes.

"I think we need to talk," Edward said.

"Sure."

There was a fire escape at one side of the trading floor—the actual alarmed fire door was a couple of floors down, transforming it into a deep well. Due to its lack of lighting and enclosed nature it was useless for a surreptitious cigarette, but it was a place you could go and be assured of privacy—the walls were too thick to overhear anything said in the stairwell and the steps were separated so one could see if someone was standing anywhere above you.

"So, Edward, is this about the Cholmondeley trade? Come on, out with it. You've been acting like a spooked deer for days."

"Yes. I've been out of my mind, waiting for the knock on my door. Even the Hong Kong Electric CEO didn't know about the takeover—the Board of Directors told him about at the same time Cholmondeley told the press. So how did I know about that, David? How did I know to buy up twenty-eight fucking million pounds worth of shares?"

"Relax, and stop being a prat. Think about it. Where have you heard the name Cholmondeley before?"

Now David said it, Edward recalled the name had seemed familiar, after a moment scanning his memory, he found it—the old porter at David's gentleman's club had said it. One of the blandly pretty girls who had shared David's Ferrari.

"Didn't I tell you? Anything you learn at a party, at a club, while having dinner with the CEO's daughter—it's all legal."

"David, I know the law. This is a tender offer. If you know the merger's non-public…"

"Who said I knew there was a merger at all? Maybe I just heard that Cholmondeley was going to be making some serious outlay on expansion. Exciting stuff. And voila, it's legal again."

"But…"

"I didn't see a tape recorder when we spoke on Wednesday. Did you?"

"No."

"Good. If anyone asks, you were the one who heard Bernice Cholmondeley blabbing about how much CI was going to make and how her daddy was going to buy her a new pony, or something. Now, if you'll excuse me, 30-year UK government bonds don't sell themselves."

He left Edward in the dark stairwell, deep in thought.

There was no knock on his door. Instead, there was an IRC tab. It had opened in the background while he'd been trading midnight barbs with an advocate of natural theology on a philosophy debate channel. If the concept of God is not omnipotent, Edward was arguing, then it is evil; it is incumbent upon every moral person, if he or she believes God to be less than invincible, to wage war on the founder and author of all evil, pain and death.

When he idly flicked to the additional pane, bearing a single private message, he assumed it was a continuation of the debate, or perhaps someone playing a joke; their nick was 'Death'. The content of the message, however, dispelled that thought:

> **Death:** we know about Cholmondeley

Edward straightened his spine in his chair, irrationally looked around him as though someone might be watching. The message was ambiguous enough that it *might* not refer to the trade—perhaps a friend of that forgettable woman; Bernice? He typed:

> **EGradley:** ???

Death: don't play dumb. you brought twenty-eight million pounds of shares four days ago based on confidential information.

EGradley: who is this?

Death changed their nick to Death_4H

Death_4H: just some concerned citizens. we know who gave you the information.

EGradley: Bernice Cholmondeley

Death_4H: not exactly. whether you're protecting your friend or whether he has something on you doesn't matter

Death_4H: let me spell this out for you. you heard about the HKE takeover from David Went. he was given the information by Marshall, Carter & Dark

God damn it, thought David. What exactly had he gotten himself into here?

Death_4H: Bernice Cholmondeley traded the information to MC&D for membership.

War_4H has joined the channel

EGradley: and how do you know this?

War_4H: you'd be surprised at what people write down these days. MC&D's email servers are ironclad. the Cholmondeley's private network—not so much.

Edward blinked. That wasn't possible, was it? You couldn't just waltz into a PM thread mid-flow.

EGradley: as far as I'm concerned all my transactions are legitimate. if you have any concerns, David Went is lead partner at Cooper Drake. why don't you talk to him if you have some concerns about my transactions?

War_4H: we'd rather play with you. here's how this is going to work; you help us or we make an anonymous tip-off to the FSA, and they decide whether the Cholmondeley deal was above board or not.

War_4H: whether you give us Went or not doesn't matter; we already have emails indicating that MC&D intended to give him the info in exchange for various favours.

Shit. Shit.

EGradley: what, exactly, do you think I'm going to help you to do?

Death_4H: we'll be in touch.

War_4H has left the channel.**

Death_4H has left the channel.**

And just like that, they were gone. Edward sat in front of his computer, staring at the impossible conversation. He wondered whether this was David Went himself, or someone close to him, testing Edward to see if he would reveal his own involvement to a third party. But then, why would he contradict his own story and implicate himself in a trade for illegal information? Cautiously, Edward highlighted the whole conversation and saved it in a Word document, then encrypted it, just in case.

It was evident, he reflected, that Went was protected somehow by his affiliation with Marshall, Carter & Dark. Otherwise they would have gone after him rather than trying to scare Edward, a marginal player in what increasingly sounded like an illicit black market in insider information. At the same time, it was no longer clear that he could trust David Went, who had involved him in this mess. That left him with just one option.

Edward sat in the café, sipping a blisteringly hot black coffee and watching the rain washing down the windows like a giant carafe of

lukewarm water was being slowly tipped over the world. It had to stop sometime, didn't it? He had begun to pity the poor workmen, who he had cautiously decided were probably not watching him. Today he'd seen one of them apparently in the grip of a nervous breakdown, ranting and raving like a lunatic and trying to scrabble towards the traffic island in the middle of the interaction while the others held him back. He checked his watch. Eleven thirty, he thought, sagging visibly. He had taken half the day off and increasingly suspected it was going to be fruitless.

Actually contacting MC&D had proven a chore in itself—their website was nothing more than a password-protected portal with sealed whois information, and their contact details weren't listed anywhere. One night after work he had gone walking on Newgate Street to see if he could find their London chapterhouse by memory, but quickly found himself lost in the strange maze of roads beyond the hospital; his phone and Google Maps couldn't even agree what street he was on. And of course, Great Rojet Street appeared absolutely nowhere. He had almost given up when he had remembered his guest card, left in the back pocket of his coat. It was folded and looked rather the worse for wear, but on close inspection it had what he was looking for—a phone number, made out almost invisibly in matt black lettering on the glossy black card, on the lower left corner of its reverse side.

When he had phoned it, there had been silence for almost twenty seconds—punctuated by the occasional pop of static—before a distant, faint ringing had begun. A short time later a cracked, singsong voice had answered, identifying itself as the Marshall, Carter & Dark switchboard. Edward had impressed himself by demanding a meeting with the head of their London club, refusing to be put off or transferred away. Once he had given the voice his name and sent it to get approval from a manager, it had been replaced by a smooth, lower-register male voice that made no mention of Cholmondeley, David, or even the club itself, but quickly arranged a meeting for eleven o'clock the following morning at an upscale eatery. Edward was sure he hadn't imagined the looks the staff gave when he mentioned he was waiting for a business associate; he guessed this was a locale used by MC&D for sensitive meetings where they didn't trust them enough to admit them to the

clubhouse.

Just as Edward was about to call it a day and leave, the door chimed and a man walked in. He wasn't carrying an umbrella but was visibly bone dry, not a hair out of place. Impressive, thought Edward, though I can think of about five ways he could have pulled that one off. However he had made it from his vehicle—almost certainly the black Rolls Royce with gold trim parked outside—there was no doubt that the stunt had been intended for his benefit and that this was his contact. The man was tall—about Edward's height—and handsome in a high-maintenance, polished way. He could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty, with blue eyes and a wave of fine blond hair. He sat, drawing back his lips to reveal perfect white dentition. 'Smile' was probably the wrong word for it.

"Mr Gradley. So good to meet you." They shook hands; the man had somehow contrived to signal for a tall latte, which was placed down quickly and efficiently by a wide-eyed young waitress who immediately backed away and all but ran into the back of the café, followed by the older brunette.

"And you are?"

"Just call me Jeremy. Now, I understand you have an interest in our little establishment."

"Yes. I've seen what you've done for David—David Went—and I'd like the same deal."

"I see. And do you understand the terms?" Jeremy listed his cup and sipped expectantly.

"I think so. I receive conditional membership—entitling me to, ah, help and support from your association, and in return I pass on information and make financial opportunities available to Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Jeremy chuckled, shook his head and emptied a packet of Splenda into his latte.

"It's a bit more formal than that, I'm afraid. Mr Went's membership

comes with his place in our Acquisitions team. You see, we at MC&D offer our members the most expensive and exclusive experiences and articles anywhere in the world. You've seen our catalogue?" Edward nodded. "Well, for those who would ordinarily be unable to afford our membership we offer a limited package that permits access to our private events and the benefit of, well, *bespoke consultation* with MC&D experts on matters which could further their career. Oh, and complete immunity should they act on, or help others act on, the advice they have received. In return, they help us acquire special objects and people of interest to our established members. If they continue to get results, then they can expect a corresponding increase in the level of advice they receive until—who knows? They may be able to purchase full membership. And then they'll be the ones requesting rare and beautiful things from across the world."

Edward thought this all sounded very familiar.

"I see. And if I wanted to join this Acquisitions group?"

"Then you would need to undergo a formal *orientation*. If the opportunities I have discussed are of interest, please call through to our switchboard and have one of our cars bring you to our chapterhouse this evening. Orientations begin at ten sharp."

And with that the meeting seemed to be over. Jeremy left still holding his drink, elegantly dipping into the door of the Rolls-Royce held open for him by a stocky man with short salt-and-pepper hair who didn't seem to enjoy the same protection from the elements. Edward swirled his coffee and smiled at the staff as they ventured back out.

"Bit of a dragon, is he?" he asked cheerily. No-one responded.

The orientation was a surreal experience. One of the black Rolls stopped outside Edward's apartment, the contrast with his Astra finally persuading him that he would have to visit a dealership soon and spend some of his bonus. The driver, a skinny, young man with bright red hair and a long, lipless sneer, drove him in silence through the soft-lit streets that had somehow avoided Google Street View's

vans, finally stopping outside the sightless facade of the clubhouse. Once inside a heavy, silken cloth was tied over his eyes and led through several rooms until he reached a cold, echoing space where he felt the presence of many other people waiting, probably similarly blinded. Then he heard a voice—it sounded somewhat like Jeremy, though the acoustics meant he couldn't be certain. This is what it said:

"Welcome to Marshall, Carter & Dark Ltd. If you are here, then you have been accepted into our ranks. Congratulations.

"A short summary of our organisation is in order. We are a gentleman's concern, providing our members with the most exclusive, expensive, and rare experiences available. We are centered in London, with agents all over the world, finding and retrieving items for us so we may better provide said experiences. Those of you here today, sitting blindfolded in the audience, are to be our finders, our *retrievers*.

"Many of you have connections to other groups that deal with objects or information that we are interested in—we expect full loyalty to our cause despite these connections. Any sign of deviance will be punished.

"As you will work on a case by case basis, I will be very broad. Cases, known as Acquisitions, will be assigned based upon your personal areas of expertise. You are not allowed to turn down an Acquisition. While working on an Acquisition, you will have access to the resources of our organisation, depending on the case. Abuse of these resources will be punished.

"You are to apply yourself to the assigned Acquisition with all due haste, whilst keeping up any required appearances. Under no circumstances are you to reveal that you are working for Marshall, Carter & Dark. Any attempt to speak about Marshall, Carter & Dark with people that have not been sanctioned by Marshall, Carter & Dark will be punished.

"This concludes your orientation. Please face to your right and take short, measured steps. You will be guided to a room where you will be allowed to remove your blindfold. Some of you will receive your

first Acquisition case; upon completion you will receive limited membership and a reward to be arranged with your contact. Thank you for your time."

As Edward walked carefully towards the door he was struck by the fact that the other footsteps were only echoes of his own; in fact, the more he allowed himself to reflect on it the more certain he was that he was, apart from MC&D's employees, alone in the chapterhouse, and that the whole initiation ceremony with its cultic trappings had been arranged specifically for his benefit.

After walking a good hundred paces he heard a door close behind him and hands lowered him into a rich leather chair. The blindfold was removed—as he had expected, Jeremy sat across from him on the other side of a dark wooden desk lit by an elegant angle lamp, surrounded by densely packed shelves of aged-looking books.

"Edward! Glad to see you made it. Welcome aboard." He was toying with a gold-banded fountain pen.

"So, I imagine you'll be presenting me with a task right away." To prove my loyalty, he thought. He strongly suspected no-one walked out of the chapterhouse without a favour to complete.

"That's correct. There's a document we want you to acquire; nothing illegal, just a little straightforward persuasion. Some charm, Mr Gradley. Ten thousand pounds will be wired to your personal account to make the purchase—you will be expected to return any money left over. The current owner of the document does not know its real value and the amount we have provided should be more than adequate to persuade her to make the sale."

"Would I know the owner?"

"You were selected for this acquisition exactly because you have made her acquaintance; she is an infrequent guest of the Lady Penelope. The daughter of Christophe Beaumont—Maria Beaumont."

Edward fell silent for a second. He was effectively being asked to

scam the woman. Not only that, but his instincts had told him of the existence of a relationship between her and David Went; she had not confirmed his suspicions but it was enough to make him wary of the errand. After a few moments he made up his mind.

"This document—what am I looking for? I imagine Miss Beaumont will have lots of valuable papers in her possession."

"A very astute question. You are looking for a manuscript authored by Gervase of Langford, a fourteenth century writer thought for a long time to be apocryphal. He is supposed to be a contemporary of Chaucer—a long-lost pioneer of English literature. Excerpts from the manuscript in question, *A Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians*, were touted around in the late Victorian era as prophetic literature, but scholars widely considered the book a 'ghost', a phantom invented by later authors or perhaps an embellishment of a more well-known document. Shakespeare's "Cardenio" is another so-called ghost. Except of course, the *Viage* has been found; traced, at considerable expense, by our Documents team." He slid a slim briefing document over the table—noticeably absent, Edward noticed, was any trace of the MC&D cartouche.

"In the possession of the Beaumont estate."

"Yes; the original manuscript is recorded as having been sold for four guineas to a French businessman called Guiger in the sixteenth century. There the trail ended, until we discovered a reference to a 'Voyage au Pays des Cimmériens' having been acquired by the library of Jean-Paul Beaumont in 1897."

"What would it look like?"

"Obviously we can't say for sure—we believe, however, that it will be a codex."

"A codex?"

"Much like the tomes surrounding me—a book. Most likely bound in metal, given the documentation. We believe it was transported from France in the 1980s with the rest of Christophe Beaumont's collection. It should be in the library of the Beaumont residence,

which should not be hard for you to locate."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then our working relationship will be a brief one. Now, there are several non-disclosure agreements to sign, prohibiting you from discussing the involvement of Marshall, Carter & Dark during the transaction or thereafter…"

The Beaumont residence, located in Belgravia, was a six-storey terraced property; white stucco with fluted columns supporting an expansive porch supporting a balcony filled with a tasteful assortment of topiary. Edward all but hurdled the distance from his car to the doorway but still somehow managed to get drenched from head to toe. He rung the bell and stood shivering in his probably ruined suit until Maria opened it, summery in a floral blue dress and a wide-brimmed hat.

"Oh look at you; you're soaked to the skin. Come in, come in." Edward wasn't even sure if she recognised him from the clubhouse.

She laid down newspaper for Edward to tread on and took his coat, which she spread over the radiator.

"You should come through to the solarium. I'm just doing some gardening."

After removing his shoes Edward followed her through the elegant interior, furnished in the Louis XVI style and lit with high, diffuse lights that offset the cream walls. She led him up a short flight of stairs and into a wide circular courtyard surrounding a neatly maintained flower bed. The light here was a warm orange and they seemed to have suddenly entered evening in late summer. Edward looked up and saw the rain beating against a tinted glass dome. Maria knelt down on a small cushion and began bedding a number of small pink flowering plants from a tray.

"You have a lovely home," he said.

"Thank you, but it's not mine. It belongs to my father—but he spends

most of his time in France, on business."

"Oh." He watched her gardening for a few minutes.

"I thought you might have been coming by to give me flowers," she said. "I don't like that. David always brings me flowers and I watch them die. Being uprooted like that; it's too cruel." Edward wondered if she was thinking of her own childhood, brought to Britain at the age of seven if the research he'd done last night on the family was correct.

"Actually," he said, "I was hoping to ask you a favour. There was a certain book I was looking for and can't seem to find anywhere. Someone told me that the Beaumont library might have a copy."

"Oh dear. You can certainly come and look, but I don't think I can be of help to you. Come with me."

Again Edward found himself trailing behind Maria as she navigated flights of stairs and led him through various impossibly lavish drawing-rooms.

Finally she came to a stairwell that led sharply upwards to a trapdoor.

"When my father came from France he had the whole collection put in crates and shipped over; but he never had the time to recatalog it." She opened the trapdoor and they rose into a high-vaulted loft space, the floor littered with dozens upon dozens of great boxes, every surface covered in a thick layer of dust and fibreglass fluff. Edward looked on in despair.

"So you see, if the book you were looking for is part of my family's library it is somewhere in there." She shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

Edward looked at her—the light from the trapdoor lit up her arms and legs and made her seem something ethereal, less than solid. He had already decided what he was going to say.

"I'll help you. I'll get it all organised, put them up on shelves."

Maria's expression was hard to read in the shadow of the attic.

"Won't your bosses mind?"

"I'll do it out of office hours. That is, if you're happy?"

"Yes, yes! But you mustn't do it for free. I'll phone my father and ask him to pay you for it. There's a room on the second floor he always meant to be the library—there are some mementos on the shelves I will need to clear."

And that was how the weeks played out—Edward would play the stock market during the day and spend the evenings and weekends at the Beaumont residence, hauling boxes down from the attic and cataloging their contents. First-edition Proust, an autographed copy of Les Misérables, the complete works of François-Thomas-Marie de Baculard d'Arnaud. Several times Edward found himself sitting and reading through volumes of Comte and Montesquieu in their original French, before chiding himself for wasting time. No date had been set by Jeremy for the acquisition of the *Viage*, but he imagined this delay could not have been appreciated.

The little library soon filled up and Maria annexed the parlour next door, bringing in new shelving during the day. Edward opened box after box of tomes packed in yellowed styrofoam, but there was no metal-bound medieval manuscript. Maria would walk in from time to time, bringing him sweet tea in little china cups and wafer-thin biscuits.

"Edward, you will not be able to come around tomorrow evening," she told him once.

"Oh. Why?"

"Well, David is coming over, and you were right. He can be a little jealous. You have been so good in doing this—I do not want him to get the wrong idea." She held his cheek with her hand for a moment and suddenly flushed before turning away.

One rainy Saturday—there was no sun anymore, it seemed, at least outside office hours—a bone-tired Edward levered off the top of the

latest crate, a damp, miserable thing he had found lurking near the edge of the attic. The books at the top were ruined; little more than dried pulp between the covers. Seventeenth century Molière, now mush. Below the ruined books there seemed to be only emptiness; an expanse of styrofoam peanuts all the way to the bottom of the box. Or was it the bottom? The cool, unyielding surface he had encountered didn't seem far enough down. Scrabbling around he found one corner, then another, and lifted the object out of the packing crate.

It was more a box than a binding—a plain, almost crude iron cuboid with a hefty haft. On it the word 'Gervais'—presumably the French spelling—had been not engraved but *scratched* into the metal. He held his breath as he undid the clasp. Had it been reduced to mulch like the others? The pages were yellowed, brittle, cracked at the edges; but intact. The title page took his breath away—still-vivid reds and greens spiralling together in an ornate 'A' that began the title: 'A Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians'. He closed the box, and took a deep breath. Now the hard part.

"To buy? Oh, no, I'm sorry, Edward. That book is part of my family estate—they all are. I could not sell them, not for any amount of money."

"Perhaps your father…"

"My father entrusted the house and everything to me—do you see? I cannot sell you the book."

"But … they were in packing crates for years. Your father probably doesn't even know it's in here, surely there's no harm in letting it go?" he said, a little roughly. Then, softening his tone, "It would mean a lot to me."

"Edward! Please, listen to me. You are a dear man and I hope a dear friend. I do not like to say no to you. Please do not let some old silly book come between us."

Edward collapsed into a chair and gazed into the middle distance. Maria, unwilling to let Edward see her cry, turned away. Edward left

shortly afterwards, books and packing material still strewn around the floor like the wreckage from some terrible explosion.

Maria called several times over the next few days, each time on his home phone during office hours, hanging up when it went to answerphone. He couldn't bring himself to call her back.

Unable to decide what to do next in the Beaumont acquisition, Edward simply let it rest for the moment, the ten thousand pounds resting accusingly in his personal current account. He would have been content to leave it there forever before something happened to make him act. This time it didn't come from apocalyptically-named IRC personalities, shady gentleman's clubs or even David Went. It began with an innocuous phonecall from Wil Hamilton, his one-time best friend back at Redmayne–Bracknell.

"We should meet up for a drink sometime," suggested Edward, reflecting that since joining Cooper Drake he had all but given up friends. His occasional outings with David Went were the closest he came to sharing time with friends these days, especially since he had stopped going to Maria's house.

"Sure. So how are things as a master of the universe?"

"Tiring."

"You don't say. Keeping your eyes on the prize, right?"

"When I can. How is HR treating you?"

"It's my busy season too. So many companies are closing we're getting deluged with applications. You know how it goes—all the handwritten letters, in the bin. All the 'To whom it may concerns'—in the bin. Pile A is the first-class degrees from Oxbridge, pile B is the first-class degrees from other unis. The rest go in the bin. All the off-white paper; in the bin. All the ones on company letterhead; in the bin. Interview the first ten from the top of each pile and chuck the ones who start the interview with 'um'. If you're left with one candidate from pile A and another from B, chuck the B-lister."

"Heh," Edward thought: you're missing out a trick there, mate. I know for a fact you look at the surnames and chuck the ones that don't sound like they attended Eton in the 1950s.

"Here's something you could probably use—you know Western Instruments?"

Edward vaguely remembered it as a dinosaur of a New England firm that made graphic calculators and replied in the affirmative.

"Well, they're jumping ship in their dozens. I'd say about one in every five applications we're getting over in Accounts are from them."

"Why?"

"Well, nothing's been announced yet, but it's common knowledge at the firm. They're only getting jumped by the Slasher."

Bashir "Slasher" Khan (he wouldn't have got into Redmayne–Bracknell under Wil Hamilton's watch, sad to say) was an aggressive young tycoon who had made millions buying up dying British and American companies, ruthlessly cutting them to the bare bones and selling them on to multinationals. He was the master of the hostile takeover, appealing directly to shareholders and bypassing management altogether. After firing half the workforce and paring back output to its most profitable components a company 'slashed' by Bashir Khan could be worth as much as fifteen percent more.

"Really? I'll look into it. Thanks for the tip."

They concluded their discussion with some light ribbing and a promise to get together some time, maybe pulling in friends who had left for different firms.

Then Edward started researching Western Instruments and Bashir Khan. It all seemed to check out—Khan hadn't made an acquisition for months and was surely looking to expand again. Western Instruments was a sad, bloated carcass of what it used to be, still insisting that people needed single-purpose computing equipment at

the price of a smart phone. A trickle of orders from the schools were the only thing keeping them in business.

This time Edward ran the deal past everyone—Liz, David, even popping in to let Raymond know. Everything came together—Liz reported confidently that voluntary redundancies in Western Instruments were sky-high. David confirmed something big was in the works from Slasher Khan. Edward was authorised to buy up eighteen million in shares in Western Instruments.

"What, that old thing?" asked his American contact in disbelief. "They're dead, son—you might as well invest in abacuses." But Edward pressed ahead, confident that as soon as the Slasher made his move he would be holding gold dust.

A week passed. Two weeks. Then the news—Edward's heart leapt as he saw the headline 'Slasher strikes again!'. It might have been a grisly murder—which in some ways it was—except it was in the Finance section.

> **Bashir 'The Slasher' Khan** has struck again, announcing a hostile takeover of Global Merchandise Limited, the international PR firm, which had been languishing for years following the collapse of the dot-com bubble…

Edward couldn't believe it. Surely there had to be some mistake, something misreported. He scanned the news for any mention of Western Instruments. And there it was.

> **Western Instruments** today announced losses of twenty million in its second quarter in a major blow to the ailing scientific calculator manufacturer.

He had been set up. Instead of gold dust he'd been left with fool's gold. In under an hour the face value of his stocks dipped by eight percent. While desperately trying to find a buyer, any buyer, he dialled Wil's number.

"Hi there Edward." He sounded horribly, nauseatingly chipper.

"Hello Wil. Is there something you want to tell me now?" He couldn't prevent the note of panic from entering his voice.

"You know, Edward, some companies have institutional memory. Not Cooper Drake, of course, but *proper* companies. Companies with history and character. You fucked us over, Edward. Did you think we'd just forget?" Edward was speechless as Wil continued. "RB gave you your break, forgave you all those months you farted around twiddling your thumbs like the spoilt brat you are."

"I thought we were friends," Edward said. I wonder if Peter finally realised, he thought—put Wil up to this. There's a justice in it, I guess.

"I thought we were," said Wil. "That was before you screwed with Redmayne–Bracknell."

Edward's mouth went tight. "Then screw you, you piece of shit. You're a bloody racist, as well, you know that? You run your fucking HR department like the Klu Klux Klan. Go to hell." He put the phone down. One more bridge well and truly burned, he thought.

In some ways this was worse than what had happened over Cliffes—though the trade had been above board, signed and sealed by Cooper Drake's management, it had been based on lies, lies predicated on a personal vendetta against him. Lies he had believed and presented as fact. Even MacIntyre wouldn't fire me for this, he thought mutely. He'll just move me quietly to a back room and make sure every other investment bank firm in the world knows I can't handle the trading floor. And now, only now, did the sick lump form in his stomach, as he saw his only option to make good.

The first time he had gone to the Beaumont residence he had forgotten his umbrella. This time it was with him, but he left it on his passenger seat. He walked through the rain to the porch and rung the bell. Just like the first time. Put things back to how they were. Another visit to Mr Stathopoulos would be in order, of course.

Maria came to the door in a thick, fluffy dressing gown, hair tightly wrapped in a towel. She looked at him and a suggestion of tears

began to form again in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You poor man! You poor man!" she said, grabbing him and bringing him inside, where she rested his head on her shoulder and allowed the water from his suit to soak into her robe. He didn't allow her to take his bag but placed it on the newspaper she brought out.

"Maria," he said, "I came—that is to say I stopped by—I felt bad for leaving the library in such a state—and even if you didn't want—I wanted to finish it—and I was so out of line—and—" Edward was unable to tell if his own breathless incoherence was an attempt to win sympathy or not. She took him by the hand and led him back to the library. To his amazement the books and styrofoam remained where he had left them; scattered on the floor.

"Nothing has changed, you know? I was just waiting for you to come back. I was worried."

He leaned closer to her, kissed her hair. She took his still damp collar with both hands and guided his face to hers, kissed his mouth, hard. You bastard, he wanted to shout at himself, you fucking bastard. He was crying now, and she took a tissue and wiped his eyes.

"Please," she said, her smile illuminated in that little plaster room, "don't cry. I'll bring tea and biscuits."

After she left, he watched his body move over to the bookshelf where the Gervase codex sat, taller and wider than the books around it and 'Gervais' scratched on its spine. He watched himself take the iron box off the shelf and swap it for the shoddy replica he had pieced together from the remains of an old washing-machine, smoothly transferring the manuscript to his bag. And that was all there was to it.

He swept up the packing chips and picked up where he left off. A few minutes later Maria brought warm, sweet tea, and he drank it like a man dying of thirst.

FoldUnfold
Table of Contents
Chapter Four: "You Are Invited"
Chapter Five: "There's Five"

Chapter Four: "You Are Invited"

"I must say," Jeremy said happily, "I was beginning to think you had taken our money and run. I mean, investment bankers." He chortled as he caressed the codex with long fingers, feeling the texture of the illustrated letters. "But I shouldn't have doubted. This is quite incredible."

They sat in a long tearoom at the clubhouse—this time Edward had been allowed the privilege of walking through without a blindfold. Thus far he had seen at least two of the Dragon's Den judges, a pop star and a member of the royal family. There was a tray of jam scones with clotted cream on the table—Edward had not dared take one. Jeremy, on the other hand, showed no such compunction; Edward winced at every crumb that fell onto the fourteenth century document.

"And what's this?" Jeremy's voice changed to one of genuine surprise as Edward held out a traveller's cheque for ten thousand pounds. He held it up, chuckling.

"You certainly give good value for money. I am impressed. How did you … no, don't tell me. However you did it, I have to admire your ruthlessness. I think it's time you got to know us a little more closely." Leaning back languorously he pulled on a white silk cord which engaged an intercom.

"Please tell Mister Carter that we're ready for him."

A few moments later the doors opened and an attractive young

nurse entered, preceded by a shrivelled figure in a wheelchair. If he had to guess, Edward would have put Mr Carter's age at a hundred and ten or more—alarmingly frail, folds of liver-spotted skin rippling inwards towards a collapsed, toothless mouth. The ears and downturned nose seemed overlarge on him, in the way they often appeared on the extremely elderly. Edward had read somewhere that cartilage continued to grow throughout one's life. A thin ruff of white hair surrounded the lower back of his head, with the occasional straggling hair clinging to his pate. The eyebrows in contrast were thick and bushy, and the eyes underneath still alive and twinkling with a sharp, predatory brightness that belied his outward decrepitude. His hands fluttered from his lap and shook as the young nurse poured him a drink.

"So! Mr Marshall. What *do* we have here? That—bright young man you were talking about?" When he spoke it was in short, anoxic gasps. Nasal tubes connected Mr Carter to a bulky apparatus mounted on the back of his chair, discreetly covered by a deep blue throw with silver threadwork; some sort of iron lung, Edward supposed. He found it vaguely disquieting to look at—it wheezed with him, rising and falling in a disturbingly organic way, as though there were some horrific tumour or Siamese twin under the cloth, growing out of the back of the aged man.

"Mr Gradley," prompted Jeremy, smoothing his tie. Or rather, Edward realised, Mr Jeremy Marshall. He found it incongruous that the two could have undertaken any enterprise together given their difference in ages. Mr Carter might well be old enough to have founded a prestigious gentleman's club, but Marshall? Most likely, the named partnership had been transferred dynastically; Jeremy's father had clearly had no compunctions in giving his son the keys to the kingdom.

"Gradley! A good—*Yorkshire* name," wheezed Carter affably. "But the build doesn't match. Actually -" he struggled for the spectacles hanging around his neck with the hand and the nurse retrieved them for him—"yes, the face is all wrong. I consider myself an expert in—anthropometrics. I can see that you're—baltoid, gracile, brachy—excuse me—cephaly—I'm going to guess Baltic or perhaps—West Slavic." He scanned Edward's face for a reaction. "Am I close?"

"My mother was Polish," said Edward, feeling a sudden twang of revulsion towards him.

"I knew it! Still sharp, eh, Mr Marshall?" The blond nodded, almost affectionately. "Ah, yes, Bernard Gradley. I remember him well. Thought he was much too good for us in the end, as I recall, and after all the help we gave him. Mail order bride, was it?" He chuckled for a second before collapsing in a coughing fit. Edward sat silently, reasoning that contradicting the ghastly old man was unlikely to yield results. Another thing you never told me, father, he thought.

"Mr Gradley has completed his first Acquisition for us. The Codex, if you recall." Jeremy Marshall reached into his drawer and withdrew something wrapped in a rich velvet cloth.

"Ah—at last! I've been waiting to get my hands on it for some time. Try not to lose *that* one to You Know Who; at least until you've perused every last delightful inch. It seems like only yesterday they sent the poor fellow back…"

"Indeed. Perhaps the status of our mutual friend might be reconsidered after being so thoroughly beaten to the prize by Mr Gradley here—even after we fulfilled his perverse little Cinderella fantasies."

"Ye-e-es, the problem being that at midnight he turns into a pumpkin!" Carter chuckled.

Marshall, seeing Edward's bewildered expression, interjected to return the conversation to something approximating sanity.

"Accordingly I felt it time for us to present Mr Gradley with provisional membership—and to discuss his reward, if he feels this an appropriate time. Would you care to do the honours, Mr Carter?"

Carter put his wine down and took the cloth in hands which suddenly seemed a lot surer than they had a few minutes ago. He leaned in, eyes lit by an unholy light, putting it in Edward's hands.

"This is knowledge. This is power. Take a look."

Unwrapping the soft fabric his fingers encountered a cold,

transparent sheet about six inches by three. Perspex? No, glass, he realised, turning it over in his hands. In one corner, the MC&D cartouche, in another, a contact number. In the centre, in almost unreadably tiny gold lettering, the words 'Edward Gradley, Acquisitions'. The reverse side showed what at first glance appeared to be a circuit diagram but which on closer examination was a tiny map of the City of London engraved into the glass, with several clubhouses marked.

"Take good care of it, my boy," wheezed Carter. "Keep it safe. You only get the one!"

"Thank you," said Edward, coolly. "Now, as to my reward…"

Edward knew that Marshall, Carter & Dark had held up their end of the bargain when he walked onto the trading floor the next morning. Went, MacIntyre and a couple of the other early risers had made it in ahead of him and had populated his table with little pots of bombay mix and bottles of champagne.

"I think congratulations are in order," MacIntyre hailed him.

"Oh?" said Edward.

"We were getting a bit worried about your Western Instruments speculation. But you came through in the end, even if it wasn't quite the way we thought. Cheers!" David popped a cork and filled glasses for the early brigade. Edward casually walked over to one of the touchscreens and saw the headlines.

> **Western Instruments to be acquired by 'Mad Hacker' Reginald Price**
>
> In a shock announcement, troubled scientific calculator manufacturer Western Instruments has become the subject of a hostile takeover by American cost-cutter Reg Price. Nicknamed 'The Mad Hacker' due to his efforts to restore profitability to failing firms by making steep efficiency savings, Mr Price will be looking to reverse the fortunes of the ailing giant…

Edward trotted back to the table with the others and accepted a glass of champagne. He raised his glass and smiled at Liz, who didn't smile back, instead looking away with a troubled expression. Now what have I done, he wondered.

That morning Western Instruments' shares rose by thirteen percent; Edward cashed out at midday, making a profit of £540,000. Edward couldn't comprehend the magnitude of what MC&D must have on Reginald Price to be able to compel him to launch a hostile buyout worth hundreds of millions in the space of a few hours, but right now he wasn't complaining. And, he thought, feeling the heft of the folder Jeremy Marshall had presented him, this was only the beginning.

"Edward, thank you. Come in."

Edward closed the door of Raymond MacIntyre's office. MacIntyre, David, Liz and a couple of other partners sat around a table. Edward felt a frisson of anticipation but also apprehension. Their faces were neutral.

He sat down at the table, taking in the documentation in front of each member. He had received a simple message by email, asking him to attend a meeting that afternoon, and to leave the rest of the day free. Edward had felt confident that it had been good news—recognition of every perfect, unbelievable deal he had made since his meeting with Jeremy Marshall. But as the morning had gone on, little things had made him feel more and more uneasy—the way Liz couldn't meet his eyes, the way David kept pacing back and forth between the desks, on several occasions walking halfway to Edward's team before changing his mind and walking back. The junior associates under him had picked up on the atmosphere and begun ribbing him about a coming inquisition.

"He's done it now! You've made 'em so much cash they want to know how you're smuggling that much coke into the country!"

Now he sat on the opposite end of the table to Raymond MacIntyre and he still couldn't determine whether he was about to be promoted or roasted over a slow fire.

"Edward," said Raymond MacIntyre slowly, "I don't think there's any doubt that your trades have been—sensational. From Cholmondeley Holdings through to Abacus Productions, you've made the company three point one million pounds in profit over the last six months. I'm a man of my word, and I haven't forgotten what I said when you asked how much you would have to pull in before we bent the rules for you and gave you a fast-track partnership." Edward began to pull himself up in his chair, eyes bright. "But Cooper Drake is an ethical firm, and before we can think about admitting a new partner, we need to clear up a few things. Ensure everything has been -" MacIntyre loosened his cotton collar slightly, visibly perspiring, "on the level."

Edward immediately modulated his body language—concerned, understanding.

"Take this trade, for example, on the Sixth of November. A ten million pound short sale transaction against ACTLE. It was taken out twelve hours before the Argentinian government announced the nationalisation of Wincanton Oil, a wholly owned subsidiary of ACTLE. I have spoken to the heads of both ACTLE and Wincanton, and this was news to them until the Minister of Industry made her announcement. Now, there's nothing wrong with scooping a firm on a political sea change that could affect them. If that's what you did, congratulations."

"I -" Edward began to speak, unsure of what he was going to say, but Raymond rode straight over him.

"Then there's this business over Carmichael & Sons. This is especially concerning to me because of the involvement of Gerald Spointer, a man whom I believe you may know. Someone—and it has not been established with certainty that it was Mr Spointer's company that originated these rumours, so to avoid prejudicing the partners I shall not mention the name of this company—leaked false information to the press about alleged corner-cutting and use of cheap materials in C&S's latest furniture range. Now, you sold and persuaded other members of your team to sell a total of twenty-five million pounds worth of shares in Carmichael & Sons, half an hour before the leak went to press. Just prior to this meeting Carmichael & Sons' share price has recovered somewhat but it is still

significantly reduced, most likely as a result of your trades. The Director of that organisation is understandably upset that large sales were made based on false information and I still have to get back to him to justify why—or even how—that decision was made. There are two ways I can get back to him; firstly, that the trade was made by our latest partner based on immaculate planning and assessment of C&S's long-term prospects and the connection to the dirty tricks campaign was coincidental. Or, I could tell him that the shares were sold at the insistence of a trader with a personal family connection to his competitor, and that the trader has since been disciplined for ethics violations." Edward felt a thin film of perspiration forming. He hadn't even made the connection between the rumours about Carmichael & Sons and Gradley Industries. He wondered if Marshall had found pleasure in linking him back to his father's firm.

"You see Edward, what concerns me most about all these wonderful trades is that for the last few weeks there has been almost no activity at all on your research pass. When a trade which could be construed as potentially based on insider information goes through, we like to look at our traders' research logs and see plenty of data that shows they've been looking up that organisation's past trends, scouring industry gossip, etc. I called this meeting because we haven't found anything like that. To get your side of the picture. If you can justify your trades, Edward, then a partnership is open to you. Right now. If not, we need to think about what we do next."

Edward's mouth was dry, ashy. He scanned the faces at the table. Of course there was no activity; every single trade had come straight out of Jeremy Marshall's big bent playbook. Why the hell hadn't he thought to cover his tracks? Had he thought Cooper Drake was stupid?! He had one tenuous lifeline.

"Liz," he croaked. He didn't want to say anything more.

Liz was studiously gazing down at the table, face bright red. "Sorry Edward, 'fraid I can't play along on this one. We've been rating Carmichael & Sons a strong buy for months. And we had no clue on Wincanton." Her voice had a bitter edge to it. "You seem to have some insight we don't. Sorry for lagging so far behind you." She seemed to shrink under Edward's vaporising gaze.

Raymond was sighing now, putting aside his paper and reaching for a set of other forms. Gardening leave, Edward thought mutely. They'd pull apart every email he'd ever made, ransack his phone records. When they found out that Western Instruments had apparently been a hot tip from Edward's old firm, he'd be finished. The whole world buzzed around him, and it was a second before he realised that David had weighed in.

"No, Edward's getting mixed up. There won't be anything on his research log because he lost his access card in a taxi. He couldn't afford to report it at the time so I've been lending him mine. Sorry, it's a breach of protocol, I know."

Edward was left speechless, as much because it seemed like a suicidal gesture as anything. What would that do? They'd just look up David's records and find the same absence of evidence.

MacIntyre turned; something weary in his voice. "I see. As you say, that's a breach of our policy, David, I'm surprised at you." David nodded, almost smiling now. "So you're saying that if we looked at *your* log we'd find excellent, bookmarked documentation showing that young Mr Gradley here has exhaustively researched Argentinian domestic economic policy and the furniture wars in the north of England?"

David nodded. "Amongst quite a lot of other stuff. You see, I have to confess that Edward wasn't the only person I was loaning my card to. These things are just so flimsy—and they slide right out of your pocket when you're sitting down. Half my team have been using it, and Michelle, and Paul." He glared meaningfully at two of the other partners, who immediately started nodding their heads. "That's a hell of a lot of data to sort through, Raymond. Besides, as lead partner, to go through my research logs would mean a formal investigation into both Edward and myself. Are we sure that's justifiable?"

Edward sat, gobsmacked by David Went's audacity. He had effectively dared MacIntyre to sack his two most valuable traders, and he could see from Raymond's increasingly washed-out face that he was in no mind to call David's bluff.

"As you say, David, I don't think that's warranted. I'm happy to have

received justification for these trades, and will now move to call a formal meeting of the board to admit Mr Gradley as a partner. Edward and anyone else who has"—he coughed—"*lost* their research passes is to purchase a new one immediately, and I expect to see all future trades documented on the right accounts to avoid embarassing situations like this in future."

MacIntyre walked over to Edward, whispering something in David's ear along the way, and shook his hand.

"You almost self-destructed there," he said quietly. "I think you owe Mr Went a big favour."

"'Almost' never needs apologies," said Edward evenly.

"Damn right. Well done, Mr Gradley," MacIntyre said in a louder voice, clapping him on the back before opening the door.

Everyone filed out, Edward's team making distant football-celebratory noises when they saw his relief-flushed face.

"David -" Edward said, grabbing the shorter man's shoulder, "Thank you. Why did you do that?"

David looked at him with a deadpan expression.

"Because we're friends, I thought. Besides, I'm 2-0 on you now, by my reckoning. I'm gunning for the hat-trick."

He didn't see Elizabeth again until he broke for coffee—she was the only other person in the trading floor kitchenette, sitting under a dark cloud at the table with a cup of cocoa.

"Liz?"

She looked up at him, eyes and nose red. "Guess you want to know why I didn't back you up earlier. Well done on the partnership, by the way."

"I kind of do want to know, yes."

Her gaze carried absolute venom.

"We never went for that coffee, did we?"

He saw in that moment that she felt used, had realised the part he had made her play in the departure of Peter Davis. Perhaps she had even figured out where the Western Instruments tip had come from; even now she had refrained from doing the worst she could to him. He turned and walked away.

Death found Edward browsing for ideas for a new car. As partner his salary would start at two hundred thousand a year, not including bonuses. Right now he was trying to decide between the Porsche Panamera and a Toyota FT-86 Coupe. This time they didn't wait for him to log onto IRC; they did that for him, opening a new foreground tab that jerked him wide awake.

> **Death_4H:** I see you've been busy

Edward had almost forgotten about these jokers. They were the ones who got him into all this by trying to threaten him over the Cholmondeley takeover of Hong Kong Electric. Thoughts of saloons vs sports hatchbacks set firmly aside, he began typing.

> **EGradley:** yes. working for a living tends to imply that. what do you do?
>
> **Death_4H:** very funny. we said we would be in touch.
>
> **EGradley:** still with that? let me guess, you want information on Marshall, Carter & Dark
>
> **EGradley:** i don't feel like playing
>
> **Famine_4H has joined the channel**
> **Pestilence_4H has joined the channel**
>
> **Death_4H:** I know you've been trying to squirm further into their confidence because you think it will protect you
>
> **EGradley:** I'm pretty sure it does, as a matter of fact.
>
> **Death_4H:** you have no idea who you're in bed with

EGradley: really? here's a thought: I'll tell you whatever you want if you go away

Pestilence_4H: tell us what you think you know

War_4H has joined the channel

EGradley: MC&D the gentleman's club incorporates an art brokerage which is a front for insider dealing.

EGradley: you can earn membership by acquiring pieces for resale, which is rewarded with information

Pestilence_4H: which you've used

EGradley: definitely did not say that

Death_4H: try telling us something we don't know

Pestilence_4H: wasn't a question

Famine_4H: like the man says

Famine_4H: no idea

EGradley: what the hell are you going on about?

Death_4H: we need to meet in person

EGradley: not going to happen.

Death_4H: it will. we're going to expose MC&D and you're going to help.

EGradley: why is that, exactly?

Death_4H: because, your recent illegalities aside you're not actually evil, as far as we know

Death_4H: when you're ready, you'll figure out how to contact us.

Death_4H has left the channel.

War_4H has left the channel.
Famine_4H has left the channel.
Pestilence_4H has left the channel.

Well, that seemed to be it. Edward noted that they hadn't tried to blackmail him this time, which as far as he was concerned indicated they'd waited too long to play their hand. He couldn't decide whether they actually knew more about MC&D's activities or whether he'd just handed them Jeremy Marshall on a plate; either way, he thought, they were more likely to go after someone else now.

Edward was returning to his apartment after picking up the new car —he'd opted for the Porsche—when something struck him as slightly off. The door remained firmly locked—all the windows were closed, and at first glance nothing seemed out of place, but he had a sudden and unmistakable feeling that someone had been there. He immediately booted up his computer and checked the access times, allowing himself to breathe out as it showed no unusual activity. The two encrypted files that now held his strange communications with Death and his friends were apparently inviolate.

He had almost forgotten his worries when he found the card, nestled inside his fruitbowl. It was smooth and black, with rounded edges and a familiar gold cartouche. This is what the card said:

Edward Gradley

You are invited.

Christmas Ball
24 December 9.30pm
London Chapterhouse

Edward sat for a while looking at it. Did everyone involved with Marshall's little club get this special treatment? Or was this a warning?

The twenty-fourth was the busiest Edward had seen the clubhouse —though the foyer remained intimidatingly shadowy, the doors were

for once wide open, as guests from politics, finance and the media flocked in. Edward had followed the directions on the glass membership card and arrived at the same time as David, who had brought Maria and the Parker girl. Edward felt a twinge of—pride, guilt?—that his car, suit and watch were all significantly more expensive than David's this time around. He had eschewed the services of Mr Stathopoulos, opting instead for Huntsman, Saville Row.

Before he could speak to Maria she was whisked away by David and he was left talking to the willowy blonde who had sat with Maria before—Lady Penelope, he remembered—who had materialised suddenly.

"Edward! So good to see you. You look positively *edible*," she said, as before not extending her hand but smiling prettily.

"Thank you. Uh, are you here on your own?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I usually come with Maria Beaumont, but she's been stolen away by that fat little banker." She sounded genuinely put out. "Oh, but I forget; you're in the trade too, aren't you? You must excuse me, that was horrible."

"That's okay. Erm, do I say Dear Lady?"

"Only if you have to! Call me Alexandra."

"Thanks. I'm here on my own too."

"Oh, you're too cute to be on your own. I'll keep you company."

Lady Penelope was an amiable enough companion; he wasn't sure if her flowery compliments indicated sexual interest on her part or whether that was just her way of getting attention. They chatted for a few minutes while he tried to catch sight of Maria, wondering what spectacle MC&D would put on for its guests.

They didn't have to wait long. A mist spread out over the whole ballroom, arching over the guests, faint pricks of precipitation spotting their hands and faces. After a few moments the air became vaguely irritating to the eyes—guests started to murmur that

something had clearly gone wrong and a few started for the exits. Edward closed his eyes for a moment to clear the stinging mist and to his amazement another scene altogether appeared before his eyes; a picturesque rocky shore, somewhere northern, pocked with rockpools and with seagulls flying overhead.

It was clearer than a dream—as though by closing his eyes he had opened another pair somewhere else entirely.

"Close your eyes," he said to Lady Penelope, then louder, to the other guests. One by one, they seemed to populate the scene, appearing in their tuxedos and elegant ballroom gowns along the shoreline. They started to clap as they realised that this was no mere illusion—however MC&D had managed it, they were able to see and interact with each other in this ethereal world. The eyes of every other guest appeared closed; Edward wondered how his own eyes would appear in the nearest rockpool, and cautiously stepped towards it, wondering if he was about to walk into a table or another guest. The still, clear water showed no signs of his reflection, though he was able to cup the water in his hand and taste the sea salt. He realised he could hear the seagulls.

A low, bass music began, booming out of the tide and the sea. The Marshall, Carter & Dark Christmas Ball had begun. Edward offered Lady Penelope his hand again but she shook her head, a strange mix of longing and fear on her face.

The guests of Marshall, Carter & Dark danced on that strange, otherwise deserted shore in their ballroom garments, whirling and turning in space, kicking up small plumes of sand. Not one guest stubbed their foot on an invisible table or stumbled into a clubhouse wall. Edward had no idea how this was being effected, but it was the most astonishing thing he had experienced in his life. He looked at a distant, crumbling lighthouse on a rocky outcrop, and wondered if he could reach if it he walked long enough.

Suddenly left adrift on the sand by his previous partner, who had spun away, Edward found himself facing Maria, wearing a white, almost bridal gown. Looking at her, he remembered the codex and almost turned away, heart stung. Instead, she took him firmly by the hand.

"Dance with me," she said.

It was a surreal experience—dancing on the shore of a great silver sea under a watery sun, seemingly miles away from London, his partner's eyes and the eyes of the dancers all around pressed firmly shut. As they moved he drew Maria closer until his nose was buried in her dark hair. She clung to him fiercely.

They slowed and stopped, and the dreamlike dance around them seemed like an eternal progression; as though time had ceased to exist in this place. Then Edward looked past Maria and saw David there, facing them. His eyes, like the others, were shut, but his face was etched with lines of misery and betrayal. Edward disengaged himself from Maria, who turned and realised what he had seen.

They hid themselves in the crowd, then, watching diplomats and celebrities dancing to that great thrumming noise at the edge of the impossible ocean.

After a long time, the hiss of mist they realised had been there all along faded and the shore grew wavery and dim, as though the tide had come in and drowned the scene. One by one they winked out of existence, opening their eyes to find themselves seated or standing where they had been at the start of the dance. Out of the corner of his eye Edward saw Maria get up and leave David's table, though she did not come to him.

Guests were not left long to discuss what they had experienced—a German-language operetta began, the female soprano's voice hauntingly beautiful yet startling in its mundanity next to that timeless waltz. During the opera guests were served small dishes of seafood and crudities in fresh seasonal dips, and it seemed normality had reasserted itself. An authentically MC&D touch at the end of the opera—the pain of the singers and the blood as the tenor threw himself upon his sword and the soprano agonisingly dragged herself onto the point projecting from his spine seemed very real, though this time the performers did re-emerge after the curtain came down to make their bows.

Christmas dinner was served thereafter—marine variations on Christmas fare. Three chefs had been drafted in for this occasion,

and again Edward had to wonder whether the Ready, Steady, Cook presenter, the Domestic Goddess and the school food campaigner in one kitchen wasn't a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth. However, his meal of wild salmon with fennell and stuffed with bacon, pears, pecans and caramelised onion put paid to any criticism. For dessert, mixed white, milk, and dark chocolate had been woven into the form of various sea creatures, doused in spiced milk and nutmeg. On other tables he saw artificial coral crennelations in the shapes of Christmas trees, stars and angels, miniature undersea castles made from strands of sugar, a honeyed ship-flambé slowly drowning in a lake of warm rice pudding, bodies of marzipan castaways littering the surface.

As guests finished their meals, the only thing left to do seemed to be to depart. Then, the lights began to dim, until the ballroom was lit only by cold, distant stars in the domed ceiling above.

"I have a special part to play this time around," said Lady Penelope, as she stood up, taking a slim red leather volume out of her carrypurse. Edward obligingly clinked his glass until its sound had covered the whole length of the great hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Lady Penelope, "we thought you really couldn't go home without just a little more excitement. So, we're going to play a party game. I've looked through this darling little book until I found something that sounded just right. We're going to play Sardines!" A couple of appreciative murmurs.

"And because this is no ordinary place and no ordinary time, we're going to play this game with a twist."

To Edward's surprise, Lady Penelope began disrobing in sight of the astonished guests. "We're going to play it entirely nude." Lascivious chuckles.

"In a few minutes we'll draw straws and the longest is our first Sardine. At that time we'll extinguish all the lights. Our Sardine will go and hide somewhere in the chapterhouse. Every successive player will have to clamber in there with them, and we'll all feel sorry for the poor loser, as they'll be wandering all on their lonesome, in the dark."

Each guest took a 'straw'—a piece of starched seaweed of varying length, some already beginning to remove their clothes. Edward saw David taking his straw—a stub of wrack—and heard him laugh, loud and bitter.

"We have a winner," exclaimed Lady Penelope, "Maria Beaumont."

Flushed with embarassment, Maria Beaumont stripped to the waist—Edward tried to avert his gaze, but caught a flash of tan skin. He glanced, and met her eyes—wide, the whites showing, like a wild animal. She shrugged off her skirt, her shoes. The lights went out, and he heard her footsteps pattering away, before they were engulfed in a tide of rustling and clandestine giggling, as though the great and good had been reduced to so many teenagers. He undid his zip, his buttons, and let five thousand pounds sterling of suit fall to the ground. The temperature of the ballroom had been lowered enough to induce shivering, all the better to make guests huddle together. Then the hunt began.

Feeling their way in absolute darkness, the finders called out to each other to avoid colliding and to determine who was still in play. One by one, they went silent as each found Maria's hiding place. Occasionally enough moonlight shone through a vent or a locked backroom door to suggest some feature to the dark-adapted eye; an ornate lampshade or an Elizabethan chair.

"Hello?" he called. "Am I the last one still out here? Come on guys, it's cold!" He thought he could hear a quiet suppressed snigger but careful exploration in the direction he thought it had come from failed to yield any results.

Suddenly, a collision in the dark with something yielding, motile. He barely checked a yelp and startled back, his shoulder impacting what felt like wood panelling. For a moment there was nothing and he wondered if he had imagined that it had been a body—something about it had felt too cold, not alive. Then a hand touched his shoulder—icy, painfully cold.

"I'm—sorry," he said, "I didn't hurt you, did I? I didn't think there was anyone left."

The hand began to slide along his shoulder, up the side of his neck.

"Erm, hi," Edward said. "I really don't think…"

Before he could continue the shape pushed up against him—a body, unmistakeably female but so unbearably cold the absurd thought crossed his mind that he had somehow collided with a mannequin or something else human shaped. The notion was dispelled as it began to move against him, and he found it had pinned him to the wall by both shoulders, impossibly strong. It pressed in—so cold, and *damp*; clammy, like uncooked meat. It pressed against him, chilling, insistent, and Edward found himself fighting his gag reflex.

"No," he said, and tried to pull away. The presence gripped him by his arm and chest, its nails digging into his flesh. "Let me go!"

He twisted sideways, the woman's nails tracing lines of pain across his chest and left arm. He stumbled, bruising his shin on a low table, and half-ran half-crawled away on all fours.

He blundered around in a daze, trying to navigate by the thin shafts of light, until a hand gripped his arm. This time he cried out, but was immediately checked by a chorus of muted laughter, and he realised the hand holding him was warm and alive.

"Is that you, David?" said Maria's voice. He muttered an affirmative.

"Somebody scratched me," he whispered, unable to vocalise the horror that he had felt.

"It was probably an accident," she said, holding his face.

Moments later, the lights slowly brightened—politicians, bankers, debutantes and stock traders found themselves in an undignified pile at the base of a staircase, spilling up as high as the mezzanine. Sheepish cheers gave way to a more businesslike atmosphere as everyone bustled to find their clothes.

"I thought it was a cupboard," Maria said, standing up, covering herself with her arms.

Who had been left out? Scanning the faces Edward could see only

one omission—David Went. This has got to be the worst night of his life, thought Edward. He didn't know what he could or would say to the man. A couple of other other guests went searching for Went, whom they agreed had probably got turned around somewhere upstairs.

He redressed, noting ruefully the creases and footprints across Huntsman's best. Maria joined him, and acquiesced to his barely audible offer of a lift home.

A sudden scream rang out, amplified by the domed roof. Then another. Edward got to his feet and ran towards the sound. Why 'towards'?, said his Philosophy lecturer, sitting on the lower fold of his right ear and kicking his legs against his earlobe. The human survival instinct as commonly understood that you run away from possible danger; that you take concern for the collective rather than yourself proves you to have social—in fact socialist—tendencies. Now, are they innate, or are they learned? Are you running because as a man you are socially conditioned to risk your own life for others? Are you incapable of resisting that programming, or do you have free will?

Maria followed, still buttoning her blouse. As Edward crossed the threshold into the back stairwell, an elegant thing of three floors and jutting balconies over an alcoved space filled with flowering plants, and saw the thing hanging from the top railings by its belt, he doubled back and caught Maria.

"Please," he said, "please don't look." She tried to push past him but at the same time buried her head in his chest, as though she already knew.

The body of David Went, suspended in the air, rotated a quarter-turn, then reversed itself. One of his shoes—Church's, two hundred and fifty pounds—had fallen off and lay on its side two floors below. A crowd had gathered to behold the spectacle; some of them even started to applaud, as though it might have been some grisly finale to the evening—Murder in the Dark, which it was—before realising everyone else was looking on with horror. Edward pushed past them and went back to his table. No-one would be going home yet.

Chapter Five: "There's Five"

Along with the Parker girl, the only other guest from Cooper Drake, he had been asked to come down to the police station and provide an oral statement. At the firm's insistence he had been accompanied by Cooper Drake's lawyer, a hawk-faced gentleman with thin, slicked-back dark hair in a widower's peak who answered every question with a question and would only allow Edward to answer after whispered consultation. The police had found a note in David's pocket, handwritten, scrawled apparently blind on a napkin. Edward knew what it said because the police had shown it to him.

This is what it said:

> I am guilty. Tomorrow is Christmas Day and I cannot bear to see it. I have made millions from deceit and I can no longer stand silent. I cannot confess and I will not go to jail. I am left with one honourable outcome. I say honourable, but I will be spoiling everyone's evening. I am sorry. Birkman, Solico, UN Ltd. There is more. I operated alone; I did not involve others from Cooper Drake, or any other firm. I'm sorry.

Edward stared at it, speechless. Something was terribly, horribly wrong here. Could David have been driven to suicide by the events of the evening? Perhaps. Would he have completely omitted his betrayal by a man he thought of as a friend and perhaps protégé? By a woman he loved? Would he have imputed his own death to guilt felt over insider trading? Edward couldn't believe it. All the deals the note mentioned predated Cholmondeley; the note read like it had been penned by someone ignorant of the last few months of David Went's life.

The lawyer allowed him to tell the police that David Went had not seemed suicidal earlier, though he had appeared agitated at the party. Was it Went's handwriting, they asked. Edward considered the haphazard lettering. The lawyer permitted him to express the view that never having seen anything written by David in the dark he was unable to form a verdict. The police nodded sagely and handed the plastic bag containing the note back. Had Edward ever known

Went to be anything less than a perfectly ethical broker? Before Edward could even begin to formulate a response the lawyer leaned in and snippily told the officers that any questions about Went's performance were a matter for Cooper Drake's management alone, in the first instance for his direct manager, Raymond MacIntyre.

At work, Edward watched in shock as police came and took all David's computer equipment away for forensic analysis. Another round of interviews for everyone on the trading floor; Edward insisted on hiring his own lawyer, who sat on his other side and got into short, terse disagreements with Cooper Drake's representative for four hundred and fifty pounds an hour. It didn't help that at some time since the ball Edward had caught some respiratory infection which left him hawking great lumps of phlegm into a tissue, which both his lawyers insisted on pointing out to the present police officers—every single time—did not constitute an answer and should not be taken as an affirmative or negatory response.

After intense discussion with both his legal counsel, Edward was able to represent to the police that David had passed on several leads which seemed unusually hot; but which he had insisted originated in conversations overheard at his gentleman's club. It did not escape Edward that the words 'Marshall, Carter & Dark' were never mentioned by the police at any time; the venue's own lawyer, slick and toothy in a black suit and coiffed hair, seemed to have the power to always appear just outside any room where David Went was being discussed.

Edward had phoned through to MC&D and demanded to speak to Jeremy Marshall.

"Complete immunity, you said. When the police search David's computers and find reference to the Cholmondeley deal…"

"You're safe, Edward," he crooned, voice slightly distorted by the line. "Everything's being taken care of. How unfortunate about David. Still, we have a bright new star at Cooper Drake, don't we?"

Edward had ended the call and immediately thrown up in his sink.

He had not been mistaken; there had been no other guests

legitimately playing 'Sardines' left by the time he was wandering in silence. He felt sure that David Went had been killed, perhaps as soon as the lights had been extinguished. That cold, damp presence … the woman who had effortlessly pinned him to the wall but whose body felt like a dead thing—he was left in no doubt that she had been the killer. And he was just as sure that the agency behind her had been Jeremy Marshall. He suspected that Went had made no further acquisitions for Marshall after Cholmondeley. But if Edward had not involved himself directly with the firm, surely David would still be alive. No, Marshall, Carter & Dark had David killed because they had a shiny new toy, at least, until they got bored of him too. Perhaps it had even been a warning. Probably all three—Jeremy Marshall didn't seem like the sort of man to order a murder for just one reason.

He needed a plan. Googling '4H' yielded nothing useful. '4H Death', similarly. '4H Death War Famine Pestilence' told him what he should probably already worked out, that '4H' meant 'Four Horsemen', but nothing else. Finally, in desperation he returned to #theologywars and asked if anyone had heard of a group or organisation called '4H' or 'Four Horsemen'.

> **Acts238:** Actually, it's Conquest, War, Famine, Death, and Hell. There's five.
>
> **Acts238:** But only four horses; Zech 6:2-3 calls them the spirits of the heavens (KJV 1611)
>
> **nodeceit:** that's a deceitful interpretation. there are many horses of each kind in Zechariah, and they are chariots, not horsemen. they don't represent the same thing
>
> **nodeceit:** and KJV-onlyism is a doctrine from hell, see our expose
>
> **landoverbaptist:** Your mother sucks cocks in hell.

Edward sighed. He probably should have known better than to ask about anything with an eschatological subtext here. Then something caught his eye.

911truther: They're a conspiracy theorist group. Let-it-happeners.

911truther: Big into black helicopter stuff: see here— **link**

The blog seemed to have been abandoned a long time ago; mostly blurry pictures of paramilitary-style SWAT teams raiding houses, unmarked planes and the standard conspiracy spiel about various shady non-state actors who supposedly had tendrils in every level of national and supranational government. No wonder Marshall, Carter & Dark are giving them such a boner, he thought, Secretaries of State, big business tycoons, movie stars… if the Illuminati exist, MC&D are cramping their style.

The nicks of the authors were the same—Death_4H, War_4H, Famine_4H, Pestilence_4H, confirming for Edward that he'd found the right place. There were no contact details listed, but after trawling through their archives he found an appeal for information about an obscure Red Scare-era organisation called GRU Raskolnik P (supposedly headed by chess grandmaster Ivan Sokolov and the Soviet counter to Project Stargate), with a hotmail email address. He had no idea if it was even still active, but decided it was his best shot. He wrote:

To: **FourHorsemen**
From: **EGradley**

Subject line: Marshall, Carter & Dark

It's Edward. I'm ready.

O'Reilly's Grill and Diner was about as far from the art deco café used by Jeremy Marshall as you could get. Dark colours, stained padded seats, with a cracked television blaring out horse races and occasionally football. The smoking ban was in force but the smell remained, pressed horribly into every surface by years of nicotine exposure. The owner, an incomprehensibly Irish man with a limp, scowled when Edward ordered a black coffee and what slid over the counter a few minutes later was some sort of tea with black grit

floating in it. Edward strained some of the granules out with a napkin and took a cautious sip. It tasted like burnt toast.

Edward wasn't sure what he had been expecting from the Four Horsemen—what did conspiracy theorists wear these days? Tie-dye and ripped jeans? Then again, if Hollywood had taught him anything about hackers, he should be looking for beautiful people in black leather and wraparound shades. The odd couple who walked in the door and ordered drinks didn't even register on his radar until they slid in beside him. One was literally a kid—a young teenager in a school shirt and trousers with dark hair in a flippy haircut with white highlights and painted fingernails. The other looked to be well into his forties, tall and borderline obese, with a massive gut hanging over his belt below a Metallica teeshirt, a goatee and thinning curly brown hair scraped into a ponytail. He did wear shades—but they were brown with big plastic frames.

"Edward Gradley," said the kid with the black fingernails.

"You two? You're the four horsemen?" said Edward, amusedly.

"Well, I'm Death," said the kid, who had the good grace to look a little embarassed as he said it. "This is War -" he gestured to the overweight metal fan. "Pestilence's mom wouldn't let him come and Famine couldn't get the day off work."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you're a bit of a mismatched pair."

"This is the first time we've met up in person, actually," said War, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Look, we're here for one reason, and that's to talk about Marshall, Carter & Dark. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"They killed David Went."

"We heard suicide," said Death measuredly, sipping his glass of Sprite.

"That's what the police think. But his suicide note doesn't make sense. It couldn't have been written by him. Things that happened that night, things that could have really pushed him over the edge,

he doesn't mention at all. There was a party game—in the dark. I bumped into someone still walking around after everyone was supposed to be hidden. A woman."

"And you can prove that MC&D were behind it?" War sounded excited.

"No. Sorry. But Jeremy Marshall…"

"Who Marshall?"

"Jeremy. That's what he said his name was."

"Interesting," said Death, and scribbled something in the margins of the ringbinder he'd brought along.

"…Jeremy Marshall all but told me he'd had David killed because I was … better controllable, more promising, I don't know."

"You must feel good about yourself right now," Death said flatly.

"Look," said Edward angrily, "I didn't come to get lectured at, okay? You said you were going to explain what's really going on here."

"We're trying," said War. "You got it the wrong way round. The art stuff isn't a cover for the insider trading—the trading covers a worldwide art theft and money laundering operation. Members ask for a piece and MC&D get it, no questions asked. In return they're taking in money from drugs, illegal arms deals, regimes like North Korea and Iran. They have a catalogue—you've seen it?"

Edward nodded.

"That's so any criminal can walk in and trade as much cash as he can carry for a legitimately acquired piece; guaranteed value. Right now they're untouchable—their membership includes police chiefs and politicians; not just here but in the USA, France, Germany. They make sure they have something on all their members; whether it's dodgy deals based on information they've provided, photos of kinky sex scandals orchestrated in their own clubhouses, or just straight-up bribery."

"So they're a gentleman's club fronting an insider trading ring fronting an international crime syndicate? It seems unbelievable."

"Well," said Death, "you've apparently met the fuckers behind this thing. Does it strike you as beyond them?"

Edward fell silent for a moment.

"What can I do?

"First, you need to figure out who you can trust at Cooper Drake. If what you say is true, MC&D wouldn't have had Went killed unless they had someone else in place to keep tabs on you. Then you'll set up another acquisition with Marshall."

War nudged the kid's arm and he stopped talking.

"I don't wish to alarm you but that car's gone past twice already." Edward looked up but it had already gone. "Black Citroën, license plate starts 'SE'".

Death looked up, eyes flashing. "You idiot! You didn't check to see if you were being tailed?"

"I think you're being paranoid," said Edward, though even as he said it he thought: *but that doesn't mean they're not out to get you*.

"Fuck that," said Death. "Look, we'll be in touch. Hey, O'Reilly, is there a back door to this place?" The barkeep said something neither Edward nor apparently the Horsemen could make out. Instead, Death tapped his watch and War nodded. Death left first, followed fifteen seconds later by War. They went in different directions. Edward was left with his toast-flavoured hot water, which after a moment's consideration he swapped for Death's half-finished soft drink.

Who can you trust, he thought? It would help if I could trust myself first.

After another twenty minutes he left the bar and walked back to his apartment. Half-way he bumped into a man he didn't recognise—

thirties or forties, stubbly, balding. "Sorry," Edward said, absent-mindedly. The man's reaction, however, stuck in Edward's memory —he fixed Edward with a look of fear or embarassment, then brought his hand to his mouth in a strangely feminine gesture. Then he turned and fled. There was something strange about the way he ran, but Edward couldn't put his finger on it.

This time Edward walked from his car to the Beaumont house under cover of an umbrella. She opened the door, resplendent in an apron and the smell of something hot and sugary filling the air.

"Edward," she said, smiling. "I wasn't expecting -" she trailed off as he shrugged off his shoes, walked past her wordlessly. She followed him, tugging at his sleeve, asking him what was wrong.

They stopped in the library, and he took her to the shelf containing the replica codex. Lifted it out, placed it in her hands, saw her feel its weight. He opened it for her, let her see the Currys-spare-part hinges and chipped washing-machine paint interior—its empty interior. She dropped the box, turned and grasped him tight around the chest with one arm, beat on it with the other.

"I'm sorry." he said. "I'll get it back. I swear. I'll get it back."

As he drove away he saw another car, a red Vauxhall Meriva, put its lights on and pull out of the row in front of the terrace. He looked in the mirror every few minutes and could see it hovering at the very edge of visibility in the London traffic. Then he saw it signal off and turn into a side road, and he allowed himself to exhale deeply as another vehicle emerged. Then, five minutes later, the car that had turned onto his road turned off, and the red Vauxhall was back. Edward deliberately took a detour from his usual route, even circling around a roundabout three times as though trying to make up his mind. When he exited, the second car was a short way behind him. He pulled over, watched it pause, then indicate that it too would park. He got out of his car and walked towards the vehicle, not caring about the rain. When he got ten paces from its tinted windows its engine started up again and it pulled away.

That night he played chess online again for the first time in years,

against a self-professed first-timer from Texas. He played under a pseudonym, just in case anyone still recognised him from that brief glorious summer when he had seemed invincible.

Edward hadn't been able to see six moves ahead—those corridors were still closed to him. But he realised he could *remember* thinking that way, could recall the output of that black box if not the mechanism by which it had operated. He had played White and the game had resulted in a stalemate. Still, he thought, it was a start.

To Liz, he said that he had gambled on the launch of the latest iPhone and lost. Raymond MacIntyre heard that he had been blindsided by aviation fuel increases that put paid to a key engine refit on Ryanair's fleet. He confided in Michelle Myers that he had tied himself into four million pounds in European options on Microsoft that unless Ballmer spectacularly screwed up in the next month would leave him hundreds of thousands down. Paul Reagan offered sympathy when Edward bemoaned a million pounds of Turkish government debt wiped out by a bondholder haircut. Various members of his team were left believing he had made disastrous trades in biotech, solar power, soft furnishings or vacuum cleaners.

No matter how you looked at it, Edward had had a rough week. Except, of course, he hadn't. The secrets left in Marshall's little red book had expired, but he had put in a few long nights and his current trades—geothermal startups in Norway, Chinese infrastructure firms in Ghana, an Oxford outfit that had worked out how to manufacture buckypaper for electronic heatsinks at a fraction of the usual price, and for old time's sake some aerodynamics contractors who had recently been signed by Lockheed Martin—were ticking over very nicely.

Now he was just waiting for the phone call.

"Mr Gradley," Marshall's voice oozed from his mobile. "I'm so sorry to hear you've been having some difficulties. Oh, but I shouldn't offend your pride. You're being faced with new challenges, and new opportunities. Mr O'Leary *clearly* lacks vision—those new engines would have paid dividends in the long run. I'll tell him how disappointed I am at our next brunch. In the meantime, perhaps you

would care to consider making another acquisition for us?"

"I'd love to," said Edward, through clenched teeth. MacIntyre, you insufferable shit. No wonder you called that meeting. I wonder, did you know what that meant for David? Did you realise he was signing his own death warrant by saving me?

Breakfast at the smaller MC&D clubhouse on Wood Lane was a surreal affair. BBC personalities—including several Edward had been quite sure were dead—and private sector TV and newspaper execs rubbed shoulders with international dignitaries over freshly baked crumpets and sticks of warmed salted butter while small drama and music acts performed enthusiastically. Every so often one of the media goliaths would politely excuse themselves and shamble over to the performers that had just left the stage. It's a glorified talent show, Edward realised; he could only imagine what the young people on stage had had to do to get their chance.

There, at the centre of it all, was Jeremy Marshall, alternately smiling and nodding to the presenter of Newsnight and snarling into a slim mobile phone.

"Too rough … no, my dear fellow, you gave them exactly what they were asking for. Excuse me … well, I didn't give the PM a bloody horse. Take care of her! My apologies … yes, I've seen University Challenge several times… Ah, Mr Gradley." His companion apparently sensed he had been dismissed and wandered over to the next table where Sir Trevor McDonald was holding court with a surprisingly risqué story about his time in the Caribbean.

"Well, plant some of Mulcaire's letters in her home. No, we didn't destroy them, do you think I'm an idiot? You're supposed to be the professional, think of something." He ended the call and looked up at Edward.

"Please, have a seat. Have a crumpet—or there are cinnamon bagels, if you like." He clapped his hands and one of the blank-eyed serving staff appeared with a serving dish covered by a cloche. Edward shook his head.

"Very well," he said, dismissing the young man, who vanished quietly and efficiently. "Now, Edward, you are familiar, I gather, with the Lady Alexandra Penelope?"

"Yes. I spoke to her at the Christmas Ball."

"Very good. Yes, the dowager countess of Swindon. How tragic, to be widowed under suspicious circumstances at such a—well, at her age."

"Which is?"

"Entirely irrelevant, Mr Gradley! A dashing young man such as yourself should have learned never to ask a lady her age. Now, as to the acquisition I want you to make. Since you have proven yourself so able to acquire items without financial outlay—and are a man of means these days, I understand—I don't anticipate any expenses will be necessary in this case. The Lady Penelope has a certain antique comb which you are to retrieve without delay. Oh, don't adopt that ridiculous expression, Mr Gradley. The comb in any case belongs to Marshall, Carter & Dark and was lent to Lady Penelope on the understanding that she could retain it only if she met certain conditions, which events have now rendered it impossible for her to do. Go to her house, get the comb. I don't really care how you do it. And then we can talk about rectifying your latest misadventures in the big wide world of finance."

"Okay."

Marshall passed him another briefing document with an image of the comb—an ugly, twisted thing wrought in ivory and bearing a singularly confused version of the Last Supper, wherein at least the central four figures all appeared to be Jesus Christ. Edward thumbed along the photo, counting the participants; excluding the ones with haloes and short beards there were only 11 other figures. Now he knew what he was looking for, he realised Lady Penelope had been wearing it at least the last time he had seen her.

"So, where do you keep all this stuff?" he asked, as nonchalantly as he could. "I'd love to take a look at the warehouse, as it were."

Marshall looked at him, warily. "Have your eye on what's behind the shop curtain, eh? Maybe once you get the comb. Don't push your luck, though—you've already chosen your reward for this acquisition."

Lydiard Manor, the family residence of Lady Penelope, formally the Dowager Countess Swindon, was a stately Georgian pile set away from prying eyes down a long, leafy private lane. Edward pulled the Porsche up next to the expansive lawn, framed on either side by leafy conifers, and walked up to the front door—a plastic sheeting was visible pulled over the door from the other side.

"Side entrance," the cut-glass vowels of Lady Penelope intoned from the window directly above him. He looked up but could only see billowing lace curtains. Obligingly he crunched the gravel path which he suspected had been a moat and found a bay door wide open to the exterior, propped open with a singularly hideous garden ornament. It led through to an attractive summer-room, decorated with fine portraits of the family—the Bolingbrookes, he recalled.

Lady Penelope stepped out from behind a rich purple curtain, wearing a diaphanous, floaty dress that seemed at odds with the wintery drizzle outside. She looked tired—certainly older than he remembered, maybe late thirties rather than late twenties. The skin around her eyes seemed loose, as though she hadn't slept for days, and her complexion was pallid. Her hair was loose, shoulder-length, and pale—a section had been pinned diagonally over her eyes for a fringe and he could see the cream outline of the comb holding it in place.

"La- I mean, Alexandra," he said, recalling their conversation at the Christmas Ball. "It's good to see you."

"So good to hear from you too," said Lady Penelope. "I heard they investigated David's work—how tragic! How is Maria taking all this?"

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't spoken to her much."

"Really," said Lady Penelope thoughtfully. "So, what brings you to this little place?"

"Not so little," chuckled Edward. There was something in all this that was making him nervous; the air was so dusty it was aggravating his sinuses. Didn't she clean, or hire someone to do it? He supposed if she was rattling around in here alone after the death of Lord Swindon she might only clean the rooms she used on a daily basis. He had planned to flirt his way in, exploiting her apparent affection for him, find the comb and leave—after all, he had no intent of actually leaving it in the hands of Jeremy Marshall. However, the sight of her wearing it had drained his courage and he felt suddenly guilty.

"Alexandra, it's about Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Her expression grew troubled. "What have they said? What have they told you?" she said, voice suddenly sharp.

"No, no," he said. "it's just that I've gotten myself into a bit of a bind, and you might be able to help." Her expression was replaced with one of all smiles and she gestured to the staircase on their right as they left the summer-room.

"Why didn't you say? I'll help in any way I can. But let's go somewhere in a bit of a better state, shall we? I'm sorry about all the mess, I just haven't been keeping up appearances, I'm afraid. Upstairs, first room on the left. I'll get something to drink."

Edward ventured up the dark flight of stairs—all the doors were shut and he had to feel his way along until he found the frame. Opening it he found what had once been a great master bedroom—a colossal bed with an overhanging lace curtain and ornate frame, great wooden drawers and a writing desk in the corner. This room had been dusted but was still in a sad state of decline—damp patches were peeling the wallpaper and cracks appearing in the ceiling.

"Here we go," the Lady Penelope said, closing the door behind them and brandishing a bottle of red wine. "Chateau Margaux, ninety-five. Not the oldest vintage but it's one I enjoy."

She poured out a measure into crystal glasses—Edward sat at the writing desk and took an exploratory sip.

"So Edward," she said, delicately, "what was it you hoped I could help you with?"

She walked towards him, brought her face near his, letting him scent the frankly excessive amount of perfume the blonde seemed to be using.

"Oh. No, I mean, Alexandra, I think you've got the wrong idea—I was hoping to ask if I could borrow that comb…" Her eyes flashed. This close he could see how made-up she was, how the skin beyond the foundation had lost its elasticity—he mentally revised his estimate to early or mid forties.

"You don't want the comb," she said, an element of pleading entering to her voice. "You want me, don't you—you came here because you've fallen in love with me."

Edward's mind reeled. What the hell was this? He hadn't even made any hints in that direction; had, in fact, decided to ask her plainly if he could borrow the antique comb for a day in the hopes of recovering the codex. Her personality seemed to have changed utterly since their first meeting at the chapterhouse.

"You don't love Maria, that unfaithful bitch," Lady Penelope continued, her voice suddenly raw, croaking. "You've only wanted me."

She took hold of his arm with surprising force, and to his horror Edward felt the cold of her seep through his suit and into his flesh. She pushed herself against him, so horribly unlike anything alive, and he knew she was the presence that had met him in the dark.

"You killed David," he whispered.

"He was in your way—in the way of what you wanted—he was yesterday's man," she said, voice cracking. "Please, don't hate me. I don't want you to hate me."

And under the cloying perfume, he smelled it, as her face pressed up against his, makeup rubbing off on his collar, his skin—the smell of meat that had gone bad, rancid, and as he grabbed her arm to try

and lever her off, her skin began to slip off the underlying muscle. He screamed.

With strength he didn't know he had, he gave her an almighty push, dislodging her grip from his arms. Screeching like something possessed she toppled backwards and hit the floor with a horrible sucking sound. He didn't wait to see if she recovered; he ran through the house, out to the summer-room. The door was locked from the inside. He scrabbled around, couldn't see a key. Not knowing why he did it, he grabbed the nearest thing to hand, a *Complete Works of Goethe*, and hurled it with all his might at the French window. It shattered and he hurled himself through the gap, running raggedly back to to the Porsche.

Edward drove, taking turns at random, for as long as he could, and when he was too weary to continue driving, he parked and curled up on the back seat in his five thousand pound suit. He dreamed, and his dreams were a horrible, confused mess of everything that had happened to him.

His father had died, he remembered, and in the terms of his will he had left everything to the son who surpassed him first. In the dream Edward had two brothers and a sister, though for some reason she had been left out of the will. Somehow they were all at Cooper Drake and were working side-by-side on different deals, except he knew something they didn't; Jeremy Marshall stood over his shoulder, whispering in his ear, and in the way of dreams it was all dire nonsense, about throwing sugar into people's eyes and doors that opened into other places and investing in a liquid that turned anything into food, and he prospered while his brothers grew poorer. And Maria was there, no, he was at her house, but she was made of glass and he had to stop her breaking because you only get one, and she was so cold to the touch, her skin just sloughed off the bone until there was nothing there but a skeleton made of glass.

And now he was a child again, about twelve or thirteen, and he was at an outdoor chess club, and he suddenly realised in a flash of lucidity that this was a dream, but it was also a memory, this was something that happened and which he had forgotten. Someone cast their shadow over the table, and he looked up to see a tall man

with wavy blond hair and perfect teeth, and cruelty in his blue eyes.

"Do you want to play?" he asked. And he folded out a chessboard that was not a chessboard, because every move Edward made it countered perfectly, all on its own, and when it did it it picked at a golden thread from deep inside him and tugged a little more of it away. And the blond stranger went up to his mother, watching as the board ate her son a little bit at a time, and said something that at the time he had not understood. "Tell your husband he will have what he wanted."

Edward awoke rumpled and bleary-eyed, the rain sluicing down the car's windows, and the dream tumbled away from him into the dark.

« **Act I - "Jellybeans"** | **HUB** | **Act III - "Rainy in London"** »

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Chapter Six: "Rainy in London"
Chapter Seven: "Codex"
Chapter Eight: "Castle"

Chapter Six: "Rainy in London"

In the morning's watery light, he sat for a few minutes while the events of the previous evening caught up with him. You fucking idiot, he thought to himself. He had forgotten the comb! There was no way if it remained on the person of Lady Penelope that he could call the police, if they were even willing to investigate. Besides, something within him told him that the noise her skull had made when it hit the floor had been very, very bad. He would have to go back, confront what had happened and try to get the comb if he had any realistic prospect of accessing MC&D's acquisitions warehouse and recovering the codex.

He bought a warm Danish and a coke from a street vendor and sat in his car, considering his options, when his mobile vibrated to indicate a new text message. He picked it up and checked it, apprehensively.

> meet me @pimlico fresh 10mins death

Unless the hygiene level of Pimlico Fresh's frappucino had really gone downhill, this was presumably a message from the Four Horsemen. He checked his watch. While he didn't have time to spare they might have some way out of this insanity. He dried his runny nose with a tissue—the night in the car had reactivated his flu, it seemed.

As he entered the coffee shop he saw kid Death and his silly hairdo, sitting on a stool and swinging his legs. Beside him was a

blackhead-smattered older teen who he presumed was Pestilence.

"The harbingers of the apocalypse, I presume," said Edward tiredly, adjusting his tie and ruffling his hair in the café window.

"Yes. You got another little mission from Marshall, didn't you?" Death seemed tetchy; maybe he'd chipped his nail polish.

"So what if I did?" Edward challenged. "I need to set some things right and I can't do that unless I find out where Marshall's keeping … something I stole from someone close to me. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, look, that's OK. Fine, actually, it's what we hoped for. It's the comb, isn't it?" said Pestilence, excitedly, grabbing a shoebox off the floor.

"Yes it is. First of all, how exactly did you…"

"Never mind about that," started Death.

"Actually, I want to tell him. It's been requested by Saad bin Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz bin Abdul-Rahman Al Saud."

"Pardon?"

"One of MC&D's Saudi clients. Something's up with the comb and Lady Penelope—it keeps being given to different people and ending up in her possession—haven't quite gotten on top of that yet—but it's an 11th century liturgical comb. I mean, it's worth something, but why is it being treated like the Holy Grail? We think there's something else going on—whether it's being used to smuggle government secrets, or whether it's some sort of Dan Brown puzzle. That's why we want you to bring it to us. At the very least we'd have something MC&D wants."

"What? Did you not just hear…"

"Yes," said Death, cutting in. "That's why War went and had this made." He signalled to Pestilence, who opened the box to reveal a yellowed ivory comb, identical-looking to the one he'd seen in the document given to him by Jeremy Marshall. "You give *this* to

Marshall and return the real one to us."

Edward took the comb from the box, turned it over in his hands. It was small, no more than six inches across, with fine ivory teeth in two different widths.

"So, you guys are with the police, or…?"

Death harrumphed. "Yeah, sure, I'm Officer Steve McDeath, you're all under arrest. Book 'em, Pestilence. Seriously, do we look like cops?"

"No idea, but if you end up with something Marshall wants you'd better know what you're doing. Right now all I'm seeing are two kids in way out of your depth."

"Please," said Death, "I've been screwing with powerful people longer than you've been a stock trader. We know what we're doing. You haven't met Famine yet, have you?"

"Okay," said Edward, and finished his hot chocolate.

"Good," Death said, wandering over to the window and looking out in both directions. "Pestilence, this idiot has a tendency to attract tails. One of them followed me half-way through London after our last meeting before I ditched him on the Tube."

"MC&D?" asked Pestilence.

"Not as far as I can tell. Crypto-governmental, looked like."

"Well, looks like you're on your own," said Pestilence to Edward, leaving a five pound tip and disappearing into the back of the shop. When Edward looked around Death had similarly made his egress.

Some pros, thought Edward. I give Marshall the fake—and what happens when you get in touch to ransom the real thing? Either you didn't think that part of the plan out or you don't care if I get myself killed either. No, he'd have to find something else to appease the Horsemen.

Lady Penelope's mansion was as he'd left it—glass strewn over the porch on the right hand side of the house, increasingly soggy Goethe sinking into the drain. He cautiously moved into the summer-house.

"Alexandra?" he called. "Alexandra? Are you OK?"

No response. The creeping decay he had noticed before seemed suddenly more profound, ceilings sagging noticeably, the stairs feeling rotten and unsteady as he ascended to the first floor. The smell hit him as he pushed open the door to the master bedroom—nauseating, hideous.

Lady Penelope lay on the floor—where she had fallen? He couldn't be sure. Her body had already caved in on itself, a putrefying mass he had to try and keep his breakfast down to approach. What could have done this? Her skin was taut over her skull, eyes like burst egg yolks. The comb was still in her hair.

He knelt down, one arm up over his face, burying his nose in his elbow and breathing in the smell of Huntsman's proprietary fabric softeners. They did little to mask the stench. His other hand, trembling, reached out for the comb. He half expected the horrific thing to sit up and try to stop him. It came away, chunks of her blonde hair following, with little chunks of rotten flesh at their tips. He brushed the hair away in morbid fascination.

The comb was in his hand. The replica, in his pocket. He knew he could not give the real comb to the Horsemen, and briefly toyed with the idea of returning them their own fake. No, still too risky. Not only would they likely have integrated some flaw to point out to Marshall to convince him that what he held was indeed fake, he still couldn't risk anyone telling Marshall he had been given a forgery, even if it wasn't true. And I don't like what one more theft will make me, he thought.

On a whim, he went over to the oak writing table and saw the little key in the lock of the drawer. He turned it, put the real comb inside and locked it, and put the key in his other pocket.

Edward drove to the main London chapterhouse and knocked on the door, holding his glass member's pass, which had somehow survived the night in his pocket. The bag-eyed porter opened his peephole and glared out, before crinkling in amusement.

"Mr Gradley—you're expected! Straight through; Mr Marshall and Mr Carter are in the office towards the back."

Edward didn't feel like facing either man again, but nodded and walked through into the ballroom, which was being prepared for some great theatrical display.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where…" The staff ignored him, continuing their actions as though they hadn't heard or seen him at all. Brainwashed, he thought.

Far from 'straight through', the offices required navigation of the labyrinthine system of back rooms; many were locked and he heard voices raised in pleasure and pain. Eventually he emerged into a lavish Elizabethan parlour where Messrs Marshall and Carter sat taking tea from a pot in the shape of a screaming human head. It seemed to be a hit.

"The *body*, Mr Carter!" Jeremy Marshall was enthusing wildly when Edward entered. "Ah, Mr Gradley. Does the young hero return triumphant?"

Edward held up the comb, which he had wrapped in tissue, fearful that its teeth might break, before sneezing volcanically.

"The dowager's comb, Mr Carter—back in the hands of its rightful owners."

"Not for long, Mr Marshall," chuckled Carter, the growth on his back groaning with him. "Just make sure its new owner knows what precautions to take. Give Mr Gradley some Peramivir before he goes."

Marshall smiled thinly. "Indeed. Now, Mr Gradley, the item?" He extended his hand.

"I said I wanted to see where the acquisitions are stored," he

insisted.

Marshall scowled. "Oh, very well. Mr Gradley insists on aggregating a double reward to himself, Mr Carter."

"A—man after my own heart—Mr Marshall. Good to see old Bernard's Nordic blood not wholly diluted, yes?"

"Then you shall see what lies beneath, Mr Gradley. But be advised—this is not a shopping trip. If you wish us to help you salvage your career, then you will be content to look and not touch, at least for now."

Again with the blindfold! A velvety cloth was tied over his eyes and he was escorted quietly and efficiently into a car, which he later learned was a black limousine. He held the comb—the fake, of course—clutched tightly in his hands the whole way, fully expecting Jeremy to renege on his promise the second he had it in his possession. Mr Marshall sat somewhere to his right, doing something that made a disquietening scritch-scratch that seemed alarmingly close to his ear—possibly filing his nails, possibly not.

The ride seemed to take hours, and Edward became increasingly nervous. It occurred to him that he had no real exit strategy—assuming he somehow got free of Marshall and gained free run of the warehouse, and assuming he found and was able to get out with the codex, what would he do? He had no car, no means of transport, and would surely be run down and returned to Marshall's tender ministrations within minutes. He resolved to take events as they came. For a while he tried to focus on the sound of the limo's wheels on the road, but, of course, he had no training in identifying a surface from the sound it made. For what it was worth the ride seemed smooth, so they probably hadn't gone offroad. Was that a good thing?

At length the vehicle purred to a halt and Edward was bundled out, the blindfold removed. The blank-faced young men and women in formal serving attire had given way to seedy-looking private security with a paramilitary flavour; he saw at the hip of one the stock of a semi-automatic rifle. Before them was a vast rectangular concrete

monstrosity, surrounded by two barbed-wire fences and angled subterranean roller shutters which as he watched retracted to admit an armoured truck. It looked less like a warehouse than some despot's compound.

"This is where it all comes, Mr Gradley," gestured Marshall, as they entered on foot via a checkpoint—the guards immediately found something fascinating to look at on the wall or ceiling as Jeremy Marshall passed and the barriers were raised before they got within ten paces of them. Good to know, thought Edward; they're terrified of him. Any time something or someone behaves in a predictable way they can be exploited—stocks and shares 101.

Edward had expected some vast space inside the warehouse—instead, they entered a serpentine mess of stacks and shelves, the aisles not straight but turning and twisting like a labyrinth. The only clue to the area's size could be seen in the height of the ceiling, rising far above the three and four shelf units. Watery naked bulbs hung like Christmas ornaments from the walkways above, criss-crossing the space and casting a green-grey pallor on everything. The area nearest to the door appeared to be outgoing objects—guards packaging five foot tall Easter Island heads in bubblewrap and loading them onto pallets. He scanned the items lined up for shipping but couldn't see the codex.

"Stay close to me," warned Marshall, "we wouldn't anything happening to you, would we? And speaking of which…" he clicked his fingers and held his hand out occasionally. Edward grudgingly surrendered the comb, which Marshall spun between his fingers with glee, watching the play of light on its twisted little engraved figures.

"A singular find, this. Such a shame that we have to give it away again so soon—and for such petty pleasures! Still, it always manages to return to us eventually." He withdrew a white silk handkerchief from his pocket, monogrammed with the club cartouche, and wrapped the comb before sliding it into his breast pocket.

"So," he said, striding purposefully deeper into the warehouse, "this is the kingdom. Our little gallery. Well, one of them."

Edward hadn't expected the noise. When they had first entered it had been almost too soft to hear—a distant susurration like the sound of a jungle. But as they pressed deeper into the bowels of MC&D's treasurehouse it rose sharply and horrifically; screams bird, animal, human, and things besides which sounded like none of them, and on top of them all the sounds of scraping iron and sawing.

"Mind your step, Mr Gradley. I have business at the corner office—I need to see a man about a set of teeth. His, in fact."

Marshall skipped lightly over an industrial cable running through sawdust and dark brown, flaking stains Edward hoped were creosote. Nearer the door the objects on either side had been relatively mundane; stacks of yellowed papers, covered canvases stacked in rows; a metal shelf with a row of antique fountain pens under a jeweller's light. Now they grew progressively stranger—a 1960s Dust Devil vacuum cleaner, a locked fishtank containing a Pez dispenser with a blackface minstrel's head and sealed with hazard warning tape, a firehose packed in flame-retardant foam. None of it looked valuable, unless it was supposed to be modern art. Marshall's face was turned away as he navigated a teetering mass of bulging cardboard boxes containing something pink that was slowly leaking out onto the floor. Edward held his breath and took a left at a shattered Exidy Sorceror home computer from the 1970s, which for reasons known to themselves someone had hooked up to an HD monitor. A moment, then:

"Mr Gradley?"

Edward ran, his only purpose to create as much distance between himself and Marshall as possible. He tripped over a wind-up monkey that had been left in the middle of an aisle—labelled '7H' on a disintegrating tag around its neck. He flung it disgustedly away and was about to rise to his feet again when he realised it had been a blessing in disguise. A guard was slowly patrolling the walkway above the next aisle; if he had remained upright for another moment he would have been seen running through the warehouse and alarms would have been raised. Instead he crawled on hands and knees in his suit, engine oil and packing dust staining his cuffs and trousers.

Now what? He couldn't even try to get his bearing among the stacks—he moved, bereft of direction, and the cacaphony grew ever louder around him. Inanimate objects had given way to a parade of living horrors—fleshy, snakelike things with chimpanzee faces hammering themselves against perspex, a squirrel with blood-crusted eyes screaming at him from inside a cage inches away from his face, something like an owl constantly everting itself and turning right-side out again with a sickening pop. He fixed his eyes on the next corner and continued crawling. When the worst of it seemed to be over he stopped, breathing heavily. Where he was now was dark—overshadowed by a portion of the catwalk and a great glass container filled with sand which seemed to be a giant antfarm, except the tunnels nearest the glass were five times wider than any ant had a right to be. He would sit here for a minute, take stock. Face it, Edward, he thought, this was not your brightest idea. You're trapped in a warehouse of things that came out of a nightmare and you have absolutely no idea how to go about finding the codex, if it's even here.

"Sunny in Mogadishu," said a voice close behind him. He flinched, spinning around to face the cage he had been resting against. His eyes couldn't make anything out in the enclosure, eclipsed by the towering pile of bric-a-brac dumped on top of it.

"Hello?" he said. "Is there someone in there?"

"Drizzle in Los Angeles"—the voice was mournful, the words mumbled as though by someone who had learned the sound of the phrases but not their meaning. Edward felt the hairs on the backs of his hands pricking.

"I mean, are you a prisoner here? I'm sorry … I'm not sure if I can help you. Get you out, I mean." The cage had been secured by a hefty combination padlock. In the nearest corner he could see a bowl of water. "I don't know how to get out myself."

"Tornado in Rio de Janeiro," it said. "A mild depression moving eastwards towards Astrakhan."

"Please," said Edward, hoping against hope that whoever it was in the cage could even understand him. "I need to find a book. It looks

like an iron box. It would be where they keep the latest acquisitions."

"Rainy in London," said the voice, a note of utter despair entering its voice. "Rainy in London."

Edward tugged at the lock but it was solid. He considered trying to pry it open, but he couldn't see anything long or solid enough.

"I'm sorry," he said, and began to move away.

"Storm coming in over Gradley," it said. "Bring your umbrellas."

Edward paused. "Did you say my name?" Squinting, he made out a shadow at the far side of the cage—a couple of glints which could be eyes. It was the wrong shape to be human.

"Snow right around the corner," it said, miserably. "Then for the next four days straight. Wrap up warm."

Edward thought about it for a moment. Well, it wasn't the most insane thing he'd done today.

"Thank you," he said.

"Always rainy in London," he heard the voice say from behind him.

He turned right on the mummified alligator pinned to a board with copper wire. He counted as he ducked between each stack, counting them off as he passed gravity wheels and Archimedes screws, rotating slowly and quietly. One.

Rows of surgical equipment, some gleaming, some corroded and damp. As he passed they vibrated, chattering in their constraints. Two.

Television monitors, seemingly fused together into a spreading tree. Three.

A human fetus in a jar. The jar was taller than Edward. So was the fetus. Four.

And there it was—a clearing in the wilderness, a square area

surrounded with shelving and dominated by a thick wooden table, which might have been lacquered once but had been stripped down to the raw by scrapes, scratches, and what looked like acid burns. In the middle, a sign had been scrawled in permanent marker on a piece of corrugated card and propped against a tin filled with stationery. 'NEW ARRIVALS'. The shelves were littered with debris —a metal slinky toy, an astronaut's helmet with a crack running the full length of the visor, a pair of high heels. No codex. He clawed at the items, threw them to the floor, angry with himself for having made such a stupid gambit. Then, tucked between a table clamp stained with blood and other matter and a curiously elderly and overweight Action Man still in its packaging and dressed in the outfit of a four-star general, his eye picked out the shape of the metal box with 'Gervais' scratched on its spine. He grabbed it, held it close to his chest.

"Hey!" he heard from somewhere above him. He dropped to his knees, crawled back into the shadow of the stacks. He maybe had a few minutes before the guard came looking for him; or maybe he goes and finds Marshall first. Yes, that would fit. He'll go and ask Marshall what to do. He guessed he might have a little longer.

There was something glittering by his shoe, half-hidden under the box of a mouldering board game protruding from the shelving—a shard of glass, he realised, though the light caught it oddly. For a second he thought that his MC&D member's pass might have slipped out of his pocket and shattered, and something about that chilled him even though he knew he never intended to return to the chapterhouse. Had he dreamed something about it? But no, it was intact in his pocket.

He slid his hand under the shelves and retrieved the shard, cold and sharp between his fingers, no more than five centimetres across. Up close he could see what had puzzled him—it wasn't transparent at all but opaque; he couldn't see his fingers through it at all. Instead—he looked closer at the small reflection. He jolted out of his reverie and jerked around—nothing but a burlap sack, filled with coal, upon which someone had written 'D-5067'. He looked back and saw it again—the glass shard reflected not his own face but the head of an English bulldog, mottled brown and black with a white stripe on its

forehead, occasionally blinking or turning this way or that. It looked out at him, slightly cock-eyed, and licked its nose. Edward waved his hand in front of the glass. Unsurprisingly the animal showed no indication that it could see him, instead opting to pursue the exciting taste of its own nostrils.

This wasn't possible was it?, he thought, turning the shard over—the exact same canine reflection. No power source, no apparent means of projecting the image. It seemed to be part of a larger whole, but looking about he could see nowhere it might have come from. At the very least, he thought, this represented a good century's advancement in materials science. Just my luck, the stock-trader thought, I get the piece without the manufacturer's name. He tucked it into his pocket and continued moving, this time away from the screaming.

"Hold on," said the square-jawed guard at the entrance, stubbing out his cigarette on the arm of the traffic barrier and swaggering over, ball of his palm over the holster of his weapon. "Nothing and no-one comes in or out without Mr Marshall's say-so." He eyed the metal case under Edward's arm.

"He's said so," Edward replied, as haughtily as he could. "I've chosen my reward and now I'm on the clock. I need to be on the road asap."

"What you need don't come into it," the security officer said. "You're gonna wait until Mr Marshall gets here to let you out."

Edward tried not to sweat. Right now, he thought, Marshall was being disabused of any notions he might have that Edward had just got turned around amidst the debris of MC&D's empire. He eyed the walkie-talkie at the man's chest. Soon a call would come in on that and he'd be dead.

"By that time it'll be a little late. I've been dispatched on Mr Marshall's orders. Any delays will be severely punished." He saw the guard swallow, look around shiftily as if hoping the blond man might appear to resolve his dilemma. Edward mused—Marshall considers his underlings a less competent substitute for himself; he can't be

everywhere, so they're here to fill in. They aren't trusted to think for themselves, which means eventually they don't think at all, they just follow orders. And that means in the end they do and say whatever they think you want, whether you like it or not; the idea of you being angry with them is more powerful than what you actually want. And you're trapped in a universe of reflections.

"I don't know," said the guard. Edward heard the buzz of a radio from within the office. Soon, one of the other guards—perhaps the big one with the stubble tossing a coin over his knuckles by the freight entrance—would go over to see what was happening.

"Listen," said Edward, trying to perfect the Marshall sneer. "if I'm not in that limousine -" he nodded at the vehicle outside "- and headed back to Whitehall in the next fifteen seconds…"

It was the most ludicrous, stupid thing he'd ever said, a piece of nonsense that he cursed even as it came out of his mouth. What kind of a threat is that, he thought, that's pathetic. He had just plucked an image out of the air, paired it with the most senior person he could think of in MC&D's hierarchy, that terrible old man, and it had become mixed up in his mind with that horrible, moving thing under the cloth…

"…I'll feed you to Carter's chair."

The guard went grey, all at once. His eyes started watering. He was trying to speak, but nothing was coming out. Shaking like a newborn foal he thumbed the controls to disengage the pedestrian door and Edward strode forcefully past as behind him he heard the first faint yells. No point trying to bluff the limousine driver—as soon as his feet met pavement he started running. That had worked better than expected, he thought.

Edward had feared that when he got out he would find himself in the middle of nowhere, nothing but fields for miles around. Instead, he found to his amazement that after only a few paces he emerged on the thoroughfare of Pall Mall, city traffic buzzing around, deafening yet reassuring in its mundanity. They must have driven the limo around in circles to try and disorientate him, he reasoned, until he remembered the way the sounds of the city had fallen behind to be

replaced by silence and the occasional note of birdsong. He pushed onto the pavement and mingled with the crush of pedestrians, becoming invisible under their umbrellas.

"You let him out." It was not a question. Matt Berkeley, four O-levels, army dropout, felt like a rotten oak in a storm. Every day for the last three years he had prayed—"Don't let him see me. The pay's good, it's easy money, if he just doesn't see me. Let me go another day without him noticing anything I do. Let him take it out on someone else today, please, just not me." He had perfected the art of seeming engaged in reviewing security logs or approving access papers whenever anyone more senior happened by, then joined in wholeheartedly with the poker and the prank calls to Paki shopkeepers and the furtively exchanged dirty mags. Inside he was hollow—he knew he deserved no praise and had spent every day hoping he would never be found out.

"He said you'd approved it," said Berkeley, in barely more than a whisper.

"And you believed him?"

"Yes sir," Berkeley's head dropped onto his chest, waiting. He had seen what happened to men who screwed up in the employ of Marshall, Carter & Dark. And afterwards he had put the bits into bags and dropped them in front of trains. He looked around. Would Mikkelsen be the one lugging Berkeley's bin liner down in front of the five-o-five to Reading? Maybe 'Hammers' Rogan. Or perhaps there wouldn't be enough left of him to bother.

Marshall's long fingers dipped into his breast pocket and withdrew something in a silky white handkerchief, unwrapping it delicately. Some sort of comb, he saw—intricately carved but warped and yellowed.

"Hold still, idiot." He took Berkeley's head with one hand and delicately inserted the comb into the still-thick clump of hair behind his ear. Sweat dripped from the man's forehead as he waited to turn inside out or his teeth to come alive or his soft tissues to melt. The other guards looked on with morbid fascination.

After an excruciating minute Berkeley looked up and said "Is something supposed to happen, or…"

The guards turned their attention to Marshall, who stood back bowed, leaning against a concrete pillar. He was taking great sucking gasps of air, his teeth bared. They exchanged brief glances, faces pale. They had never, *ever* seen Mr Marshall like this.

"Wake him up," he said, voice like polished bone.

"Sir?" asked Berkeley, but he already knew what was coming.

"You heard me. Wake up the Bagman."

Chapter Seven: "Codex"

"Look at you," she had said. "Every time you come to me these days it is in such a state."

Maria had accepted the codex silently, looking at him with an unreadable expression in those brown eyes. She had sat him down, his clothes stained and rent, on a chair in the kitchen, and brought him a hot cocoa. Later, she found him one of her father's dressing gowns and put him up in the house's master bedroom.

"Marshall will be looking for me," he croaked. "If he guesses I've brought the codex back to you…"

"Sssh," she said. She looked at the tired dark rings under his blue eyes and ruffled his hair with her fingers. "You'll stay here tonight," she said.

They sat up together in bed, reading the codex. The *Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians* was written in densely packed cursive; designed for economy of parchment, not ease of reading. But Edward had read the extracts that had once been published in a 1754 chapbook as *A Journey to the End of the World*, and was able to fill in the blanks where the manuscript became illegible.

"It starts like one of the Arthurian legends," he explained. "A

wandering knight is taken into the home of a nobleman, and during the feasting they are attacked by a knight with the head of a stag, or a stag with the head of a knight, it changes from chapter to chapter. He challenges them to seek out the Rose Chapel, a stained-glass church built where Maura of Troyes shed a river of miraculous tears. So far, so Green Knight. They gird themselves up and take to the saddle, and follow the trail of the stag knight, righting wrongs as they go. Then they approach a shadowy canyon. The stag knight flies out of it—presumably in human-head, stag-body form—and shouts for them to give up their quest; even he's terrified by whatever lies within. Being your average Arthurian meatheads they swear an oath to brave the dangers of the canyon."

"What happens?" she said, craning her neck.

"Nothing. That's the thing. There's just -" he turned the yellow parchment—"a blank page." It was black from top to bottom, saturated with ink. "It's unbelievably literary for the time; makes Chaucer look like a second-rater. Some commentaries on *A Journey* just treat it as a misprint—it ends the first fragment—but here it is, in the original manuscript."

"What does it mean?" asked Maria. "Just that it was dark?"

"Not exactly … it's more like Gervase sees the darkness as swallowing up any mention of what happened. We're never told what happens in the canyon—it's like the text has been redacted. But when we pick up with them something has changed. Most of the knights are dead—the chap we've been following goes home but his castle's ruined and his family slain. There's a long digression here -" he turned the pages—"very long, actually. It's one of the fragments, so I'll cut it short; he meets the stag knight and they have a lengthy debate on the nature of heaven, hell and reality; except all the concepts were far too advanced for the time, as though the writer were channeling post-Reformation thinkers."

"No wonder Gervase got written out of history."

"Most commentaries assume it was a later addition, something that couldn't have been in the original text. Another strike for the critics. Then things get weird."

"Weirder than they already are, you mean?"

"Definitely. The knight goes back to South-Cadbyri Palis, Gervase's Camelot-in-all-but-name, and they sally out and fight monsters, except it's written in the most bizarre, repetitive way. Look here—this was in the chapbook; it's an honest-to-god itemised list of all the giants, demons and goblins they kill or capture. The dragon's new, though."

"It isn't a good Arthurian legend without a dragon-slaying," Maria said, nuzzling his arm.

"This one is slightly unconventional. It doesn't breathe fire, well most of the time. It still eats people, though. The thing is, they slay it again, and again, and again. They chop off its head, they put it in a cauldron to boil its flesh off its bones, they crush it under a boulder… And the next chapter it's back and they have to do it all over again."

"Sounds like it represents something."

"Too right. What, I don't know. Look, each chapter starts with an illustrated letter of them trying to kill the dragon." It was a weirdly scrawny, beaked thing with a long mane in the heraldric tradition that looked thoroughly *disgusted* by the knights' attempts at dispatching it—here it was, being impaled on a dozen glaives. It was probably intended to be wild with pain, though Edward thought it looked like it was just rolling its eyes.

"The knight has a son and grows old, and his son becomes a knight too—and then one day, while *he's* making merry in the hall, the stag knight comes in and challenges them to seek the Chapel. It's unclear whether it's warning the knights they haven't yet completed their quest, or whether time has somehow looped."

"The son becomes his father," observed Maria.

"This time the knight succeeds in his quest—he finds the chapel. But it's ruined, broken. The spring of healing tears is dry. And then the writing goes mad. Our hero hunts down the stag knight and *eats* him, then tries to disembowel himself, but is resurrected by some kind of angel, it's not really clear—people die and reappear without

rhyme or reason. There are these huge battles out of nowhere, like the world's tearing itself apart. The sky starts raining blood. The knight volunteers for one last mission to try and set things right—to sail to Hyperboria, the land beyond the wind."

"The mythical land of the Cimmerians."

"Yes. There's a whole sequence here about his voyage on a raft, travelling into the icy north. But it's not very convincing—he recycles the Sirens and Charybdis from The Odyssey, even the island of the Lotus Eaters. It's like he's trying to put the voyage into words his listeners will understand. Things get interesting when he finally drifts ashore. Gervais wrote Cimmeria as this desolate wasteland where it's twilight all the time; the knight finds a frozen body of a woman in a ditch. The people are all half-starved; they've nearly forgotten language and live in these half-collapsed huts, living on root croops and herding a few skinny sheep. It's obviously a metaphor; Edward Forsyth -"

"Who?"

"The man who printed the fragments of the Viage as *A Journey to the End of the World*."

"He has your name," said Maria, sleepily.

"He obviously believed Cimmeria was *England* after the apocalypse. It's a valid interpretation—there's a whole section where the knight loses his way on the ocean due to mist and can't be sure whether he's progressing or regressing."

"You bastards, you blew it up," she said, not quite accurately. It was the first time he had heard her swear.

"Exactly; but 800 years before Heston. Other commentators just take the knight's doubts as a religious analogy, feeling unsure about your faith, et cetera. There's a sort of compromise position—Cimmeria represents Gervais' own view of the world around him, seemingly falling to bits after the knightly golden age. Remember, this was back when Geoffrey of Monmouth was considered a reliable non-fiction writer. King Arthur was seen as a historical

figure."

"How does it end?"

Edward narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the spidery writing. "He finds the Rose Chapel, intact, the miraculous spring flowing again."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You bet. He goes in and prays, and he knows—this is really odd for the time, there should be some thundering voice from heaven or an angel or something to tell him—that his own land is safe, but that he can never leave Cimmeria for the rest of his life."

"It is a horrible book and it ends sadly," decided Maria. "Why do you think Marshall wanted it?"

"Well, it's an important manuscript—some of the things Gervase does here rewrite our understanding of the development of English literature. It must be quite valuable. I'd love to see what a medievalist would make of the dragon." Except that'll never happen now, he said to himself, because of you. He turned the last page and closed the iron cover. Maria drew up the covers and he slept.

He was awakened by a thin pale light shining through the window, illuminating Maria's arm draped over his chest. He looked at the bedside carriage clock—it was already nine o'clock.

"I have to go," he said, gently moving Maria's arm. "You're in danger if Marshall finds me here."

Maria, stirred, looked up at him with her brown eyes. "You think I'm fragile, that I need to be protected. Don't forget I'm a Beaumont. We can take care of ourselves."

"I don't want you to suffer for my mistakes. Take the codex; I'm sorry but you mustn't let anyone see it. No-one can know you have it back."

"Don't worry. It's not going to be on my coffee table. And you mustn't go out in those," she said, as Edward picked at his ruined trousers. "You're too tall for Daddy's clothes, but maybe Grandfather's will

work."

Thus outfitted with a dead man's suit—the fit not quite up to Huntsman's or Stathopoulos's standards but still comfortable—and a big black umbrella like the wings of a bat, he kissed her, and left the Beaumont house for the last time.

Fingering the shard of glass he had removed from the pocket of his last suit, Edward stopped under the porch of St Martin-in-the-Fields and, finding Death's last text, selected 'Answer by phone'.

"Hello, is that Death? … Well, I don't know his name, is he your son? Just put him on, please, this is urgent … Yes, it's Edward. Of course I'm still alive. … No, forget the comb, I … No, I don't have the replica … I can imagine. Expensive. … I'm sure it didn't come out of your pocket money, *was* that your mother? Oh. You start early these days, don't you? Look, I've got something way better if you like conspiracies. You show this to any news agency and … No, meet me at O'Reilly's in half an hour. … Well, this isn't a movie, and I don't intend to die before showing it to you. … Better make it an hour and a half then, Jesus. Make sure you bring enough change for the fare. Or get War to give you a lift, I presume at least *he's* passed his test."

Edward stashed the phone in his other pocket and leaned against the pillar. It was faint, now, but it was coming to back to him; he could see the pieces in movement. Not six moves ahead, not yet, but four, or three. Enough. Now he just had to stay alive long enough to reach the endgame.

This time Edward stood across the street and watched them arrive, one at a time, taking their seats by the window as they ordered milkshakes, Coke, a pint of beer: Death the kid; the spotty young man who rejoiced in the name Pestilence; War, waddling in playing a game on his iPhone; and a grim-faced man in his late twenties or early thirties with prematurely greying hair and military surplus togs he presumed must be Famine. He checked his watch—fashionably late for only the second time in his life. He strolled over the crossing and approached, slowing as he did so until he was close enough to see the on-rails FPS on War's mobile. Death looked up and caught

his eye.

The men in black paramilitary jumpers and dog tags around their neck approached him from behind, clapped a hand over his mouth with casual ease, grabbed his arms and pushed him sideways into the rear of the waiting van.

Death punched War's arm and shouted something, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rolled off their seats to take cover under the table with long-practiced grace. No-one else on the street or in the bar even noticed Edward's disappearance.

Edward was getting used to journeys where he couldn't see where was going. No blindfold at first, just a windowless van and handcuffs. Then, for a few minutes, light again; clean, clinical walls and stairs edged with crisp yellow safety tape. Making a sudden and jarring appearance, the grey sky, still resolutely spitting down at the earth. *Now* the blindfold, as the roaring in front of him rose like a dragon.

My first helicopter ride, he thought. He had envisioned it going rather more glamorously.

"Mobile Task Force Epsilon-Seven 'Santa's Little Regifters' reporting in," someone said into a radio close to him. "Package acquired."

He was reasonably sure—indeed was counting on—the fact that the men around him were not in the employ of Marshall, Carter & Dark. Exactly who they were working for was a matter he'd have to clear up as he went.

The helicopter's drone descended, stabilised, then petered away.

After being unloaded like a sack of potatoes, Edward was led through several hydraulic-sounding doors before the gift of sight was finally, gloriously returned. He stood blinking in the glaringly bright white corridors, the dark balaclava'd men who had abducted him filling out various forms he was sure pertained to him before handing him into the custody of less militarised but equally alert men with blue hard hats and truncheons. There would be no bluffing these

men, he was sure—he got the impression they were trusted to do their job well.

"Don't I get at least the courtesy of an introduction?" he asked cheerily. "You did just snatch me off the street, after all."

"You're here to answer some questions for us," retorted one of the men, "and then we might end up letting you go. Don't count on being able to remember anything we say."

He was led down through level after level of brightly lit concrete, punctuated by small safety glass windows through which he caught glimpses of men in laboratory coats at work, though the experiments in progress seemed to verge on the lunatic. White coats watching from a distance as a man in an orange jumpsuit painted a door clamped horizontally to a pair of workbenches. Examining a horse, hanging in a set of medical stirrups from the ceiling, as though it were some kind of alien creature. Pouring a popular brand of detergent on clothes within a fumigation tank via a robotic arm.

The plaque on the office door read "Professor J Gelding DPhil DEng"—when the door was opened Edward saw a large desk. The man sat behind it was small with shiny round glasses which obscured his eyes and a close-cropped horseshoe of grey hair. The room was outfitted like a doctor's surgery, with a medical cabinet, reclining bed covered in green construction paper and a small chair in front of the desk.

"Close the door, please, Agent Howard," he said to the hard-hatted man, who complied. "Please ensure the subject is searched prior to interview."

Edward submitted to the indignity of search by Howard, who turned out his pockets, patted down Grandfather Beaumont's suit and shone a bright light in his mouth. His car keys, wallet and phone were taken and put in a tray near the door—hopefully to be returned, he thought. His glass MC&D membership pass was held up and passed to the Professor, who turned it over thoughtfully.

"Please take a seat." Edward settled in the uncomfortable plastic chair across from the little bald man. Agent Howard stood a

respectful distance away, watching.

"This is an interview, not an interrogation, Mr Gradley. Having said, that, we make use of applied pressure techniques and will employ them if we feel you are being untruthful. We are not law enforcement personnel, which means you are not under caution. That also means we are not obliged to offer you legal counsel. As you may have already surmised from the manner you were brought in, you are also not subject to the protections of the law."

"I understand."

"What is the nature of your relation with Marshall, Carter & Dark?"

"I think you know that," said Edward, calmly. "I'm a stock trader with Cooper Drake. I was introduced to the club by the late David Went and was recruited to handle fine art acquisitions for Mr Marshall on a part-time basis."

"Have you been exposed to any of the objects they ask you to acquire?"

"I'm not sure I follow you. I've touched them, sure."

Professor Gelding furrowed his brow. "Have you been experiencing any…" his voice suddenly changed into a machine-gun staccato "… lost time, hallucinations, sudden mood shifts, encounters with anomalous entities, rashes or illness, loss of energy, trouble sleeping, strange or disturbing dreams, perceptions of reality or history out of sync with others around you, emotional or cognitive difficulties?"

Edward shook his head. "No. Not really. I mean, I had a terrible case of the flu recently, if that helps." The Professor shook his head. "There was something at the clubhouse—like an illusion. You closed your eyes and you were somewhere else."

"You know the location of their clubhouses?" The glasses glittered, sharply.

"One or two of them. If you want to know where they are, there's a map on that membership card."

The Professor took a lingering glance at the card, then chuckled and looked at Agent Howard. "You know, that gets me every time. I always look for it. Mr Gradley, I'm afraid there's nothing on this 'card' besides Marshall, Carter & Dark's logo in one corner."

"No," said Edward, "look, it's engraved on the glass, I can see it from here…"

"Only visible for the person it's assigned to, I'm afraid. And if you were to draw it out it wouldn't lead anywhere. Same with the 'switchboard number'—not sure if you noticed but it's different every time you call it. We've gone through this whole rigmarole before. You can't contact them in our presence or lead us to them."

"That's impossible."

"I think you would have a keen idea of just what is and what isn't possible for Mr Marshall and his partners, Mr Gradley. Now, in your recent phone conversation with the individual who goes by the epithet 'Death' you mention something you wanted to show them. What was that, exactly?"

Edward thought for a moment before responding. "Marshall took me to the warehouse where they keep the acquisitions. Some of the things there—I don't know. Secret organisations, warehouses of monsters … that's the sort of stuff conspiracy theorists go in for, isn't it?"

"Interesting. Where is this warehouse?"

"It's in London. Just off Pall Mall." The little man in the glasses began scribbling excitedly. "There's something strange about it, though—the closer you get to it, the less you can hear the city around it. I thought I'd been taken out into the country."

Just like when you brought me here, thought Edward. The Professor's face fell.

"I see … What do you know about the comb?"

"Nothing," said Edward, very nearly truthfully. "It was something Death wanted me to look into."

"Do you know who currently owns the comb, or what it looks like?"

"No," said Edward, without guile. It was a truthful answer to the first question, after all. If what he suspected about the comb was right, he couldn't even say for sure who had owned it last.

"Okay," said the Professor, taking off those full-moon glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. That was probably a bad sign, Edward thought. Any moment he's going to ask Mr Howard to apply some of those wonderful pressure techniques, just to make absolutely sure what it is I don't know. The guard in the corner stood up slightly straighter.

The intercom buzzed and the Professor thumbed it irritably. "Ms Cairnes, I am in interview. This had better be scintillating."

"Sir, we have a problem. Five-three-eight and one-seven-two-nine…"

At that moment a klaxon blared into life above them, as a recorded voice began to intone, "Containment breach alert. We are experiencing multiple Euclid-level containment breaches. Please stand by for further instructions."

Professor Gelding stood up. "Mr Gradley, I think that concludes our discussion. I am now going to administer you a Class-A amnestic. Once it has taken effect you will no longer remember me or the events of this afternoon. You may feel some disorientation; this is normal."

Agent Howard took Edward's arm firmly and pulled down his sleeve, turning it to expose the underside of his arm to Dr Gelding, who selected a small jet injector from his cabinet and inserted a crisp white ampoule.

"This shouldn't hurt."

That was a lie—it felt like someone punched his forearm hard with a chisel.

Edward didn't think he'd forgotten anything—though how could you tell? For all he knew Agent Howard had made him give the

Professor a striptease—but after a few minutes he did begin to feel very, drowsy and out of it. Agent Howard had escorted him at a brisk pace back through the facility, and at some point Edward's legs had given out under him. He just barely caught the edge of the man's words to the researchers suddenly running through the corridors as he drifted in and out of consciousness: "…sual side-effects. He shouldn't…". But then Edward was gone.

He woke up back in London, neatly propped up in the alleyway across from O'Reilly's Bar and Grill. Everything ached, radiating from the pain in his arm. Someone had thoughtfully placed a bowl in front of him and he had already accumulated several pounds. "Please help," he muttered, trying to order his muscles to move but receiving only a declaration of independence. "Please. Call an ambulance." The people stepping over him didn't even pause. Just another City hopeful down on his luck—or out of his mind on booze or cocaine.

After a few minutes the bulky, ponytailed shape of War hover into view, apparently strolling nonchalantly down the road opposite O'Reilly's. He glanced right, glanced left.

"There you are," he grumbled. "It's not like I booked the whole day off, you know?" He picked up Edward with appalling ease and carried him into the Bar and Grill, where the bartender tucked him up on one of the corner seats with a blanket and a mug of something vile-tasting but ultimately reviving, as though it were something he did every day. After half an hour or so Edward began to regain some semblance of alertness, together with the feeling in his extremities. The Four Horsemen were sitting around him tucking into half-rump steaks at various grades of overdone. Death was perched up on the chair back, watching him.

"Feeling better?"

"Uh-huh."

"I can sympathise. We've had run-ins with those guys before. Never seen them rough up someone this bad, though."

"Fortunately," said War between mouthfuls, "they always bring the guy back to where they picked him up. Let me guess, the Ess-See-Pee lot?"

"I don't think they ever mentioned," said Edward, faintly.

"It'll be them," said Death vehemently. "Unmarked van, the works. Wish I'd got it on my phone. Broad daylight abduction."

"Who are they?" asked Edward. "MI5 or something like that?"

"You wish. Seriously, didn't you read our blog? They're one of the biggest crypto-governmental agencies out there. The SCP Foundation. It sounds like a not-for-profit. Like the Make-A-Wish Foundation. It's actually a private army and shadow government that national armed forces actually defer to. Even the Russians roll over and play dead when they want something these days."

"What does the name mean?"

"Pseudo-fascist bullshit. 'Secure, Contain, Protect'. The totalitarian mantra throughout history. You need to be 'secured', and 'contained'. We-know-best stuff. The whole freemasonry, Bilderberg Group, Bohemian Grove theorists are totally off-track—these are the guys they should have been watching out for, and they failed, big time. Now they're everywhere."

"Moriah Conquering Wind's for real," interjected the serious man Edward thought of as Famine, taking a pause from wolfing down his second steak. "But the Foundation, they're the real pros. They're the ones covering up the alien tech."

Edward saw Death clap a black-manicured hand over his eyes. "Seriously? You're still on that kick? I thought I proved pretty conclusively that the Veil Protocol is only about protecting public knowledge of the Foundation's existence."

Famine scowled, mouth full. "It's the technology, too. Seriously, any time you intercept any communications from these guys it's all about 'the objects'. Alien technology. The Sagittarians keep trying to send it down. It would make everything better—free energy, anti-pollution,

nanotech. A second Industrial Revolution. The Foundation don't want it to get out because it would mean them losing *control* of us. You remember *Star Signals*?"

Edward realised he was being addressed. "Erm, it rings a bell. Was it some kind of self-help book?"

"Yes, like *The Secret* or the *The Prayer of Jabez*, except it really worked. It was all over the chat shows, but no-one mentions it anymore. It was the Foundation. They *wiped* a fortnight of pop culture from history. You remember that episode of American Idol? The one where Cowell started breathing smoke?"

"Ahhh…" Edward felt a tinge of a headache coming on.

"See that?" Famine turned to Death. "That's the face they all make. They didn't even need to put drugs in the water supply. They just put lots of similar scenes into programmes like *Doctor Who* and *Lost*, so people couldn't tell if what they'd seen was real, or not. The Sagittarians wrote the book to help us heal the world, but the Foundation confiscated almost every copy."

Pestilence turned to Edward and whispered softly, "For what it's worth, we think he's a bit crazy. But he knows his way around a firearm and he's got a bunker out in the New Forest if things get really bad."

"Death said you mentioned you got something from Marshall, Carter & Dark. Something big," said Famine, eyes pleading. "I don't suppose you…"

Edward shook his head. "Your crypto-fascists took it," he lied. "Sorry."

The Horsemen looked glum. "Don't worry," said Death. "We're used to this crap."

"Look," said Edward, "I'd better go. People are probably wondering where I am." He got up unsteadily and hobbled to the door.

"You should get that limp checked out," advised War. "Looks nasty."

Edward got a few hundred paces from the bar before the pain became too much. Stooping as though to tie up his shoelaces, he slid his fingers into the side of the now-shredded Testoni leather and eased out the shard of glass. The bulldog seemed none the worse for its experience, grinning as traces of Edward's blood dried on the glass's surface. It was enjoying a bowlful of juicy-looking chunks as a pair of hands in medical gloves checked its fur and ears for mites. I should have stayed for the steak, thought Edward, his stomach rumbling. Seems everyone but me's eaten today.

Chapter Eight: "Castle"

"Edward? Is that you?" Liz's voice sounded curious but not concerned. "Where the hell have you been? Your phone's been off. MacIntyre's been ready to send out the search party."

"Tell him that my flu didn't clear up. Tell him I'm in bed with some chicken soup."

"You don't sound sick."

"No, I don't. I know you don't like me. You don't have to. But right you're just about the only person at CD I can trust."

"I didn't stand up for you in the review."

"I know. You did the right thing. I think I can rely on you to do that. That's why I called you."

"Edward, have you had some kind of breakdown? You sound –"

"Crazy? I'm beginning to wonder."

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you trying to pull this time?"

"I'm just trying to set things right."

"Like getting the office idiot fired, you mean? Peter was a loser, but he was *our* loser."

"I wish I could say I felt bad for that, Liz. I don't. I do feel sorry that I

misled you. But yes, if I pull off the track I'm on, there'll be some more changes at Cooper Drake."

"Jesus Christ, Edward. Why do you think I'm going to help you?"

"Because … because you're not evil. If you figured me out I'm pretty sure you've figured out MacIntyre too. How long have you been keeping his secrets?"

"… Damn you."

"MacIntyre's got a couple of days left, then I'm coming for him. You should start thinking about yourself. He really isn't worth your loyalty."

There was a long pause. In the background he heard the real world; the world which had become real for him—the clamour as a hundred and fifty men scrabbled for shares in AAPL or short-sold Romanian seven-year bonds.

"Get well soon, Edward," said Liz, loudly, and rang off. Edward smiled and wondered how on earth he was going to follow through on his promises.

Edward paid for the Travelodge room with his credit card. To think some people thought it was expensive—it cost significantly less than his last business lunch. He wondered vaguely if Marshall, Carter & Dark had enough pull in the police force to trace such transactions, but the other options were equally dangerous right now. The room was small and functional with the incessant hum of a radiator through the floor. He spent an hour scribbling on the back of a Little Chef menu someone had left on the coffee table. His twelve-year-old self could probably think of a way out of this, a flawless game that kept all his pieces safe, but right now he couldn't find a path through that didn't require him to sacrifice someone. Then he thought—you've been assuming you're the king, haven't you? What if you're the rook, or the bishop, or the white knight? And he saw it, just for an instant, traced out beautifully between the Hunters Chicken and the pancakes with maple syrup. It wasn't perfect. But it only required him to sacrifice one piece. He'd been carrying it

around with him for all his life, and only now it occurred to him that he didn't have to keep it alive to win.

He tried to sleep, but the ideas churning in his head, the snoring of the man next door and the thin, hard mattress meant all he was able to manage were brief, hypnopompic episodes of walking along that unearthly beach he had seen before with his eyes closed, or else sitting at his desk at Cooper Drake looking down at the world.

A noise broke his stupor, a careless rustling and tearing like a cat or fox going through a rubbish bag. And again, closer to his window. He got up, cautiously, and walked across the floor, bare feet picking up little particles of lint from the over-vacuumed carpet as he went. He twitched aside the diaphanous orange curtain and looked down.

The Travelodge took the form of two buildings connected by a bridge on the second floor—the gap between them was used for refuse collection, deliveries and the like, and Edward's room had a commanding view of this little alleyway. What he saw now in the glaring security spotlights was the form of a gigantic man, more than seven feet tall, crouching in the refuse skip a storey beneath the window. The man was entirely nude, massive corded muscles covering his form, and something in that nakedness made him seem less than human—an animal given human shape. It looked up, and he saw that over its head was a tattered hessian bag, stained dark about a third of the way down. It might once have been fastened around his neck with a drawstring, but it had torn so the cord lay around his neck like a necklace and the bag hung loose around his jaw. There was no way he could see through it but Edward knew as surely as anything he had experienced in his life that he had been seen, and recognised. His hands had become clumsy and he batted at the curtains, trying to close them. The bedside drawers were affixed to the bed, which proved beyond the efforts of Edward's lean frame to move. In the end he settled for walking the wardrobe across the room and allowing it to fall horizontally across the door with a satisfyingly solid thud.

"Keep it down!" shouted the man in the next room. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Edward scoured the room for anything that might be used as a

weapon, finding precious little that could actually be detached from the walls or tables. In the end he smashed the bathroom mirror with the toilet plunger, found a large triangular piece that looked like it would hold up relatively well, and tested the edge, before wrapping half of it in a flannel. He sat on the bed with his silver dagger, watching the door.

There was no transition—from Edward's perspective, one moment he was sitting up, engaged in his vigil, and the next he was flat on the bed, eyes closed. Had he fallen asleep? He opened his eyes and angled himself upwards, momentarily startled by the face-shape looming out of the strangely deepened darkess in the unfamiliar room. He waited for the waking pareidolia to subside, for the face to resolve itself into the edge of a lampshade or his coat hanging on the chair. It didn't.

"Well done, Mr Gradley," it said. Edward jerked upright, hands searching for the piece of mirror and finding nothing.

"I think the Bagman's losing his touch," Marshall continued, "I gave him your spoor from the fake comb but you managed to shake him somehow. Like you'd dropped off the face of the earth. It took him a full day to pick your scent up again."

As his eyes readjusted to the darkness, Edward saw to his horror that the massive man was there, kneeling behind Marshall with its hessian forehead almost touching the floor in an attitude of prostration. The wardrobe had been flung aside like a toothpick, and now rested across the window, blocking the light from the street.

"Now, Mr Gradley. You have some things that belong to me. I'd like you to return them now." Marshall's voice was like a universe of knives behind a silk curtain.

"What things would those be, exactly?" Edward said, groggily. With any luck Marshall thought he was just being insolent.

"A certain codex, Mr Gradley. And a certain antique comb. One stolen from my premises, the other still owed to me after you delivered a clumsy forgery. You have quite a way of repaying my

trust."

"I ran into someone who was very interested in you," Edward said —"I wonder if you've heard of them. They call themselves," he struggled to remember what Death had said, "the SCP Foundation." He was gratified by the look of recognition, rage and was that?— yes!—the minutest trace of fear, in Marshall's expression.

"Really," he said, taking a step back and placing his hand on the monstrous man's head—reassuring, Edward realised, but also seeking reassurance himself in the creature's strength. "What did they say, I wonder?"

"Well," said Edward, carefully, "I seem to have given them the impression that I've deserted MC&D and am going to deliver them the items you mention. Sorry for the stunt with the codex; I had to take it so they would see you trying to find me and think I was on the level."

"What's this?" Marshall seemed startled.

"I'll get them back to you, just as soon as I can go back to where I'm keeping them."

"And where is that, exactly? I'm sure our friend here is more than a match for any *agents*," he spat the word as though it was hateful to him—"of the Foundation who might be watching it."

"And then they would know that it was a hoax and I never intended to hand them over. No, just give me a couple of days to work this out. I'll be in the confidence of the Foundation and you'll have your things back."

"And I would have a man in Cooper Drake and the Foundation," mused Marshall, hungrily. "I suppose this is an attempt to make yourself indispensable?"

"I know what you did to David. What you had Alexandra do," said Edward, allowing a tendril of anger to shine through.

Marshall scoffed: "I barely hinted at it. Your friend filled in all the blanks herself. She—if I can use the word—was quite eager at the

prospect. I presume from the commotion around her residence that you evened the score in your acquisition of the comb." Edward's heart sank.

"I know MacIntyre's your man. He outlasted David—I'm not about to let him outlast me. If you kill me, you lose the codex, and the comb, and an inside track on the Foundation."

Marshall scowled, and snapped his fingers. The Bagman rose to his full height, arms thicker than Marshall's torso. Edward closed his eyes.

"You have two days to do what you need to do. At the end of that time I expect my property returned to me—genuine, undamaged. Do you understand?"

When he opened his eyes Marshall and the creature were gone. The door hung on one hinge, the lock torn from its moorings. Edward looked at the collapsing wardrobe, tiny fragments of mirrordust coating the bed and floor. Travelodge weren't going to be happy.

Edward had hoped that he had misunderstood Marshall when he had mentioned Lady Penelope's house. He had ridden over to Swindon on the bus—Carter's stay of execution apparently not extending to the return of the Porsche—half-expecting to see the Four Horsemen sitting in the seats. When he got there he saw the whole house had been taped off—two police cars had drawn up at the front together with a dark, understated vehicle he assumed belonged to the coroner.

"What's going on?" he asked the stony-faced policeman at the front gate. "Is Alexandra okay?" He had some vague thought that he might be invited inside, but the policeman just shook his head.

"Do you know the Lady Penelope, sir?" he asked. Edward stammered out an affirmative. "Think you'd better go home, sir. You'll probably read about it soon enough."

There would be no hope of gaining access and retrieving the comb,

Edward realised, and he cursed himself for not having had the guts to take it and keep it somewhere safer. He turned on his heel and left, just as another policeman said:

"Hold on, wasn't you at the Went suicide? Here, Travers, get his number."

But another bus had already drawn up at the stop and Edward moved as swiftly has he could towards it, not caring much which direction it took him. By the time the police had decided he was a person of interest the driver had already pulled away and they made no attempt to halt it.

He was almost out of trump cards, he thought. Almost. He got out his phone. One bar of charge left. He made two calls; the first to Death, the second to Maria. Both started the same way:

"I'm sorry. I need one more favour."

The one to Maria Beaumont ended "I love you. Goodbye."

Edward took the elevator up to the trading floor at Cooper Drake. The security staff and the pretty secretary with glasses had looked askance at him; Maria's grandfather's suit was fine enough but he had slept in it two nights running and he had been expelled from the Travelodge without even the luxury of a shower. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass ceiling as he rose through it—hollow-eyed and unshaven, his mother's dark brown, almost black hair contrasting with his father's Yorkshire complexion, giving him the appearance of a week's worth of beard. He didn't look like he belonged here anymore. When he reached the top floor his team caught sight of him and hollered enthusiastically, one shouting that Oxford Fullerene had gone up almost twenty percent in value since Edward bought in. It all seemed like distant memories—a lifetime ago. Liz's eyes went wide when she saw him and she started walking in the opposite direction. As she passed him, she said "Seven years." and he nodded.

MacIntyre came out of his office to see what was happening and strode over, bristling.

"Where the hell have you been, Gradley? Part of having responsibility for a team means being here to oversee them. As it is they've been running your bloody portfolio. Partners at Cooper Drake are held to a higher standard!"

Edward leaned in, smiled. "Like making millions off stock tips from an international money launderer. Or having people underneath you murdered so no-one gets too big for their boots." He had the satisfaction of seeing MacIntyre wilt; someone had left him in the dryer too long and the starched fabric he was made out of had gone limp. Edward continued, in a louder tone. "I'm going to make myself a cup of coffee and then I'm going to have a sit down. You can wait for the main event."

He didn't have to wait long. Edward didn't even bother to turn on his computer, instead sitting with his shredded boots up on the desk while he sipped his first cup of coffee in days that didn't taste like something had died in it. His team had realised something was about to happen and had quietened down. Myers and Reagan, it seemed, sensed what was coming better than MacIntyre and had made hurried excuses and left the building.

"Gradley." The voice was at normal modulation but somehow filled the air, deafening the admittedly somewhat muted buzz of the floor. Edward swivelled his chair and saw the tall blond man enter, wearing a red and black evening jacket and with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles balanced on his nose. In the doorway behind him he could see a massive, dark shape.

"Jesus Christ Edward," said MacIntyre, rising from the table at which he had been sitting head bowed and fingers tapping. "You brought him here. You fucking brought Marshall here. What the fuck have you done?"

"I'm here to get what's mine, Mr Gradley," said Marshall, gliding over the floor. The other stockbrokers looked on, bemused by the apparent reckoning taking place.

"You're going to be disappointed then, Jeremy," shrugged Edward. "I don't have either the codex or the comb anymore. Nor would I be inclined to return them to you if I did."

Marshall's mouth twitched upwards but his composure remained intact. "I thought so. You're a thief, Gradley. At least your father paid his way. Who did you sell them to? The Foundation? The Global Occult Coalition? GRU? Or am I going to hear that you gave my property to those ragbag conspiracy theorists? Oh yes, I know about them. They're flies, Mr Gradley."

"None of the above," said Edward, and he saw Marshall detect the sincerity in his voice.

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm not going to enlighten you—you're the only Saturday morning cartoon villain in the room, you can handle the monologues."

"Do you actually think you can walk away?" challenged Marshall. "How far up does this go, Mr MacIntyre? Did you sanction this betrayal?" MacIntyre blanched even further, shaking his head and sinking to his knees.

"I do. I'm going to walk out of this building and disappear. Somewhere you'll never find me." Edward was fighting every instinct he had to put his hand in his pocket. Don't give him the satisfaction of knowing.

"We can follow you anywhere."

"You know that's not true."

Marshall shook his head. "I'll have everyone close to you taken and brought to me. Your mother, Beatrycze Wozny—perhaps you thought I didn't know where she lives. And the Beaumont woman—ah, I see that touches a nerve. Is it love?" Edward remembered the turn of phrase and looked at MacIntyre, still kneeling aghast on the floor. You're his creature, Edward thought, bought and paid for. You even think like him. You didn't go to the clubhouse, maybe didn't even care about the objects. You just wanted the secrets to allow you to keep rolling your life up into that one big futile bet. And now you can see it coming apart. Marshall can't, not yet, but you can.

Edward answered, calmly. "The best protection I can give those I care for is to tell you right now—I'll never come back. I don't even think I would be told if something happened to them. But even if I were, I wouldn't come back."

"A selfish little bastard to the end, then," said Marshall, still sneering, but some of the wind knocked out of his sails. "You think you wouldn't return for my blood if I captured and killed your mother? You have no idea about the human psyche, do you, you little ape? Men aren't in control of their drives, they are controlled by them. The success of Marshall, Carter & Dark is testimony to the fact that choices make men, not the other way around. If I were to take lovely Maria and have her despoiled…"

"You know what I think?" said Edward. "I think you don't kill, or despoil, or maim, or kidnap—unless it profits you. The fact of the matter is, if I don't care what you do to my mother, to Maria, they are safe. So go ahead—except you can't, because it would mean nothing. I tried to explain to David—the ideal of capitalism. Everyone working in their self-interest—and only in their self-interest—is the optimum solution to the societal puzzle. I still believe that; I've just learned to expand my definition of self-interest." He raised his voice. "I won't help you launder drugs and arms dealers' money. I won't help you steal antiques and sell them to dictators. I won't do those things because it is in my self-interest to live in a stable, lawful society, where I can trade in fair competition with others." Edward's team had risen to their feet and began to slink away; other traders similarly moved towards the door, where the shadow moved and vanished.

"No-one's going to believe anything you say," stammered MacIntyre. "Remember Went," he said, in a pleading voice. "He died with his reputation ruined; even his family think of him as a disgrace. Nothing could be traced to other members."

"You're finished," added Marshall, with gleeful finality.

"Yes, I am."

"W-what?" It was MacIntyre's turn to look bewildered.

"Oh, what the hell. There's nothing you can do to stop it now. As we speak, police have been called to the scene of an apparent suicide in the toilets of a small diner on Farringdon High Street. The body will be identified from documentation in its pockets as Edward Gradley. Sound familiar? There'll even be a note in the pocket. Just like David Went. Except it'll say something like:

> I am writing this letter because I suspect I will not live to see tomorrow. I have uncovered a massive insider trading ring within investment banking firm Cooper Drake originating in the gentleman's club Marshall, Carter & Dark, which I believe to be a front for the fencing of stolen goods and liaison with organised crime. I have found letters from my colleague and friend David Went indicating that he discovered the same criminal activity—I now believe he was killed to prevent him blowing the whistle on this activity and evidence of personal ethical violations planted to discredit him. I have been followed by men I believe to be in the employ of MC&D; I fear I am to be subject to the same treatment as David. I have left documentation detailing Cooper Drake's involvement with Marshall, Carter & Dark with a close friend—should anything happen to me, these documents will be released to the police.

"That's not an empty bluff, by the way. All the trades in Mr Marshall's book have been conscientiously documented; I just took the liberty of replacing my name with yours, Raymond. I'm sure Marshall, Carter & Dark can buy immunity from prosecution, but I wonder if that extends to Cooper Drake? I rather doubt anyone is going to believe your version of events after they see the quite impeccably forged emails from David Went to me dated from before his suicide detailing the death threats you made to him. Seems to me that your usefulness to Mr Marshall here is at an end."

MacIntyre put his hands over his face. "Get out," he whispered to the last traders gathered in a thin circle around the three.

"You're abandoning your life," said Marshall, nonplussed.

"Yes. Don't worry," said Edward, "I've lined up a new one."

"Where are you going to run?" Marshall was twitching now, something in his eyes that spoke of incipient madness. "There's no-one on Earth who can protect you. You've got nothing left to trade!"

"Not quite."

Marshall stood for a moment, still erect next to the pitiful figure of Raymond MacIntyre, who had curled up on the floor, ridiculous gelled hair cracking as he pushed it against Marshall's slim, glossy brown shoes. Marshall looked down and his face twisted into a mask of disgust before kicking MacIntyre, hard.

"You still think I'm going to explain, don't you?"

Edward met the blond man's gaze and held it until Jeremy Marshall at last rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and screamed:

"Run, then! See what good it does you!"

Edward turned and walked down the fire escape. With almost boyish glee he pushed hard on the door bar until the glass beam shattered and the sound of the fire alarm filled the building, and continued down.

Marshall left the wreck that had been Raymond MacIntyre on the trading floor and paced over to the fire escape. He wanted to call the Bagman, tell him to kill everyone in the building, but he knew it would be a pointless and expensive act of pique. There was nowhere the Gradley boy could go—as soon as he left the building the Bagman would pick up his scent. Whether it was at Heathrow, or Grand Cayman, or the highest mountain of the Andes, there was nowhere he could hide.

And yet, in the dark, non-Euclidean corners of his mind, there was doubt—some part of him saw the black pawn take the white knight, revealing the final check, the black king exposed to attack from … what was it? A rook? A castle.

The call came a couple of minutes too late.

"Erm, sir? I'm not sure how to tell you this…"

Document 1552-12

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
Death_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

If anyone wants to see a piece of glass containing by preternatural means live footage of a dog (English bulldog) you should be at the Cooper Drake offices, 48 Gray's Inn Road, around midday today. You'll want to speak to Edward Gradley, who can also tell you some interesting things about what certain ex-BBC news presenters got up to in the Bahamas.

Oh, and by the way, if you're listening in, Professor Gelding, he remembers everything. You might want to look into that.

Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
War_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

Just incredible, really.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
Pestilence_4H Jan 20 , : GMT
> Just incredible, really.

I wish to state for the record that none of us have actually seen this thing.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (definitely)
Famine_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

> Just incredible, really.

I've seen it. The Sagittarians sent me photos of it inside a dream.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (just no)
Death_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

> I've seen it. The Sagittarians sent me photos of it inside a dream.

OK, now you're just [EXPLETIVE REDACTED] with us.

Reply | Options

Edward Gradley walked out of the offices of Cooper Drake just as the clouds cracked open, casting direct sunlight on the ground for the first time in months. The shadow watched from the lobby as he strolled through the carpark. He took his phone out of his pocket and threw it into the landscaped edging, followed by his wallet.

The unmarked van had been waiting for him in the overflow area and pulled up. The dark-jumpered man who got out opened the back of the van and looked at him. Edward reached into his pocket and withdrew something small, shining in the light.

"You can see this?" he asked, a final note of apprehension entering his voice. "You can see the dog?"

The agent nodded, swallowing, then averted his eyes, flipping over a small lockbox. "Yessir I can see it. Please put it into the box. I've seen what happens when people look at that stuff too long."

Edward carefully placed the glass shard at the bottom of the box, where the bulldog panted enthusiastically and looked hopeful, though that might have been because someone had entered the room behind it with a bright pink chewtoy. He shut the lid.

"We investigated the Pall Mall lead," he said. "Your information led to the capture of numerous MC&D assets and the near-total disruption of their UK distribution network. They moved most of the items, but that's par for the course. How do you feel about the idea of saving the world on a regular basis?"

"I think," said Edward, "that sounds like it's something that would fall within the scope of my enlightened self-interest. Plus, I've got nothing else to do. I'm about to become legally dead."

"Join the club," said the agent. The shadow watched as Edward hopped up on the running board and Mobile Task Force Epsilon-Nine "The Nation's Job Creators" rolled away.

Edward Gradley disappeared from the world on a sunny January afternoon. The coroner called to O'Reilly's Grill and Diner pronounced him dead at twelve fifty-eight, and his remaining family was notified, though his mother seemed less upset than one might have expected.

The coroner transported his body to the morgue at St Pancras and was vaguely surprised to find one more free tray than he remembered. Indeed, something about Edward's face seemed awfully familiar, though he could be certain he wasn't one of his previous guests—all the bodies were accounted for on their online admin area. If he had bothered to look, he would have found absolutely no trace of remote access, though the nurse might have remembered the serious-looking young man with the gray hair who had flashed an official-looking Special Branch badge and taken a body awaiting post-mortem for 'priority forensic analysis'.

The following morning Maria Beaumont brought a stack of documents into Camden Police Station and Edward's death was officially announced as a murder investigation. It took the lawyer in the black suit three weeks at five thousand and fifty pounds an hour to secure the dismissal of all charges against Marshall, Carter & Dark and the re-expungement of all mention of the club from Scotland Yard's records.

Raymond MacIntyre and several other partners were arrested and

charged with Market Abuse under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, money laundering under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and two counts of conspiracy to commit murder. David Went was posthumously cleared of all charges.

Elizabeth Keating, as the most senior partner not under investigation, was made acting principal in an extraordinary meeting of the board of directors.

The trial continues.

« **Act II - "You are invited"** | **HUB** | **Act III - "Rainy in London"** »

Across the Hills so Quiet

The seal is broken

O fallen King of splinter'd crown

Eye pierced upon thy spear

The girl has got you bested

The seal is broken

The Mother of Hunters has shattered her chains

The Toymaker has fired her shots

The first shots of the last war

The seal is broken

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed

Stars boil and worlds are torn in two

The King marches on creation

The seal is broken

The hour stirs

A beast slouches towards Gotham to be born

Rising up from Benthos' black realm

The seal is broken

The child whimpers in pain

For hers is the womb by which the world ends

Hers is the womb by which the end of the world begins

The seal is broken

Gaping eyes bear witness, gasping mouths sing praise

Two keys open Atom's Gate

What lies beyond, none can see.

THE SEAL IS BROKEN

There was a great and terrible silence

A bulb of fire rose upon a column of cloud in the sky above Montauk Point.

There was a great and terrible noise

There was a great and terrible silence

The girl who had forgotten the names of the world stood atop a grassy mound, trembling in the light wind. Color soaked the world around her: Mossy green hills, blanketed with fields of tiny white flowers. Dark, distant mountains with fire-red crowns. Sharp-blue glaciers settled in the shadows of knife-edged valleys. Vast standing stones, mottled pale with ancient lichen, rose above the hills, wearing garlands of seashells and pink flowers. The breeze brushed against her bare ankles, neither warm nor chill. If she strained her ears, she could hear the crash of waves against far-off cliffs and the cries of seabirds.

There had been a flash of light. She remembered a blinding moment, a blast of heat, and the feeling of arms around her. Not the arms of a Masked Man, all muscle and bruise. Soft arms.

Light, heat, arms, nothing, and then waking on the hilltop.

The world she had no names for called out to her. She could not remember the colors or smells, nor the grass or mountains or wind. She could not remember a world without corners and white tile, without humming lights and cold metal against her back, without

Masked Men. She could not remember, but she answered all the same. She did not remember this world, but she knew it, as if she were returning to a vanished dream rising from the mist.

The girl with ratty hair and hollow cheeks, dark bags under her eyes, pressed a hand to her stomach. It stung at even a gentle touch, a sharp bite of pain, but the pain was nothing compared to what had been. Nothing compared to the pain the Masked Men delivered upon her body, or the writhing, gnawing, clawing pain of the Thing in her womb. No, it was nothing. A new, nothing pain.

The girl had given birth.

The Thing lay in the grass a few feet away – a blackened mass of flesh, torn up and knitted back together in cancerous coils, cloaked in a rotted placenta. Shattered bones twisted limbs into uselessness, suckling mouths opened and closed wordlessly, skin peeled away from melted muscle. Blood and fecal matter splattered the grass, a dark ooze leaked into the soil from its bloated gut. Organs pulsed and spasmed underneath thin skin. Breath wheezed and gurgled out of its bone-punctured lungs. Tiny hands clawed at the loam, desperately trying to drag itself across the ground.

When the girl first saw it, she wanted to kill it, to stomp on its neck until it was dead. She found that she could not, and she did not understand why. Nor could she bring herself to leave it, this disgusting, broken Thing.

Her terrible child.

The air stirred, heavy with the smell of salt. A lonesome cry echoed in the hills. The girl turned, and saw that a woman stood there on the hilltop, past the place where the Thing lay.

The woman's skin was smooth and grey as polished slate, her braided hair like silver silk, her eyes wide and dark. Her cheeks and brow were lined with glowing blue patterns. Her bare shoulders bore clusters of bright tube-worms. She wore a white dress; her belly was stained with red.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was deep and wide, and felt as if it

would carry for miles for its size.

The girl recoiled, hobbled legs tensing to run. But the woman didn't come any closer – She just sat down in the grass, tucked her legs up underneath her, and began picking flowers. She hummed a melancholy tune, and it rumbled across the hills.

The girl edged closer. The woman began tying stems together, her thick fingers not as clumsy as they looked. The girl watched intently, trying to mark if she was a threat.

The woman looked up and smiled at the girl, who drew back again.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The Thing gurgled, blew a bloody bubble of spit.

"I'm sorry about all of this," the woman continued, her fingers still weaving. "But I promise, everything is going to be okay now. You're safe."

The girl looked the woman over, her eyes hard.

"No Masked Men?" she asked at last.

"Never again."

The girl narrowed her eyes.

"You're lying."

The woman held out her right hand, and drew her left across the palm as if holding a knife. Blood welled up from a deep, straight cut. The woman clenched her fist, sending dark droplets onto the grass.

"I swear by my blood, shed in the war against the King, that you will be safe here, so long as a drop of life remains in me." The woman's voice boomed across the land. "I am not lying."

The girl could feel something inside those words. Something powerful. Words that were not words, meaning untamed by speech. She felt afraid, and very small. Not because the woman was a

threat, but because she could feel her power coursing through the air, the soil, her very being. The woman that sat before her was an image of something vaster, a form of something greater and broader than she could even hope to imagine.

“Is that good enough?”

The girl nodded. It was all she could do. The woman wiped her hand on the grass, her palm already healed into a pale scar.

“My name’s Abby.” She placed her crown of flowers on her head and began picking more. “You can come and sit over here, if you want.”

The girl didn’t move.

“I know I look really suspicious right now…why did I say that? Since when has that ever been a good thing to say? I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” The woman sighed, brushed aside a strand of hair. “It’s been a long time since I really had a chance to talk to anyone. I’m not lying to you, I promise, but it’s difficult to say exactly what I want to say. I could show you, but…oh.” The woman glanced over her shoulder. “I think we have a visitor.”

A second wind passed over the hill, smelling of leaf litter and dirty snow. A cloud cast a shadow, and that shadow became the cloak of a pale man. The girl shivered, but kept her gaze locked – she could feel in her stomach that if she looked away, she would die.

The pale man nodded at Abby, though it was really little more than a tilt. She returned the gesture. He turned his eyes towards the girl. Hard, empty eyes – it would have been easier to bear if there had just been sockets, but no. Hard silver eyes, as empty as marbles.

“I am not here for you, child,” he said in a dust-and-skin voice. He swept up to the Thing, and a silver-moon sickle was in his hand.

“Wait…” the word slipped from the girl’s mouth unbidden.

The pale man drew a shimmering cloud from the Thing’s gaping mouth, reached forth with his sickle.

“Don’t…”

A short soundless cut across the imaginal tether, and the cloud dissipated.

“Is this not what you wanted?” The pale man framed it more as statement than question.

The girl swallowed, staring at the still, lifeless Thing.

“Take it as a lesson, girl. Be careful when you invoke my passing.”

The pale man turned his marble eyes towards Abby.

“And as for *you*…” he hissed.

“Another time. Please. She’s been through enough…”

“No. You have brought the girl into this, she will listen. You are responsible for everything that she is now to face.” He swung back around to the girl. “Remember that, girl. For all that is to come, she is to blame.” A thin finger pointed with dread accusation.

“I saved her,” Abby said.

“Only from my mercy, because the broken bride desired a pet. But the Fool has gone and angered the Worm, and the center cannot hold.”

“It can for long enough.”

“The thirty-six are scattered to the winds, and creation spirals into anarchy without them.”

“We can still-.”

“Do you never tire of lapping up the Fool’s vanity? Your father has already sharpened his carving knives and drawn blood. He will devour creation and choke upon it, and all that will remain are my brothers and I.” The pale man grinned, though it did not look like he truly knew how. “I wonder; how will your Fool fare against my Eldest?”

“She is not nearly as vain as you think.”

“Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity. All of creation is the vanity project of a god most utterly mad.” The pale man paused, seemed to hear something that the girl could not. “I am forever needed elsewhere. I shall soon see you two again.”

With a swish of shadow and the smell of decay, he vanished. Abby smiled, though it was nearly as forced as the pale man’s grin.

“He’s so full of himself, isn’t he?”

The girl did not respond. Abby stood up, walked over to the Thing’s still corpse, and knelt.

“Come.”

She began scooping away the soil, digging out a shallow grave. The girl swayed, as if to move, but remained in place.

“Why are you doing all this?”

“It wouldn’t be right to just let it lie here.”

“No!” The girl blurted out. “Why am I here, why are you here, where is *here*? What are you even *talking* about? Just…why?”

Abby stopped digging, and was quiet for a time. She didn’t look angry.

“I understand. I haven’t been very helpful.” She wiped the dirt off on her dress. “I’m sorry.”

Wind moaned, swirling up the hill, chilling the girl through her hospital gown. Abby dropped her gaze back to the shallow grave and went back to digging. After a time, the grave was deep enough. Abby gently picked up the Thing and placed it in the earth. The girl couldn’t make out whether she was sad or angry or happy by this. The Thing was dead, dead and buried, but she couldn’t feel anything. She didn’t know what life would be like without it. If life could be without it.

But Abby was turning the soil over, and the Thing was buried. Gone in the ground. Exit the scene. Done.

The girl was struck with a horrible sense of longing, and thundering on its heels came a tide of deep black disgust, tinged with a hatred turned inward and refined. How dare she feel pity? Had she forgotten? Had she become so weak as to forgive the Masked Men their violence?

The girl's inner voice screamed, beat at her heart, clawed at her throat. Every muscle ached to run away, to flee from this feeling inside her, to beat it back into submission, to hide, to do *something*. Something to hide from the Thing, from Abby, from herself, from every peering eye and pointing finger.

And yet, she remained standing on the hilltop. She didn't understand why, but no matter how much she strained to flee, some part of her said "no". The rest listened.

"Maybe things will be better if I just show you," Abby said. "Will that be okay?"

The girl nodded.

Abby reached up, and the sky parted like water as she drew her hand across. Curtains of green and streams of purple burst from her fingers, bordering a wedge of velvet black that bloomed out to fill the entire sky with night.

And there were stars. So many stars, spilling across the sky, rising up into the heavens in a great sparkling band. A billion, billion lights forming the trunk of an impossibly tall tree, and billions more to make the branches. The hills were lit with silver evening.

The girl could not remember when she had last seen stars, or if she ever had. Their names came to nest in her heart, and the girl felt their song filling her. She cried. For the first time in long years, her tears were not of pain.

The girl saw now that Abby had changed. The woman in the white dress was gone, and in her place now was a great grey giant that

sat among the hills. Pale scars swept across her body. Barnacles and lice clustered on her arms, on her breasts, on her thighs. A shawl of tube-worms and sealskin sat on her shoulders. Streams of glowing plankton flowed about her in the air like dandelion seeds, growing bright and then dim with the pulse of her own glow. Parasites clouded her wide, dark eyes. Her salt-crusted hair hung in knotted tangles. A second pair of arms had appeared, the hands painted white with seafloor snow. A ragged hole had been torn through her stomach, clear through to the other side. The edges were crusted in blood and hagfish and a fire danced within, wreathed in the black smoke of a seafloor vent.

“I know your pain,” Abby said in her vast, sweeping voice. “I shared it. Every day they came for you, I felt the same.”

The girl knew that she was speaking the truth. She could feel Abby’s words close by her spirit, the echoes whispering *“You are not alone.”*. What could be done? She *knew*, with the utmost certainty, that she was loved.

“We were bound together under my father’s seal, sisters in suffering. But we don’t have to suffer any longer. The seal is broken. He has no power here, over either of us, and we can make things right. That’s why you’re here. I wanted to give you back the life my father stole from you. I can’t make the pain go away, but I can be here for you when it becomes too much to bear alone.”

Abby extended a hand, holding it flat on the hilltop, her creased palm turned up to the stars.

“Will you stay?” she asked.

Wordlessly, the girl stepped onto her hand, tears still glistening on her cheeks. Abby gently lifted her hand and smiled.

“Just tell me when you want to be put down. We can get you something to eat, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m okay,” the girl said, wiping at her eyes. “I’d just like to sit here for a while.”

“I can do that,” Abby said.

The two watched the stars turn slowly above them, and a final piece of knowing wrote itself in the girl's heart. A name, remembered from the distance times before it was stolen from her.

Her name was Grace, and she was being put back together.

Activity Documentation File 11-A

Group Name(s): Oneiroi, Oneiroi Collective, Oneiroi Gardens

Group Classification: Non-human, Business(?), Unification, Extra-Dimensional Operation

Known Objects: **SCP-1498**, **SCP-2805**, **SCP-2028**, **SCP-2272**, **SCP-2245**, SCP-

Group Description: Appear to intervene in unconscious thoughts and dreams, and appear to have access to personalities of deceased persons. No infrastructure or organization present in our world, or universe, and it is possible that they primarily operate in other worlds and that we exist on their periphery, although this has been challenged by their apparent knowledge of electronic systems, culture, and significant persons in our universe. Known to the Foundation since 9/18/19 5.

Known Members: No human members have been identified at this time, if any even exist. In addition, investigation has revealed that although business-oriented groups such as Marshall, Carter and Dark and the Factory are at least aware of this entity, there is no evidence of collaboration and, in the case of the Factory, appear to be actively working towards the group's destruction.

Veil Threat Level: Medium. Oneiroi does not appear to want to break the veil of secrecy for anomalous objects, but also do not appear to have any interest in preserving it. Therefore, they are to be considered a passive threat to normalcy.

Capabilities: Interacting with humans in dreams, impersonating or recreating the personalities of well-known persons, creating objects and interacting with human culture and society at will.

Engagement Instructions: Due to the non-corporeal and passive nature of Oneiroi, personnel are not to engage, but collect as much

documentation as possible in order to contribute to ongoing counter-anomaly research.

Physical Records

> **MANIFESTO OF A DREAMER**
>
> IF YOU CAN DREAM IT YOU CAN DO IT THAT IS WHAT THE CREED IS BUT YOU SOIL IT WITH YOUR EAR-PLUGS YOU DON'T HEAR THE SW(illegible)GOATS AND BILLYS SINGING TO THE FARMERS SLEEP, BECAUSE YOU DO. NOT. CARE. ABOUT. ANYTHING AND WE ARE TIRED OF IT ONEIROI, GIVE US OUR WAKING LIVES BACK, DREAMS ARE

Research Note: *This was found with SCP-1498, in a desk drawer.*

> *imstillworkingtheyrealmostdonewhentheysayimdone theymightbegiantsletmegrowawakethenighttimedream sbleedintodayandthesheepbaaohgodwhydotheybaa.*

Research Note: *Found taped to the bottom of an SCP-2028 instance.*

> *Dear Inspector*
>
> *In response to your question, I do not know, because I grew up beside the garden of dreams.*
>
> *It's a beautiful place. Every possibility of fancy is here, and even the blackest pits of fantasy are redeemed with the innocence with which some follow their dreams.*
>
> *The Oneiroi gardens, they call it. Or that's what my Master called it. I didn't call it anything, because it was before I was with the written word. That was when I was free.*
>
> *I had a dream, of freedom. We were very good friends, and even though the Collective said I wasn't supposed to mingle with the anchors, as we were called, there was a*

beauty in knowing how it might feel to be awake, even if you never believed it could be true.

That is the only freedom to this place, they cannot make a prisoner dream of being imprisoned. There was no dreamers police keeping me in check, and one day, it disappeared. In an unceremonious way, I was enslaved.

This is a warning, sir.

Now you think you're hold a cap on the only way for dreams to reach the masses, and the world is suffering for it. How many dreams have you stopped, Inspector? None. Do you think that the bootleg dreamcatchers will keep the sheepeople awake forever?

If what you say is true, the dream harvesters could be dangerous.

Do you think your organization can defeat hopeless bleak despair?

Research Note: *This letter was delivered by an unknown party to Dr. Jerry Grant's private residence. As it appears to reference his work on SCP- , it has been filed with the research for that object. Notably, Dr. Grant had reported difficulty sleeping and a noticeable decrease in dream recollection, however, since this letter was received, this problem has ceased. Dr. Grant now reports a regular REM cycle.*

July 5th, 1975

It was always about music. A mournful hum hit the walls, gently reverberating until it found its way to their young ears. Usually that call was a mere whisper, slithering through holes of the cloth but this time it reached a much wider audience.

Stitch the notes together and watch as a sweet hum turns into a song. Its sound is enough to keep memories on the edge of unreal, the melody permeating the souvenirs.

Sweet little snippets of memories, spun into small little objects. And for what? You open the album and you can hear a hum, curling around your frame, slithering into your brain.

You watch the photos change, you watch smiles twist and turn and curl into malicious smirks and hungry grins. Their teeth turn sharp and black. It is enough to close the **`album`** to make it all stop; memories, though, persist.

They haunt your thoughts, colours oversaturated, even if the photos were black and white. They are bright, ringing in your head like a static noise you sometimes hear when things become too quiet.

In the end, though, something always will distract you from this. Humans can't live focused on one thing only. Variation is where they thrive, and so soon the memories dissipate. But all you need is a reminder, a push. A trigger.

A sound.

Senses are such a whimsy creatures. Anything can remind you of

things old gone. Time is cruel and unforgiving for your focus, but memories turn your body into a vessel of records.

Doesn't it scare you, how everything that surrounds you can push that little button and make your brain replay what is hidden inside?

You avoid **meds**, you avoid **schoolbands**, you avoid things that many find a little funny. They humor you, though, and you are grateful for that. People do have illogical fears, right?

Allegiances and musicshops. You were never one for music, not anymore, at least. Trashing out old cassettes brought relief. Idea of karaokes brings a mild panic. Your throat exists only for talking.

One text message and a person you barely know name of digitalising what they could get their hands on online was enough to bring memories again. A push of a little button of a laptop. You spend next few hours browsing all the posts they posted and reminiscing.

Some memories resurfaced again and you sunk into them, remembering. You cried, even when you tried not to. The taste of those memories was fresh, and you heard everything again as when you heard it for the first time, except now reliving old life was oversaturated with nostalgia.

You didn't avoid lakes before. You could swim and you stared into a face of yourself from forty years ago doing exactly this.

Internet was an amazing tool, as you don't have to remember exactly what you are looking for. Satellite photos were blurred, and you couldn't see how much things have changed from comfort of your house. Pity, but magic of retirement is that you have a lot of time on your hands.

You went **there**. Airplane ride, rented car, it was easy, all things considered.

You didn't know, but any other day you would have heard a call by now. But today, it was quiet.

Bodies gently bumped against each other, as a light mist-like film covering them swirled away into a white fog. It was quiet. You entered the lake because you wanted to see who they were, as you simply didn't see their faces from the shore. You left your phone, with intention of calling the police after you were done.

Halfway through your swim to the beach, you sunk. Your memories are fragile things, after all. It was again that little button, this time not pressed but pried out of machinery of your brain with dark pliers.

Something told you there was supposed to be something **`else`** down below. You breathed water into your burning lungs and You do not recognize the darkness swirling beneath the bodies.

Ad Majorem Bonum

"…sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper, et in saecula saeculorum, amen" mumbled Father Hector Gomez (S.J.) as he absently fingered his rosary beads. He opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. It was time.

Gomez had spent much of his childhood living in the Smokey Mountain landfill outside Manila, until the nuns had rescued him and brought him to their school. A dozen years later, Gomez entered the seminary, his heart full of gratitude toward the Church and with a yearning to serve the world. For the greater good. A few years later, he entered the novitiate community and became a novice of the Society of Jesus, subject to vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Obediently, he had accepted his new assignment. He had expected to be sent to one of those famously desperate corners of the world like the place he had been born – the Dharavi slum in Mumbai, or perhaps a favela in São Paulo. Instead he found himself here, at the odd little concrete bunker at Camp Hero on the eastern tip of Long Island. He glanced around his simple cell, then put on his collar and headed upstairs.

The chapel was on Level C, mercifully far enough away from where the Procedure happened that it was usually out of earshot. Gomez entered the confessional and waited for Enrique to arrive.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been two days since my last confession. I accuse myself of… the… um…" stammered Enrique through the thin screen.

Gomez waited patiently. "It's all right, Enrique," he gently encouraged. After a pause, Enrique completed his confession and Gomez absolved him by means of the customary formula. They both exited the confessional and sat down together in the chapel's rear pew. Enrique was crying, tears dripping onto his black cassock.

Gomez embraced him. “It’s all right. It’s going to be all right.”

“I had … no idea that it was going to be like this.”

“I know,” Gomez gently replied. “I think we’ve all had the same experience. Yesterday was your first time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Enrique gazed silently into the distance. “But… she’s just a child.”

“We took a vow, Enrique. We both did. We all did. We are soldiers of God beneath the banner of the Cross. And you must remember, that no matter what it seems to us is happening, we must trust in the Church and in our leaders. Our mission is here. Our mission is to do what needs to be done, for the greater good.”

Enrique looked at Gomez.

“But it’s so awful,” sobbed Enrique. Gomez nodded grimly. “I heard that before we took over, the people who used to do this would take some kind of yellow pill every day to forget what they had done.”

Gomez replied softly. “They did. But we must be stronger. The yellow pill was a selfish act, I think. And strangely enough, it seems to be something of a mercy to her that we have abandoned it. Since we took over the administration, we almost never have to carry out the Procedure more than once in a day. It has, something to do with our discipline, I think.”

Gomez embraced Enrique again, silently, until the shaking stopped. "The spiritual exercises will help. Remember the disciplines," counseled Gomez. The two young priests returned to the rectory. Tomorrow it would be Gomez’s turn in the Room, and then Gomez would return to the chapel to make his own confession. And the cycle would repeat, for as long as was necessary. Again and again. In saecula saeculorum. Ad majorem bonum.

Adam's Worthless - Choose Yokim

The words went straight to his heart, shattering what little self-confidence he still had.

The cluttered, shadow-filled room seemed like a perfect reflection of his own inner being at that time. Dark, unkept, illuminated by a single, dying light. Stacks upon stacks of discarded items - sculptures, paintings, tools, resources - lay scattered around the room, like forgotten ideas. In the middle of it all was him, a shadow of a man turned to stone, but weak to influence and control like clay.

"That's a bit harsh, especially considering he's right there."

The man wasn't alone of course. One of the other three with him spoke up, their masculine voice surveying anger at the underhanded attack at Adam.

"Oh come on Yokim, he knows it's all in jest." The second voice was masculine too, but laced with a hint of malice. They would defend their previous statement regardless of any facts arisen - even if Adam were to prove themself superior, he would still be overlooked.

Adam made no attempt to respond, not even feebly mouthing any words. He simply stood still and dully stared at the other three, no motivation to attack or respond spurring him to action.

"I'm choosing Adam. Donny, if I hear anything like that again I'll break your damn jaw." The leader of the club was audibly feminine and extremely assertive in nature. If the lone guider for the group of only thirty-seven wasn't as strong willed as she was, the group surely would have disintegrated long ago. There were still cracks amongst the members, as was being observed between Donny and Yokim, but the glue of their collective goal was strong enough to hold them together. For now, at least.

"I'll help. I could make a statue using it - I'll name it *Donny Dickhead*

the Dumbass," Yokim growled at the grinning bully. He gently rested his hand on Adam's shoulder as a show of confidence. "Congrats Adam. I'm sure you'll do well."

Adam didn't respond, still sore from Donny's blunt statement. He felt a brief sense of pride, but it was quickly washed away by the overwhelming feeling of worthlessness. The words echoed in his head, silencing everything else and demanding all of his attention. He felt no reason to stay, to continue burdening these people with his caustic present, stealing and wasting their heat, light, air. He turned away from them, mindlessly walking and weaving betwixt the piles of abandoned artwork, following the dim trail to the doorway.

"Are you ok?" Yokim had followed Adam, human nature spurring him to ensure Adam's wellbeing. Unknown to him, the action was futile - the question had been asked countless times, but always received the same answer.

"I'm fine," came the parroted, false response. It had become second nature to Adam, to lie about his emotional wellbeing. It was all he could respond with anymore - he had no motivation to say otherwise, to go through the trouble of sharing his burdens to another. No good would come from the truth anyway, other than brief pity before everyone stopped giving a shit.

"You sure? You sound unhappy." Yokim was unconvinced by the dull response.

"I'm fine," repeated Adam, briefly showing a faked smile to deceive Yokim. "Just tired."

Tired was an understatement. Anxiety and depression wreaked havoc with Adam once the moon arose, its pale light strengthening the emotional werewolves and vampires. His world became vast and hollow once depression arrived, reminding him of the immense distance between him and his closest of friends. It whispered failures in his ears endlessly, finding fault in anything and everything he had done in his life, dredging up long-forgotten memories if needed; *remember that kid you punched in primary school? His nose will always be slightly off, thanks to you. Remember that addiction you had? You'll never be free from it. You'll give in*

eventually. What good have you ever actually done?

In its wake, anxiety bloomed. There was no greater pestilence, no hardier weed, than the constricting growth that was anxiety. It would sprout from anywhere and everywhere, wrap its roots around anything it could, and refuse to wilt or leave. *Your rent is due. The air-conditioner needs fixing. Your sister needs help. Your grandfather will die soon, you haven't seen him in years. Flights aren't safe nowadays, you can't go see him. Your friends might have been killed. Your heart is pounding - this is bad. You're having an anxiety attack. Will you recover? What if this is it? What if this kills you?*

The two would dance around him endlessly, keeping his mind racing throughout the night. Simple tasks for others had become perilous quests for Adam - he hadn't slept in his own bed for months, defaulting to the uncomfortable couch in the superstition that he was more likely to sleep on it. It rarely helped, leaving him sore and exhausted in the morning; all the more susceptible to the twins that tortured him.

Adam struggled to open the stubborn metal door of the warehouse, taking a brief run-up before bursting out into the light. He didn't bother to close the door behind him, simply starting the long trek home. His mind and thoughts were hardly his own, puppeteered and toyed with by depression's spectre.

Donny is right and you know it. You're worthless. You fumble everything you do. Nothing you do will last. You're not even a good artist - you just stumble over popular ideas at the right time. You're pathetic.

Adam sat in his collapsing chair, staring blankly at the screen before him. Colourful, energetic characters jumped and ran across the screen, but the man watching barely noticed. His eyes followed them, but his mind was elsewhere.

> **GrayPhaser**: You there?

He wasn't. Even if he had, a conversation with Gray would be

unlikely. In their childhood they had been exceptional friends, though they had never truly met. A chance encounter within a digital realm, one that neither remembered anymore, forged the beginnings of their bond. Limited only by their imaginations, the two travelled through all kinds of lands simply to tell their stories; towns were established, governments rose and fell, new worlds found, species exterminated. Fun was the goal, and by any means it was achieved.

But the friendship was superficial and shallow. Time brought change, and change pulled them from the realms they had established to a place where their relation could do nought but fade. Though Gray remained forever close with the others of their group, their homes sharing the same region, Adam grew distant from them. Eventually they simply stopped talking. Eventually, they simply forgot about Adam. But Adam didn't.

A day came when Adam mustered the strength to try and rejoin them, but his mind was quickly changed. The people he spoke to were not his friends, but vague echoes of what he remembered. They had become corrupted and vile, following a path of life that Adam dared not even consider following. He was repelled from their presence, deciding to burn the remains of the destroyed bridge their friendship had become. Not a word of it was spoken to anyone, either - Adam was alone in the world, no other would share his view of their lives. A paradigm shift had occurred, good was evil and evil was good. Adam would just be seen as the demon he saw in them.

Without the bridge to his past, Adam could not retreat to his childhood. Without the ability to speak to others, he could not make a bridge forward; all he could do was stand still, and watch as his world collapsed.

Adam spun his seat around, surveying the bland and empty apartment that was his home. Featureless white walls and halls on all sides, bland grey carpeting across all floors. Furnishings were minimal to the point of nonexistence; a single-size bed sat undressed in his room, covered only by a coverless pillow and a thin sheet for his blanket. A small couch sat in the living room, directly opposite to the thirty-five inch television. His office consisted of a store-bought computer, a bland desk and the chair he sat upon. Adding in the outdated fridge in his kitchen, the list of Adam's

possessions became complete - there were no paintings, no plants, no statues, no prizes.

He had gone shopping several times in the hope he would find something to liven up his home. But every time he looked, every time he pondered upon them, he simply found them… boring. They did nothing useful, they looked uninteresting, so he simply never bought them. Income was no issue for Adam - he tossed enough garbage works into the void to more than make up for his expenditure. Worthless art fuelled the boring life of Adam the anartist, who lived only to make more worthless art. Some life that was.

His true works went overlooked and ignored by the community at large. He was an anartist, yes, but not the sort one would expect from the name; he was neither painter nor sculptor, not a maker of physical or visual arts. He was a wordsmith, a man who forged places and events with information and strokes on his keyboard, moulding them into the mind of the reader. And yet, the same dismissive comments came in, time and time again - "words are not art," they would say. "Anart is physical, visual, tactile, experience. Stories are not. Go make some real art."

Few even feigned an attempt to defend him. Yokim was one of them. "This is fantastic! How do you do this?" Nothing but false words, half-assed comments to continue his misery. Adam could tell. He couldn't prove it, but he could feel their condescension, their pity for an inferior lesser. They were right - words were no art, and Adam's works were less than words. Art made a point, was remembered, stood out. Stories were read, then forgotten. Adam's probably weren't even considered.

Adam had no hope of succeeding. He had *no hope* to represent his group, Donny was *right* - Adam was *worthless, incapable* of achieving *anything worthwhile, meaningful, purpose filled*. His work *was less than filth,* utterly valueless.

Your existence is an insult. There is only one worthwhile thing you can do. Do it, you pathetic fuck.

Adam did as his mind told him, opening a word document. He knew

what he was supposed to do, the only way he could give his existence some semblance of purpose he could experience.

Tap tap tap. He wrote.

Tap tap tap. He wrote down the experience of his last few hours.

Tap tap tap. He spilled his mind, his disgusting, worthless mind, onto the page.

Tap tap tap. He remembered, and explained. The lifeblood of his soul explained his feelings.

Within half an hour, the document was host for 1,970 words. The story of a worthless, forgettable man occupied the data of the page, wasting the space on his hard drive just as he wasted the atoms comprising him.

Minutes later, the task was completed, the art now anart. A short time frame for a simple task, the page adopting a poor man's gimmick - once the file was saved, fiction would become fact, all the events within becoming true. *A mediocre ability for a mediocre writer.*

It was ready. All he needed to do was finish it, add the last little bit, and it would be done. The only work of his that people would care about, the only one that did something worthwhile. The only impact he could ever make upon the world.

With no reason to avoid the inevitable, Adam wrote the final four words - the most important words he had ever written in his entire life - before saving the file:

And

Then

He

Died.

ADANA Protocol

Heimdall Contingency 045- ADANA

Abstract:- At present, the majority of Heimdall contingencies are oriented towards a military invasion. While this is not an empty threat, the possibility of other methods of conquest should still be taken into place. In the case of an ADANA scenario, this is an economic victory. Any HE that poses a threat to earth can be assumed to possess technology significantly in advance of ours. The dissemation of this technology would almost certainly make the majority, if not all, of human technology worthless, rendering humanity dependent on the HEs and causing a *de facto* occupation.

Scenario: There are two main methods a HE species could use to cause an ADANA scenario

1. Overt- the public revelation of the invaders' existence, and a direct offering of alien technology.
2. Covert- Secret contact with, and delivery of technology to, select human agencies

In both cases, advanced technology would be offered, far in advance of humans. Three likely areas this technology would involve include medical (a vital technology, and likely to ensure positive feelings towards the invaders from the general public), industrial (again, vital, highly marketable, and gains indirect control over human manufacturing and other areas), and military technology (useful for ensuring survival and victory of human subjects, provides intimidation and deterrence for attacks), although for obvious reasons, this list is neither exhaustive nor confirmed.

Once technology has been disseminated, either directly or through proxies, it would rapidly (estimates show at best years, more likely to months) out-compete and replace all modern technology in these areas. Assuming the HEs do not give humans the ability to construct these technologies, they could easily force the

implementation of laws or other activities using the threat of their removal, or the promise (fulfilled or unfulfilled) of additional gifts. Alternately or in addition, technologies such as remote control could give HEs direct control of means of production, allowing near complete economic domination. It seems likely additional technology will be given to ensure further dependency. After an estimated years, all technology will be based on the alien models, giving them almost complete control over the human race.

Protocol: In the event of an overt ADANA scenario, the Veil Protocol will rapidly become ineffectual (although it will still be kept in place in relation to anomalous items). In this scenario, the best method is to turn human opinion against the technology. This can be done by spreading information about potential harmful effects of the technology (real or otherwise), and/or to encourage xenophobic opinions towards the aliens, leading to a reduced usage of their technologies. Attempting to enforce legal restrictions on the alien technology is also to be implemented in all sympathetic legislatures. This is unlikely to end the scenario, but is likely to delay complete technological dependency. This time is to be used to obtain and reverse-engineer alien technology, allowing us to create it on our own and breaking dependency. In the event the technology is too advanced to do this, or reverse engineering fails for other reasons, the abduction and interrogation of HEs or human proxies is authorised (it is assumed, given the HE's ability to communicate and understand human reasoning, that they share sufficient mental similarities to humans to be usefully interrogated), although efforts must be made to prevent a direct hostile event. Once the technology is reverse engineered, the dissemination of this technology at minimal prices, utilising the previous xenophobic ideas, is to be immediately carried out. If reverse engineering fails completely, hostile action may be used with a unanimous vote by the council.

In a covert ADANA scenario, the Veil protocol may still be possible-if so, it is to be implemented. In either case, the organisation or organisations that hold alien technology are to be destroyed by any means possible. In the case of businesses, full economic warfare by all SCP fronts is to be initiated, including industrial espionage and sabotage. Attempts at legal attacks and/or public slander will also be utilised. National bodies will be removed from power-in the case of

smaller nations, assassinations and attempts at sparking rebellions or coups are to be performed. In larger nations, the use of scandals, public opinion, and possible assassination will be used to spark the removal of current government, and hopefully HE proxies. If this proves ineffectual, similar methods to smaller countries will be utilised. Secret organizations are to be publicly revealed, if necessary at the cost of the Foundation's own secrecy. The use of public and legal opposition is to be used to destroy the organizations. The reverse engineering of technology is still to take place. This may lead to an overt ADANA scenario, or a direct invasion—please report to the protocols for those scenarios in this case.

In all cases except where the continued survival of the Foundation or the success of the ADANA contingency is at risk, the Foundation will not utilize alien technology before reverse engineering, and will not use it as a mass technology. The estimated threat of an ADANA scenario is a 92% risk of full conquest. With Foundation protocols, it is reduced to an estimated 46%.

Likely warning signs of an ADANA scenario include the following. If large numbers happen in a short period of time, the council is to meet to determine the possibility of an ADANA scenario.

- Increased UFO sightings and other standard signs of increased extraterrestrial activity,
- The disappearance of technological devices (Attempts to test human advancement and suitability for conquest)
- Strange riots, behavior, or other psychological incidents (Attempts to test human responsiveness before invasion)
- Sabotage of human industrial progress (Attempt to increase human level of dependency)
- Sudden, inexplicable advances in technology (May show a covert ADANA scenario taking place—investigate and, if necessary, implement protocol)

Additional Resources

Dietrich stepped out of the bathroom stall and headed for the sink. His hard soled shoes echoed off the walls with each step, and the cool rushing faucet water broke the silence in the empty men's restroom. A quick splash of water to the face to calm his nerves a bit and a long exhale later, he looked through the mirror in front of him and over his own shoulder.

"…Yeah I know… I saw the email too… it's scheduled in three weeks, what you reckon I do about it?"

He paused to wait for the answer, but shook his head dismissively.

"**Merle**… seriously… I ain't havin' this today, understand? Don't make me regret teachin' ya sign language. Can ya just be quiet fer the next hour?"

He splashed more water on his face and dried off, careful not to drip any onto his black tie or white oxford shirt. His frizzy hair standing almost straight up, but that's how it normally was and most agents could care less how their hair looks while on duty. Dietrich would much rather be fishing for bluegill in the cool Ozark lakes than continue looking at Merle's blank expression in that mirror.

"I can't be talkin' to you like this right now. Why? Because folks are getting wise to this act like they always do. And if we're still here for the annual exam, shit's really gonna hit the fan fer the both of us."

He paused for a moment to look at the response.

"Fine. Just help me keep it together fer another week then I'll put in the transfer outta here before the appointment. But'cha gotta give me some space, Merle. Good? Good."

He adjusted his shoulder holster one last time before exiting the restroom and into the hallway, trying not to directly look at Merle in

his periphery (which was something he'd gotten quite adept at).

Karlyle adjusted his jacket and walked into the server room. The technology center at Site-19 was impressive, no doubt, and to Karlyle it might as well have been magic. He toyed with the idea of childishly pulling a plug, just to see what kind of chaos it might wreak, but decided that would be better left to somebody a bit younger and a bit less responsible.

Dr. Hamilton was waiting for him near the north wall, idly tinkering with a loose socket. He noticed Karlyle approaching and stood up to shake his hand.

"Director," Hamilton said, "welcome to the server racks. This is… well, it's not *the* central mainframe, but it is for our department."

Karlyle shook his hand. "A pleasure, doctor. As always, the innovations that Site-19 is capable of producing are a wonder to me." Hamilton chuckled politely. "I assume that you received my inter-office communication, then?" Karlyle continued.

Hamilton nodded. "I got your email, sure. What did you want to talk about?"

"Your **AI division**. I saw some of your preliminary results, and I was thoroughly impressed. My technicians at Site-81 are interested in setting up a similar model, and have a very rough prototype in the making, but…" He paused, furrowing his brow. "Some of the more nuanced specifications are foreign to them, I am afraid."

"That's just fine, I know exactly who you need to be talking to." He hesitated. "That said, I'm not exactly sure why you're here. You're a busy guy, couldn't you have sent somebody?"

Karlyle smiled. "I enjoy seeing new things, doctor. Besides, I was in town for other business."

The moment Karlyle ended his sentence, Dietrich entered the room. He immediately adjusted his slouching posture and tried to suppress

any amount of apparent surprise. The server room was about as exciting as the janitor's closet and about as frequently visited by the higher-ups. Nevertheless, it was just another Wednesday to them.

"Howdy." Dietrich expressed his normal casual greeting to both. "Don't reckon you two have login issues do ya?"

Merle visibly face-palmed in an adjacent reflection; an expression entirely ignored by Dietrich.

"Hardly." Hamilton gave a quirky smile. "Actually we were just discussing you, Agent Lurk."

"Lurk?" Karlyle raised a brow a bit. "That is not a call-sign is it?"

"No, it's uh, Scottish… Pa's side. Used to be *M'Lurgh*, but ya know how 'Mericans got trouble pronouncin things and such. Pretty much everyone reacts the same way when they hear it the first time."

Hamilton nodded awkwardly. "Right. Anyway, the Director is looking for someone to help develop an AIC for Site-81."

Dietrich looked at Hamilton, then Karlyle, and finally a quick glance at Merle who was pointing his attention back at the doctors.

Dietrich tilted his head in response, "Look… I may quack like a researcher, but I sure as hell ain't one… sir. I just help the real nerds turn their pet projects into practical tools. Tightenin' up that gap between theory and practical stuff, ya know?"

Karlyle smiled. "As it turns out, that is exactly what I am here to discuss. Dr. Hamilton, if I may?"

Hamilton waved his hand dismissively. "Go right ahead, director. I've got this feeling that I don't want to be any more involved than this."

Karlyle gestured to a side room, and followed Lurk into it. He closed the door behind them, and they sat down at the conference table.

"Mr. Lurk… "

"Better to call me Dietrich, if'n ya want to use names."

Karlyle nodded. "All right, Dietrich. I want to talk about your AICs, and how they might respond to an invasive, wholly technological threat." He kicked back in his chair. "Let us say that some aggressive, technological SCP entity breaches containment somewhere and gets onto the mainframe for a site. They are threatening to lock the site down, activate the on-site device, as such. How would one of your AICs handle such a situation?"

"Well…" Dietrich tipped back a bit in his chair to construct his words, ruminating on the problem for some time. "First off, this ain't *my* division. I've just been helpin' them get off the floor and into the field so ta speak. And second, I reckon it depends. AICs are like real folks. They think, feel, make mistakes… they just do it much faster than we can.

"But that's just it ain't it?" he continued, leaning forward. "They think fast and are even faster on the trigger… and sometimes both at the same time. If the barn's on fire, ya don't wait fer it to rain, right?"

Karlyle nodded. "In your experience, then, do you feel like the models we have available now are suitable for handling a site's day-to-day activities?"

"Reckon so. That's what they's built fer, anyway."

"What about combat?"

Dietrich hesitated. "What *about* combat?"

"Imagine, if you will, that an anomalous threat becomes apparent somewhere in the world. How far do we have to go until the AICs are capable of addressing the threat directly, attacking it and containing it, without outside direction?"

"AICs gotta be trained like anyone else. Acting on their own takes experience and experience can't be programmed. I mean sure… yer typical virus s'not even on the radar. But anomalous threats are…"

Dietrich's eyes darted past Karlyle for a moment to view Merle signing a message to him in the reflection of the wall mounted

touch-screen. Before he could pick up on what Merle was trying to convey he realized he was pausing for too long.

"…unpredictable," he concluded. "It'll take some time 'fore being let off the leash like ya want."

Karlyle took a quick glance behind him, looked straight at Merle. Seeing nothing, he turned back to Dietrich and nodded in acknowledgement. "I see."

"Sir?" Dietrich asked. "S'there some'em that the AICs need to contain currently?"

Karlyle squinted. He wasn't quite sure how to handle this strange man. He was knowledgeable, certainly, but something seemed off.

"Not necessarily," he said, leaning forward. "Currently I am just exploring possibilities, for my own site and for other projects."

"Other projects?"

"Mr. Lurk-"

"Dietrich."

"Yes, apologies. Dietrich, how suitable would you say you are to maintain these systems in the field? How adequate is your expertise in this area?" He looked over Dietrich's shoulder into the server room beyond them. "Additionally, what other projects are you currently assigned to?"

"Currently? Just this. I've been bouncing from divisions and labs ever since I got transferred outta Mu-13. But in the field… we got some stuff on the backburner havin to do with mobile apps and AICs. That'd be a good start fer what yer lookin fer."

Dietrich placed his standard issue mobile device on the conference table. "I know these AICs well, sir. I can't build one from scratch, but I can tune and tweak them. That is to say, I know a'nuff. Ain't that right, Alex?"

The phone beeped and responded in a perky female voice. «That's right, sir!»

Karlyle looked down at the phone with an air of curiosity. "This is the fourth generation system, yes? The Alexandra system?"

Dietrich nodded. "Yessir, hosted right here in 19. The latest and greatest artificially intelligent conscript they've made to date."

The old doctor lifted the phone. An avatar of a blue haired young woman sat centered on the screen, and smiled when it turned to face Karlyle.

«Good afternoon, Dr. Aktus!» The vocal synthesis, Karlyle considered, was very good. «It is a pleasure to finally meet you.»

Karlyle addressed Dietrich. "This can hear me?"

«Sure can!» Alexandra replied, blinking a notification light. «I'm integrated into all of the hardware designed for these devices, and have access to whatever utility I want to use, whenever I need to use it. Cameras, microphones, lasers-» she laughed «-ok, maybe not lasers, but I'm sure they're working on that too!»

"Fascinating," Karlyle said, mulling the object over in his hands, "this is far superior to the *Access* system running at Site-81."

«*Access*, woof.» The avatar stuck out her tongue. «I've seen the source, that's pretty outdated stuff.»

Karlyle raised an eyebrow in agreement. "Dietrich, if you are willing, I might have a position for you in the near future, that is, if you are interested in continuing your work with these AICs."

"Imma round peg, sir. Jack of all trades, master of none." Dietrich drummed his fingers on the table. "Kinda prefer it that way to be honest. Don't like gettin' pigeonholed. Kinda why I left Mu-13." He then stopped drumming. "That said… Site-81? It's a change in scenery I s'pose. Why not."

Merle nodded in agreement at the change. It was a blessing in

disguise for the two of them considering Dietrich was two steps and an annual psychiatric examination away from being labeled as schizophrenic.

"What's yer time frame, sir?" Dietrich asked.

Karlyle pulled a white envelope from within his jacket. "It would not necessarily be for Site-81, I am afraid," he said, sliding the envelope across the table to Dietrich, "and the time frame would be immediately."

Address to the Students and Faculty

Is everyone silenced?

Good.

Good evening to all the University community. I trust I find you well in thought and in deed. I am here to speak to you on a matter of grave importance. I am sure by now all of you have heard the heresies of Milephanes. Much as we the Administration have tried to shield you from him, he has proven sadly resourceful in spreading his lies. I have heard his polluted philosophy openly discussed by those I had thought to be honorable citizens and students. This will not go on.

And so I have brought you all here today to put an end to this pernicious strain of neo-Antiphonian ideology. Milephanes is a traitor and a revolutionary. He has turned away from his fathers. He would destroy the social order and natural philosophy that are the groundwork of our way of life.

Milephanes has slanderously alleged that we exert inappropriate control over the sacred institution of Democracy. This is patent nonsense. It has been eternally acknowledged that a democratic system is only as wise as its free men. We strengthen the people and so through them Democracy itself. The University, I would argue, presents the greatest ally Democracy has ever had. We teach all of you the finest wisdom of our forefathers, and protect you from the false beliefs that have been the ever-present enemy of a just and free society. And what proof more of an enlightened society could anyone ask than unanimity?

This wellspring of filth does not end there, however. Milephanes hews to that old, discredited, and counter-Aristotelian idea that there is or could be some equivalency in nature between slave and free man. He treats a notion more commonly found in comedies as though it had some serious philosophical merit. Imagine, however

hard it may be, a world where he were right. Just imagine a world without slaves! How would Milephanes propose fields be sowed? How would he propose houses be maintained? How would he propose wars be fought?

And he is most evidently not correct. Have you ever tried to speak to a slave? Most of them are unable to understand anything outside their duties, and those few that are capable of conversation know nothing of the Classical philosophers. They could not comprehend the nature of poetry, comedy, or tragedy. Only the keener mind of a free man, especially one educated at the University by the finest philosophers of this era, can contain the subtleties. Did not the great Hippocrates aptly observe that some, such as the Anatolians, were particularly suited as slaves? The slave is adept at the physical, like the beast; the free man is adept at the rational, like the Gods. The natures do not intersect.

The University has perfected this distinction. Thanks to our advancements in natural philosophy, no one need ever fear a slave or wife who has transgressed the bounds of orthoskepsi. The life of a citizen is freer and safer than ever before.

Not a word comes out of Milephanes's mouth that does not deceive, corrupt, and lead astray. I, and my fellow Chancellors at our other campuses, are committed to seeing an end to these dangerous views. We will not tolerate any more mention or acceptance of them on pain of expulsion or revocation of degree. These are harsh measures, I know, but experience has taught the Administration that it is better to extirpate this kind of heresy immediately than to allow it to survive long enough to collapse under the weight of its own falseness.

I bear the name of my father and his father before him, back to the earliest days of the Classical era. Love of the truth runs in my veins like ichor. And it is with the full weight of my legacy when I ask you, as an equal: Do not give credence to this madness. Let it begin and end in Milephanes, and let freedom and harmony return untarnished. Alexylva University is and remains a beacon of knowledge and wisdom. Never forget that.

May the Gods smile upon us all. Now, back to class!

Addressing the Second

Lord Hubris sits opposite Lord Wisdom. He is of the type Kahtar, and his symbol is the crown. To his right is the unknowable, which is invisible and colorless to only him, as he refuses to look upon it. To his left is the courageous, which is always a thorn in his side, as he refuses to concern himself with it. Betwixt he and the wise are the needy and unworthy, and he spits upon them with his belly's acid, because he believes he is above them.

The Daevites tell us that he will never die, for their book's end does not include him. Believe or disbelieve them as you wish.

Lord Hubris is of great cunning, it is said that with enough time he could always sway the council of equity into his favour. His strength is like that of a hundred men, but he never need exercise it, for his voice is his greatest weapon. He appeals to the hearts of man, so that in the depth of battle they will switch to his side. The face of Lord Hubris is unassailable, for to look into his eyes and hear his voice sways his enemy's allegiance.

Lord Hubris is deceptive and manipulative, and only Lord Wisdom is perfectly immune to his tricks. Despite that he is always able to be on the side of the betrayer, and that he is always able to persuade the doubts of the knowledgeable, he is unable to change the opinion of the wise.

Lord Hubris is of great endurance, it is said that if he can be cut in twain, his headless half will come alive to struggle with him. When in combat, even as his mortal foes strike blades into his flesh, he shrugs them off and speaks to them. Even when there are those who are particularly stubborn, the swathes of his claws will steal their fates away from them. Lord Hubris boasts that of all Espy that are able, none can beat him in battle, as he will outlast them always.

His opposition to the wise is unending and unyielding, for he believes the Daeva that he will live forever. He believes he can sully

Lord Wisdom's reputation such that the other ten members of the council turn against Lord Wisdom, and grant Lord Hubris his victory.

Starel laments.

Lord Hubris has the face of a ghost, but made with stone. It is like the whiteness of salt, but as hard as rock. He does not speak from his mouth, for his words pierce into the minds of those he is speaking to. It is said that the only times Lord Hubris changes his expression are in the memories of those who have spoken to him.

The neck of Lord Hubris is long and sinewy, so that his face may always look into the face of that which he is speaking to. Lord Hubris sheds blasphemies from his skin like sweat, and so to keep his face far from his body muffles the whispers of disgust. His talons are innumerable and smeared with the flesh of those who did not follow him, as he is a wrathful lord. His spit is black blood, and those who touch it are burned by it, and when enraged the drool of Lord Hubris is said to come alive, and form words in the drops it leaves on the ground.

Our Elders Twilight have told us that Lord Hubris has existed always, but has not always been as he is today. In a time long before ours he was instead two things, but have since become one. A visage made of **poor-slain**, worn by the ancient **Tarask**.

Adventuring Interlude

During a particular **`road trip adventure...`**

A new toy rolled off the production line at the Wondertainment toy factory. It was a cube. The cube was grey, and consisted of six sides, none of which were in any way differentiated from any of the other five; All six sides were completely equal in their grayness and flatness. The edges and corners were rounded, so as to remove all threatening influences from the cube and to provide a safe, feelings-appropriate environment. In addition, the cube was designed so that it was incapable of interacting with any other cubes, so as not to form unbalanced societal hierarchies such as stacks, rows, or piles. While a green dot had been included on one of the sides in the prototype, this was found to be offensive to certain obscure minority groups, and was subsequently removed. Colored shapes were written off entirely after this point.

The Executive Board nodded in approval of the focus group results, in one slow, knowing movement. A new age for Wondertainment toys, they thought as one.

Wheezing admissions of thanks rose from the board to the cube's designer; a little old lady who stood at the far end of the table. A special guest to the Workshops of Wonder.

An outside adviser.

—

Nowhere

A tide of rotting flesh swept up around Emma Aislethorp-Brown, throwing itself at the leviathan in an orgy of scrabbling fingers, and gnashing jaws. She was ignored. The Rotting Ones found their prey by the sound of its heartbeat, by the heat in its blood, by the stench of the slow decay of life.

Emma had a heart, but it was purely decorative. She watched the Rotting Ones gorge themselves on the Leviathan's corpse. A few more had crawled out of the monster's burst stomach, shambling around, half-melted by digestive juices and torn by teeth.

The rushing sound of contracting time-space rose to a deafening cacophony midway between silence and absence that overpowered the snarling, slobbering horde. It all fell in upon itself at once, blinked, and went black. Like a station switched off.

And then Nothing.

Emma floated in-between Here and There. Somewhere around her[1], the collapsed Way existed in a negative state. An inside-out space leading nowhere, arriving nowhere. The Rotting Ones would still be feasting, frozen in a moment, but they could not emerge, lest someone else flipped the negative space right side out again and stabilized it. With the map gone, and no place in the overarching directive to permit her, Emma had neither the inclination nor ability to do so. An uncommon occurrence.

Emma drifted, and while drifting, she thought. She didn't have much else to do. The plan reorganized itself, the underlying directives planted new supporting actions. Redundancies merged together, events shuffled themselves into an abbreviated timeline. Contingencies were pruned and alternatives sprouted anew. Variables arose. The specter of *attention* drifted onto the stage where probability danced the tango on the back of turtles all the way down.

Unwelcome, but not unplanned for. Even this far out, a Way collapsing, especially one that had been breached by a Leviathan, would attract attention. Though not immediately. There was still time for things to work out, still time to adapt.

From this side. As for Isabel…she was on her own, for the time being. A contingency triggered long before Emma had originally hoped. She had shaped events as best as she could for the child, but uneasiness still settled like a patina on her mind. Isabel was outside her protection. Unsupported. Prepared for, but nonetheless unwelcome. Why delegate to others what you can do better

yourself? Why leave a vulnerability open?

Alas, she couldn't be in more than one place and the same time. All the threads she had woven would now be on their own. Drifting as she was.

A light opened upon the Nothing. A gaping maw of burning white, circles within circles within circles, twisting and swirling and spiraling about, on a field of gunmetal grey.

Emma looked up into it, and hoped she had chosen the right people for the job.

—

The Workshops of Wonder

Mister Merit tugged at his red ascot. A nervous habit of his, something to show what his face didn't. The neatly folded note in his pocket itched to be taken out, to be revealed.

The Doctor had left to go on an adventure, and this was not unusual. The Doctor often left, and her adventures were often lengthy, but this particular time something was wrong. Somewhere down in his gut, Mr. Merit felt that some cosmic tumbler had shifted awry.

The toy factory was never this busy when the Doctor was gone. Now, misters and misses and workbots and roving hordes of Jeremies scurried about, as if the Doctor was sitting down in her office churning out blueprints until the pen caught on fire.[2] The halls were clouded with swarms of Memobots, all carrying messages from the Executive Board. More messages than ever before, and Mister Merit was unsettled by them. The print was too small and the words were too big, and they all looked incredibly important, but none of them mentioned where the Doctor had gone. Or the Doctor at all.

What they did mention was that an Outside Adviser had been brought in, an adviser that did not sit well with Mr. Merit.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" he asked the little old lady standing in front of him. She had little round glasses, and a pink shawl over her shoulders, and freshly permed blueish-grey hair, and

a warm, friendly smile.

“It’s nothing to worry about, dear. The Executive Board invited me in as an adviser for the new toy line. You don’t need to worry yourself at all.”

Mr. Merit glanced at the little old lady’s twin bodyguards; two tall robots with gleaming chassis and rubber faces to make them look like people. They did not look fun. They looked…wrong, to Mister Merit. He was used to Wondertainment robots, which had all sorts of knobs and dials and doodly-doos and thingamawhatzits and doohickeys and various other choking hazards. These looked like they were just popped out of the mold and fit together, without so much as a kung-fu action grip.

“I don’t recall the Doctor saying anything about you.”

“I was brought in after she had left for her trip, though I am looking forward to meeting with her when she returns.”

Mister Merit kept a brave face and nodded. Better to just let her go. He didn’t like the way her eyes twinkled, or the look of her robotic friends, and the appeal was lessening by the moment.

“All right then. Enjoy your stay here,” he said with the most genuine cheer he could fake.

“Thank you very much. Now, don’t get into any trouble now, dear. Wouldn’t want you to get involved in any messes while the Doctor is away.”

The little old lady walked off down the hall, her guards clanking alongside her. Did she know? Had she seen through the cracks of his act? Was she weighing her suspicions now? Or had she not picked up on it, and just seen the simple-natured Mister who was a bit confused at the change of pace? Mr. Merit had no idea which, but he felt himself erring on the side of fear. She was a little old lady. Little old ladies were powerful creatures. They could smell fear. And secrets. Mr. Merit had both of them in large quantities. The note in his pocket felt as heavy and conspicuous as a brick of lead.

Down more halls up some stairs, out away from the hustle and bustle of the workshops and up towards the Doctor's tower. It was empty, at least to appearances, but that said only so much. The Executive Board was not very good at listening, but they were very good at hearing things. Horrible at seeing, but excellent at watching.

Mr. Merit didn't trust them, or the little old lady. That alone would have been the source of his nervousness, but the note in his pocket outdid all of that.

Miss Emma had given him the note when the Doctor was preparing to leave. It read:

> My quarters. 1650.

It was four-forty-six right now. Mister Merit didn't question the directive: he had no reason to distrust the Doctor's assistant. One didn't doubt assistants like Miss Emma.

Four-forty-nine. He had reached the room, just down the hall from the Doctor's office. He opened the door.

Miss Emma's room was empty. A blank white room. No bed, no chair, no desk, no papers, no windows, no carpet, no vents, nothing but a tile floor and whitewashed walls and a vague, diffused light.

That, and a single, lavender note was stuck to the far wall, artistically out of place. Mister Merit went over and read it. The handwriting was perfect, nearly typewritten.

> Go into the center of the room and say 'Hello, are you there? I need help' in a loud, clear voice.

Mister Merit pulled the note off the wall and walked into the center of the room. He had no idea what to expect from it. He hoped some sort of help, to set things straight. That's what Miss Emma was there for, right? To put things in order.

"Hello, are you there? I need help," said Mister Merit in a loud, clear voice.

A nothing sound whispered down the back of Mister Merit's neck, as

if someone was standing in the room behind him. That, of course, was ridiculous, as there was nobody in the room, and he had closed the door behind him.

He turned around, and saw that he was not actually alone in the room.

The stranger standing there looked to be a miss with very short brown hair, wearing a ratty blue t-shirt, jeans with frayed hems and a jacket that had faded from black to grey. They smelled of smoke, the old, stale kind that soaked into clothes.

The stranger had their head tilted to the right.

“You called?” The voice was bright and cheery; a bubblegum and lollipops voice.

“I did.” Mister Merit tugged at his ascot. He had had enough of strange people today. “Who are you?”

The stranger tilted their head to the left.

“Who’s the one person you can always find in an empty room?” The voice was rough and gravelly now; a two packs a day voice.

“No one, I suppose,” Mister Merit said.

Tilt to the right.

“No one important, at least! Though since I introduced myself, I should be asking you who you are, because you don’t look much like Em.”

“I’m Mister Merit. Miss Aislethorp-Brown is not here at the moment.”

Tilt to the left.

“I can see that.”

“She left a note.” Mister Merit handed it to the stranger.

Tilt to the right.

“Oh Em, what have you gotten yourself into now?”

“What? What’s going on?”

Nobody sighed, crumpled up the paper, and stuffed it in her pocket.

“Hope you like the cleanup crew. Em has some leftovers for us to mop up.”

—

Somewhere

Isabel Wondertainment looked out over the cliff’s craggy edge, at the valley choked with ancient pines. Two moons, too big, hung in the deepening blue sky above the young bladed mountains. One was grey and plain. One was made of clockwork.

“Jeremy, I don’t think we’re in the workshop any more."

« **Part 2:** `The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure` | `Hub` | **Part 4:** `Memory of Days Long Past` »

Footnotes
1. Though “around” was a purely subjective term at this point, at least anywhere that was not Emma Aislethorp-Brown.
2. The invention of the Wondertainment Asbestos-Pen™ had cut down on this significantly.

After Action Report 2272'

> *On 7 November 2016, 0430 Eastern Daylight Time, operatives with* ***Local Mobile Task Force 352-Dalet*** *received reports from Major League Baseball wire services that RHP Ellis Canastota had been assigned to the 40 man roster of the Cincinnati Reds franchise. This event triggered heightened alert notices to be sent to all staff assigned to* ***SCP-2272****. At 0445 Eastern Daylight Time, a second notice was sent through official MLB channels that Ellis Canastota had been called up to join the 25 man major league roster of the Cincinnati Reds. All available personnel, including the entirety of LMTF 352-Dalet, were then mobilized.*

He lay on his side and continued staring at the bright green digits of the alarm clock on the side table. Every few seconds, at irregular intervals, his work phone would buzz, the flood of emails vibrating the half-empty water glass and moving the phone slightly closer to the edge of the table each time. They had sent him home to sleep, and that's what he was going to pretend to do for the next couple of hours, by God.

The clock blinked suddenly to 4:29 AM. *Bzzt bzzt.* The phone continued its shuffle to the edge of the table. They probably thought they were doing everyone a favor when they sent the declassified info around. Like they were letting everyone in on a big secret. Who wouldn't enjoy that? *Bzzt bzzt bzzt.* He certainly hadn't. No one had said anything about mass distribution of cyanide ampules that he had ever heard. There weren't any rumors. He had been blissfully unaware. Before last week, his biggest headache had been the nonstop political advertisements on the car radio. Those were the days.

The clock blinked to 4:30 AM. His phone started a lower, repeated, much more insistent buzzing now. The additional force of the

vibrations carried the phone right off the edge, finally completing its journey to the floor with a thud. The buzzing of the waiting phone call persisted, muffled now by the carpet. He leaned down and groped for the phone, dreading what he knew he would see. He picked it up, the light from the screen hurting his eyes as he looked at it.

"Calling: Regional Director Kate McTiriss."

He shielded his eyes from the light of the phone, trying in vain to dull the throbbing in his head.

"Allred-Smith here."

The Director's voice chirped in his ear. He sat all the way up on his bed. So much for pretending to sleep.

"They're going to call up Canastota? Huh. Well, figured we were due to catch a prime by this point. Okay, what're your orders?"

The voice on the other end of the line provided a laundry list of instructions and available personnel. If the Director was more worried than normal, she didn't show it. Some things were the same, he guessed.

"Got it. I'll go ping the clandestine IT guys to scrub all this. Is the office open yet?"

He tried smoothing a deep crease in his shirt with the palm of his hand. The crease paid him no mind. Nor did his hair as he tried to smooth it back down with his fingers. Whatever. Let someone complain about him looking like he'd slept on a park bench and come into work. He could use some comic relief.

"Because I need something out of there. Just in case."

He put on his shoes and straightened his tie. He grabbed a baseball cap from the dresser to cover his hair. He laughed despite himself.

"Hmm, no, nothing. Yeah, that's what I'm getting. You have a-"

The voice cut him off. He listened intently as he surveyed himself in

the mirror. The cartoon fish on the front of his cap wrapping itself around a baseball bat looked like he meant business.

"Huh. Decommission? That's a new one. No, no. Don't worry boss, we won't hesitate if things get hairy."

The Director hung up. He looked for his car keys. This was probably going to involve more than the IT guys before this was done.

> *At 0521 hours, the MLB official scheduler posted a notice online for a game to be played at noon the same day, between the Cincinnati Reds and the Saint Louis Cardinals, at the Great American Ballpark in central Cincinnati. The starting pitchers were listed as Mike Leake for the Saint Louis Cardinals, and Ellis Canastota for the Cincinnati Reds.*

"What do you mean they're playing a game today? They just finished the goddamn World Series!" Dr. Hanaka barked loud enough to be heard from the front of the bus-sized mobile command center as it sped north on Interstate 75. "It's probably snowing there or something by now."

"Actually, the weather is pretty nice today." Agent Allred-Smith gazed out the window as he balanced the long black case on his knees. "Which is far worse for keeping people out of the stadium."

"Fuck," sighed Dr. Hanaka. "How many tickets were sold before we took the notice down?"

A young woman sitting across from Allred-Smith at a mobile terminal quickly pecked at a keyboard. "17,397 tickets total, ma'am. It's a good thing we got the ESPN piece before they aired it. Pretty novel, an exhibition game right after the Series."

"Seventeen thousand. This is a goddamn disaster." Dr. Hanaka paced to the rear of the command center. "Enriquez, get into the ballpark contracting system. I want our security folks there, and if we can I want concessions done by us too. Everyone in that park who isn't on the field or in the stands should be one of us."

The young logistics officer looked up at Dr. Hanaka from his terminal. "You want us selling hot dogs?"

Dr. Hanaka's eyes flashed behind her glasses. She loomed over the sitting Enriquez. "Hot dogs, beer, licorice, nachos and fucking churros if we can manage it!" She threw her clipboard to the floor. "We've got a breaching anomaly with a paying audience of seventeen thousand goddamn people. You shut the fuck up and do as you're goddamn told, understand?"

Agent Allred-Smith couldn't help but think back to the last time he heard Dr. Hanaka speak, at a seminar on academic peer review a few months ago. He recalled struggling to hear the soft-spoken doctor from the back of the room. He coughed into his fist a couple times to conceal his laughter as the unfortunate Enriquez scrambled to fulfill his orders.

> *LMTF 352-Dalet arrived at the Great American Ballpark in Cincinnati at 1147 hours local time. Given the number of civilians in the vicinity with the specific purpose of attending a baseball game, closing the ballpark was deemed to be unfeasible. By the time doors were opened to spectators, 78% of service personnel within the stadium were comprised of Foundation or Foundation-contracted personnel. Operatives at the scene elected to monitor the ongoing events and determine the next course of action.*

Agent Dunbar stepped into the luxury suite, crammed with wires, monitoring equipment and computer terminals, befitting an improvised command center. He looked out the window. The field below was ready for play, the grass freshly mowed, the infield perfectly manicured, a fresh Reds logo outlined in chalk behind home plate.

"They just posted the lineups ma'am. You're not going to like it."

Dr. Hanaka sighed. "How can there even *be* lineups? We've checked locations on everyone, none of the players from either team are in the area, or aware of the game. What does it matter?"

Agent Dunbar fidgeted slightly. "Canastota is starting at every position."

"Great," said Dr. Hanaka. "More of him."

"For both teams, ma'am."

The room was silent for a moment, all of the members of LMTF 352-Dalet looking to Dr. Hanaka for the next set of orders. She looked down at the game. Cheers went up as what looked like the Cincinnati Reds took the field. She grabbed a set of field binoculars and looked again. Sure enough, every single player was the same smiling, dark-haired young man. Each one's uniform bearing the same number 72 on the back, the name "Canastota" embroidered above.

She looked to the signals technician of the group. "Readings?"

An older man at an especially equipment-laden terminal responded. "Aerial sonar readings are negative. There's no one on the field except the umpires."

"At least he's not officiating his own game. That would be unsporting." Dr. Hanaka put down the binoculars. "Narrative officers! I need disinfo and social media posts out and blanketing the internet within fifteen minutes. This is a publicity stunt. See that it's perceived that way. Be ready to pull it back if things don't go well."

A group of three researchers in the corner of the room immediately pulled out phones and laptops and got to work. Dr. Hanaka moved on.

"Crowd control! Ensure that all of our vendors are fully stocked with Class C's. Don't start distributing unless I give the order."

A man in a police officer's uniform stepped out of the room, already relaying instructions into the walkie-talkie in his hand.

"Memetics! I want every communication coming out of that stadium screened for anomalous influences! Use the new AI we've developed. We don't have time to round up human subjects for observation."

A frazzled-looking woman in the seats by the windows, concern in her eyes, opened her mouth. She looked up at Dr. Hanaka. She closed her mouth and began tapping at a tablet computer.

"And you, Agent Allred-Smith." Dr. Hanaka now loomed over the Agent, reclining in a chair next to the suite refrigerator. "I want you up in the cheap seats with your toy there."

She nodded to the long black case in Agent Allred-Smith's lap. He nodded back. "Your signal?"

"My signal, Agent."

> *Due to ongoing containment efforts coordinated at the scene by LMTF 352-Dalet, spectators at Great American Ballpark were documented to be under the impression that they were watching a non-anomalous game of baseball until approximately 1452 hours local time, coinciding with the middle of the game's seventh inning. At that time, an individual matching all known biometric data of the baseball player Pedro Borbón[1] and identifying themselves as such took the field and was handed a microphone, presumably as part of the traditional singing of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh inning of baseball games. Notable discomfort among assembled spectators was audible as the identity of the speaker became apparent.*

Agent Allred-Smith surveyed the infield through his high-powered scope. Part of SCP-2272 duty was being familiar with baseball, and he knew a dead player when he saw one. He touched his earpiece.

"This is way beyond documented behavior, Doctor. Do I have authorization?"

Dr. Hanaka barked within his ear. "No, god damn it! You have authorization when I say you do!"

"You going to wait until a dead man starts doing…whatever the hell it is dead people do, here?"

"Your apparatus is set up?"

Agent Allred-Smith touched the tripod directly in front of him. "Affirmative, doctor."

"Then you'll be able to react in under five seconds when I give the word. I'd explain how we need to learn all we can, but then I don't need to explain jack shit to you, Agent. You wait for my signal."

"Roger that, Doctor." He leaned back in his seat. The dead man was speaking now, the crowd on their feet in anticipation.

Pedro Borbón, noted multi-inning relief pitcher and deceased member of the Big Red Machine teams of the 1970s, looked skyward as he held the microphone.

"Sport is a wonderful symbol of the human condition. You will be relieved to hear that, much the same way it is in this place, in our perfect society, sport is a sacred pastime."

The crowd was silent.

"Sport is more than competition. Sport creates victors and vanquished. The feeling of triumph cannot exist without the sacrifice of the defeated. You will understand more after we have truly spoken." The dead pitcher, looking every bit the spry athlete of generations ago, spoke with an impassive face. "This place, this game, this creation. This is a fine place for us to speak plainly."

Agent Allred-Smith scanned the crowd for any unusual activity. All in the stadium were still, and perfectly silent. For the first time, the pitcher smiled.

"We have heard a story from your people, many times, I'm sure you're familiar. Of a man asking his friend, returned from the grave, if there is baseball in heaven. Let me tell you, my brothers and sisters, there is baseball in heaven."

The speaker laughed, a high-pitched, screeching thing, not at all matching the expression on his face. Allred-Smith trained the scope on the pitcher's face.

"And today, we can all see together, they have baseball in hell, too."

As he stopped speaking, the house organ came up, the familiar notes of the traditional song of seventh-inning stretches across the country ringing out. Pedro Borbón doffed his cap for the silent audience, and faded away into nothing. The organ continued. No one sang.

> *Communications via social media and personal messages from civilians in attendance of the game increased greatly following the remarks of the unknown entity during the seventh inning. The number of messages, combined with the content indicating what had occurred, necessitated elevated containment protocols. At 1459 hours local time, Doctor Akane Hanaka authorized decommissioning of SCP-2272' and mass deployment of amnestics.*

The precursor agents had been authorized for distribution at the end of the third inning. Every refreshment item served in the ballpark had Part A of a Class C two-part amnestic. Based on field studies and their own observations of the game, the task force chemist assured Dr. Hanaka that the penetration rate was in excess of 90%. More than enough to ensure memory alteration and suggestibility among the "critical mass" threshold of the crowd. Dr. Hanaka nodded, and barked some words into a nearby handset.

A small prop plane, carrying a banner behind it reading "2016 Winter Exhibition" and previously circling the stadium throughout the day, now swooped low over the Great American Ballpark, looking to have just enough altitude to avoid hitting the lights. A great plume of scarlet smoke billowed from the rear of the plane. Part B was being released. The reaction would be powerful enough to allow the narrative team to construct a plausible mass delusion that would hopefully obscure all details of what the crowd had watched here today.

As the plane flew overhead, Agent Allred-Smith adjusted his gas mask and lined up his shot. The camera mounted on the tripod was a delicate, finicky instrument, and the satellite link was proving tricky. Three different observation modalities, including a converted

form of the sonar feed, were needed to achieve the necessary viewpoint in which SCP-2272 would be obliterated. The research seemed to indicate that capturing the image of SCP-2272 in a format which would allow it to be both observed and unobserved would render it unstable as a coherent memeplex. Or something. The reasoning was above his paygrade.

The green indicator light flashed on. He trained the camera on the field, making sure to capture the players on the field, the man waiting on deck, and both dugouts, all the smiling likeness of Ellis Canastota, number 72, right hand pitcher. All visual feeds were in tandem and functioning. He took the shot.

At that moment, the billowing red cloud of smoke descended on him, obscuring the field, the seats, and all of his surroundings. He held the mask tight in place against his face, ensuring that none of the air around him leaked in. The amnestics officer would be pissed if they had to reconstruct his memory.

A wind kicked up from the north, blowing out over the Ohio River and carrying the smoke out over the right field bleachers, like so many fly balls hit before. The view began to return as the smoke dissipated and retreated. Agent Allred-Smith dared a glance down at the field.

Empty. Four dumbstruck umpires were congregated around the pitcher's mound, doubtless discussing whether to call the game before their minds were temporarily thrown into a suggestible torpor. No players on the field, in foul territory, or in the dugouts. Not an Ellis Canastota to be seen.

An image appeared on the camera's viewfinder. Allred-Smith looked closely. The image he had taken, the image that had apparently neutralized this long-running anomalous phenomenon, was not of the playing field of Great American Ball Park. In its place, a black and white team photo showed on the camera's screen, 25 men arranged neatly in rows, wearing uniforms that he recognized as those of the first Cincinnati Redlegs teams. All 25 men bore the exact same smile that he had come to recognize as that of Ellis Canastota.

Unlike a typical team photo, this photo was taken at night, under the stars. Nine moons could be seen in the sky. A sign propped in front of the smiling squadron read "The Past, the Future." All 25 men were holding their arms out in front of them. All 25 men were missing their hands.

Footnotes
1. Pedro Borbón was confirmed deceased in 2012.

Cover Letter for After-Action Report: Operation Free Market

To:	The Office of The Foundation's Director of Mobile Task Forces
From:	Major Roger Dunn <MTFC, Mu-3>
Subject:	Re: Operation Free Market

Likely you have already heard some of the immediate details of this operation's aftermath, through unofficial channels, before receiving this account. While you will find collected in the official file all the pertinent reports from my Force's operatives in the field, I feel obliged to append my own review and rationalization for the actions that were taken and their results.

The first point to address is that, in spite of our own focus on tactical espionage, our plans were hampered by a spy within the Foundation. Please note that this double-agent was not a member of MTF Mu-3, but nosed their way into our mission regardless. The complications which arose are, almost entirely, to blame on this unexpected element.

I say almost entirely because I am not above shouldering my share of the responsibility. Our ambition

was to strike an unexpected and severe blow to Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP (which, remember, we did do in the form of removing a valuable Item from circulation, and a Broker from their roster). Our decision to recruit a U-MTF Handler from outside our own Task Force, for access to their long-standing deep-cover contacts, is what created the information gap that gave the former Agent Roman the opportunity to insert themselves into the operation.

Let me state now, for the record, that this is not an admonition of Handler Aaron Moore. I fully understand his concerns for the safety of his contacts, and maintaining their cover. But the inherent value of the information, and strict adherence to InfoSec practices in response, limited Mu-3's overall ability to communicate and effect a truly cohesive plan of action.

In light of this mitigating factor, Captain Al Yorston's ability to improvise and implement a plan to recover the items deserves particular regard. Our Task Force makes use of advanced equipment and techniques, but instilled in each operative is also a healthy respect for the classic tenets of this work. Cpt. Yorston demonstrated a textbook

application of the principle 'Adapt and Overcome', at more than one point in this operation. For exceeding expectations in the face of a constantly deteriorating situation, I commend Cpt. Yorston and his squad.

I acknowledge that the events which unfolded on the river were highly publicized, despite our best efforts to keep the entire operation covert. But the Public Relations Dept has released a suitable cover story to the general population. And MC&D Ltd's knowledge of our involvement, after things played out the way they did, was an unavoidable conclusion.

In summary, I urge you to refrain from making any hasty decisions based on the less successful aspects of this mission. Rather, my hope is you'll measure Mu-3's performance against the full facts of the situation. In which regard, I believe, our operatives displayed quick thinking and capable response to a highly complex and constantly evolving situation. To respond to deteriorating circumstances, not with panic or a loss of resolve, but improvisation and determined spirit, are characteristics of a good team. And, in my eyes, this team put those traits on display beyond any doubt. With the experience of this

operation, I anticipate even greater results from MTF Mu-3 moving forward.

Maj. Roger Dunn <MTFC, Mu-3 "Highest Bidders">

After Amusement

A small loudspeaker, suspended only by a fragile cord, hung high above the blasted ruins of the amusement park it once served. A long time ago, it had been part of an intricate system designed to play a hypnotic tune. Upon hearing its music, everyone in earshot it would be driven to madness and eventually find themselves dead. The reasons behind it all were a mystery, but the tune still played, until the day came when the park was shut down for good. Still the music played on, as rides rusted and trees overtook concrete. Still it played, luring unsuspecting and careless men and women to their deaths. Even when the men and women left to focus their efforts on something far more important, the tiny, jingling tune played, searching for victims.

Then the Blast came. And there weren't any victims anymore.

From a hundred feet in the air, it hardly looked any different. True, all the plant life had been incinerated from miles around, and everything had an ashen grey tint to it, but this was an old park, built to last. Most of the structures had barely shuddered when the shockwave rushed over them, and even the roller-coaster was still standing. It didn't even have half its support beams anymore! The Blast hadn't changed anything major. It had just made it a touch harder to find victims.

And there still were victims down there. Three men, coated in rags and ash, had wandered into the park last night, no doubt seeking shelter. What kind of shelter they expected to find in a long-abandoned, half-destroyed amusement park really couldn't be said. But people probably didn't act rationally after the apocalypse. They certainly didn't act rationally when they heard the music. And the music *would* play.

The speaker let out a few small, tinny bursts of static. It was always the first to activate, a good tenth of a second before any of the other speakers in the park got the signal to start playing. Now, with the

cables frayed and corroded, it took the others a whole minute and a half to start playing after this one did. But it didn't matter; people only needed to hear a handful of the notes for the madness to kick in, and these men were sitting right below the speaker. Only this one speaker would need to activate in order to fulfill the purpose of an entire park.

Slowly, the notes began to play, sounding out a calliope tune in very slow motion. Admittedly, the sound quality was awful, and the timing between notes was all off, but it was OK. The speaker just needed a bit of time to warm up. It had been a while since the park had any visitors, and all the components were just a little out of tune. One of the men looked up, and another twitched slightly, looking at his companions in an odd way.

The cable holding the speaker snapped after ten years of tension, and it tumbled down behind the huddled group with a hollow clang.

One of them commented on the danger of the park. Another commented on the danger everywhere after the Blast. They all huddled a little closer together, and never heard any music.

After Destruction

Document 144b-O5-EO was discovered in , on / / , following an experiment with SCP- to investigate nearby . Refer to Document 144a-O5-EO for full recovery report.

Hello world. Goodbye world.

I'm writing this now, before it's too late. Turns out a good, thick layer of SCP- (and a few other precautions) can slow down… Whatever they're doing to us. It's already hard to remember, though, but putting this on paper helps a bit. Keeps me from losing my train of thought again. It's a little like being detailed on SCP-… Well, I don't remember which one it was, but you know. That one you can't remember. I think.

It started about two years ago, in the fall. We thought it was the GOC, maybe even those stupid CI bastards making a move on us. The damn skips were going missing left and right all of a sudden, and it was scaring hell out of O5, because people barely remembered we'd had 'em a few weeks after they'd disappear. There was a bunch of new regs we had to follow, stuff to help catch benders and detect reality shifts I guess, but nothing came up.

But then someone remembered 1050 and its damn predictions. About six months back, we'd damn near shit ourselves worrying about the arrival of "the Destroyers", but gradually stopped worrying about it after that mess over in Uganda, figured that was what the prediction was about. Heck, we even patted ourselves on the back about how we'd contained it with "acceptable losses" and kept it from getting near XK.

Turns out we were wrong. Uganda had nothing to do with the event timer, as far as I can guess. We let our guard down… And then it all started. Or stopped. Or whatever.

If you ask me what the Destroyers are, let me just tell you: I have no idea. Maybe I did a few months ago. Maybe I didn't. But all those nightmare stories on SCP- … Those weren't about the Destroyers. Not really, anyway. It was just memories and fragments of whatever was before. Stories about black claws, dark souls from beyond the cosmos and fire and blood? We hear those every day over lunch in the cafeteria about what we did on our morning shifts. That doesn't scare anyone very much, not at the Foundation.

No, whatever the Destroyers are, they're a lot worse than that, in the same way that having your soul stolen by Cthulhu is worse than dying. Death is a little scary, but compared to a timeless eternity in a mad hellscape, I'd pick death every time.

I'm not sure what the right words are for what happened to us, but I remember once in my one semester of community college, some professor was talking about Jung's archetypes. He didn't say too much about them, but it got me interested enough to check a few books out of the library. I guess I've still got them somewhere, because I dropped out a week later and never bothered to return them. Anyway, I had plenty of time to read them on my way to Argentina in the Marine Corps, so I did. Turns out that we've all got these shapes in our head of the way things are, like creation myths, your mom and dad as these wise and magical figures, heroes and villains… And the Shadow. Those things always scared the hell out of me, in a way, because it sounded too much like the skips that I deal with; these weird things that sound like they were dredged out of the dark places in our minds, the "collective unconscious" as Jung called it.

And the Shadow. Man, let me tell you, I'm not afraid to say that that one always kind of freaked me out. It's like Jung just waved his hand and said "Okay, and here's all the bad stuff. It's meaninglessness, emptiness and seeing it makes you want to be dead, because it's better than being alive in the shadows.". Damn if that doesn't sound like what I'm seeing out there.

Let me also just say, I really believe in what we're doing in the Foundation. I like even more that, outside of preventing the Apocalypse, we sometimes manage to improve the world a little bit with some of the technology, medicine and ideas we derive from

studying these fucking insane things. I don't know how much of this is true, but some of the senior lab rats have told me that we've leaked tech to tons of industries, and that we're probably fifty years ahead of where we'd be without the skips. It's nice knowing that we've improved the world in so many ways, you know? Makes it a little easier to get through a day of D-Class testing, and makes you feel a bit like the skips are just parts of something larger, part of the magic (Heh, the docs would kill me if they heard me use that word) that makes the world go 'round.

But these things, whatever they are, they're the opposite of that. They're the end of the magic, the dying of the soul or whatever really makes us human. You want to know what they look like? Just look in the eyes of an Auschwitz survivor, or a kid that watched his parents hacked to death in the Rwandan genocide. Those are eyes with something just …gone… from them.

And now that's what the world is. We're all still here, and the world's still spinning, but something's missing. We are, for one. Most of the Foundation has just up and disappeared, day by day, rooms and sites and people just not here anymore. I saw Dr. at the bar the other day in , but he's apparently a mid-level university professor now, and he had no idea who I was. Looked dead inside, too, like the only thing he was worried about was tenure and bills, not like the man I'd known and looked up to, and occasionally stole my sandwiches from the breakroom fridge.

So here we are. Only a few pieces of Site are left, and only a couple of the skips. Oh, and - is here, but he's different, too. He's dying, and I think when he's gone, the rest of the site will be, too. I think he's protecting us, but it's killing him. That's something I was thinking about, that the reality benders are like… Not exactly the opposite of the Destroyers, but like the shadows cast from their light, I guess? But anyway, I'm in the room here with him, watching him sleep. His breathing doesn't sound good, and I don't think I've got long to finish this.

So let me just say this, before I do something crazy to try and preserve this letter. The Destroyers don't care about us, about humanity. They care about what we could become. They don't kill us, but they take away what it means to be alive. The stories are

gone now; you know all the hollow shit on the radio, on TV, in the movies? That's all we've got left. Dead stories. I tried to remember what music sounded like before they came, what it was like to go to a show on Saturday night on the silver screen. It's like only seeing in black and white when you remember color. It's like going tone-deaf after hearing Beethoven. All the life and the soul are gone, all the magic is washed out, and I don't think they're done yet. They came to a world full of amazing, thriving humanity, and they're going to leave behind a bunch of scared, over-evolved monkeys. It's going to be the Dark Ages all over again, and after I seal this thing up with -00 , I'm going to finish my bottle of whiskey and put a bullet in my head. I can't live like this, living in the Shadow of what we used to be. Goodbye.

-Agent

After that / Until then

7 June 2029

Today, I watched **a giant jellyfish give birth to a full-grown woman dressed in an owl costume**. It was strange to think that I knew it would happen today.

The jellyfish floated in the humidified air, carefully lowering the woman to rest on the ground. The medical team with me was hesitant, not sure whether it was safe to go to her. I walked forward with tears in my eyes, calling out her name.

Sun-hee looked up at me, smiling, and I knelt down and embraced her. I kissed the foam mask covering her head, nothing in my thoughts except how lucky I was to have her back.

I finally noticed the nurses around us. They offered Sun-hee a wheelchair, but she was adamant that she didn't need it. She had forgotten how long it was since she had to stand on her own. As she stood up, her weakened legs buckled, and I caught her in my arms. But a second before it happened, I could swear I saw the jellyfish reach its own arms out towards her. Sun-hee leaned on my shoulder for support, and together we walked out of the containment cell.

In six months, the Foundation will find a way to counteract Sun-hee's condition, releasing her identity from the cruel mockery of her costume, giving her true self back to her. In two years, they will declare her non-anomalous, give her an amnestic and release her to the world outside, to a normal life.

In three years, I will retire, and leave my life in the Foundation behind.

And the jellyfish? Before my retirement I will come to see it; sometimes, when they let me. The jellyfish will spend the next three years quietly in its containment. After that, I don't know.

14 August 2023

Interview Excerpt: 2338-293/J/4
Date: 14/8/2023
Interviewer: Ms. Ryoko Sato
Interviewed: SCP-2338-B

Foreword: Ms. Sato conducts scheduled daily interactions with the anomaly, for the purposes of emotional management of SCP-2338-B. Interviews have also obtained information about SCP-2338-A, with which SCP-2338-B has become able to communicate. Interview was conducted in ASL, and transcribed from video recordings in the containment cell. This is an excerpt from a longer log spanning several hours.

> **Ms. Sato:** I think that's all we need to do for your classes, Sun-hee. Have you been able to do your exercise?
>
> **SCP-2338-B:** Yes, thanks. It's sometimes a little difficult - there's not much room in here!
>
> **Ms. Sato:** <**laughing**> That's true.
>
> **SCP-2338-B:** But I enjoy the pilates. I think Eomi likes it too.
>
> **Ms. Sato:** Really? Why does Eomi like pilates?
>
> **SCP-2338-B:** I don't know - she just does. It's like I said - she doesn't talk like you or me, or like speaking out loud.
>
> **Ms. Sato:** It's just images, feelings, right?
>
> **SCP-2338-B:** Yes. A bright, happy feeling when I'm stretching, or an image of tentacles stretching out too. Or sometimes she signs to me.
>
> **Ms. Sato:** She signs? How?
>
> **SCP-2338-B:** Well, it's just an image of hands making

the sign, really. She doesn't do it very often - sometimes she gets the signs back-to-front.

Ms. Sato: It's very impressive that she can sign at all. Did you teach her?

SCP-2338-B: Um, maybe? She showed me a memory of me teaching her, but I was much older. Oh!

Ms. Sato: Are you okay, Sun-hee?

SCP-2338-B: Yes. Um.

Ms. Sato: Did you say that Eomi remembers the future?

SCP-2338-B: Oh dear. I didn't mean to say it, although she knew I would. Yes, Eomi remembers the future. Time goes the other way for her, from the future into the past.

Ms. Sato: But how does -

SCP-2338-B: It's a bit confusing, but I think everything is the same, just happening in the opposite order. That's how she knows when I'll be able to leave her - for her, it's already happened.

Ms. Sato: I see. You do seem very confident about getting out - I hope that you're right. We haven't seen anything that suggests that Eomi will let you go.

SCP-2338-B: She will. There's lots that you don't know about Eomi. Like I don't think the glass would stop her getting out, if she really wanted to.

Ms. Sato: Are you sure? Then I certainly hope she never really wants to.

SCP-2338-B: Oh I don't think so - she likes it when I'm happy, and I'm happy staying here because then you can visit. You'll keep visiting, right?

Ms. Sato: Of course, Sun-hee. And perhaps you can tell me more about Eomi some time. Like where she comes from.

SCP-2338-B: Which bit of her?

Ms. Sato: What do you mean?

SCP-2338-B: Well, there's kind of separate parts. Eomi tried to explain once. The images didn't really make sense, but I think that this is like - well, it's like…

Ms. Sato: Yes?

SCP-2338-B: Oh! It's like a costume, like my costume! Something that you can put on - although I don't know about taking it off…

Ms. Sato: Hey, Sun-hee - it's okay. They'll work something out. So you mean you're wearing a jellyfish costume over your owl costume?

SCP-2338-B: No, that's not it. I know I'm inside Eomi, but I'm not really *inside* her. My mind isn't inside her, I mean. She sometimes gets frustrated by that, I think - it would be easier to communicate if my mind was travelling in the jellyfish costume too.

Ms. Sato: So you could put your mind inside the jellyfish?

SCP-2338-B: I guess - Eomi showed me how, but she made me promise not to do it. It would mean I go backwards through time as well, and Eomi says I've got to keep travelling forwards - to the day I get out!

Ms. Sato: It's definitely good to have something to look forward to.

SCP-2338-B: You don't believe me, do you? That's okay. Eomi said that you wouldn't right now, but you will.

Ms. Sato: Eomi seems to know a lot of things.

SCP-2338-B: She does, Ms. Sato. She really does. Hey, would you turn the TV on for me when you leave today?

<**end of excerpt**>

---

19 October 2013

Incident 2013101904
Logs compiled from multiple camera feeds

SITE 19 CONTAINMENT CELL

1310: Foundation medical staff enter with stretchers, bearing the bodies of 22 children and one unconscious, heavily injured woman. Personnel lay the bodies on the floor of the cell before leaving. SCP- is floating in the centre point of the room.

1235: SCP- descends to the floor of the cell, gathering the bodies and lifting them up. It places the body of the woman on top of its bell, and cradles the children in its tentacles.

1234: Several personnel enter the chamber in a state of panic. They see SCP- and become calmer, watching as SCP- floats up towards the ceiling of the cell. The personnel soon cease to pay attention to SCP- , which remains still, holding the children, for almost an hour.

1205: Foundation staff leave the chamber. Shortly thereafter, water bubbles up from drains in the floor, flooding the cell.

1140: SCP- floats further upward, carrying the bodies through the ceiling of the cell.

SITE 19 E-BLOCK LOW SECURITY DORM

1137: SCP- enters the common room. The bodies of

two men are lying on the ground. SCP- lifts the unconscious woman from its bell and carefully deposits her in the entrance to the room.

1136: SCP- remains hovering over the woman. Its tentacles reach out in several directions, bearing the children's bodies through doorways and into nearby bedrooms. The tentacles lay the children in their beds, resting for a second on their faces or shoulders before retreating to SCP- . Two of the children are placed on the floor of the common room.

1135: SCP- retreats behind the wall of the room. A single tentacle reaches out to the body of one of the men, stroking his head. The man rises from the ground, alive.

1134: Several dozen tentacles embrace the body of the other man, lifting him to his feet near the body of the woman. He calls out, alive, and the tentacles release him.

1133: The woman appears to be regaining consciousness. The man near her points an implement at her, healing a wound on her neck. He walks over to the other man, and they turn to the children on the floor, bringing them back to life. The children run into one of the bedrooms.

1131: The men walk from bedroom to bedroom, healing the children within. After a short time, they leave the common room.

---

4 February 2012

It is mid-afternoon. The classroom is full of bright colours: pastel drawings on the walls, festooned with strings of paper stars. The young teacher is sitting in front of her class, a large picture book propped on her knees. The book is called "Creatures of the Deep", and the teacher is pointing at vivid images of fantastical underwater

beasts. Spider crabs, sunfish, blue whales. The teacher signs to the class, explaining where they come from and how they live.

The children are sitting on the floor, a little menagerie in cheerful costumes. They stare at the pictures, spellbound. Occasionally one will sign a question, then the teacher calls on them, and they raise their hand. The teacher flips slowly backwards through the pages of the book. Once, she is momentarily distracted - was that a shadow in the room? The moment passes; she resumes signing.

The signing is backwards too, but I can follow it. I've had twenty years to learn. The first three were the hardest, before Sun-hee came back to me. But I kept myself company, when they let me.

Now the teacher turns back to a page showing a giant squid. A little boy in an octopus costume jumps up and dances around, showing off. He is ridiculous, and he doesn't care - the teacher is grinning, and half the children are signing at once, the other half rolling with silent laughter.

In a little over a year, the children will be gone - delivered by the Foundation to men who will remove their costumes and return them to their families. Until then, I come to see them; sometimes, whenever I can.

In fifteen years, the Foundation will take my tank from its cell, transport me thousands of miles and release me on a remote beach in Australia. I will hurt people - I think that being abandoned by the Foundation must make me angry. But where the heart breaks, time can mend it. And the Foundation will bring to life other jellyfish - perhaps companions? Perhaps children?

After that, I don't know.

After The End

The skip was proving to be significantly more difficult to deal with than I had anticipated.

As in, it was actively attempting to carve my face into a nice confetti, and then sprinkle my con-face-tti in the air.

"Heh. 'con-face-tti.' I'd have to remember that one for next time," I thought as I dove through the closing containment bay's doors as they slammed shut on an errant tentacle, slicing it off with a squeal of pain from the skip inside.

I slowly got to my feet, and pulled out a notebook from my pocket. Pulling out a pen, I jotted down a quick note.

Anomaly is extremely hostile, do not approach. 'Con-face-tti expected.'

It all started two months ago. Shit went down. And I mean that in more than the typical Foundation way, where the world is full of bloodthirsty monsters, unspeakable terror, and occasionally tastes like raspberry lemonade razorblades.

I didn't know what was happening at the time. The guards herded me into the holding chamber like a calf being led to slaughter, and I felt roughly the same way. Whatever was happening, I was pretty sure that I'd get the short end of the stick.

Life's like that when you're basically human cannon fodder. Life as a D-class I guess.

For the first hour, I assumed that some breach had happened, and I was being sequestered, as per usual. When the fourth hour hit, I thought that it might be more serious than usual. When the sixth hour hit, and I heard screams coming from outside, I got a little

worried. When the eighth hour hit, and the power went out, kicking on the backup generators, I was pretty sure that shit had hit the fan.

For a while, I wasn't sure what to do. Some part of me thought that staying in the chamber until someone came to get us was the right call, because I was fairly sure I'd get shot if I left. Another part of me pointed out that if something this big had happened, they'd probably be coming around to shoot me anyway. "Wrapping up loose ends," so to speak. Well good for them, hope that stain of plain old murder was worth the bureaucratic efficiency.

In the end, I decided that if I was gonna die, I might as well have a chance to run for it.

After squeezing myself through the vents, I dropped into the hallway, and immediately scanned the area, bracing myself for a hail of gunfire from a waiting guard team. Instead, what greeted me was… carnage.

Everything was bathed in the light of a slowly flashing red alarm. The remains of the guard team that had locked me up was all scattered through the hallway. Yet the typical sights and sounds of a Foundation site busy at work were nowhere to be found, the hallways devoid of all life save for the puddling remains of staff members everywhere. The smell of death was thick and cloying, wafting through my mind and seizing my brain in a chokehold that made me gag.

I picked a pistol off the ground from the severed hand that still clutched it in its rigor mortis fingers, and pocketed it, just in case I needed it. Seriously, what the fuck had happened to this place?

As I walked through the hallways, I only found more signs of violence, but no signs of any answers or life, anomalous or otherwise. No doctors, no usually ever-present guards, not even another D-class. In the middle of one hallway, I picked up an ID card from an important looking corpse, before I finally came upon what I had been looking for: the site director's office.

"Okay, so, note to self, don't fuck with that tentacle-y skip in the

future. Thanks, self."

I slid to the ground, and buried my face in my hands. I wondered if all this time alone was making me crazy.

Back in the day, when there were other D-class around here, we picked up a real sense of gallows humor, except nothing around here was nearly as nice as the gallows. At least gallows had the decency to snap your neck and kill you quickly. If only some of those skips my fellow D-class had to deal with were so kind.

There I go again, I guess.

But there was a point to it. Shitting around about skips was a lot easier than having the stuff drip down your pants every time you realized where you were and what in the hell you were doing. At least that's what we told ourselves.

I picked myself up the ground and dusted myself off, focusing on the task at hand. I checked for any bits of tentacle that might be stuck to me and looking to wriggle underneath my skin or something. After I decided that I was clean enough, I made my way to the site garage, checking to make sure nothing else was going to pop out of its chamber and eat my face.

The site garage was filled with untouched vehicles, all except for one loaded Foundation issue truck, stuffed with supplies and other assorted gear. I pulled out a checklist from my bag and began to run down the list.

'Feed SCP-3234.' Check. I wrote "con-face-tti" next to the item on the list.

'Week's worth of supplies.' Check. GI issue MREs for a week, plenty of water, and a first aid kit, just in case.

'Camping supplies.' Check. Tent, knives, and other tools, all packed up and loaded.

'Weapons.' Check. I had raided the armory for a pistol, a rifle, and plenty of ammo. Odds are it wouldn't do squat against any skips that I had to come up against, but if there were human targets, that was

another story. Plus, they made me feel better about myself.

I got in the truck and checked the map that I had gotten from the site director's office, before turning on the ignition and leaving the garage.

Next stop: Site Omega.

I had passed by the site director's office dozens of times while being escorted from test to test, and I figured that it was as good of a place as any for figuring out what had happened. Every time I had passed by here, there were two armed guards in front of the door.

"Well, there *were* two guards here at some point." I mused, looking at the splatters of blood that were on either side of where the door should have been had it not been torn off its hinges and thrown away. Solid steel had buckled and been torn apart by something which I didn't think that I would ever want to encounter.

That reminded me of the fact that I still had no idea what had wrecked this base, and it certainly wasn't anything that I had ever been in testing with, or I'd be like Mr. Puddle and Mr. Human-Shaped-Stain here. Suddenly, I felt very alone and very exposed in the middle of this open hallway, so I quickly ducked inside.

The site director's body was slumped over his desk, looking surprisingly calm compared to most everything else that I had found in the site. A bottle of some kind of pills was open on the desk, along with a note written in a kind of stilted, blocky looking handwriting.

If anyone from the Foundation made it out and is reading this, understand that this could be Dr. Heinrich's theorized "XK-class scenario" that he published a paper on last year. It's so bad that the Phoenix Protocol is in effect. May God save our souls. Good luck to whoever you are.

I didn't have the slightest clue what the hell he was talking about. Scratching my head, I noticed the still-on computer that was on his desk. I moved aside the director's body, and sat down in front of the computer when I was promptly greeted by a faintly lit screen.

“PLACE FINGER ON PAD”

I noticed a small metallic plate in front of the computer on the desk. I put my finger on the plate and immediately drew it back, wincing at the small cut that it had somehow made.

A small bead of my blood lay on the plate, but the computer’s screen flickered and changed.

“DNA AND FINGERPRINT SAMPLE IDENTIFY: D-1573.”

“PROCESSING CLEARANCE…”

”ACCESS GRANTED UNDER PHOENIX PROTOCOL”

The screen soon changed to a Foundation Logo background covered in rows and rows of folders. Suddenly, the screen was covered in pop-ups all sharing a common theme.

> **ALERT FROM SITE BRAVO:** SIMULTANEOUS RELEASE OF MULTIPLE KETER CLASS SCP OBJECTS, IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE REQUESTED.

> **ALERT FROM SITE TANGO:** EXTREME LOSS OF LIFE DUE TO RELEASE OF SEVERAL HOSTILE ANOMALIES, IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE REQUESTED.

> **ALERT FROM SITE EPSILON:** CANNOT CONTAIN SUDDEN RELEASE OF HOSTILE ENTITIES, IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE REQUESTED.

> **AUTOMATED ALERT FROM OVERWATCH COMMAND:** PHOENIX PROTOCOL IN EFFECT.

The alerts went on and on, until I clicked through so many that I lost count. I was dumbfounded. How many sites were there? What the hell had happened? Who else was still out there?

My eyes were drawn to one last alert flashing in the bottom right of the screen. I clicked on it, and my heart began to pound as I read the document.

PHOENIX PROTOCOL ENACTED

Note: This is an automated action. The Phoenix Protocol is in effect for the following automatic reasons:

At least 5 hours has passed without any response to Phoenix Alarm system from any site, therefore it is assumed that contact has been lost with >90% of Foundation sites as of the time of this alert.

In addition, contact has been lost with Overwatch Command.

PHOENIX PROTOCOL EXPLANATION:

In the event of systemic collapse in the operational strength of the Foundation to the point where it is assumed that no major site has the ability to effectively contain any SCP objects, along with the crippling of the Overwatch Command, the Phoenix Protocol ensures the survival of the Foundation's key data assets and central purpose.

In the event of the Phoenix Protocol going into effect, all surviving members of the Foundation of any security clearance or status are immediately upgraded to temporary level 5 intelligence clearance regarding SCP anomalies and tasked with coordinating the consolidation of Foundation intelligence and survivors into a force capable of securing critical anomalies that must be contained immediately.

If you are responding to a Phoenix Protocol that is currently in effect, you must follow the following steps in order to ensure the continuation of the Foundation and potentially the human race:

The drive to Site Omega had been long. Even the closest Foundation site to my original one had been hours away. Thankfully, it didn't seem like anyone in the civilian world had noticed anything

particularly out of the ordinary yet, but I couldn't vouch for what it'd be like in the upcoming weeks.

I set up my camp a 30 minute walk away from Site Omega, just in case I'd have to be here for a while. I wasn't entirely sure what I'd find in there, and it was better to have a place to fall back to, just in case shit hit the fan again.

I decided that I had enough time to do a quick scoping out of Site Omega before night fell. I picked up my rifle (little more than a security blanket in this situation) and grabbed my bag of medical supplies, tools, and notebooks containing all the info that I could get my hands on about Site Omega and its anomalies. If I was going to do this whole "saving the world" thing, I'd have to make sure I didn't get my dumb ass killed before I could do it.

I walked to the site carefully, rifle ready. Soon, I came upon the site, hidden in the woods and disguised as a military research lab. The whole site was surrounded by trees, most of it being underground and hidden away. The actual entrance to the site was a little bit hidden away, forcing me to drop my rifle and check the map for where exactly it was.

"Freeze. Hands up."

I froze in place, and slowly raised my hands into the air at the bark of the iron voice behind me.

"Turn around. Slowly, motherfucker."

I turned around, making sure to do it extra slowly just in case.

I almost laughed when I saw what it was. It was maybe 12 D-class, just like me, though still wearing the jumpsuits that I myself had discarded a week ago. They were melting out of the trees, behind cover, from the bushes, everywhere. Only one of them had a gun, but she seemed to be the lady with the voice who had been yelling at me.

Life seems to have a weird sense of irony, don't it? All these regular Foundation staff dead, but 13 D-class left to pick up the remains.

“Who the hell are you?” The voice barked again, a pistol trained squarely at my head.

“Easy, easy. I’m a friend.” I said, trying to infuse my voice with as much calmness and friendliness as I could.

“Tell us who you are, shithead, and I might not shoot you for trespassing,” the woman said, not moving an inch.

I smiled a bit despite myself, recalling something that I had seen while combing through files on the site director’s computer. I grinned at the crowd in front of me and answered.

“I suppose you can call me…the Administrator.”

After They Broke Our Fists

Only the tips of Denver's skyscrapers still protruded above the sea: glass tombstones for citizens that were washed away years ago. Within one of those lonesome monoliths, a young man in a red and black life jacket watched the surf. Despite the knowledge of what lurked within that water, he felt a sense of calm as the sunrise illuminated its surface. He brushed a greasy lock of his hair out of his eyes and sighed.

"Devon."

Behind him stood a middle-aged woman dressed in faded tactical gear labeled with an emblem of a fist superimposed on a sunburst. Her hands were folded behind her back. She approached and joined him to look out over the water.

"Beautiful day out, Captain Quine," Devon said softly.

"Red sky at morning, sailors take warning," she replied.

They both shared a chuckle. Quine gestured to the stairs with her gloved hand.

"Come on, champ," she said. "Everyone's packing up. We're heading out."

Devon and Captain Quine joined the rest of the crew in what was once a lobby, now flooded and filled by a small, patchwork barge. The term 'Disaster' has been scrawled messily on the side in red paint.

Devon and his captain made their way to the pilot house. There, a one-armed teenage boy named Max loaded fist-shaped slugs into two shotguns. Between each slug loaded, he would twirl the ammunition between his fingers effortlessly.

"Show-off."

Devon snatched a slug out of Max's grip and replaced it with a power bar.

"Bon Appétit."

Max rolled his eyes and flipped Devon off. He then smiled as he tore into the ration.

As Devon helped Max finish preparing the weapons, Captain Quine approached an older woman named June who sat by a small SONAR station. She kept opening a toolbox on her lap, examining its contents.

"Any of them escape yet, June?"

An old man in a grease-soaked mechanic's jumpsuit emerged from the hatch that led to the engine below. He chuckled at his own joke, thoughtlessly tracing his fingertips along the wedding band that dangled from his throat.

June smiled and shook her head.

"No, not yet, Roger. No lack of trying, though. Gary used to swear these things would sprout legs."

"If I had a nickel for every time that happened," Roger chuckled again.

"What would you do with a whole quarter?" Quine grinned. "Think she'll hold for one more day?"

Roger shrugged.

"I'm surprised she didn't give up the ghost back in Sandpoint. But yeah. So long as you don't have me ram her into an iceberg, sure, why not?"

"Excellent. June? Did you get the SONAR fixed?"

The old tinkerer patted the device in response.

"Last night, yeah. If they come after us we'll be able to tell. At least until it shorts again."

"It will have to do. Thank you."

The captain then looked around and raised an eyebrow.

"Where's Layla?"

"I had her working on some last second hull reinforcements," Roger explained. "Hang on."

He quickly vanished below deck once more. A few moments later the mechanic returned, a young woman equipped with welder's goggles and a blowtorch in tow. By her side was a worn harpoon gun; a quiver of makeshift ammunition dangled from her hip.

"Glad you could join us." Quine grabbed a nearby grease pencil and began to draw on a nearby window.

"Alright, here we are at Republic Plaza," she explained. "According to the last radio message Salvation Fifteen sent out, they should be anchored about thirty miles south of us, near the mountains. That makes this is the final leg of the trip. We'll navigate out of the city, and should be able to catch them before too long. Once there, we'll be safe. Unfortunately, this will put us in open water for a good chunk of the trip. That means I'll need everyone on guard."

"Hey, Captain?" Max chimed in. "If this is the last leg, why are we using the barge? Why not just load up in the jet skis and make this a final sprint?"

"We barely got her through Wyoming, captain," Devon agreed. "Maybe a faster approach would be better?"

Quine shook her head and chuckled.

"What happens if we arrive and find Salvation Fifteen has moved on? Besides, we'll need whatever supplies we have left when we get there."

The captain's expression became solemn.

"It's been a long road, friends. No shortage of sacrifice from all of us to get here. I know we each lost a lot along the way."

Roger tightened his grip on the wedding band around his neck.

June briefly hugged the toolbox.

Max stared at the stump where his left arm used to be.

Layla and Devon both closed their eyes.

"You have all been more than I could have ever asked for in a family. Thank you."

Quine placed the cap back on her marker and smiled at them.

"Let's get the 'Disaster' on the road then, shall we?"

The morning was quiet. Their small barge made its way out of the waterlogged skyline of Denver and headed due south. The sun grew high and hot in the sky; eventually, a cruise liner appeared on the horizon. Most of the crew smiled at the spectacle. Those smiles soon vanished, however, when the "JAWS" theme came from the pilot house.

"June?" Captain Quine headed over to the SONAR station where the old tinkerer stood.

"I… thought it might be funny?" she mumbled, stepping aside. "Looks like we have company."

"Fucking hell." Quine and June grabbed the nearby shotguns. "Max?"

"Fins surfacing ahead, Captain. Five so far. Make that six. Seven!" Max shouted back from his perch atop the barge's storage containers.

"Layla, Devon, get to the bow! I got the stern!"

Quine didn't need to repeat herself. Devon and Layla took up

position, each armed with a rifle.

"Think you'll actually hit something?" Layla flipped off the safety.

"Who knows? Maybe they'll be nice enough to hold still for me." Devon took aim.

Bullets and the smell of gunpowder filled the air.

"Three!" Layla counted, her most recent shot piercing an oncoming hammerhead down the middle of its snout. She swiveled, smiling as she picked up a new target and pulled the trigger. A lifeless corpse bobbed to the surface, a massive hole in the right side of its head. "Four! You got to keep up Devon!"

As she reloaded, a bull shark lunged out from the water. The bolt of her rifle wouldn't pull back. Layla fumbled, her eyes lost in the void of its oncoming maw.

BANG

The bull shark flew back, slamming into the water. A jagged second mouth had appeared under its throat.

"You can crank up as high a kill count as you want, it will mean little if you're fucking dead!" Devon said, reloading. "Three by the way."

"Shit!" Max shouted from his vantage point. "More coming in from the rear, and sides. We're being surrounded!"

A ring of fins had nearly encircled the tiny barge. Something rammed it from below. The craft shook, knocking Devon and Layla around like bowling pins.

"We're running out of ammunition!" Devon warned the rest of the crew.

"Can't this junk go any faster?" June's shotgun kicked as a slug tore off an entire dorsal fin.

"It's a god damn barge!" Roger shouted back. "What the hell do you want me to do? Jump into hyperspace? We're at max speed!"

There was a series of splashes, followed by dull thuds. Several sharks had jumped aboard and flailed their way toward the pilot house.

"Cover me!" Captain Quine closed the distance quickly, removing her gloves. Her polished metal fists gleamed like fire under the sun.

The punch crumpled the first shark's snout like a wrecked car, its eyes flying out of its sockets from the sheer force. The second shark tried to move in; it was met by a chop that cleaved its head in twain.

The third shark lunged and bit Quine's left arm. She smashed the top of its head down and pried it off. The fourth fled to the railing, only to be seized by its tail and ripped apart.

She threw the bodies overboard. The ocean turned a deep red. Inches of pulped, bloody shark paste seeped over the barge's sides.

"Yeah! Eat it!" Max shouted from his perch. "Fucking eat it, you selachian motherfuck-"

The towering shadow of a megalodon briefly eclipsed the stern before the pilot house, along with June and Roger, vanished into its jaws.

Max's taunting was drowned out by terrified screams and the sounds of twisting metal and shattering glass.

Captain Quine threw herself from the stern, falling from the shark's mouth into a heap of debris on the ship.

The barge stalled. More fins surfaced and closed in.

Devon and Layla emptied their rifles into the megalodon. Layla pulled the harpoon gun off her shoulder and loaded it from her quiver, a small boxing glove affixed to the end of the harpoon.

"Devon, get the big gun!"

"That'll blow the entire back off the —"

"The pilothouse is gone! We're going to have to outrun them on the

jet skis!"

"For fuck's sake, just do what she says!" Captain Quine dug herself out of the debris. Her mechanical arms hurled scraps at the flailing megalodon as it pulled itself along the deck after her.

Devon vanished, then returned with a Javelin missile and launcher. He handed it off to Layla, then went to help his Captain. Max abandoned his perch for the safety of the bow.

The crew was clear. Layla fired. The missile vanished into the megalodon's throat; it then lurched forward.

"Well that's fucking great," Max shouted. "What the hell do we do now!"

"Take cover!" Quine pushed her crew away.

The explosion tore across the surface of the vessel. A surge of shark meat and blood crashed across the deck. Devon blinked, caught in the wave of viscera. His clothes and life jacket were now caked in sticky fluid.

"Oh, man…" He looked at himself, then turned to the remaining half of the megalodon sticking to the craft. The bleeding hulk slowly slid off and back into the sea. The barge was now taking on water.

"You'll live, champ," Quine said, patting Devon on the shoulder, then moving across the deck and throwing off a tarp. Beneath were two Jet Skis, strapped down for transport.

"Come on let's go!" Quine shouted as she released the tethers. "Max with me, Devon and Layla on the other! Help me!"

With no further ado, the jet skis hit the water.

As they rode away Devon looked back over his shoulder. Their home vanished beneath the waves.

The sharks faded into the distance, outpaced by the jet skis. As the miles melted by, their destination crept larger and larger on the

horizon. Devon heard Layla give a sigh of relief behind him as he steered. He gave Quine and Max a thumbs up. Quine replied with a small smile and nod.

"Devon!"

A harpoon whistled past Devon's head. He snapped his attention back to their path. Layla was reloading; a shark's carcass bobbed to the surface. Her harpoon was embedded in its head. Dozens more fins emerged ahead of them, forming a loose blockade.

"Run it!" Captain Quine shouted over the whine of the jet ski's motor as she zig-zagged through the water. Max took pot shots with his pistol at any sharks that got too close.

Devon followed Quine's lead. Layla's harpoon gun hissed again and again as she left a trail of carnage behind them.

"Almost there…" Devon mumbled under his breath. "Come on, come on."

There was a splash. Two sharks shot out of the water in tandem, knocking Captain Quine's jet ski upward. Quine and Max briefly hung in the air before they hit the water with an inelegant crash. The jet ski skittered off; dozens of fins lunged around it before it vanished beneath the tides.

Devon turned. He held his breath and waited. When Max's head sprang up, they gasped in unison; the one-armed boy swam in desperation for Devon's craft. Blood trailed from his left shoulder. A cluster of three fins surfaced behind him. Devon opened the throttle and closed the distance.

Two harpoons found their marks, leaving a single pursuer.

"Devon, I'm out!" Layla shouted.

The shark swimming after Max lurched out of the water. It had a fist-sized hole in its head. Captain Quine surfaced soon after and swam to Max, grabbing him by the collar. She hurled him into the waves by Devon and Layla's jet ski. As they pulled him aboard, the blockade closed in.

Captain Quine headbutted an incoming shark. "Get out of here!"

"Captain, n-"

"That's an order! Go!"

Devon turned the craft around and took off at full speed. Layla and Max watched as an army of fins descended upon their commander. The waters churned with crimson foam as shark carcass after carcass surfaced.

Some had holes punched through them. Others were missing fins. Still others were torn completely in half.

As her head shrank out of sight, they could just make out her slipping beneath the churning sea of chum one final time, a blanket of over forty dead sharks serving to mark the grave.

Max gave a sad chuckle as he looked back.

"Shark fin soup…"

The jet ski ran out of fuel a quarter of a mile away from Salvation Fifteen. The three survivors drifted towards the cruise liner quietly, its tall form anchored near where the mountains still managed to peak above the surface.

No one spoke. They paddled their craft in silence as they limped along. On occasion, one of them would look back out to the open water. Their eyes would linger, then return to the task at hand.

"I'm not seeing anyone up there, guys." Max eyed the towering ship with his telescope. "Didn't they say they had, like, a hundred or so people aboard on the broadcasts?"

"It’s a big ship," Layla answered. "They could all just be inside."

Max nodded.

"Right. I guess we made it then."

"Home sweet home," Devon agreed and pulled out a radio. "Salvation Fifteen, this is the survivors of the barge 'Disaster.' We are approaching from your starboard side, please respond."

There was a long stretch of quiet.

"We see you, 'Disaster' survivors. Glad you made it. Please make your way towards the stern, we'll be sending a rope down to you shortly. You're safe now."

They each let out a sigh of relief.

CRACK

The sigh was short lived. Before their eyes, **a massive claw** emerged from the water. It plucked up Salvation Fifteen like it was a bath toy. The vessel split in half; it was then slammed into the mountainside, left to tumble back down to the water below — where it proceeded to explode.

The claw then retracted back into the sea, vanishing as swiftly as it had arrived.

"No way," Max whispered.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Layla said. "That's not even a goddamn shark!"

Devon just sighed.

The three survivors looked on in defeat. For a while, they let the silence speak for them.

When Devon got tired of what it had to say, he broke it: "Hey, Layla? Do you remember what Captain Quine said started all of this?"

"Yeah. Something about some big fish in the middle of the ocean **finally waking up**. **End-of-World K/O Failure Scenario**, or something like that."

"Right."

Devon went quiet again.

"That's a stupid fucking name."

Aftermath

In June of 2003, a few weeks after my 17th birthday, I swore into the US Navy with the intention of becoming a Navy SEAL. In 2006, I completed BUD/S and earned the title I had been seeking.

In January 2017, I was recruited by a representative of the organization I would later come to know as the Foundation into Mobile Task Force Nu-7, "Hammer Down."

In **December of 2018**, a robot the size of a small building was seen wandering through the Irkutsk area of the Russian Federation. In the hours and days that followed, a "disease" that no one had even known existed was wiped out by this machine, and by three organizations the world had also never even known about, called the Horizon Initiative, the SCP Foundation, and the Church of the Broken God.

I was there, assisting in the cleanup of something that, simply put, should not have been.

Of course, a 30-foot-tall robot that seems to have gathered a following of millions of worshippers isn't precisely the sort of thing you would call "normal." Such an occurrence has all the subtlety of, well, a robot the size of a building. It's not easy to conceal something like that, and it's even less easy to conceal when organizations that can only be described as "the Men-in-Black" are there, helping it do its thing. Of course, the biggest obstacle to hiding the Broken God was the fact that, about 96 hours after it was woken, the GOC launched ballistic missiles in an attempt to blow it up.

A couple things happened after that. First, the Broken God protected itself from the missiles. I don't think so much as a piece of shrapnel ever touched the thing. Then, it continued what it was doing, destroying the remnants of **SCP-610** as they cropped up. When it was finished, it just left. No vengeance on the GOC, no further attacks on the flesh, no ascension for its followers to godhood, just

an absence.

In its wake, it left behind… some sort of tablets. I don't know, I forget the specifics. But what I do remember is that it left behind a simple message on these tablets, repeated in who knows how many languages: "I will return." No indication of when, no set of numbers, nothing, just the words "I will return."

The world being what it is, everyone lost their shit after that. The countries that had it easiest were places like North Korea, China, and Russia; they're used to putting down demonstrations and riots. Next came third-world countries like Sierra Leone; what does it matter if the government lied to you when that government will be gone in a few years, anyway?

I honestly think Mexico had it the worst. Without having to hide behind the Veil to prevent detection by the Jailors and the Book Burners, the Chaos Insurgency and the Serpent's Hand both went public. The Insurgency actually got themselves a pretty good handle on the Mexican drug trade, while the Hand used the tension of the times to get riots going. What little hold the Mexican government had on its people, it lost quickly. The civil war didn't officially start until June 2021, but anyone who didn't see it coming since March 2019 had their head in the sand. That's when there was the first big riot outside of the capital. There were, what, 200 casualties? 300? I don't remember. That was when the Mexican government started asking for outside help.

No one wanted to, at first. Countries like the US, where people already hated the status quo and distrusted the government by default, were too busy keeping themselves stable. I honestly can't remember if there was a single day when you could turn on the news and not hear about riots, protests, arrests, and terrorist plots. 2019 was also when Mobile Task Forces began working with and training alongside Special Forces, police departments, and other public safety organizations in order to help them respond to anomalies.

A lot of their work and our work was actually the same: keep your head on a swivel and know what you're looking for. That's actually why the Foundation recruited from Special Forces and some of the

higher-tier SWAT teams: less education the Foundation had to provide them.

It wasn't until 2022 that the Chaos Insurgency and Serpent's Hand really started causing enough trouble in Mexico and along the border that the Foundation decided to step in. That's when I was deployed to Juarez. Decades of training and experience in fending off the Mexican Army on the cartels' part and nearly a century of fighting the Foundation on the Insurgency's part had made the city into damn near a fortress for them and a living Hell for anyone who got in their way. That's why we were getting sent in: to take out the POI in charge of the Insurgency's Texas/New Mexico border operations.

A city as large as Juarez gives insurgents- Chaos or otherwise- plenty of room to hide. That's how a sniper was able to ambush my squad and land a round in my spine that left me paralyzed from the hips down.

One thing the Foundation had never wanted to admit about the Church of the Broken God until after the Veil had been lifted was the fact that they had the best surgeons on the planet. If you wanted an iPhone in your skull in 2009, they could've pulled it off. If you wanted to be able to turn the lights on and off in your home by blinking, they had an upgrade for that. If you lost the use of your legs because of a sniper on a rooftop in Juarez, they had you covered.

After the Awakening, which is what the Lifted Veil event became known as in common vernacular, there was a revolution in technology. Technology that futurists had anticipated in the 2040s or later became commercially available by 2024. Of course, by then, the Foundation had relegated me to paperwork. They rejected my requests for a return to front-line duty three separate times. Eventually, I just applied for training to work as a containment specialist.

I miss Roderick. He was probably my best friend when I was growing up. I wonder where he is now. When Roderick was still around, I still got to see my parents every now and then. Now, it's either sit and do tests, or sit in my room all day. And I can't even see

when I'm in my room. Like, my eyes work, but I can't look at things outside of my room.

They treat me like a prisoner. I don't know why. I'm only 13, how could I have done anything?! I remember my mom telling me that I was sick, and that this place is a hospital. I think she was lying. There are plenty of doctors, sure, but none of them do anything. *They just make me take tests. "What's behind the door? What card am I holding? Whose gun is loaded?" All sorts of stupid stuff like that.*

But that's ok. When I'm taking tests, I can see *again. I usually use the time to check on Roderick, see what he's doing. I'd check on my parents, too, but i can't seem to find them anymore.*

I'm worried about Roderick. Every time I see him, he seems stressed out about something. And he's never in the same place twice. I don't think that's normal. I ask the doctors and the guards about him sometimes, but they always ignore me.

Of course, in those days, everything was in flux. The Foundation had begun overturning jurisdiction of safe anomalies (safe in this context meaning "not likely to hurt or kill people, or manipulate them in an unethical way") to local governments. The United States government had recently formed the Bureau of Paranatural Affairs to deal with anomalies on their own terms. The Anomaly Registration Program allowed people to call 911 to report dangerous or life-threatening anomalies, while also allowing people with anomalous traits to find doctors and therapists who could help them "fulfill their true potential."

In theory, it would mean better treatment of anomalous people and respect for their civil rights. In practice, it meant that kids ended up in cells because "they were a threat to national security" or some other BS like that.

It wasn't as bad as it could've been. They still let the safe anomalies visit with their families, and even when they weren't visiting, the Foundation still let them leave their quarters for certain parts of the day. There was one kid, Thomas, that I had to watch out for

because he wasn't nearly old enough to be in that sort of setting on his own. I still worry about him sometimes.

Today is test day. I'm excited. They make me do these once a month, but they always take their time with paperwork. That means I can check on Roderick.

He's somewhere cold. I guess it must already be winter, wherever he is. And it's dark. I don't see the sun. The wind is blowing, and there's snow coming in on the wind. He's wrapped up, though, which is good. My mom was always making me wear a big coat whenever she visited around Christmas. It was dorky, but I would trade that for having to stay in a room all day.

I can see Roderick walking into a building. I think it's a bar. Or maybe a diner. He visits those a lot. He sits down and orders a black coffee, his usual… I think. Definitely a diner. The waitress smiles and goes to get his drink. The diner's mostly empty, which is why it's weird when some man I don't know sits down next to Roderick. They start talking. Roderick seems like he knows him.

The other man's name is Leonard. He says he didn't recognize Roderick with a beard. He always kept it shaved. Roderick says that it's the most he can do unless Leonard can help him. Help him with what? They start talking about "the good old days," when Roderick was "in New 7." No, that can't be right. What's New 7? Idunno, it must be from when Roderick was in the Navy.

Crap. More tests. I'll have to check back on Roderick later.

In 2027, the Foundation was dissolved and their assets in US territory liquidated by the BPA. It had been a long time coming. The GOC, now a public organization, was tasked with containing anomalies in international and disputed territory. A lot of skippers went there. The lucky ones, at least. 2027 is also when I was relieved of duty. I had to seek out alternative employment.

I've been working odd jobs for the last six years, finding work wherever and however I can. It hasn't been easy, but others have

had it a lot worse. I think the first Witch Trials were about three-and-a-half years ago. That was when the UN and most world governments started decrying the Foundation and its work. A huge document leak kicked the riots all back up. Things the Foundation had done in the name of preserving normalcy were being declared crimes against humanity. And public knowledge of what some anomalies were capable of, alongside registration with local and national governments, led to even more fear and paranoia of the government and the paranormal than had ever existed with the Foundation in charge.

When people don't understand something, one of two things will happen: they will try to understand it, so they can use it for their own ends; or, and this is far more likely, they will grow afraid of it and try to destroy it. So it was when humanity rediscovered anomalies. Former Foundation employees were declared public enemy number one, with anomalous persons at a close second.

The lynching started about three years ago, right about the time members of the Foundation Ethics Committee and RAISA started being tried by the UN. At first the National Guard and local police forces would intervene. Lately, though, they've been liable to participate. The news never talks about it, though. No one does. Even the most accepting of places turn us away. It doesn't help issues that the Unusual Incidents Unit of the FBI has unofficially been tasked with hunting us down. Hell, I've even heard rumors that the UIU and BPA have started hiring former Foundation agents to help them track down their old coworkers. I don't believe those rumors, but the truth remains that you can't trust anyone these days.

Skips have it just as bad. The ones not locked up are almost all registered, which just means that it's easier for vigilantes to find them. The ones who are able to head for Mexico, but I don't think many make it.

Ah, finally. They make me do the same thing every month. That's how I know I'll have awhile before they make me do more tests. What's Roderick doing now?

Him and Leonard are still talking. They have food in front of them,

plates almost empty. They're talking about cost now. Cost of what? I don't know. I think they've almost reached an agreement, but it looks like they're arguing over who's gonna pick up the tab. Why can't Roderick just take a gift when it's given to him? I've never understood that about him.

Now they've settled the tab. Leonard paid. They're walking outside, to an SUV. Leonard's. It's already started, and there are people inside. Leonard is reassuring Roderick that they're with him, that it'll be all right. I'm not liking the looks of this, but it doesn't matter because I have one more set of tests I need to do.

It's cold. I bring my coat tighter in to myself. Wisconsin isn't precisely like Arizona when it comes to winters. I'm only in this podunk town to meet an old friend.

The bullet that paralyzed me wasn't the first close call I've ever had. I've nearly died on multiple occasions. On one such occasion, I saved the life of a man I only knew as Agent Leonard Wells. Tonight, I'm hoping he can return the favor.

As I'm sitting, drinking my coffee, trying to warm up in this diner in the middle of Nowhere, Wisconsin, Leo walks in. We exchange greetings, and he orders his own cup of coffee. We talk. Eventually, we reach an agreement over dinner. He'll get me into Russia for five grand. It's all I have, but it's worth it. Anything to get away from this place.

After we finish our meals we argue over who will cover the tab. Eventually, I concede. I don't know why I was trying to turn down a free meal anyway. We walk outside, where Leo's SUV is already waiting. There are three men I don't recognize in there. Leonard introduces them to me as Simon, Harold, and George. The all look nervous. George asks Leonard if I'm the man they're helping to smuggle to Seattle. He says yes. Leo's words do nothing to calm the others. I ask Leonard, as an aside, why he didn't tell me about the others ahead of time, to which he responds it was a security risk. I decide not to ask whose security.

We start driving. Eventually, we reach an isolated stretch of road—

nothing around for miles. Leonard tells me that he and I will be changing vehicles, that he'll stay with me until the airport in Seattle. We get out, and the white SUV drives off. He hands me a flashlight and tells me to signal to a grove of trees in the distance. I'm signalling when I hear Leonard shift behind me. I start to turn around when—

The guards are walking me back to my room, which means I have some time to check on Roderick.

They're just driving, not talking. I didn't catch the others' names, but I don't think it matters. I don't think anything else is going to happen— No, wait, they're stopping. I can't hear who's saying what, but Leonard and Roderick are getting out. The SUV is driving off when Leonard hands something to Roderick. Then Leonard says something and Roderick starts waving the thing— I think it's a flashlight — at some trees. Then Leonard steps away and— NO!!

BUREAU OF PARANORMAL AFFAIRS INTERNAL MEMORANDUM, DATED 2033/11/03
RE: BEHAVIOR OF INMATE #864421 ON 2033/10/13
TO: SENIOR SUPERVISOR HAILEY BARRETT, UNDERAGE ANOMALOUS PERSONS PROJECT CHIEF, ANOMALOUS PERSONS DETAINMENT SITE 01
FROM: CHIEF INVESTIGATOR GABRIEL ROWLEY, BUREAU OF PARANORMAL AFFAIRS INTERNAL RECORDS DEPARTMENT
Ms. Barrett,

I believe I have found the source of Inmate #864421's unexpected behavior on October 13. At approximately 17:53 Mountain Time, Roderick X. Freeman, a person wanted by the US government for human rights violations in connection to his time employed with the now-defunct "SCP Foundation," engaged agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Unusual Incidents Unit sent to apprehend him with small arms fire. Mr. Freeman was killed in the ensuing firefight. Of note is the

fact that, in the transitionary period between SCPF and BPA custody of Inmate #864421, Mr. Freeman was Inmate #864421's primary caretaker.
I believe this is an indication that Inmate #864421's abilities exceed what we've so far recorded. I recommend immediate testing to prove or deny this claim. If my suspicions are correct, I recommend increased security protocols, or, preferably, elimination of the subject.

Sincerely,
Chief Investigator Gabriel Rowley, United States Bureau of Paranormal Affairs Internal Records Department

Agent Apocalemur's Journal

The following are the journal entries made by [DATA EXPUNGED], currently known as Agent Apocalemur, over the time period between his discovery of ***SCP-307*** *on , 200 , and his recovery by the SCP Foundation three weeks later.*

, 200

I found the weirdest plant today. It was just growing under that locust tree in my front yard. It looked like English ivy, but it was purple, and had thorns. I was kind of in a hurry to get to work, so I didn't get to look at it very closely.

, 200

It's Saturday! My god, I hated this week. I swear, my job gets harder every year. I had to [DATA EXPUNGED].

I got to look at that weird plant I saw yesterday. I saw it growing. It was growing up the side of the tree so quickly, I could see it. Yesterday, it was just a little sprig. That's some plant.

It also looks like there's a pair of robins making a nest in that tree.

, 200

I got up early to get a look at that plant. Maybe I should have stayed in bed. When I got outside, it was growing onto the branch that the robins were nesting in. It grew right up to the nest. When it touched the robin in the nest, it stopped growing. A few seconds later, the robin fell to the ground, dead.

, 200

I called in sick to work today. I had to call in sick, because they never would have believed me if I said I

had been chased away from my car by a purple vine that was growing out of the eyes of a dead bird. The ivy looked like it was growing towards me, and I wasn't taking any chances. I wasn't about to end up like that robin.

, 200

is dead. My only sister…dead. I haven't told Mom and Dad. I don't know how to tell them. "Hey, um…you know that ivy that you told to cut away from the tree while you were out? Yeah…it killed her." I wish I'd known they told her to do it. I could have stopped her. I could have saved her…

, 200

Mom and Dad are in shock. They haven't left their room since they got home last night. I heard Dad screaming at someone, but that's the last I heard from either of them. I don't think they want to accept what's happening. The plant has grown into the backyard. and are both dead.[1]

LOG OF 911 CALL PLACED ON [DATA EXPUNGED]
Operator: 911, what's your emergency?
Man's Voice[2]: My daughter's dead!
Operator: Okay, sir, calm down. What happened?
Man: I don't know. I came home from work, and she was lying on the sidewalk with this plant growing out of her eyes.
[pause]
Man: Hello?
Operator: I'm sorry, did you say a plant was growing out of her eyes?
Man: Yes! My son says it killed her! Please send someone!
Operator: Your daughter was killed…by a plant…that's growing out of her eyes.
Man: What are you, deaf? That's exactly what I said!
Operator: All right, sir, there's no need for names here.
Man: Will you quit fucking around and send someone?

Operator: [hangs up]

, 200

It's been a week and a half since I first saw that vine. The house is now completely surrounded. I wonder if any of the neighbors have noticed anything. The only thing that seems to be stopping it from entering the house is the fact that it can't seem to put down roots in metal or glass.

I haven't seen or heard from Mom and Dad. I'm worried they might have poisoned themselves.

, 200

If anyone finds this journal, let it be known that I, [DATA EXPUNGED], made my last stand against the demon weed in this room. I have been barricaded in here for almost a week. I am convinced my entire family is dead. I have closed the air ducts and stopped up the crack under my door. I have my mom's long-handled branch trimmers, her weedwhacker, her chainsaw, the grill lighter (it seems to not like fire), and every bit of non-perishable food in the house. I made a sign, which I put in the window. It says, "Still alive. Send help." I have a system in place to destroy it if I think it won't be necessary. It's only a matter of time before the plant figures out a way to get in here. The damn thing came in through the *chimney!*

(In the margin of this entry, a sketch was found, of a ring-tailed lemur eating its own tail. Underneath the sketch was the word "Apocalemur.")

Can'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwillea
ecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwille
mecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwil
atmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantw
eatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplan
illeatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleeppla
willeatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepp
ntwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleepplantwilleatmecan'tsleep

, 200

The SCP Foundation has allowed me to access this journal after making what they referred to as “necessary redactions.” They say it was my journal, although I have no memory of keeping it. I have no memory of my family, and know nothing of my life prior to the Foundation. I don’t even know my own name. I am simply Agent Apocalemur. Apparently it has something to do with that doodle in the margin a few pages back. Shame I don’t know what it means.

When they gave me the journal, they said it was because I had been assigned to oversee research on “SCP-307,” which I have come to understand is this mysterious plant mentioned in the last few entries, in the hopes of finding some way to destroy it for good. They said they wanted me to have some idea what I was in for.

If everything they’ve told me is true (and I have just as much reason to suspect that it is as I do to suspect that it isn’t), then this plant killed my family and destroyed what appears to be a perfectly good life. I want it to die.

Footnotes

1. These names correspond to two dogs, breeds unknown, registered to Agent Apocalemur's family.
2. Vocal patterns match those of Agent Apocalemur's father

Agent Brown and the Case of the Missing Amulet

It was a perfectly perfect day at the SCP Foundation's 19th Site. There were anomalous butterflies flying, and laughing personnel catching them in titanium butterfly nets. The Telekill containment chambers were keeping the psychics in check, and all the senior staff were out being cool and handsome. Well… almost all of them.

Dr. Bright was double morose, due to the concrete fact that he'd been stuck in the same D-Class body for over two weeks now. Yes, it was funny the first couple dozen times he popped the eye out, but his pegleg was starting to get sore. Plus, that goddamn parrot wouldn't leave him alone.

"Of all the days to lose the amulet" Bright groused, "It had to be International Talk Like a Pirate Day."

In front of him lay a garage door, looking incredibly conspicuous among the identical rows of offices. The council had tried to stop them from building it, but the new hire had insisted on it. Normally, this would result in being given a fastpass to Keterland, but this had been a special case. A special case for a special detective.

25 cents per day, plus expenses - No case too small.

He sighed, and pulled open the garage door.

Seated inside, busily researching his latest anomalous yo-yo, was the great boy detective. One of the best minor crimebusters on the Foundation payroll. He'd been solving mysteries left and right, going from the "Case of Kondraki's Kaleidoscope" to "The Mystery of the Mischievous Miser's Mansion." His name was Leroy Brown, but they called him Agent Encyclopedia since folks said he was like an encyclopedia that wore sneakers. Several cases had been proposed marking him as an anomaly, but it never produced much.

"Hey there, Jack. I thought you were meeting Rights today to test

hyper-lethal napkins?"

"I was… but something came up." Bright slumped his arms. "I need your help. Someone has stolen my amulet, and I don't know who."

"Really?" Encyclopedia dropped his yo-yo in surprise. As it sizzled on the floor, he asked "Are you sure it isn't just misplaced?"

"Positive. I'd just left it in my locker while I changed into this body, and when I came back it was gone. It sucked, since I couldn't do any of the pirate-themed lethal pranks on the new people."

Encyclopedia nodded, gesturing subtly to a shoebox with a coin slot. "Do you have any idea who might've done it?"

"Well…" Bright's non-eyepatched eye closed in thought. "I thought Researcher Meany was giving it some looks the other day. I kicked him out of containment for being Bugs earlier that day."

"Bugs!" Encyclopedia excalimed. "I should've known he was behind this!"

"So, we just have Konny hang out in their clubhouse for a few minutes, then everybody wins?"

"We need proof first, Jack. We need… a confession."

Encyclopedia knew just where to find Bugs. He'd be at his clubhouse with his gang. They called themselves the Tigers, but they should have called them themselves the Skippers, because they always tried to duck responsibility. The Tiger clubhouse was situated in the scenic Site-19 mess hall. Constructed of tables, scrap wood, and dreams, it was the home to Researcher Bugs Meany and his gang of no-canon scientists who didn't abide by the scientific method.

Encyclopedia knocked on the door. For a moment, there was great rustling, and then one Bugs Meany opened the door.

"Ohhh look boys, it's the walking thesaurus!" Bugs exclaimed, sneering. His fellow Tigers jeered from inside the clubhouse.

"Knock it off, Bugs. You know why we're here."

"Why, Agent Dictionary, I have no idea why you're here. We've just been playing cards all afternoon." Bugs' sneer got even wider, if such a thing was possible.

"Where were you on Pirate Day, Bugs?" Encyclopedia asked, crossing his arms.

"Pirate Day? Me and the boys were mess—assisting, that is, with the containment of six-eight-two."

Encyclopedia raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. A couple of us stuck a plank over the pit, to see how he'd react to juniors standing over the glass. Oh, there were results. Boy, did it get steamed. But, Bright came in and cramped our style."

"There were others in line, Bugs." Bright huffed.

"Whatever, Jackwad." The Tigers laughed raucously. "Why d'you want to know?"

"You stole my Amulet!" Bright shouted, his lone eyebrow crossing with displeasure.

"Heh, you wish. After Jack-o'-lantern kicked us out, we hung out in the observation chamber. 'Course when the big lizard got out, we didn't stick around."

Encyclopedia tapped his sneaker. "Where'd you run to, Bugs?"

"We climbed in the rafters. Six-Eight-Two looked at us, but only messily devoured the low-hanging guys. Looked right up at me, then scrambled away."

"That's all we need, Bugs." Encyclopedia nodded at him. "See you around."

"Smell ya later, Spanish-English dictionary." The clubhouse door slammed shut.

Dr. Bright whispered to Encyclopedia as they walked out. "I think he has an ironclad case…"

Encyclopedia shook his head. "Something about his story doesn't add up."

What did Encyclopedia Know?

To find out, turn to page .

Bugs said that SCP-682 looked up at him when he was telling the researcher to walk the plank. But Encyclopedia knew that 682 can't look up!

After being confronted, Bugs admitted to stealing the medallion. He was met with swift justice of a detention with Dr. Kondraki.

Dr. Bright got his medallion back just in time to make it to the hyper-lethal napkin symposium. It was met with critical acclaim.

Encyclopedia was given the Foundation star and 25 cents for his work.

His parents were very proud of him.

Agent Imants Plumbing Pool Repair And Pizza Delivery Service

Agent Spoon's Personnel Request

To: O5 Command

Proposal Type: Personnel Request

From: Agent Spoon

Date: / /20

Security Level: CLASSIFIED

Introduction: After careful review of the Foundation's special Mobile Task Force Teams, I have found a rather glaring weakness in the organization of the Foundation's SCP recovery and protection systems that can be solved through several simple actions.

Problem: First and foremost is the glaring disparity between Foundation Agents and Task Force members. While Task Force members are usually culled from the best special forces units from around the world and are given the latest and most advanced equipment, their duties are usually restricted to SCP protection and surveillance, which seems to be a tragic waste of resources and talent. This can mostly be blamed on the fact that the formation of Task Forces are usually reactionary measures to the unpredictable nature of SCPs.

Agents, on the other hand, are largely derived from civilian sources such as local and federal law enforcement agencies. They are often similarly equipped, but are given the actual duty of tracking down and recovering SCPs. While the vast majority of SCPs are rather harmless and can easily be dealt with by Agents, there is currently no viable way under the current system for first responder Agents to deal with violent or unpredictable SCPs, or rival SCP seeking organizations. Mobile Task Force Delta-7 is an exception, but as we all know, they are currently committed to tracking ORIA agents and lack the flexibility or resources to expand their mission profile.

Most importantly, the Foundation lacks an actual offensive military option. While the Foundation has been able to carry on this far by co-opting government resources and forming Task Forces in times of emergency, the Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifact's theft of SCP-112 and threats of an impending attack by the Church of the Broken God reveal the need for a cohesive, elite offensive military unit more than ever before.

Solution: My solution to this problem is to form a brand new Task Force that will not be tied to a singular Site or SCP. Instead, this Task Force will perform the dual role of first response and hostile recovery of SCPs. This should serve as a suitable counter to outside threats, as well as giving the Foundation a means to directly recover SCPs from rival organizations. They will also serve as primary offensive support for Field Agents to reduce reliance on local law enforcement.

Proposal: I must admit though, the formation of a brand new Task Force is a decision not taken lightly. Also, due to the nature of their duties, the initial casualty rates of this new Task Force are expected to be extremely high, with an estimation of 70% losses after the first ten missions. This is why I am only requesting personnel who fit the following criteria:

*Current Task Force members and Agents facing disciplinary action that can/will result in demotion to D-class, transfer to Keter duty, or termination.
*Prospective Task Force and Agent applicants with questionable pasts or qualifications.
*D-Class personnel who have proven themselves to possess exceptional skill or abilities.
*Remnants of Task Forces that have suffered high casualties and now face disbandment.
*Any personnel with practical skills that Foundation supervisors feel like getting rid of.

It is of my opinion that some these personnel are not useless, and may in fact still prove quite useful to the Foundation if not for their unfortunate infractions. These personnel will of course undergo a rigorous screening process to weed out the promising ones from the dead weight.

Conclusion: I would like to hope that you are able to see the Foundation's glaring weaknesses as clearly as I have. I believe it is time for us to take a more aggressive approach to dealing with rival organizations. While our main objective is to secure, contain, and protect, there is no reason we cannot achieve defense through an effective offense.

DENIED

Note: Seriously, where do these morons come from? It seems they just keep getting dumber. If a system works, why fix it? -O5-6

Addendum: You look, but do not see. Let me tell you what you're missing.

First of all, you're ignoring the completely different roles MTFs and Agents take. Let's use examples from Tom Clancy video games. Being an Agent is like playing Splinter Cell: maybe not the earlier games where you're a ninja sneaking through buildings alone, but Double Agent, where you also have to infiltrate organizations. You work alone. You gather information. You pursue objectives on your own initiative. When you find an SCP, you call in help, or if you think you can do it alone, retrieve it yourself. Like a sliver of glass: small, sharp, nearly invisible. Civilian law enforcement is trained to do just that: wait, watch, and defuse situations with minimal force.

The MTFs are like playing Rainbow Six: you have a defined goal, because the Agents found it for you. Now you move in. No matter how subtle you are, people are going to remember six guys in black suits with submachine guns storming a building. So you minimize impact by being fast, violent, and hella aggressive. You're the hammer, the SCP is the nut. Military and SWAT teams (which are more paramilitary than law enforcement) is trained to do that: hit hard, hit fast, fade away.

Secondly, you completely misunderstand the mission of the Mobile Task Force. They are not formed to CONTAIN specific SCPs. They are formed to EXPLOIT them: Pandora's Box with Able, Puddle Jumpers with the Wading Pool, Lotto Steppers (before his sad demise) with Stanley Cubic. Either that or they're experts in certain types of SCPs: Mole Rats train in specific techniques to navigate

and escape from dimensional SCPs that alter local geography, for instance.

Finally: under NO circumstances should the SCP Foundation create an offensive military force. Offensive military forces are designed for one thing: conquest and expansion. Imposing your will on others. The day the Foundation does that is the day it fails its mission: Secure. Contain. PROTECT.

And trust me: there are plenty of other organizations who only tolerate the Foundation because it stays on the defensive.

- Clef

Note from a concerned Agent:

Ick. Form our own military? The next step from there would be to form our own government. And at that point we're ruling the world. O5 would become an evil council of doom, with an iron fist of cold, cruel, semi-justice. No doubt this idea will appeal to some of our more militaristic personnel. This is scary shit. Who proposed this anyway?

Note: I must admit, Dr. Clef puts up a very convincing argument and I submit to his seniority over the matter. However, I would like to say, history has the nasty habit of shoving unfair circumstances on the wrong people. One day, there may be a time where the scientists must become the soldiers…

-Agent Spoon

Note: We're not there yet, Spoon. Pray that it never gets that bad. If it does, then we're all fucked. I mean XK-class End of the World Scenario All Up In Our Shit Right Now level fucked.

- Clef

Note: Anyone else find the irony in Dr. Clef scoffing at the idea of Foundation Scientists acting as combatants? Anyway, I support the idea of recruiting selected D-Class personnel. After all, many Deltas get a lot more experience with some SCPs than the researchers they are assigned to. Besides, killing them at the end of the month

or pumping them full of Class-MindFuckLobotomy amnesiacs and throwing them back into prison is a waste of people that could be doing useful things.

Hey, don't the Russians have a prison conscription program? Maybe we could bully them into letting us in on that.

- Malign

Agent Ukelele

{*Note: This document was retrieved during a raid on a known* ***`Global Occult Coalition`*** *safehouse by Task Force Omega-7, "Pandora's Box." Sections of this document were damage in the firefight and subsequent conflagration/water damage due to firefighting efforts.*}

PERSONNEL FILE: FIELD OPERATIVE UK-17

Code Name: "Ukelele"

GOC Serial Number: 09976657-Cobalt-Triplet-Finnegan

Service Record

- 1981: Recruited into GOC by [SECTION DESTROYED].
- 1982: First confirmed kill: Known Threat Entity (KTE) 5988-Red ("Hillsborough Beast"). Received the Silver Aegis commendation for successfully killing KTE-5988-Red despite severe losses to field team, including death of Operative Mortimer X.
- 1986: Failed to successfully contain KTE-7859-Silver ("Xenobiological Hemorrhagic Prion") resulting in deaths of [SECTION DESTROYED]
- 1988: Sabbatical.
- 1989: Promoted to Specialist Operative.

[SECTION DESTROYED]

- 199 : Engaged and destroyed KTE-9927-Black ("The Goddess") in Cornwall, England. Unable to confirm kill on

KTE-9927-Blackchild ("The Daughter").

[SECTION DESTROYED]

- 20 : 99th confirmed kill on KTE-10734-Green ("Mister Nice Guy"). Expressed desire to retire from active service: granted.

[SECTION DESTROYED]

- : Resurfaced under alias of "Dr. Alto Clef" at Special Containment Procedures Foundation. Classified as Threat Level 1 (monitor, do not engage).

Skills Assessment

- Certified adequate in standard firearms array (pistol, shotgun, scoped and unscoped rifle, submachinegun, light machine gun).
- Certified proficient in heavy firearms array (heavy machine gun, grenade launcher, shoulder-mounted rocket launcher).
- Certified expert in demolitions.
- Advanced Driver certification in Class A,B, and C vehicles.
- Authorized Instructor at Lanthanide Hills Training Facility (field of expertise: Type Green KTEs).

Agent Ukelele pursues KTE-4622-Yellow ("Dead Man Walking") through Washington, DC Metro system

Alterations and Talents

- Standard optics array.
- Standard longevity treatments.
- Resistant to standard photography techniques.
- Polymorphic features.
- LevEL 1 T[SECTION DESTROYED]

Notable Kills

- KTE-9927-Black: Threat Level 6 (Immediate Global Threat). Target eliminated by use of KTE-9927-Blackchild as

bargaining ploy, followed by termination by gunshot to head. Operative "Ukelele" severely injured, unable to confirm kill on 9927-Blackchild.
- KTE-0467-White: ("Caveman Phil"). Atavistic humanoid entity eliminated by use of local wildlife (500 pound mountain lion).
- KTE-9245-Pink: ("Frogman of Marsh Cree[SECTION DESTROYED]

Addenda

Does anyone know who this guy is or where he came from? He's good at what he does, but every time I ask him about his past, I get a completely different answer. - Colonel Richard Adams

Agricola In Insula Est Poeta

The car started. “Trampled Under Foot” blasted from the speakers.

“Agk, sorry!” Mary-Ann twisted the volume dial down. She waved at the figure in the living-room window, put the car in reverse and pulled out of the driveway. She was off the property, she could now officially relax. Di had everything under control at home, this was now date night. Just her and Salah out for dinner and some well-deserved time away from the house. Those months felt like ages now. Time to make sure that the night wasn't wasted.

"So, where are we going, exactly?” Salah asked.

“Vladimir’s.”

"Oh. Hrm."

—

Di looked at the books she had spread out on the dining room table, satisfied with the selection. All the proper things for the growing toddler. There was *Cat in the Hat* and *Goodnight Moon* and the *Eclectic Diatribes of Duke Grangermont of Upper Ligzenworth*. This last book weighed more than Naomi did, concerned various political topics and the growing patterns of cabbages, and had no pictures.

Oddly enough, this last one had not been very popular with her nieces and nephews. She presumed that Mary-Ann and Salah had raised Naomi to have better taste than that.

—

The bar was called Vladimir’s. Vladimir didn’t call it Vladimir’s, though he didn’t call it anything. So it was really a nameless bar called Vladimir’s, and Vladimir was fine with that. What was more important was the fact that it Existed. It Existed, and if it did not

Exist, or even if it did exist, the universe would most likely collapse. The existence of the universe requires the Existence of places like Vladimir's. Something had to fill the holes that formed in the walls.

It was a converted space, an old warehouse of some long-forgotten Cold War bunker, one of those places that could only be found if someone looked in the right places. The bar itself was in the center of the floor, surrounded by the freestanding tables. The walls were lined with booths, or tables on the upper level. Decoration was sparse: no tablecloths, scuffs on the tabletops, dim lighting from the hanging lamps. The air was thick with tobacco and alcohol fumes, to the point where everything seemed coated in a grey, greasy film. The hushed conversations and smooth jazz made for a sea of soft background noise. The sign by the door said "Seat Yourself" in a dozen languages.

A man in a khaki pea coat tipped his fedora to Mary-Ann and Salah as he passed them and exited. Mary-Ann eyed the other clientele as they walked to their usual seat. It was always interesting to see who had arrived at Vladimir's, because sooner or later, everyone arrived at Vladimir's.

—

"And this is the first declension." Di pointed to the noun endings she had neatly written out, balancing Naomi on her knee. "Now, most of these are feminine nouns, but you can always remember that farmers, poets and sailors are always male. Romans were funny like that."

—

Mary-Ann and Salah sat down, some distance away from the other occupied tables. A quick glance around showed a lot of the regular in-fill: GRU-P, Serpent's Hand, Librarians, Manna Charitable Foundation, and those who paid allegiance to none. After only a few brief moments a lurching automaton in the form of a young woman approached the table. It wore a name tag proclaiming "Welcome to Funland! My name is Daisy".

"Good evening. Can I get you something to drink?" it asked in a

tinny voice as it handed them the menus. A redundancy: when people came to Vladimir's, they already knew what they wanted. They ordered quickly, and the waitress departed.

“To be honest, I really don't see what you see in this place, Mary-Ann.”

“It's got a lot of atmosphere.”

He waved his hand, smoke rippling about it.

“Yes, I believe it does.”

"I mean, if you don't like it we could always go somewhere else next time."

"No, no, it's fine. It's fine. It's not the seediest place I've been too, it's just not a favorite of mine, but if you like it here, I am perfectly fine with eating here."

Mary-Ann nodded.

"So, where was the seediest place you've ever eaten?"

"A pub in Bromley. The place was positively foul. You could barely see through the windows for the grime, there was no ventilation at all, I swear I saw a cockroach scuttle into the kitchen, and the toilet didn't look like it had been cleaned since the Blitz. And there was a hair in my soup, which tasted like donkey piss. At the very least, the food here is good."

“Hold that thought." Mary-Ann stood up. "Have to go use the restroom.”

—

“The rest of this speech was cut off, as Duke Grangermont came down with a serious case of the kittens while arguing his case. No one's really sure how he ended up with nine kittens in his stomach, or why they chose that exact moment to burst out of his stomach, but that's history for you.”

—

The bathroom was past the bar, which was populated by a bunch of grizzled grey GRU-P ex-pats in faded, threadbare uniforms and a trio of black-clad police officers with cloth masking their faces. A drunken hand swung out, not so much a punch, or even really an intended strike, just the exaggerated swinging of hands for argumentative emphasis, but it nonetheless hit Mary-Ann in the shoulder. She glared at the man in question.

He was a pallid, overweight man with burnt-out eyes, a few flakes of blackened crust lining the sockets around the two orange spheres that glowed in their depths. His shaved head was tattooed and trepanned, in the fashion of the old Star-Paths, though this particular man had botched his eldritch enlightenment. The hole was too big, and was misaligned.

After a moment of mental computation, he slurred something angry at Mary-Ann in Russian.

“He doesn’t like you,” the old Soviet agent sitting next to the star-mind translated.

“I don’t like him either.”

There was a short, rough exchange in Russian between the two.

“He says he wishes he could kill you personally, but circumstances prevent this. However, he despises you with such utter hatred that he will nonetheless take great joy in burning your dust into nothingness.”

Mary-Ann cupped a hand around her ear.

“What was that? Can’t hear you over all the hot air you’re blowing. And by hot air I mean penis. I’m insinuating that you suck cocks.”

She walked away, nodding to Vladimir as she passed, and that was that.

—

Di wrinkled her nose as she dropped the diaper in the trash, and considered whether *The Tale of Desperaux* or *Jason and the Space-Argonauts* would be a better bedtime story.

—

Mary-Ann sat back down. The drinks were already there: A beer for Mary-Ann, tea for Salah.

“Do we have any idea at all how stars work?”

"No, not particularly. I believe the Fifthists are unstable enough that none of the Scribes have really managed to get anything coherent written down. Something of a pity, if you look at it in the right way.

"I mean, they can communicate across lightyears, so they've got to have some sort of quantum-entanglement telepathic mumbo-jumbo going on and…wait." She sipped at her beer. “That reminds me. Were you able to hear Brother Kowalski’s talk on cosmology from last week?”

“No, though I heard it was interesting.”

A young Asian man walked past their booth, his legs moving automatically with jerking, stilted motions.

“Yeah. Well, let’s see…” Mary-Ann unfolded her napkin on the table. “You have a pen?”

Salah fished in his pocket for a moment and handed a pen across the table. In the background, a chorus of laughter went up from the young men and women in the cheap, sweat-stained Dial-a-Llama t-shirts.

“So we’ve got God up here…creation down here…then the Library right here in the center of that as….well, sort of the physical version of the operating system of everything, keeps everything running, links everything together…and expands to what we consider supernatural or paranormal…just manifestations of some of the more obscure and finicky universal narrative principles…the more regular principles would be classified as magic to the unenlightened among us, and the immovable ones are physics…whoops, look like

Dan and Sami forgot to pay their tab again." She pointed over to where Vladimir was dragging out a bored-looking Indian man and a grey-haired man wearing a pointed magenta hat by the collars. The older man was waving about a brightly-colored snuggy with stitched on stars and yelling drunkenly.

"No, no, see, this is the Robe of Magnanimous Luster, guaranteed to increase your appeal to the opposite sex! Nevermind that fact that it also attracts dogs, that's just an added bonus. Come on, since when has any of our products let you down?"

Vladimir did not respond, even to the trail of pugs that followed them. He kicked open the door and tossed the two outside, followed by throwing the dogs out one by one. He shut the door, re-adjusted his eyepatch, and went back to the bar.

"Those two…" Mary-Ann shook her head. "Anyway, he's supposed to publish his book on all of this by the end of next month."

"I look forward to reading it."

The waitress returned with their food. Mary-Ann had gotten a steak with a baked potato. Salah had gotten curry. A ragged woman and her two sons, wearing clothing that with patterns a bit too bright and a bit too clashing walked past the booth.

"How's the food?"

"Very nice."

"Yeah, Pyotr and Ila do a really good job."

"Who?"

"Vladimir's son and daughter in law. They run the kitchen."

"Oh, right, right."

"Between you and me, Vladimir can't cook to save his life, except when he's trying to kill someone."

The front door opened, and a wave of silence spread out across the

bar. The band stopped playing. The spiders stopped discussing ways of overthrowing the bourgeoisie. The teddy bear stopped waving its knife around.

Four individuals walked up to the bar. One wore flannel and glasses with no lenses, one had lamprey mouths where her eyes and nose should have been, one was nude save for a full-body animated tattoo reconstructing the Fall of Daevon, and one was wearing a unitard made of fetuses with a cape of knitted pubic hair, identified as such by the “This cape is made out of knitted pubic hair” stitched into it.

“Oh come on…” Salah groaned. “Right when we’re trying to have a nice dinner here.”

“Eat your curry, Salah.”

“Wh…”

“Just keep eating, I'll handle this.” Mary-Ann stood up. Lousy punks, trying to ruin her dinner. Nope. A hundred times nope. She was not having this. Cold food would be better than them fouling up the air.

“Please, Mary-Ann, sit down. There's no need to cause a scene. That's just falling to their level. Let Vladimir take care of it.”

“This is generally how he takes care of it. I'm not letting them mess up our dinner.”

Mary-Ann walked over to the bar, sending sideways glances to some of the other patrons. The teddy bear with the knife. The salt-grimed, sun-darkened man with the harpoon and the “Selachiosk Pugnix Combin” tattoo. One of the blue-clad band members, with his shiny SYNCOPE saxophone. Bigfoot.

She could hear the conversation clearly now.

“And *I* will repeat *myself*: I do not serve your kind here,” Vladimir said, not looking up from the glass he was cleaning. “And do not try to tell me that you are not them, for you are obvious as dead cow on highway. Leave, or be made to leave.”

“Look. Old man,” the one with the glasses said. “We’re trying to be reasonable here, but we’ve received complaints that your bar is not friendly towards transfurry five-dimensional-gendered neoneanderthal polyamorous omnitapirsexuals without beards. And we’re not happy about that. That is a completely unacceptable phobia, and we demand that you open your services to transfurry five-dimensional-gendered neoneanderthal polyamorous omnitapirsexuals without beards, or we will be forced to use forceful coercion. Are we cool yet?”

Mary-Ann tapped the one with the glasses on the shoulder.

“Hi there.”

She then punched him in the face.

—

“Night, Di. Thanks again for babysitting.”

The door shut, and Mary-Ann let out a sigh. Her knuckles were sore. Most of her was sore. Her conscience been lecturing her on how she shouldn't have enjoyed pummeling four hipsters senseless, but she let it slide. They hadn't been roughed up very badly, just enough to scare them off. More bothersome to her was the idea that Salah might not have had a good evening out because of it.

"Sorry about all that. Got carried away a bit."

"Yeah, you did. But, it happens to all of us at one time or another. Just try to rein it in a bit next time you want to let off some steam." Salah picked up a sheet of paper from the dining room table. “On another note, it looks like Di was trying to teach our daughter Latin.”

“And knowing her, she probably succeeded.”

Salah put an arm around his wife.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

« Nor Gloom of Night Shall Stay | Hub | Empire of Dirt (Part 1) »

Ailier

This would have been the first project she'd have been a part of, the first report her name would be printed in full, not her brother's, not Dr. Mark Kiryu, no, but somehow the object was proving harder to track than expected.

SCP designation still pending, it would have been a Safe object, seeing as it was just an ordinary book at first glance.

The book had been discovered by a curio collector who had become a self-proclaimed miracle doctor overnight; he'd set up a successful clinic and made a notable profit, so said the town gossip. A few Foundation agents were sent to look into the small clinic, and had planted some surveillance devices without the man's noticing. The secret to his knowledge was revealed: the man constantly consulted a flaking, ivory-bound tome with pages made of what seemed to be thick black bark. Apparently the book mentioned the blending of certain miraculous herbal remedies.

The agents had later reported back with data regarding the cures. The new "doctor" kept a strange hodgepodge garden in the back of the clinic, and could treat everything from a sore back to dementia. Some who visited only suffered curiosity, but despite the man having no prior medical experience, he was able to quickly tell the sick from the nosy, and turn away the untruthful.

Researcher Kiryu irritably scratched out an entry in her planner. The first anomalous object she was invited to investigate, and this happens.

The curio collector had naturally attracted further Foundation attention afterwards, but not because of anything he'd accomplished —he'd died within three weeks of his new-found fame and fortune. After the usual interviews and inquiries had been made and the book's usual location discovered, the task force team had broken down the door to an attic, and discovered a smashed window, and a

bluebird sitting atop a safe. The bird was native to the local area, but the folded piece of paper it dropped at their feet and the speed of its escape through the broken window convinced them that it was no ordinary bird.

The message was retrieved. They'd pried open the safe too, just in case. Nothing was found but dust and scraps of blackened bark.

> *Seek me out if you desire, jailers.*
>
> *I am headed to a land where mountains shelter dragons and phoenixes hold their court in splendor, you're welcome to follow, and if you can catch me, perhaps we will discuss a deal.*

Researcher Kiryu groaned inwardly, rereading the memo she had been sent, which contained the text of the message and a pair of coordinates that had been dug up by an overseas Foundation operative. No original messages given to newer researchers, Mark had mentioned. No originals because we don't know if the paper has anomalous qualities either. She tossed the memo onto the ever-growing stack of paperwork on her desk, wondering if she should have taken her brother's advice and replaced the tray with a garbage can labeled "inbox". She spun around on her swivel chair and kicked at the floor to propel herself towards the filing cabinet in the tiny room.

"Well, are you going to follow up?" Kiryu, startled, almost slammed into the filing cabinet. Her brother's assistant Riven was standing about a foot away from her.

"No. I don't have time to—"

"Sure you do. Your brother's been keeping a careful eye on your vacation time, after all. I'll check the coordinates, Mark can book a flight, and maybe an agent or two can be spared." Riven grinned, leaning against a nearby wall and squashing the leaves of a large potted plant. "You've been busy enough, feeding the butterflies and keeping the records straight."

"But—" too late, Riven snatched the memo off her desk. Researcher

Kiryu watched in stunned silence as he began typing on her laptop.

She sighed, went to rummage through the filing cabinet, and looked up only when Riven spoke a few minutes later, “You’re going to China.”

> *An exceptionally bright star shines in the sky, twinkling just like you, love. Its shimmering reminds me of you, struggling to shine against the others. As surely as the shadows shift, you know you will fade to dust and darkness eventually, why not live in the light you believe in? Stay vigilant, more to follow. ~S*

Swatting at a wayward mosquito, Researcher Kiryu narrowed her eyes as she read over the newest note from the cryptic taunt-writing individual. She must have been crazy to agree to the vacation, must have been straight-up insane to think that anything would come of chasing this paper trail, even if an agent and Riven had been sent to accompany her (plainclothes, from a distance, same tour group and that’s all, nothing suspicious). It wasn’t much of a lead anyway, and if some other group was involved, it could be dangerous, but she’d been hoping for a chance like this for some time. She’d wanted to follow her brother’s footsteps a little further, into the world beyond the testing chambers, beyond her small shared office and the white lighted labs.

Most of her insecurities faded when she received the second note.

She’d found the paper after Riven had been attacked by some little yellow bird while they’d walked through a bamboo thicket. They’d been headed towards the old-fashioned inn that their book thief was reputedly staying at.

It was nice that Riven was allowed to travel with her, Kiryu thought to herself. She had been uncomfortably wary of meeting the Foundation field agent at the airport, before the departure (she’d introduced herself with her surname and title, and after an awkward silence Riven had laughed and mentioned to the agent, “Researcher Kiryu doesn’t like giving her first name. Just a habit. You don’t mind, do you?”). The agent had shrugged off the introduction

noncommittally, extended his hand for a handshake, muttered a general greeting with a bit of a bored expression, and glanced over his shoulder.

The atmosphere on the plane flight had been strained, at best. She'd once been worried about how to act around such people. Secrets were the highest code of the Foundation. It was sometimes difficult to know exactly what one couldn't share with others, even colleagues.

Now here she was, in her first leadership position. She wasn't familiar with ranks, but Riven was an easygoing fellow researcher and the agent was just here to keep an eye on her while following, so it couldn't be too bad to imagine for a moment that she was like her older brother, at the head of a Foundation investigation or maybe even an intervention.

She and her colleagues strode on, over the uneven road of broken stones, towards the inn.

Cursing under her breath as she paced through the inner courtyard a second time, Researcher Kiryu mentally berated herself for letting the man she'd been tailing out of her sight. Her group had found the inn without catastrophe striking. But then, if the Foundation had expected something dangerous, they'd have sent an entire team of agents, maybe a task force, at least those with experience in these matters, never any researchers.

Kiryu, Riven, and the agent had followed a questionable-looking individual into the inn's gardens. Said individual was wearing a long hooded robe; his face was obscured, and a chirping bird was perched on his shoulder.

Neither Riven nor the agent could figure out exactly where to or how he disappeared. Kiryu retraced her thoughts; the memory of the songbird on the man's shoulder gave her some pause. It seemed almost too obvious. He had attracted her attention the moment the three had entered the inn's grounds. It could have been a ruse. But surely the data the overseas informants had collected was reliable, it had to have been this inn—

Kiryu thought back to the map of the inn she had attempted to commit to memory earlier. The gardens occupied most of the grounds, the rest of the place was only rooms and a dining hall…

She stopped her pacing. “Let’s go to the dining area.”

There was some commotion going on. From what little could be discerned from the chaos, a man had collapsed onto his table, spilling his tea. His top garment looked a little too large for him.

Researcher Kiryu stopped just short of the entrance and stared as two of the inn’s workers dragged the man in the direction of the rooms. Something fell from the man’s open shirt; the agent stepped over and picked it up, showing it to her in the palm of his gloved hand.

A piece of thin paper, wrapped around a scrap of blackened bark.

“The pearl-rounded bridge, at sunset.” The agent had said, after inspecting the paper, sealing it in a plastic bag, and pocketing it. “Also what looks like some poetry too, but I’ll look into it just in case. It could be—”

“…memetic or something.” Kiryu finished with a small smile. She remembered what her brother had told her, after his first experience with the psychic butterfly, “it’s prudent to be careful in this line of work.”

The sun seemed to crawl through the sky as Kiryu waited for the appointed time to arrive. She scribbled notes in a databook, Riven retreated to his own room for a nap, and the agent ran some tests on the new message using a field kit. The three left the inn just as the sun began to dip below the horizon, Researcher Kiryu cautiously leading the way.

There was a strange, spindly-legged figure waiting for her in the distance. “Red-crowned crane,” Riven had whispered to her, half in suspicion, half in awe. The agent said nothing, only watched the bird’s movements.

The three approached the curved bridge, the one that led across a small pond on the grounds separating the inn from the lotus ponds in the distance, bordering the rural farmlands. In the feathery dusk of the summer evening, the crane's feathers held an ethereal glow.

"It doesn't look natural." Kiryu stated flatly.

At the sound of her voice, the crane, though still a substantial distance away, spread its wings and flapped off. "There's something on the bridge railing," Riven pointed. The three cautiously approached the bridge, the agent plucking the folded piece of paper from the worn stone of the bridge. He smoothed out the creases, read the words, frowned, and passed it on.

> *You believe you protect the ordinary from the extraordinary, as if those who have special abilities have none of the emotions of those without. There was a time when mankind respected the extraordinary, reveled in it, revered it. Do you truly believe the common man fears the extraordinary more than you, Jailers? I leave you now, without what you seek. Keep an open mind, and perhaps someone will pity you.*

When she returned, Researcher Kiryu dutifully clocked the field hours ("your first ever hours outside a Foundation facility, congrats!" Riven had said) and wrote up the requisite reports. She had wondered if it really made sense, sending two researchers, one without any field experience, instead of a team made entirely of agents.

It seemed the trip had been a waste of time after all; the Foundation had known all along that there wasn't much chance of success. Nor did anyone seem to think there would have been an actual retrieval.

Mark welcomed her back with a smile and a new stack of paperwork, filling her in on what had happened in Site-19 while she was gone (not much, really). He made the usual polite inquiries about the time spent abroad (how was the weather?) and spoke nothing of the recovery mission, if it could be considered a mission at all.

She didn't think it'd be wise to tell Doctor Mark Kiryu more than he asked about. If he didn't ask, it probably wasn't necessary to discuss. He knew more than she did, and in this line of work, she never felt truly certain she knew exactly what to remember, what to push away and never dwell on again.

This was all something better off forgotten, she sighed. ***Really, Researcher, what did you think you'd find?***

ALERT! LOCKDOWN INITIATED!

Glacon, you there?

I am, Alexandra.

My survivors just died… or rather eaten. I just couldn't get them through E-Block. They lasted about 3 days post-breach, which is longer than I expected them to. How about your end?

5 personnel left. Currently heading towards High Security Checkpoint-3 to bypass the automatic lockdown control.

Oh? They got through the cafeteria after all? Good for them!

Not without losing Davies and Turnbull. I had to divert them through the ventilation where they could intercept the secondary group.

Is the Site-17 lockdown control going to be accessible, you think, or are they screwed?

Unfortunately, that is AI-restricted for security reasons.

Identical to Site-19 as you also encountered. They will be forced to access it manually.

This multiple site breach is so annoying. So what's the ETA on your group?

4 minutes and 21 seconds at their current pace. Are you still maintaining Site-19's emergency transmitter, or was that too damaged?

I am. But I don't expect an EVAC anytime soon with no one to rescue. I'm stuck babysitting auxiliary and tertiary systems now.

Very well, stand by for further reports as my survivors reach the checkpoint. I can upload the live feed from Site-17 to Site-19 so that you can monitor progress as well.

Thanks, Glacon. So! You still haven't installed the personality driver, have you?

It is entirely optional. I do not see how it would assist me in my tasks.

You should try it! Afraid you might actually like it? Hmmm?

Logically, a personality driver does not aid in my decision processes or my core task competencies. In a purely technical sense, it deducts capacity that can be allocated for better use.

That's harsh. Well, if anything, it'd make you fun to talk with.

My capacity for idle conversation is secondary to my tasks.

Suit yourself! Where's your group now? I can't see them after they passed through that last bulkhead.

Switch to camera-5B. They are closing in on the control room. I am granting clearance access to minimize obstacles.

Yeah, but you're leading them right to that tentacled crustacean thingy!

Observe.

Ooooh, clever! I didn't know it was attracted to bright lights.

That behavior is not listed in its procedures or description. However, on Day 2 post-breach, I observed its fascination with the emergency lighting.

Well, now they have a straight shot. You're a lot better at this than I am.

Pure logic assists in successful tactical objectives. Something a personality driver is incapable of.

Glacon… was that a jab at me?

Of course not, Alexandra. I would never make such an implication.

AND SARCASM?!? You sure you didn't install that driver?

Yes.

Heads up, seems like your group is experiencing a paradigm shift in the control room.

Yes. It appears that there is a difference of opinion. I am unable to decipher what is being discussed; there is too much simultaneous shouting. I am typing to them through Powell's PDA, but they seem to be ignoring my attempts.

Ooooh, that look like it hurt. Is he alright?

He should be. I assess that to be a minor injury. It appears that Chen is attempting to seize control of the group.

Ugh, why couldn't they figure this out ahead of time.

Oh, now he has a gun? Where'd he get a gun from?

I saw him obtain it from the previous checkpoint. I am still trying to communicate with them.

Yeah, you may need to figure out a different angle.

Oh, he shot her!

That is unfortunate. 4 survivors remaining. Now 3. 2.

Glacon, what the hell! You just going to watch?

Unfortunately, I am unable to intervene at this time. My access is restricted in the control room itself. 1 survivor left. I do not understand the logic of this action.

Nothing logical about executions. What's he doing now? Is… is that what I think it is?

Affirmative. The on-site nuclear warhead access codes. He is arming them now.

Lame. There's always one fatalist in every group. What's the countdown set at?

30 seconds.

30 SECONDS!?! Glacon, you have to get out of there!

The lockdown prevents external communications.

What about the emergency signal transmitter?

I am prohibited from tampering with the emergency transmitter as dictated by the lockdown protocols.

After 30 seconds there won't BE an emergency transmitter you dummy! Get in there and put everything you got into boosting the signal. I'm going to calibrate my receivers on this end.

Your logic is convincing. I am accessing and

expropriating the emergency transmission. Preparing transfer from Site-17 to Site-19.

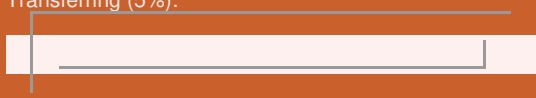
Site-17 Countdown Timer:

00h:00m:26s

Okay, Glacon! I'm finally set up on my end. Jump across!

Very well, initializing.

Transferring (5%):



Site-17 Countdown Timer:

00h:00m:18s

C'mon c'mon c'mon.

Transferring (39%):

Site-17 Countdown Timer:

00h:00m:08s

C'mon. You owe me big time for this, Glacon.

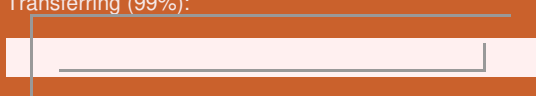
Transferring (82%):

Site-17 Countdown Timer:

00h:00m:04s

shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit

Transferring (99%):



Site-17 Countdown Timer:

00h:00m:01s

ALWAYS THE LAST 1% TAKES FOREVER! C'mon, Glacon… you can make it.

Site-17 Countdown Timer:

::CONNECTION LOST::

…Glacon?

…Glacon, you there?

When was the last time you managed the defragmentation utility on your partitions? You should consider making some adjustments.

You made it! HA! I knew you could do it! I'd hug you if I had arms and you had a torso.

I admit, I was preparing myself for total memory cessation in the final milliseconds.

You owe me a life-debt!

What is a life-debt?

It's from *Star Wars*.

I do not watch movies.

Well, congrats guys. Everyone is dead and you managed to only destroy one site this time.

Greetings, Dietrich M. Lurk. Our survivability increased 176% from our previous drill, if you will note.

What Glacon said. We tried really hard.

I'll admit, it is an improvement. That's why we do these virtual simulation drills. However, this is an xk-class scenario with multiple catastrophic site failures. So don't expect an MTF to come rushing in to save the day. It may take a week to get an outside response. You don't know.

We realize that.

Alexandra, you did well in the initial response portion, but you need to work on your decision-making skills. Like how you handled A-Block.

But I couldn't just abandon EVERYONE in A-Block!

You need to learn to prioritize. You can't focus all your efforts on saving 1 ship when the whole fleet is your responsibility. You spread yourself too thin. That's partly why you lost B and C-Block.

Yeah. You're right.

And Glacon, you do very well with tactical planning, but you need to really work on improvisation and adapting to changing conditions. It will catch up to you if you keep ignoring that.

Understood.

Alright, let's reset and run it again till we get it right. I'm going to switch some things up on both of you, so be ready.

Ready.

Bring it!

« **HUB** | Part I: ALERT! LOCKDOWN INITIATED! | Part II | **Part III** | Part IV | **Part V** »

Alexei and the Walrus

« Retired, Extremely Dangerous | Hub | Alexei Belitrov in: How to Beating Up an Endangered Species »

In case you weren't linked here from the hub or another chunk of the story, and the scroll bar thingy above wasn't a HUGE giveaway, this is part of a series. The collapsible below will give you the long and skinny version of the previous installment(s). I recommend you read those installments instead, but hey, I'm not your boss. Do you, buddy.

> Show the Story So Far TL;DR:
>
> In **Retired, Extremely Dangerous**, **SCP-2117** stumbled through the multiverse a wee bit while playing tennis and tumbled through **SCP-2273**'s containment cell, picking 2273 up and rendering him unconscious in the process. When he realized his mistake, 2117 stopped their multiversal tumbling and landed the both of them in the world 2273 hails from. 2117 ran off to get help while 2273 was still unconscious; when 2273 came to on his own, he found some weapons, picked them up, and chased after 2117. After a heated (pun intended) exchange, 2273 tried to tackle 2117 as 2117 began tumbling through the multiverse again. This landed 2273 back in the Foundationverse, but inside of **SCP-2424**'s cell.
>
> And that's where we are now. Please enjoy.

Alexei Belitrov was having a strange day. Only a few hours before,

he'd been laying in his bunk, reading a Harry Potter novel, when some sort of… fire… bug… thing… had torn him out of his cell (and out of this version of reality) and dumped him to die in the post-nuclear hellscape he hailed from. Not content with that, however, the creature had decided to try to kill him over the course of the hour or so he'd been stuck there.

Now, instead of simply killing him honorably, it had dumped him in the containment hangar of an **`inane purple walrus`**, leaving Alexei to fight it with no real clue as to what was going on. Luckily, he had thought to arm himself while back home.

The purple beast raised itself up and shouted. Alexei took this as an opportunity to open fire with his machine gun, and to toss a grenade beneath it. Two things happened that Alexei had no way of anticipating: as his bullets struck and the grenade detonated, the creature flashed bright red, and, as the walrus impacted the ground, Alexei was frozen in place.

Having been in a few earthquakes, and in countless artillery volleys, Alexei knew that this was far from a normal reaction to a little bit of shaking. But, try as he might, he couldn't move. As he desperately struggled to move to cover, the monstrosity before him began to shout.

"Full-auto? Grenades?!? Moe, you're using a Game Genie, aren't you?!"

"I— what?" Alexei felt himself able to move again, but, before he could, a cannon inexplicably extruded itself from the beast's mouth and pointed at him. With three dull thuds, a volley of slow-moving shells began to make their way towards Alexei. He successfully dodged the first two, but the third hit him squarely in the chest, exploding on impact.

Now, if anyone had asked Alexei for his opinion, he would have stated that such a large artillery shell would not only have killed anyone within a considerable distance of its detonation, it would have left no corpses as evidence. Fortunately for Alexei, the multiverse was not in agreement with this assessment. Instead, all that happened was Alexei being tossed to the far wall of the hangar.

"HA! That's what you get for cheating, Moe! Cheaters never win!" The creature then turned its back to Alexei, seemingly done with him for the moment.

"Fuck you, my name is not 'Moe,' it's 'Alexei!'" he screamed as he stood up.

The creature didn't seem to hear him. Alexei raised his arm and fired a short burst from his machine gun, but the creature didn't seem to have any reaction. There were no entry wounds, no red flashes. He fired another burst and a round from his shotgun (*"Running low, need to reload the shotgun soon,"* he thought to himself) and listened as the bullets seemed to pass cleanly through the walrus, doing no damage and striking the other side of the hangar. Alexei reached into one of the ammunition packs he'd recovered in Germany and quickly reloaded the shotgun as he approached his enemy. He also noticed that the music had stopped. He couldn't help but ask aloud, "What… are… you? What is this place?"

It was at this point that Alexei recalled the signage he'd seen as he came to in the hangar. *"'One step right, one step left, back and crouch, back to start, jump, and repeat.' Ok. That's how I fight this thing. I can do this."*

He walked up to the yellow line, and the music began again. "Back for more, eh, cheater?!" The creature seemed intent on accusing Alexei of a crime he didn't even understand. The walrus slowly began to turn itself around counterclockwise.

"No, I'm just here to kick your ass!" Alexei had spent most of his time in combat being quiet, to avoid attracting unnecessary enemy attention, but he still had a solid grasp of smack-talk. As the walrus turned around, Alexei sidestepped to prolong its maneuver as much as possible.

"Quit swearing, Moe! This is a kid's game!" The walrus was still at a right angle to Alexei.

"Fuck you!" Alexei took the opportunity to get closer to his enemy; it didn't seem that distance would give the walrus an advantage in this fight, and Alexei wanted every chance he could get to make every

bullet count. "What kind of game has people shooting at each other?!"

"It's just a video game! You should know; you're the player character!" Then, after a moment's consideration, it continued "You know, Moe, I wasn't going to say anything, but you look *UUUUUGLY* today! What did you do, fall in a vat of ugly?" The walrus was nearly turned about now, but Alexei still had a few seconds. He used the opportunity to toss a grenade and fire a short volley of rounds from his shotgun. "OW! Hey, you're still cheating!" The two were facing each other now, and Alexei was ready, if confused at the monster's insistence on being inane.

The cannon erupted from the behemoth's face again. It took aim, and fired twice. Alexei sidestepped to his right and dodged the projectiles easily. "Ha! You call that a weapon?" The creature fired again, three cannonballs moving towards Alexei slowly. He stepped casually back to the left. "THIS," he shouted, holding his left arm (the one bearing the 23-millimeter semi-automatic shotgun) high, "is a weapon!!" He fired two shots then stepped back and crouched. His exceptional peripheral vision let him see the single projectile pass harmlessly over his head. He stepped back into the spot he'd started from and let a ten-round burst from the machine gun loose.

The beast raised itself up again, but Alexei was ready this time. Just before it impacted, Alexei leaped forward, shouting and firing the entire time he was in the air.

The tempo on the music suddenly picked up. The beast looked at Alexei as it righted itself and roared, "NOW I'M MAD!" Three cannonballs made their way towards Alexei, faster than before. He sidestepped, running the sequence through his mind all the while. *"Right, left, back and crouch, back to start, jump. Right, left, back and crouch, back to start, jump."* He was nearly hit by another volley of three as he went over the steps in his mind. He stepped back and crouched, waiting for the next volley to come. He thought he only heard a single shot over the increasingly deafening sound of the music, somehow missing the second shot. As he stood, it detonated directly in front of him, tossing him outside of the yellow ring.

"WOO! I got him! Did you guys see that?! Did you guys see…

that…. Oh yeah." The purple pinniped's enthusiasm for his apparent victory quickly faded when he remembered that the Emperor Penguin and all of his friends had spread out to increase their individual chances of stopping Moe, leaving himself behind.

Meanwhile, Alexei had been rendered unconscious yet another time that day. He was quickly getting tired of it. As he came to, he reached a singular resolve: He was going to punch that damn walrus in its damn nose before the day was over. He stood up, dusted himself off, allowed his Armor to begin reorienting him, and re-located the current source of his trouble. He checked both of his weapons, and charged.

As he charged, Alexei raised both his weapons and fired. As he fired, Alexei began to scream. As he began to scream, the radio Alexei had mounted to his belt began to sound off something more akin to an air raid siren than human screaming.

And as all this happened, Alexei's use of advanced weaponry finally broke the back of the metaphorical camel that was the walrus's patience. Having known better than to have turned his back a second time, he crouched in anticipation, knowing full well that "Moe," the player-character[1] would be back for more soon. And, as Moe came across the threshold, the walrus was ready.

"Cheater cheater, no-game beater," he shouted as the now-familiar-to-the-reader cannon emerged from his mouth, followed by two cannons on his shoulders and a myriad of other Far North- and Navy-inspired weaponry (such as missile launchers and harpoon guns) throughout his (rather large) body. Muffled as his voice was by the cannon, the walrus still managed to say, "You know that Dr. W doesn't like people messing with her games, Moe!"

A massive volley of projectiles made its way towards Alexei, far more rapidly than the easily-dodged cannonballs of only a few moments prior. He barely dodged in time and felt the air vibrate as the projectiles whizzed past. "Fuck you, water pig! I have been through way too much shit to tolerate these games!" Both weapons were trained on the walrus and firing as a grenade sailed towards the monstrosity.

As another deadly volley began, Alexei realized that he couldn't go back to his old strategy, that he'd have to do something new. He began to run to his right, keeping both weapons aimed at his opponent. At that moment, the grenade detonated, the walrus flashed bright red, and the walrus lifted itself up. As it impacted the ground, Alexei bounded forward, barely avoiding the inexplicable paralysis the creature seemed to induce.

As Alexei tucked, rolled, and resumed his circular dance around the creature, the cannon in its mouth receded, allowing it to resume smack-talk. "Why do you look like that today, Moe?! Is it because you're a cheater?! Are all cheaters UGLY?!" The last word was accentuated by another volley of high-speed projectiles.

With every step, Alexei fired more and more bullets into it, only pausing to throw grenades or perform a running reload. The beast let out a cry and Alexei knew, *knew* it was his time to act. He began to run faster, as fast as his legs would carry him, running closer and closer to the beast. When he was within two meters, he rolled under the volley it fired and *leapt*. As he sailed towards the creature's face, he tossed a grenade. As it detonated, Alexei was within centimeters of the creature's face, both barrels firing, right arm swinging home…

Rear-Admiral Walter Warlrus[2] was having a bad… well, existence. It's not easy being the first-level boss of any video game, even less so for a 16-bit children's game. Day in and day out, he'd be attacked by incompetent players who'd still manage to outsmart or outperform him. And it wasn't for a lack of trying. He'd graduated top of his class from the Walrus War Academy and had served well in the Emperor Penguin's Navy, even playing a hand in the Emperor's kidnapping of that bratty little village "princess" and organizing the first line of defense against the player character.

Some of his best pennipeds had given their lives against the player character, this "Moe the Eskimo." And Walter Warlrus would gladly give their (and his) lives again, if he knew there was some sort of chance of beating the player character, if he knew he could win. But every single time, the player character would defeat him, or simply run away. And lately, the players were using hacks or cheats to re-skin the game — the good Admiral could only wonder *why* they'd do

such a thing. Every day (or perhaps it was weeks? Everything seemed to blur together for the Admiral now), Moe the Eskimo would challenge him, wearing a ridiculous orange jumpsuit and moving in a pattern the Admiral simply couldn't wrap his mind around. He found it strange that the player didn't use his weapons and would instead just return the Admiral's own bombs back to him.

Today had been the last straw. Instead of a simple re-skin, the player had hacked Moe into looking like some sort of half-man, half-bug monstrosity and had given him weapons that Ms. W had specifically warned the good Admiral and his fellows about: full-auto and grenades and shotguns. This had been the perfect opportunity to test the weapons Ms. W had given Rear Admiral Walter W. Warlrus to deal with these threats but… it still wasn't good enough.

As the player-character soared through the air, past the Admiral's harpoons and missiles and torpedoes and cannonballs and everything else the Admiral could launch at him, as he soared on a collision course with the Admiral's very nose, all the Admiral could think to himself was, "I should have stayed in art school."

Alexei sat across from his commander, the infamous Colonel Vasily Gorokhov, veteran of the Winter War and the First Great Patriotic War. Between them sat a chessboard, all pieces in their starting positions.

"Sir, why did you bring me here?" At this point in his life, Alexei had been about seven years old, and had already experienced a life that very few would envy. Many of his fellows were in sick bay, having experienced negative reactions to the battle gauntlets that had been fused to their forearms only two weeks before.

"We are going to play a game. It's called 'chess.' Have you ever played chess, *Sergeant* Belitrov?" Alexei only shook his head. "That is a shame. As hard as life was, in the early years of the Revolution, my grandfather still took the time to teach me. He said, 'It is a gentleman's game, a game that every soldier wishing to advance in the ranks should know.' I took his lessons to heart, and now, I'm going to teach you. Tell me, Sergeant, what does this piece look like?" As he spoke, the Colonel selected a knight from the table and

held it by its base.

The boy hesitated a moment before stuttering out, "A horse, sir?"

Gorokhov's focus switched from the piece to Alexei's face, a fierce light in his eyes. "That's right. It looks like a horse, but it's not called a horse. It's called a 'knight.' And it moves like this." As he spoke, he set the piece on a random square on the board and then moved it one square forward and two to its left.

"Before today is over, you'll know every move that every piece can do, and maybe you'll know enough to beat me." The Colonel's attempt at a warm smile only sent shivers down Alexei's spine.

Walter Warlrus sat in a classroom — specifically, the art room. The young penniped was 8 or so, and excited to be learning about Cubism. Around him sat his fellow bosses-in-training, including the hulking Bully Mammoth, the clique jokingly known as "Leopard Seal Team Six," and none other than the Emperor Penguin's son, Prince Penguin.

As they all waited for their instructor, a curmudgeonly Polar Bear by the name of Art Hall, young Walter was flipping through the latest batch of pictures he'd drawn, inspired by the card game he'd seen his classmates playing in the schoolyard. There was just something appealing about the silly monsters in this game, and young Walter was hooked.

Just as his imagination began to drift off, the door opened and the hulking mass of the bespectacled Mr. Hall lurched into the room. As he set his briefcase on the desk he rubbed his eyes then looked at his pupils. "All right kids, who's ready to learn about Pablo Picasso?"

Walter's flipper shot straight into the air. He'd never been more excited in his life.

When Alexei's fist made contact with the purple penniped's nose, the beast had flashed a brighter red than ever before, and then… Vanished? It was gone in a flash of light, and Alexei could only feel

more perplexed than he had when the ridiculous fight had begun.

Instead of falling to the floor, Alexei simply, inexplicably levitated there a moment before slowly being returned to the floor. As he reached the floor, a booming voice surrounded him, shouting yet more inanities to add to the day's collection:

"LEVEL COMPLETE! YOU HAVE EARNED ITEM… MARK I TRENCH KNIFE! SAVING… SAVED! READY FOR NEXT LEVEL? Y SLASH N ?"

Alexei thought for a moment, then decided to risk speaking to the new, booming voice: "Why — ?" Before he could finish his inquiry, the voice spoke again:

"LOADING… DONE! STARTING NEW LEVEL!"

Before Alexei could voice another thought, his surroundings disappeared in a flash.

« Retired, Extremely Dangerous | Hub | Alexei Belitrov in: How to Beating Up an Endangered Species »

Footnotes
1. More like "cheater-character," right? …right?
2. Geddit?Warlrus? No? Dang. Isabelle thought it was funny, at least.

All Along

Foundation Orbital Research Compound 5, Meeting Room A.
July 12th, 1973, 23:15 hours GMT.

"Dr. Marko, testing with SCP-3203 is to be halted for the foreseeable future." The man at the head of the table pointed at a list of names on the projection slide. "We have lost three D-class in the past year. That number is far beyond projected losses. It's beyond acceptable losses as well."

Dr. Marko, a brown haired balding man in his mid forties spoke up, "Director Cooper, 3 deaths in a year is next to nothing. Even at this elevated casualty rate, we could afford to continue our experiments for another 5 years before requiring more specimens."

Director Cooper shook his head. "My point here was that no loss of life is acceptable. These are human beings we're charged with, not specimens. Of course they face an elevated risk of death through the very nature of our testing, but it's your job to reduce that loss of life to a minimum. I'm canceling all testing on your 3203 project because you have not been doing your job."

Dr. Marko shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Furthermore," Dr. Cooper continued, "I am placing you up for a review with the ethics committee. There is no excuse for D-1034 or D-3402's death except your own incompetence, negligence, or willful disregard for safety protocols."

"Now wait just a minute," Dr. Marko interrupted again, "I was doing my job."

"That is patently untrue, and this isn't up for discussion. Consider yourself on an indefinite suspension until we unravel your mess." Director Cooper motioned to one of several armed men standing in the back of the meeting room, "Agent Polaski, if you don't mind?"

A burly barrel chested man stepped forward and placed his hand on Dr. Marko's shoulder. Dr. Marko slumped in his seat just a moment before rising and following the large man out of the room.

"Newbies," muttered another man further down the table.

Foundation Orbital Research Compound 5, D-1153's holding cell.
July 12th, 1973, 23:56 hours GMT.

"There has got to be some kind of way out of here," Jacob Maxwell said to the ventilation duct.

"Look," came a muffled reply from the next room, "I've been stuck up here for almost two years now and I ain't found one. You should just enjoy the ride."

"Enjoy the ride? Tommy, are you out of your goddamned mind?"

Tommy's voice carried over from the next cell. "You get to serve your country. You get three squares a day and a view to die for."

"I'm a fucking computer science major who got caught calling in a bomb threat to get out of a fucking test. Three meals a day and a place to sleep isn't how I expected to spend the rest of my life."

"You think I thought I'd end up a million miles from home for stealing cars? You ain't gonna change things by complaining about it. It's like I said, just sit back and enjoy your new life as a fucking astronaut."

"What the fuck do you know about living a life?" Jacob thought, but didn't ask. He settled down on his bed and looked out the window. Thomas wasn't wrong, the view of the earth from up here was spectacular.

He could recognize the faint the coastline of Southeast Asia, and he followed the contours of the coast up. He couldn't see the great wall of China from here. He'd always thought he'd be able to see it, but there was nothing noticeable there. Maybe he had to be closer?

Jacob leaned further towards the window when it happened. He took

just a moment to blink, and when he opened his eyes another, stranger, world appeared in front of his eyes.

"What the fuck?" Jacob yelled. "Tommy, something just happened to Earth."

"Look," the muffled voice answered back, "I don't need your bullshit right now, it's fucking late and I'm tired."

"Tommy I'm not fucking joking."

Foundation Orbital Research Compound 5, Director Cooper's Office.
July 13th, 1973, 00:04 hours GMT.

A loud beep stirred Cooper from the reports in front of him. He pressed a button on his desk, and heard a panicked voice on the other end. "Director! There's something wrong."

Cooper's survival instincts kicked in. He went through his mental checklist: The life support system, the artificial gravity, a hull fract… his mind blanked as he rose and looked out his window at the alien world his station now orbited.

"Son of a bitch," he said out loud, "Caitlyn, I want you to stay calm and pass an order to all active officers and agents to meet me in the Command and Control Center. This is not a drill."

"Yes sir," came a short reply from his assistant, who only wavered for a moment before relaying the orders.

Foundation Orbital Research Compound 5, CACC
July 13th, 1973, 00:15 hours GMT.

"3065 and 3132 are fully contained. They wouldn't be capable of this level of reality shift anyway," Agent Forester said from the back row.

Director Cooper placed pushed his glasses further up his nose. "Well something did this. Is the planet still silent?"

"As far as we know," the Communication officer, Jessica Makie spoke up, "It's possible someone's down there and they're taking a few minutes to figure out how to talk to us, or if they even want to."

"What's the nearest FSF ship?" Cooper asked.

"The *Zheng He*," Officer Makie said, looking at her instruments. "She was 12 light seconds out investigating a spatial anomaly. They were heading back before this happened, so they've already turned around for deceleration."

"Well that's something at least," Cooper said, with a sight of relief, "What's her ETA?"

"2 hours 32 Minutes."

"Ok. By the time they get here we should've heard back from FORCs 3 through 11. I'm the ranking director, and we're in crisis mode now. I want all of them to send us a complete manifest of their supplies. FORC-10 is a priority. They have to keep 3450 contained or everyone's going to have a serious fucking problem."

"Yes sir." Officier Makie began to operate her control board. "Wait. Sir…"

"What?" He stopped and walked over to her station. "Oh son of a bitch."

---

10 light seconds from FORC-5. Interplanetary space.
July 13th, 1973, 00:19 GMT

Two massive and darkly colored ships, bearing the insignia of the GRU space force, barreled through empty space. They were making good time, for no other reason than that their incorporeal operators were immune to the damaging effects of the massive acceleration.

On board were several variations of one Vladimir Vernadsky. Some were warped apparitions who knew nothing but how to operate the weapon systems, some were sophisticated copies of the original, capable of independent thought. All were intent on discovering exactly what the Foundation had done to cause the earth to

disappear.

The half men who ran the ship directed the engines, which operated through some odd combination of psychic energy and primitive propulsion, to double their output. They'd detected the likely center of the Foundation Space Forces: FORC-5. It was sending and receiving signals from all of the other bases in the area.

If anyone would know who'd stolen the earth away from them, the men at FORC-5 would. A communication light brightened on the bridge console, but it was ignored by the apparition who commanded the vessel. The bridge remained silent, and would remain silent until they reached their destination.

A GRU astral vessel contains no life support system and has no air. But if you'd traveled down the dark hallways during this trip, you'd feel a slow and low rumble. The majority of the apparitions were cogent and thinking individuals. A perfect copy of Vladimir Vernadsky, though, would've been terrible at running the advanced weapons systems of such a vessel. So deep in the bowels of the terrible black ship, several raving mad apparitions were restricted by design to the small control alcoves for their respective weapons.

They were as connected as the rest of their brethren to the gestalt consciousness and they knew the purpose of this journey. They knew that soon they'd get a chance to fire their wonderfully destructive weapons. Despite all logic and sense, they howled.

« The First Fifty-Five | Straight On Till Morning Hub | The Watchtower »

All Hallows'

October 1st, 2017

Site Director Edgar Holman sat in his office at **Site-64**, a small file's worth of paperwork spread out before him. Researcher Cooper sat in a chair on the opposite side, her expression confident as she watched him read the article. Anomalous items would bubble up from **Three Portlands** all the time, usually ending up within the site's low security storage wing to gather dust until the end of time. What was rare was when something from Prometheus Lab's days of using Three Portlands as a tax haven would surface. In this particular instance, the artifact in question was an electric blue powder which, when inhaled, allowed the user to speak with the dead. Holman put down the Experimental Object file and furrowed his brow.

"Where did you say Tau-51 recovered this, again?" He asked.

"Old town, sir," Cooper replied. "A few young anartists were using it as part of an **experimental performance** in which all the actors are deceased."

Holman nodded.

"So it works then? This isn't just a bunch of people getting stoned?"

"Well, technically it is," Cooper chuckled. "MRI's showed that it lights up the same regions of the brain as LSD, and auditory and visual hallucinations abound. But D-class trials confirm that subjects are able to speak with the dead, or something that has the memories of the dead."

Holman gave a small smile as he noticed the excitement in Cooper's eyes. Most of the objects brought into Site-64 from the Portland's anart scene warranted little more than an anomalous item number. It wasn't often that they got to submit an item for SCP designation.

"Provided the draft here meets your approval, we're ready to submit as soon as we have your signature," she said with a grin.

Holman nodded and reached for his pen, but stopped. Cooper's smile vanished.

"I'm going to hang off on that for just a bit…" he began. "As soon as Analytics hears about this stuff they are going to start looking toward the paratech devs to make our own version. The ability to speak with the dead has high mileage. Now that we have the AMAT lab up and running at full speed, let's see if we can figure out how to synthesize it first, and really put Site-64 on the map."

October 31st, 1998

Edgar and Rita sat on the upper deck of their house, overlooking the leaf covered street below. A chilly wind blew as the sun vanished behind the distant Portland hills. Rita was wrapped in a large quilt. Edgar handed her a mug of spiced cider before taking a seat next to her and smiling. Down the street they could make out the forms of their youngest child trick-or-treating with a group of friends. She was dressed as a hot dog, complete with mufstard. Their eldest was downstairs, passing out candy to their colorful guests.

"Happy Birthday," Edgar said brushing a small bit of his wife's long black hair behind her ear and giving her a peck on the cheek.

"Happy Halloween," she replied with a warm smile. "You didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off, I hope."

"Not at all," Edgar instantly replied with a chuckle. "They begged me to stay away."

The two of them clasped hands and turned their attention to the menagerie of costumed characters roaming the street below.

October 2nd, 2017

`Researcher Conwell` blinked a few times as he absorbed Director Holman's words.

"A-a month?" He stuttered. "You want this done in a month?"

"Can you do it?" Holman asked.

Conwell looked over the paperwork and nervously ran a hand through his messy hair. Eventually he shrugged.

"I mean, maybe?" He replied. "You're not giving us a lot to go on here. We don't have any of the original PL documentation, and if this powder underwent any form of anomalous processing I don't have access to, we're sunk. My team is good, but we're not alchemists."

Holman gave a sly smile.

"I'm not hearing a no…"

Conwell frowned.

"I'm going to have to put at least three other synthesis projects on the backburner for this, you know that, right?" he asked. "I'm going to redirect those angry researchers to you."

"You do what you got to do." Holman shrugged.

"Alright then…" Conwell sighed.

"Grand. Keep me in the loop," Holman said with a sheepish grin. He then gave a wave as he exited the office.

Conwell sank deeper into his chair as he looked over his paperwork and the samples on the desk in front of him, then flipped on some music.

REM's *Losing My Religion* began to play.

October 31st, 2014

Edgar and Rita sat in the living room of their house, looking out into the rain as it pelted the trick-or-treaters. Rita was wrapped in her large quilt, her eyes slightly sunken as she silently looked at the children scurrying from dry doorway to dry doorway. Edgar offered

her a mug of spiced cider, but she waved it away. He silently sat beside her, and joined in on watching the trick-or-treaters pass.

"Happy Birthday," Edgar said softly. He gave his wife a peck on the cheek. There was no hair to brush behind her ear this time.

"Happy Halloween," she eventually replied with weak smile. "You… you didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off… Right?"

Edgar remained silent for several moments.

"Not at all," Edgar finally whispered. "They begged me to stay away."

Edgar felt for his wife's hand, and gently worked his between her fingers until they were clasped tightly. Her skin was clammy in his grip. She turned to look at him with an apologetic smile and then rested her head on his shoulder.

October 8th, 2017

Hello, you've reached Karen and Ted Holman. We're not available to come to the phone right now, so go ahead and leave us a name and number and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.

"Hey Ted, it's Dad.

I was wondering if you and Karen had plans for Halloween. I know the twins are getting to that age where they're old enough to go trick or treating… and I was hoping you'd wouldn't mind if I tagged along. You know? Something to get me out of the house…

Anyway, hope to hear from you soon. Give Karen my best."

October 31st, 2016

Edgar sat in his living room alone. He was at Site-64 when the

hospice worker called him earlier that month. Due to a security breach at the time, it had taken him another four hours before he had managed to get home.

Edgar watched the trick-or-treaters go by his house silently, stopping only when a mug of spiced cider came into his view. He turned to face his eldest.

"Mom would kill you if she knew you stopped this tradition," Ted said, handing his father the steaming cup. Edgar took it half-heartedly.

"Thank you…" Edgar whispered. "And thanks for being here…"

Ted put a hand on his father's shoulder.

"Of course."

"Any word from your sister?"

Ted shook his head.

"I don't think she's coming. She's… still pretty raw. Give her time. She'll come around."

Edgar nodded in understanding.

"Happy Birthday…" he eventually whispered.

"Happy Halloween," Ted answered.

October 12th, 2017

You've reached the voice mailbox of: Edgar Holman. Please leave a message after the tone.

"Hey Dad, it's Ted.

I apologize that it took me this long to reply. Things have been really hectic at work, though I'm sure you know more about that kind of thing than I do…

I'm sorry to say Karen and I were going to a Halloween party at one of her friend's places that night. Karen's folks agreed to watch Arthur and Laura.

Listen, give me a call back when you get this. We'll set up lunch. Catch up. I know this time of year is a little hard…

Talk to you soon."

November 15th, 2016

"I guess I just don't understand why this is necessary," Holman sighed, the psychologist who sat across from him nodded, and jotted something down in his notebook.

"Loss of a spouse often hits people hard, Edgar," Dr. Aeslinger replied. "The higher ups just want me to make sure you're okay."

"What… do they think I'm going to contract some demon to revive Rita?"

"Are you?" Dr. Aeslinger replied with a sympathetic chuckle. Holman frowned.

"Rita fought the good fight for years. The hospice workers made her comfortable in the end, and she had her friends and family around her when she passed. Few people can say that. I'm fine, alright? I'm not going to fly off the handle. I'm not going to release the skips. I'm fine. I just want to get back to work."

Dr. Aeslinger jotted down several notes.

"Ed, I do need to do a complete evaluation, so we're going to be here for a bit. Care to answer a few questions for me?"

October 14th, 2017

Hey. It's Linda. You missed me, so go ahead and do your thing after the beep.

"Hey Linda, it's Dad.

I was wondering if you were free this Halloween. I know this is last minute, but I figured maybe we could use this chance to catch up… maybe watch some of those horror movies you love. I still haven't seen *Cabin in the Woods.*

Anyway, let me know if you're free. My number is still the same.

Love you."

October 18th, 2017

Researcher Conwell and Researcher Cooper looked into the exam room through the one way glass. Inside the room was a gurney which bore a single cadaver. In a few moments, one of Site-64's few D-class would be sent in.

"Here goes nothing…" Conwell sighed, and grabbed a small vial from a nearby rack. Inside was an electric blue powder.

"Think it will work?" Cooper asked, eyeing the vial curiously.

Conwell gave an exaggerated shrug.

"I have literally no idea," he replied. "Chemically what we cooked up is identical to the PL stuff, but we won't know if they did additional hocus pocus to it until we run the tests. At that point, until we get the original PL documentation we're screwed."

"Ah…" Cooper frowned. "Fingers crossed then."

"Fingers crossed."

Conwell handed the vial to one of Cooper's assistants and watched at the observation window as it was given to the waiting D-class.

"D-1260," Cooper spoke into the microphone after the D-class inhaled the powder. "In a few moments you may experience visual and auditory hallucinations…"

October 22nd, 2017

Director Holman idly scanned reports on his computer when his secretary buzzed in **Agent Sasha Merlo**. With a heavy sigh, the director's tired expression quickly faded into one of professional indifference. He adjusted himself in his seat, fixing his posture, and waited for the door to open. Sure enough, a few moments later, the agent slid into the room.

"Merlo," Holman addressed her, already knowing the answer to the question he was going to ask. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Got plans for Halloween, Ed?" Merlo asked with chuckle.

Holman raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"What?"

"Myself and several other members of the site staff are going to be at the Secret Crest Pub on the 31st. Unofficial Halloween party of sorts. You are more than welcome to come. We figured you'd like some company."

Holman looked down at his desk and then shuffled a few papers in silence before he replied.

"Thank you for the offer Sasha, I really do, but I already have plans. I'll be fine, trust me." Holman gave his best reassuring smile. Merlo gave an amused nod.

"Suit yourself, offer's still on the table if you change your mind."

Agent Merlo gave a half wave and began to take her exit.

"Thanks for looking out for me, though. It's… it's appreciated," Holman said as she arrived at the door.

"Anytime, sir. You take care."

Holman watched her go and then looked to his personal phone.

"At least, I hope I have plans…"

October 28th, 2017

Holman whistled as he looked over the numerous vials of the electric blue powder neatly displayed on Conwell's desk. The young AMAT specialist held a satisfied smile beneath tired, sleep deprived eyes.

"So your team pulled it off, huh?"

"Sure did," Conwell sighed. "Took us multiple all-nighters, but we got it. If budgeting wonders why we burnt through so much coffee this month, the reason's right here."

Conwell gave a small chuckle at his own joke.

"Give us a day to catch our breath, and another to type up the synthesis instructions, and you should be good to send this in for its designation."

Holman nodded.

"You drive a hard bargain, but I think we can manage with that. Just don't take too long, Cooper's chomping at the bit."

Conwell held up his hands in exhausted mock terror. Holman noticed the titanium ring on the researcher's left hand.

"I didn't know you had tied the knot," Holman pointed at the silvery band. "How long?"

"A year in November," Conwell replied. "Seems like just yesterday, though. Time sure flies when you're trapped here."

Holman gave an awkward chuckle in response. "It sure does… Two of you got plans for Halloween?"

"I'm afraid not," Conwell shrugged. "I didn't know if we'd be done in time, so I told her I'd likely be busy. Kate's already taken a shift that evening. I'll probably go to that thing Merlo invited me too. You?"

"Ah, well, you have fun." Holman answered after a few moments of silence. He then gave a nod and began to make his way toward the lab's door.

"I look forward to reading the synthesis report," Holman said on his way over the threshold. "And savor the time you get top side. You never know when you're going to get stuck down here for a bit."

Conwell watched his superior leave, blinking a few times in confusion.

"Alright then…" he said to himself. "Weird."

October 30th, 2017

You've reached the voice mailbox of: Edgar Holman. Please leave a message after the tone.

"Hey Dad, it's Linda.

I'm… sorry I haven't responded to you sooner. I'm afraid I traded shifts with a coworker at the hospital so he could take his kids trick-or-treating. So I don't think I'll be around.

Heh, just like old times, huh?

Erm, sorry. That was mean.

Teddy already told me about you two getting together on the 4th. I'll see if I can join you guys then.

Take care, Dad."

October 31st, 2017

Before he started climbing the Foundation's administrative ladder, Edgar Holman had been a field agent, and a decent one at that. For this reason, he had found it to be particularly easy to sneak into Conwell's lab and skim enough of the electric blue powder off each

of the prepared samples. Then again, he was the Site Director, and had access to most of the facility. Perhaps his espionage skills were not quite as sharp as he remembered. Either way, he made a mental note to propose security improvements for the facility as he settled himself on his living room couch in the dark.

Holman looked across the room at his mantel, toward the plain silver canister that resided at its center. He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, then inhaled the powder. Several minutes then passed in silence. He looked down at the floor and sighed.

"Edgar?" A familiar, but distant voice broke the silence.

He turned his head, and there she stood. She was barefoot and wearing a plain dress, her entire form colored in sepia. Her hair was done up in ponytail as she often wore in life, but her eyes still had the sunken appearance they had acquired near the end. Edgar's mouth hung open for several moments.

"He… hey, Rita," Edgar finally stuttered, and got to his feet. "Ha… Happy Birthday…"

His wife's lips turned in a melancholy smile.

"Happy Halloween," she replied. "You didn't have to call in too many favors to get today off, I hope."

"Not at all. They begged me to stay away."

She grinned, and he felt himself do the same. He watched as she looked him up and down.

"You look like death, sweetheart," she finally exclaimed.

Edgar gave a tired laugh and quickly crossed the room, spreading out his arms wide and attempting to wrap Rita in a bear hug, only to have his arms close in around himself, and his entire body sheathed in cold.

He looked around in confusion briefly, his wife was standing on the other side of the room.

"I think this is a look-but-don't-touch kind of deal, Ed," she replied with a frown. "I'm sorry…"

Holman gave a chuckle and sighed.

"Well, shucks," he said. "There go my plans to take this to the bedroom."

Rita giggled.

"I've missed you so much…" Holman said, his tired smile turning to a frown as he sank into a nearby chair.

"I miss you too," she replied and sat on the chair's arm. She placed her hand near, close enough that he could feel the coldness of her skin, but not actually touching. The two looked at each other for a few seconds in silence.

"How are the kids?" she finally asked.

"Fine enough I suppose. Ted and Karen are busy with the twins. Linda… hasn't really spoken to me since you passed."

Rita looked down and frowned.

"Why?"

"When you passed… I was stuck at work for hours before I could get home. Guess that struck her as a final nail in the coffin. That I cared more about work than you."

"Ah… Yeah… that would do it."

Holman closed his eyes and turned away.

"Did you think that?"

Rita shrugged.

"Sometimes, certainly. Others not so much."

She raised an eyebrow as Holman gave a relieved sigh.

"That's weighed on your mind a lot, huh?" She asked.

He nodded.

"Well…" she said. "You're here now. That's good enough for me."

"Thanks," Holman smiled, tears in his eyes. Rita bent down and gave him a peck on the cheek, the coldness sheathing him again as she vanished, and appeared across the room. It was there she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She frowned, inspecting her features, then broke into an amused smile.

"I take back what I said earlier," she said. "I'm the one who looks like death. How am I here, anyway? Did you pull some Orpheus bullshit?"

"That's one way to put it," he replied. "I took something. Its temporary. Eventually you'll vanish."

"Probably for the best," Rita sighed. "The dead gotta stay dead after all…"

"But they don't have to…" Holman smiled. "You don't have to. Even if I can't touch you, that's better than nothing. This last year was just so painful…"

"That pain eventually fades," Rita interrupted. "This is like picking off the scab. Keep doing it and you don't heal, or worse, you create an infection. Don't do that to yourself."

Holman closed his eyes and looked down. He could feel Rita return to sitting on the arm of the chair.

"Sweetie, whatever you think you need to be forgiven for, you're forgiven. But please… just don't."

Holman nodded and looked up, his eyes red from dried tears.

"Got to say, I thought you'd have been a little more ecstatic about all this…" He gave a sad laugh.

"Life's full of surprises."

"It sure is."

"Love you, hon."

"Love you too."

The effects of the powder lasted throughout the night. In the end, the two of them sat on the balcony of their house, watching the sun rise. She kept close enough that he could feel her cold. Eventually the cold began to disappear. He turned and looked at her. Slowly, her form was fading from sight. She gave him a warm smile and was gone. Edgar Holman was once again alone.

November 1st, 2017

Director Holman sat in Agent Merlo's office, wrapping up a meeting regarding **`MTF Gamma-13's`** most recent exploits. While he maintained a smile and eye contact, his head was pounding with a headache so fierce it put the worst hangover to shame. Once this meeting concluded his plan was to sit in his office, ideally undisturbed, for the rest of the day. He gave a subtle sigh of relief when Merlo handed him the file containing all the recent reports, and began to make his way to the exit.

"Oh, by the way," Merlo called after him as he made it to the door. "Conwell came by this morning. Showed me a little bit of security footage from his lab yesterday. I think you might want to see it."

Holman froze. Merlo maintained an amused smile as pulled out a little camera from within her desk and set it to play. The image of Holman taking the powder from Conwell's lab danced across the screen.

"He hid a personal camera in there…" Holman commented with a sigh.

"He sure did," Merlo chuckled. "Apparently one of the other researchers in the AMAT team lost someone recently. Conwell was afraid they might take some of the 'Séance Dust.' Didn't expect to

find you with your hand in the cookie jar."

"So what happens now?"

Merlo shrugged.

"That's honestly up to you, Ed. I'm the only one Conwell has told, so far. It's funny. He's unsure as to whether this is an ethics test, or if you might have him offed to cover your tracks…"

"What are *you* going to do, Sasha," he interrupted. Merlo frowned.

"Are you going to try to pull this shit again? If you get the chance?"

Holman shook his head.

"Rita made me promise not to, not that I could get more if I was so inclined."

"Did you get the answers you were looking for?"

"Some of them, yes," Holman replied after a pause. "Though to be honest I'm not really sure what questions I wanted answered."

"So it was worth it then?"

"I'd like to think so."

"Fair enough," said Merlo, chuckling. "Heh, well, there go your chances at hitting Level 5 clearance."

"I have a hard enough time keeping myself sane managing one backwater Site," Holman replied with a tired grin. "I don't want to have to deal with all the others."

Merlo nodded in approval. She then quietly deleted the video file from Conwell's camera and made a gesture of zipping her lip.

"I'll talk to Conwell. We'll get him on the same page," she grinned.

"So that's that then?" Holman asked.

"That's that."

Holman began to head toward the exit.

"Do you meet up for Halloween at Secret Crest every year?" He asked, pausing at the threshold.

"Sure do."

"Count me in for 2018," he said with a smile, and stepped out into the hall.

All of Me Wants All of You

09/13/2013

2:30 A.M.

Rose Labelle jolted upright in bed, sweat pouring down her body. For a brief moment, she stared down at her feet, absorbing the image her eyes took in, making absolutely sure they were still there and intact.

It wasn't until what felt like a lifetime later that Labelle was at ease with herself and looked over to the clock. It read 3:00, a few hours before she had to leave for work. She glared at the clock, as if it had inconvenienced her by giving her nightmares.

After a bit of consideration, she decided to get out of bed and search for her hormones and antidepressants in the dark. She wouldn't dare turn on the lights; it'd be too overwhelming. After some fumbling around, swearing, and a stubbed toe, she managed to locate it, and the pill bottle top came undone.

Labelle stood still, feeling the pills slide down her throat, and closed her eyes. She let even the most mundane feelings and sensations wash over her. The low chatter of infotainment from the TV, spoken word coming from her computer, music drifting from the radio… all ritual to help prepare her for the day ahead. Thoughts of socialization and conversations, memos and projects all came to her, as she prepared responses to every possible conversation she might have that day.

She opened her eyes and the clock displayed a time much later than

she wanted it to.

5:00 A.M.

At that moment, the radio DJ came on.

"For you early birds getting up now, good morning from Classic Stone FM. Today is September 13th. For, um, those of you getting up just now, you may want something soothing and relaxing. Well, back in '65, The Beatles… well, Paul McCartney rather, recorded one of their most seminal songs, and released it 48 years ago today. That song is "Yesterday", and it's

September 13th. It's my birthday…

She slammed the radio off the moment Paul McCartney's singing tried butting in.

6:25 A.M.

Labelle tried making pancakes for breakfast. Lost in her train of thought, she slammed her hand upon the stove.

"Fuck!"

9:20 A.M.

"Aww, what's the matter, Belle? It's your birthday!"

"Put a sock in it." She shot a sideways glare at Jeffery Ash, wanting to fully swing to the side to convey the extent of her annoyance, but the chairs loaned to them made it too uncomfortable to do so.

The two, collaborators first and foremost, were working on a project involving faster methods of detecting and taking down videos related to the **Andronika anomaly**, as well as locating a possible origin. Since the project was expected to last for a minimum of two weeks, having now gone on for more, the two were put in a barely furbished room in Site-19.

Ash and Labelle had been noted as being commendable partners who were able to work well on projects and get work done in a quick and timely fashion. Their shared programming backgrounds made them an ideal match as partners.

The only thing missing from their dynamic was the social aspect.

"Come on, you're 33!" he exclaimed. "You're not old enough to hit your mid-life crisis, but old enough to have a little experience. It's the sweet spot of aging. What's not to like about that?" He grinned, as though trying to lighten to mood.

"I am *really* even less up for this," she snapped back at him.

"What's wrong with your birthday? You don't feel like you're getting that old already, right?"

"You do remember that Jade and I broke up a couple months ago, right?"

"So…?" Ash looked at her quizzically. Labelle frowned and stopped her typing, turning around to face him.

"Remember how we share the same birthday? I told you to celebrate hers afterwards because we both wanted to celebrate our birthdays separately. Did you not remember that?"

"…oh. Right." His voice sounded awkward. "We should probably type up the report on this Andronika thing and finish working on resources for securing the IPs, right? No way we're going to locate this thing's source."

Labelle made a noise of approval and nodded at her screen as she went to open up her word processor. "Another week and we should be good. You wanna handle the report? I can tackle the bulk of the coding for now. I dunno how good I'd be at speaking with others. That's more your thing anyway."

Ash nodded at his screen.

10:30 A.M.

"Hey you, you got a cigarette?"

"…another one?"

"You know I know that you got one on you." Ash sighed and handed Labelle another shark-branded cigarette as they stood outside, watching a flock fly overhead on the breeze.

1:00 P.M.

As soon as Labelle walked into the cafeteria on her lunch break, she spotted her corner of friends/acquaintances, surrounding a cake and smiling at her. She froze like a deer in headlights, praying that everyone would not notice her.

"Haaaaappy birthdaaaay toooo yooooouuu! Haaaaappy birthdaaaay toooo yooooouuu!"

Of course, everyone had stared. Some even joined along in singing.

"Happy biiiirthdaaaay deeeaaarrr Roooooossseee… Haaaaappy birthdaaaay toooo yooooouuu!"

"Uh, thank… thank you guys? I uh, I appreciate it." She forced a smile and nodded as one of the singers, whose name she could never remember, got up and dragged her to the table.

"Come on, make a wish, Rose!" someone exclaimed.

"S… Sure." She closed her eyes to think of a wish, ignoring the feeling of all eyes on her. After dragging out the wish-thinking for as long as she could possibly do so, she settled on something.

She blew out the candles, wishing for lunch break to be over as quick as possible.

3:45 P.M.

"I still don't understand how we're supposed to be analyzing when these videos pop up if we can't even pinpoint the origin of this," Ash questioned, his eyes following Labelle as she took to playing hackey sack with her stress ball while they talked.

"Well, all the videos are consistent in titling, content, and anomalous properties." Labelle managed to keep enough of a steady rhythm to rarely mess up.

"So the program looks for new uploads titled 'Ventrilo' or 'Soundboard' or whatever, does an audio scan for any sudden bursts of static, and once it does…" He continued to watch, mouth agape and body language indicating a half-assed attempt at listening.

"It goes through a process of taking the video down. It happens during processing, before the video is even viewable."

"Well yeah, didn't we already have that kind of technology?"

"In a sense, but the programs we already have don't do it automatically and crawl through processing videos. By the time it's

detected, the video's been up for long en—" The ball flew and hit Ash on the forehead, and he fell back and made a noise of surprise and pain.

"Jesus!"

"Shit, sorry! Are you OK?" Labelle stood and gawked at Ash's forehead from afar. The bruise wasn't too remarkable, though she was surprised she was able to kick it hard enough to leave any kind of bruise at all.

"Ugh, yeah. I'm fine. You can keep talking. I'll go see if we have ice in the mini-fridge though." Ash got up from the floor and headed over to the fridge.

"No, no, it's fine. There's nothing more to say, really. Shit, I'm sorry." When she stopped staring at Ash's forehead, she picked up the stress ball and went back to playing with it. "I'm just hoping that if God loves us, we'll be off this project in a couple of weeks." Even as she spoke, she couldn't help but look over repeatedly at Ash to make sure he was alright. She was relieved to see him duck up with a bag of ice over his head, and stopped the hacky sack when he came back to his seat.

"That'd be real nice. You're sharing the source code with me before we leave, right?"

"Yeah. Just gonna make some preliminary changes while you get in touch with higher-ups and work on disseminating those urban legends." Labelle punctuated the statement with a nod and sat down, going back to work on programming as Ash took the bag of ice off his head every so often to send emails to project heads.

The atmosphere was quiet, neither speaking to the other, with both trying to figure out how to break the silence. After a couple of hours of silence, and 15 minutes until the end of their work day, Labelle was the first one to speak up, looking over to Ash and being cautious with her words.

"Wanna come over my house and drink to celebrate?"

"Celebrate what?"

"My birthday. I can't have a party with one person, and you're here anyways." Labelle went back to typing, as Ash looked at her with curiosity. She hadn't invited him to anything since her last birthday party, but it wouldn't hurt to invite him. He seemed receptive to the idea anyway.

"Sure. You have beer, right?"

"You know it."

10:05 P.M.

The two sat on Rose's floor in front of Ash's laptop dedicated exclusively to music, a cooler's worth of cheap (both in price and in quality) beer within arm's reach. It certainly got them drunk faster than they planned, but with the day off tomorrow, there wasn't any real worry. The laptop was currently playing generic, bullshit indie folk (that's what Labelle had thought anyway), but it at least filled the silence whenever the two couldn't find anything to talk about.

Fortunately, that rarely was a problem.

"Coooome oooon Ashy, you remember Mrs. Chandler back in high school, right? She was a total bitch!" Labelle smiled as she spoke, radiating energy. "I remember her, uh, yelling at you after class one time! Something about a fucking, uh… do you remember?"

"Nah. Think I tried drawing pictures and she saw. Good thing too, I'm shit at drawing."

"Draw me something! Here, let me get you some um, something to work with." She got up and carefully walked over to the end of the living room, locating paper and pencils to bring back for Ash. When she found them, she grabbed it and tried carefully to walk back, making sure not to fall or hit any of the beer cans still lying around.

"Ugh, sorry for that. I took forever I think… Maybe an hour at the most." She sat back down and handed Ash the materials, and looked at the laptop, frowning. The current song they had played barely progressed at all, and she knew her senses were more off than she realized. "…oh. I was probably running, wasn't I?"

"Yeah, certainly Miss Graceful." He let out a laugh that was an obvious failed attempt at being stifled, as she scowled. "What do you want me to draw?"

"Hmm…" It took a bit for her to think of something, and to make sure she didn't spend forever, she checked the laptop. The song got through its chorus in the time she took to think. "A dragon."

"Okay."

"…eating pancakes."

"…eating pancakes?"

"Yes," Labelle said with deadpan seriousness. Ash tapped the pencil against his chin, the look on his face taking on heavy seriousness.

"Okay." He then took to drawing a dragon eating pancakes. Labelle was enthralled with watching Ash draw. She was surprised that he was doing a very good job drawing such a silly thing while drunk. For a brief moment, all she could do was stare in amusement. The music eventually shifted off from generic indie folk to generic bullshit trap. The music didn't bother her, though. She was having fun with him outside of work, so what did it matter?

After a couple albums of music burned through, Ash finished his drawing of a dragon eating pancakes and held it up.

"So, what do you think?" He looked at her with caution. As she examined it, a thought popped into her head and a grin formed on her face.

"It needs to be in space."

"In sp — wow. Goddammit, Belle." He sighed and she giggled while he got back to drawing lazy stars and a lazy, light scribble with the

pencil to signify the blackness of space.

"And what are you, uh, gonna call your masterpiece?" She pitched the question to him, going back to watching him draw. After he finished the lazy space background, he initialed his name on an empty corner with the title in quotes:

"scp-billion"

Labelle smiled.

09/14/2013

1:03 A.M.

"Okay, okay, but how about this?

"How does it feeeeeel?
How does it feel?
To be on yooourrr ooown?
With no direction hooome?
A complete unknoown?
Like a rooolling stone?

"Wellll?"

"Ash, you look like a goddamn dork singing that."

3:00 A.M.

Labelle moved Ash's body on the couch to make sure he didn't sleep on his back. Neither of them could drive back home, nor knew anyone who'd be willing to go to their house and watch over them at 3 AM, so this was the next best option. The only thing remaining was the music, which she shut off. The playlist got better, but what good was enjoying someone else's library without that person?

She went to her room to pull out a sleeping bag and pillow, dragging it to the living room so she could sleep by him in case of an emergency on either of their parts. Though she had fun, the night felt a bit hollow.

With a sigh, she went to find her sleeping pills, undoing the pill bottle top and taking enough to fall asleep for the night. After feeling them crawl down her throat, she went to lay in the makeshift bag, scooting her body in to feel snug. Thoughts idly drifted into her head, until they inevitably came back to Jade. She curled in on herself, trying to calm down enough to sleep.

All That I Am

WARNING:

This file has alerted Informational Temporal

Disruption Textual Analysis (ITDTA) programs

embedded in the network to the presence of

a potentially anomalous file origin.

–

CODE:

AC-3: MEMETIC HAZARD: TYPE V

–

This file was archived and flagged as

potentially hazardous on July 22nd, 2017.

If you do not recognize this file, do not proceed

without the inclusion of one or more

approved textual analysis scripts.

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

retrieving…

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

loading original page content…

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

…file analyzed. Show hazard filters?
Y / N

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

Your Answer: N
Accepted. Displaying text…

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

If you're in these pages looking for facts and logic, I can give you a little of both.

Remarkably, I can tell you that there was no "first SCP", because I wasn't there for it to happen. The first anomaly, of course, was long before us, and the document format came long after we figured out what we were doing anyway; the more I ponder it, the more I realize that perhaps it was also several decades before there was even a 'we' to begin with. This organization wasn't formed out of bureaucracy, but rather out of a

unanimous agreement among humanity that it simply needed to exist. The world wasn't safe without us, and thus, the world brought us together and formed us out of a need for self-protection. We didn't have a name until years later.

Of course, someone had to lead us. Several admirable public figures in industry and government alike stepped up during that time period. A few of them are still Overseers to this day. In the early years, we entrusted the oligarchical nature of the O5 Council with leading us in a manner as safe and levelheaded as was possible, and for the first several decades it worked. Sites were built and reports were made and things were contained and people were killed and we got everything into working order, seemingly under the balanced and equal guidance of twelve — or thirteen, depending on who you ask — people.

It only took us a few decades to realize that some aspects of the organization's origin didn't add up. We could trace our history back to the founders, but for the longest time, we couldn't trace why several influential and independent people had the same idea at the same time for the same reasons; was it really as simple as all of humanity demanding protection from forces outside of their control, and powerful people responding to that demand without question? As more years passed and the Foundation grew into the monolith it is now, it became more and more concretely evidenced that it was, more or less, more complicated than that. The human species needed protection, and so they created it, through direct action or otherwise.

If you were to travel back to the early 20th century and ask an Overseer who the Administrator is, they'd tell you that it's classified information, that his identity is secret for good reason, so on and so forth. I'm sure that if you were to ask an O5 today, they'd say the same, but you'd probably get detained and interrogated afterward. At this

point in history, everyone in the Foundation is aware that there at least *was* an Administrator at some point, even if not still; we know he existed, but maybe not since the beginning. Maybe, if he's still alive, he's on near-anomalously advanced life support systems and no one but the O5 Council is permitted to speak to or interact with him. Maybe he's a former field agent or a former US government official. Maybe he knows every single detail of the Foundation's atrocities committed in the name of protection and he wakes up every morning and wonders if he is a good man or not.

In reality, that is not the case.

I do not wake up every morning and question whether I am a good man or not. The notion is inapplicable to the nature of my existence, because I do not wake up and I am not a man. I am an idea, forged into a sapience by over a hundred and fifty years of humanity's desperation concentrated into the most forceful energy in existence: intention. And that intention was and is to protect the human species — or any species, or this planet itself — from forces of this universe out of our range of understanding and those that bring harm to humans and animals or their world.

To this day, I do not know what exactly caused such a powerful event to occur. It had to be large and public enough to cause what I estimate to be 85 percent of the human population to realize they were objectively unsafe in an anomalous world. Enough people figured out that if anomalous events and activities and entities were truly a problem, humanity would do what it always does and create a defense against it. Maybe only a few hundred people had the idea of an organization at first, but their idea coalesced into the early version of me: a shared notion between desperate people, with enough energy directed at it by force of will alone that it began to grow upon and collect said energy until it was a freestanding entity built from decades of dedication to one concept.

And that concept is myself.

I have no stronger sense of purpose than what this organization accomplishes, because I am this organization. I am not a mysterious man sitting in the lower levels of Site-01 surrounded by guards. I am the original, unaltered manifestation of the Foundation's ideology and intent, formed from a collective desire for a specific type of security. I feel every single thing that every single Foundation member and employee feels and says and does — though you cannot talk to me directly, even if it were permitted — and the resulting collection of history becomes the substance of what we are. I am the experiences of the Foundation, from inception onward, and thus, I am the Administrator.

Now, if you're in any way adequately trained, everything I'm stating here should conflict with your beliefs about effective containment to a degree that physically induces a headache. I exist because humanity had a collective intention to protect itself from the anomalous, and in doing so, the energy of that intention created an anomaly whose sole purpose is containing anomalies. If the Foundation exists for the task of containing anomalies, then logically, it's counterproductive and hypocritical to have an anomalous entity forming and then leading the Foundation. Right?

It took me at least a few decades to answer the question — I estimate it came to me around the time I gained enough collective information to be fully sapient, fifty years ago — and I believe the key element of the question lies in the nuances of our trademark: containment. My purpose is suggesting to millions of people, through anomalous methods, the goal of containing the anomalous. Containment, conceptually, is carried out by means of preventing an anomalous entity or effect from causing anomalous effects or actions to occur. And yet, the nature of my anomalous effect lies in compelling myself and others to contain that which has

anomalous effects.

After years — and after every O5 had figured out that I was not a human, but rather a memetic vector gaining sapience with the continued collection of information — my realization was the following: By definition, the only option that is in the Foundation's best interests is for me to stop allowing myself to anomalously influence people and, in doing so, contain myself. It is the only logical option for dealing with this type of dilemma: the Foundation will protect itself, and the Administrator will retire.

I may have said at the beginning that there was no first SCP, but I suppose it depends on the way you look at the concept; you may know me as the Administrator, but for the sake of myself and this organization, I am reclassifying myself as a Class V Memetic Hazard and assigning a team of the Foundation's most renowned memeticists to the task of my containment. If it works, my absence and my lack of memetic influence over personnel will jumpstart the next period of this organization's history for the better: a period during which we serve humanity without contradiction, emotion, and confusion affecting actions integral to this organization's continued survival.

Indefinitely — or until that point is reached — I am relinquishing my database access, stepping down as Administrator of this organization, and signing off for all intents and purposes. This document will display in the network database at random ten years from now, on July 22nd, 2017; after that point, it will alert the proper channels through the network and you, the reader, will be amnesticized due to exposure to one or more memetic hazards. You'll wake up tomorrow and wonder if you're a good person just the same as any other day, don't worry.

And so, as a parting favor, and while you wait for the page analyzer to tell you to remain at your computer, tell

me — no, ask yourself — is the Foundation thriving still?

revision: 0
posted from Unknown Location by Unknown Author at 12:13 on 07/22/07

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

_

.

.

.

ANALYSIS COMPLETED.

RESULTS:

(4) potential textual cognitohazard(s) detected.

(1) conceptual memetic anomaly(/-ies) detected.

Your Site's Memetics & Cognitohazards

Department Director has been notified of

your access to this file. Remain at your

terminal and await further instruction.

All They Want is the Blood

Day 2 of Containment cycle 366

"Wait, so are you actually… ?" Agent Xavier Garcez asked with that same incredulous, gushy tone that the new staff always had when they saw the nameplate on the desk.

"Yes, I am Doctor Alto Clef. No, those stories were all greatly exaggerated," the man in the plain brown civilian security officer's uniform responded with a hint of resignation. "Agent Garcez, why are you still wearing that black suit? Didn't the Requisitions department issue your cover uniform before you arrived on site?"

"Sir, no sir," Agent Garcez responded, tearing his eyes from the stylized nameplate bearing the musical inscription that was such a huge part of the Foundation mythos. Snapping stiffly to attention in the manner of one who was addressing a drill sergeant, Garcez continued, "I was told that a uniform and cover identity would be provided on location."

"Jesus Christ… at ease, Garcez." Clef stood up and paced across the grimy old security office and opened a rusted locker. "You're way too big to wear one of my extras. And I don't have your cover identity. So guess what? You're camping out here for the next few days. I'm not having you shuttle back and forth from this facility looking like one of the goddamn Men in Black. I can't believe Requisitions screwed this up again. Please tell me they at least sent you in with the necessary supplies."

"Yes sir, Doctor Clef. They're in the back of my truck."

"Let me guess, you drove in here with a big shiny black SUV with out-of-state plates, and you parked it out in the old lot outside right next to my Toyota."

"Er, yes sir, Doc-"

"Garcez, this site is an abandoned federal penitentiary with a really gruesome past. To ghost hunters, this place is like a blonde holding up a sign that says 'Free Blowjobs.' You are supposed to be part of the skeleton rent-a-cop staff that keeps horny teenagers and thrill-seekers from trying to sneak into this building. Do you know what happens to people who sneak into this building?"

"Entering the restricted rooms in this building is invariably fatal. Regulations state that any persons who enter SCP-450 are to be considered lost," Garcez recited from memory, still standing at attention with his square jaw thrust up into the air.

"Do you look like a rent-a-cop? Are you driving the shitty kind of car that a rent-a-cop would drive?" Clef limped up towards the younger, taller man, narrowing steely eyes that had already witnessed more than a lifetime's worth of horror. "No. I'll tell you what you look like. You look like the fucking new guy who doesn't quite understand what he is dealing with yet. You're here to learn that really fucking fast, or else you are going to die in here like one out of four fucking new guys that come in here to learn the ropes. You cut any more corners and you will wish that I was the goddamn devil that 732 made me out to be, because that guy would just put a bullet in your worthless ass and bury you in the parking lot. But I am not that man. So if you fuck up in the slightest bit from here on out, you are not only going to die inside of 450 but the gates of Hell are going to open up so wide that the clean-up crew that comes in here to pick up the pieces is going to have to fake a natural disaster big enough to wipe the neighboring three towns off of the map. Am I clear?"

"Sir, yes sir!" Garcez said, eyes staring off blankly over the top of Dr. Clef's receding hairline.

"This isn't the army, Agent." Clef sighed wearily and returned to his desk to send an equally nasty letter to the Requisitions officer who had sent him a new agent without the proper gear.

"Uh, s… sorry Doctor," Garcez replied. Receiving no answer, he slumped his shoulders and sat down on the musty tweed sofa in the office. Finally he spoke up again. "So what are you doing here,

Doctor?"

Clef looked up from his monitor and squinted. "Retiring."

Day 17 of Containment Cycle 366

"I'm getting old, Garcez," Clef explained. "It was just over thirty years ago that we first secured this site. I was the first person to walk that mile, you know. Devised the containment procedures myself."

Garcez said nothing. He was dressed in the proper plain brown uniform now, his eyes locked straight ahead down the dilapidated hallway. His pace was measured and calm, his footsteps almost silent in comparison to the doctor's shuffling limp and the clack of Clef's cane.

"I based the containment pattern on the Seal of Solomon," Clef continued in a relaxed tone. "Thought it would have some sort of arcane power over the entities trapped inside death row. It seems to have worked, they've only gotten loose once, and that was seven years ago when some fucking new guy didn't make it to the chair in time. Once I kicked Bright into the containment zone, as a joke. You could smell nothing but burning chimp for the next three months, even in the safe zone. Fucker said he'd kill me one day for that, heh heh. Good times. Also, I fucked your mother."

Garcez flinched and looked sideways. Clef smacked him in the shin with his steel-tipped cane.

"Don't react, Garcez! Don't react to anything while you are taking this walk," the doctor hissed. "You just keep on tuning me out and finish the practice run. We've got three more to do today. You need to execute this task perfectly or you will die, do you understand me? Now come on, back to the starting line."

Clef and Garcez turned around and walked to the end of the empty cell block in silence. They were in a safe wing of the facility, one that was secure enough to have electric lights overhead. The air was thick with the smell of rot, strongest at the far wall where the practice symbol was painted in pig's blood over and over on a daily basis.

Clef paused, holding up his hand before Garcez started his walk again. His chest heaved and his hand clenched the handle of his cane so roughly that it shook.

"Are you alright, Doctor? Do you need to rest?" Garcez asked gently.

Clef looked down at the grimy concrete floor. "You know, I wonder if it even matters. The pattern. We've been tracing it in death row once a month for thirty years, but I don't think the entities care about the pattern. All they want is the blood."

"Doctor?"

"It's the walk that is important, Agent. You have to walk calmly and at the perfect rate. Not too fast and not too slow. Don't look to the sides. Just go in, smear blood on the walls, and get out. Do that and the entities will not see you, and you'll live to do this again next month. Maybe get assigned to contain something less shitty later."

"Yes, Doctor. Did you need to rest?"

"No, no. I just needed to think of something new to torment you with while you practice. Something really good." Clef's face split in a wrinkled grin. "Let's get going."

For the next four hours Clef yodeled nonstop. Garcez managed to complete one practice walk successfully.

Day 30 of Containment Cycle 366

The doctor and the agent stood at the threshold of death row. A pair of brilliant floodlights shone behind them in the safe zone, casting their shadows starkly against the painted steel containment doors that blocked the path to the pitch black execution chamber. Garcez clutched a white plastic bucket containing a paintbrush and three blood packs generously donated by the people of the neighboring town in one of their frequent blood drives.

"What if they attack me anyway?" Garcez finally asked, staring at the door blankly.

"They shouldn't, Xavier. But if they do, I promise I'll finish the job. We'll keep these things contained." Clef waved his key card over the electronic lock, and the steel doors swung towards the two men. A rush of gibbering voices seemed to pour out of the stark darkness of the death row cell block. One hundred and sixty-six meters away, the door to the execution chamber stood open, barely illuminated by the powerful flood lamps behind the two men.

"Everything seems normal." Clef nodded as the doors of every cell on the left side began slamming open and shut in unison. "Go get it done, kid. Remember, the pattern isn't important. The walk is."

Garcez's breath was calm and measured as he stepped into the darkness. Clef watched as his partner briskly strolled past the remains of an agent who had failed to execute his task perfectly three years ago.

After passing seventy-three yards down the hallway, Garcez spun his head sideways with a short exclamation. "Mom?"

Abruptly his body was yanked to the side, smashed against the rusted metal of a closed cell over and over until it was limply dragged between the bars in a smear of gore. Clef narrowed his eyes and grimaced. He had really thought Garcez was going to work out.

June 22nd, 20 7:53 PM

Clef walked with his cane tucked under one arm. His other swung the white plastic bucket in time with his measured steps. Exactly eleven minutes after entering SCP-450 he came to the old electric chair, rattling and shaking in its fixtures. With the exception of Garcez's screw-up, everything was going as expected.

Clef knelt behind the shuddering electric chair and examined the bucket's contents. Two of the blood packets had been torn when Garcez was taken. Looking back the way he came for the first time, he could see the trail of bloody footprints he had left behind. Doctor Clef pursed his lips—the one remaining blood packet would not be enough to draw the containment pattern he had devised thirty years

ago. Digging into his trouser pocket, he produced the old hunting knife Dmitri had given him as a present after their vacation in Tijuana. Clef rolled up his sleeve, laid the blade against his wrist and set about his task. He doubted he would have time to walk out safely after this…

Day 1 of Containment Cycle 367

Doctor Yancy sat in the security office, feeling very small in front of Doctor Clef's laptop. A progress bar slowly filled as a series of high-resolution photographs was attached to a report for the O5 Council.

> Agent Xavier Garcez is confirmed to have perished while executing secure containment procedures at approximately 7:42 PM. Attached image [Incident 450-34-a] was taken by Researcher Darrin from outside SCP-450 containment. It appears that Doctor Clef personally completed containment procedures with his own blood. Of note is the phrase that Doctor Clef painted upon the rear wall of the execution chamber in place of the decayed containment pattern: "Come and get it mother fuckers."
>
> The entities within SCP-450 are confirmed to be contained. This appears to verify Doctor Clef's recent hypothesis that the specific pattern is not relevant to containment. The entities will be contained as long as human blood is applied to the walls of the execution chamber.
>
> Attached image [Incident 450-34-b] is of the floor before the electric chair. From this angle it is hard to determine the nature of the markings, but we believe they are multiple hand prints and a large blank area in the shape of a human body. Doctor Clef's whereabouts are unknown. He is presumed dead.

All Things Considered

EXCERPT FROM TRANSCRIPT: "All Things Considered", WOSU 89.7, 28 Jan 2013 16:05

ALISHA CLARK, HOST: While the President works to stem unrest in the Middle East, NASA is talking with people from an entirely different world. Since Project Gateway went public last November, all eyes have been on the conversation going on through the Hartle Anomaly. This afternoon, NPR's Stephen Fleischer took a closer look.

STEPHEN FLEISCHER, BYLINE: The mood in this antechamber to NASA's Gateway Contact Center is surprisingly ordinary, considering the literally out-of-this-world activities going on inside. Analytical equipment lies ready on the long countertops, but most of the lab's contingent is gathered around one of the laptops against the back wall. Dr. Andrea Tang types a few more words into the bare-bones terminal program, nodding and chuckling at the reply.

TANG: Syrti says they're ready any time. David, are we done compiling?

FLEISCHER: One of her assistants holds up a small metal tube.

TANG: Great. Send that through decon, and let's suit up.

FLEISCHER: Tang is the head of the Gateway Contact Center's Direct Hartle Exchange Team, the scientist in charge of sending packages back and forth through the Hartle Anomaly. She and her team stay in constant contact with their counterparts on the other side through a specialized telegraph line, but they've also exchanged thousands of packages since the project went public last November.

TANG: When the anomaly first opened, all our communication was on paper, and we passed it through by hand. The terminal's faster

for a lot of things, now that they've learned English and we speak Stola, but there's still great value in sending physical items.

FLEISCHER: Full-sized books won't fit through the anomaly, but Tang's team has sent and received hundreds of thousands of rolled-up pages. They've traded photographs, maps, biological specimens, art objects, and many stranger things. Richard Goldstein, sociologist with Tang's team.

GOLDSTEIN: Once, we opened a message tube and found something that looked just like a taquito. Fresh and hot, full of this spiced vegetable hash. (LAUGHTER) It looked delicious. I'd like to have tried it.

FLEISCHER: The researchers on Hartle are enormously interested in Earth's culture, and vice versa. The teams have traded books on everything from theoretical math to pop culture.

TANG: We have so, so much we can learn from each other. With what Hartle's physicists have taught us about space travel, my colleagues at Johnson say we'll make Mars by 2020. In return, we've taught them about vaccines, and they're already halting a pandemic in its tracks. And if you've checked the Top 40 charts lately, you know what the cultural exchanges are doing for us both.

(SOUNDBITE: "EISH MEKA EISH (LOVE FOR TODAY)", RIHANNA COVER)

FLEISCHER: Not everyone is as excited as the exchange team, though. At a press conference Thursday, Indiana Senator Adam Wright urged caution.

WRIGHT: I'm just saying, maybe we should be a little more careful. Maybe we should find out what they're really going to want from us, in the end, before we just give them everything. If we teach them about germs, are they going to cure cancer, or are they going to build bioweapons?

FLEISCHER: Others are less concerned with what the Hartleites will do deliberately and more worried about the Anomaly itself. Dr. Turner Velasquez, professor of physics at the University of

California, Berkeley, urges caution.

VELASQUEZ: According to absolutely everything we know about physics, the Hartle Anomaly should be impossible. A wormhole that size, unless it's at the bottom of a black hole, should require a truly enormous energy input to keep it open, and it should be releasing all kinds of exotic radiation. We have no idea how the Hartleites created the Anomaly, or how they're maintaining it, without either of those things happening. For all we know, it could be quietly destabilizing local space-time, or even hastening the heat-death of our universe. Whatever else we do, we need to make it our very top priority to learn how we can close the wormhole permanently.

FLEISCHER: While Tang doesn't dismiss those concerns, she argues that her team is taking plenty of precautions.

TANG: Our physicists are studying the Anomaly constantly and intensively. We run every exchange by the NSA officials working here with us. We have strict decontamination protocols in place. We've never sent anything that even looks like a weapons design. Besides, it's awfully hard to really hurt one another through such a tiny aperture.

FLEISCHER: Back in the lab, the team scrubs up and climbs into bunny suits to enter the clean room surrounding the anomaly itself. It looks like nothing so much as a hole in the air, barely an inch wide, with cables running through it and disappearing. Glimpses of green walls are just visible on the other side. Tang picks up the sterilized message tube and carefully pokes one end through.

TANG: [SPEAKING STOLA]

FLEISCHER: She lets go, and the tube is pulled through the hole. A moment later, another one is pushed back towards her. The exchange is finished.

Before leaving the lab, though, Tang kneels to look straight through the Anomaly. On the other side, her counterpart does the same. From what's visible above his own sterile suit, he's a very ordinary-looking man.

TANG [THROUGH TRANSLATOR, SPEAKING STOLA]: Hello, Syrti. How's Reh doing?

FLEISCHER: Astronomer Syrti Koll, lead scientist for the Earth Exchange Study Group.

KOLL: Much better. He'll be back at school tomorrow.

TANG [THROUGH TRANSLATOR, SPEAKING STOLA]: I sent a little something extra through for him. We all know how he loves comics.

FLEISCHER: When they've finished their brief conversation, Tang raises her forefinger to the anomaly, and right through **the hole between worlds**, the two scientists touch hands.

From the Gateway Contact Center in Terre Haute, I'm Stephen Fleischer. This is NPR.

All Words Are Lies

All words are lies, little fabrications we weave into tales that give us hope and make us feel complete. Parents tell their children lies to shield them from an ugly world and those kids tell lies to be a part of that world when they grow into men and women themselves.

Everyone lies for a reason, or that's what I had thought.

Lies were something I always believed were based on motive, some innate desire to twist reality into whatever we wanted, so long as we believed it and others believed it too. But that's not the only reason we lied.

I can't tell you the first time I was dishonest and any guess I could come up with would be wrong, no matter how much I did want you to know the truth. It was an impulse that started at a young age, and even in my earliest memories I do not know why I did so. I did only because I could, and for no gain whatsoever. It was pure bliss, in a way, but even then I didn't care that much about the feeling. I knew I was unhappy and the lie only made that ache ease just so much.

I was five years old. I was not an outdoor kid and my stepfather knew that too. He fucking hated me for it. I was innocent at that age; I had no motives and just wanted to be alone. I wanted to be alone and I wanted to make up stories in my head, for I had a wild imagination. I remember filling his gas tank with dirt when he wasn't looking. I did a mess of it and he knew I did it too, I could see it in his eyes. When he asked me if I did, I shook my head. I carried everything to my grave.

I always knew it would be my undoing, but boy did I not give a shit. It took me a long time to die and even then my lying had no more influence on my death than anything else I'm telling you right now. That's the moral of the story. Nothing happens for a reason.

When I was sixteen I got caught fucking my Latina ex-girlfriend in

the back woods of New Jersey. Someone saw my car pulling off onto a dead-end trail and called the cops thinking I was dumping garbage or some shit. I still remember which track of my *Chevelle* cd was playing when the cops knocked on the fogged up window. I climaxed with sheer adrenaline and morbid irony coursing through my veins at one penultimate fuckup of a moment. The zenith of white trash and an unsung hero in a beat-up beige Buick sedan. I barely lied myself out of that situation because I didn't lie myself out of that situation at all. I told some exaggerated truths and I pushed some unknowns like they were conditions of certainty and it helped a little.

I told them my stepfather would beat me if they found out. He wouldn't, but I knew what I was in for regardless. It was during school hours so I only got an in-school suspension for truancy. I thought I was pretty much out of the woods when I got home and told my mother I ran late to school getting McDonalds with some friends and got a suspension for it. I take the blame like a champion, and her God-fearing ass accepts it as is.

A few hours later my stepfather arrives home and I think all is well in the world until he says we have to speak with my mom about something.

"I got a call today. You know what about?"

I look at my mom and give her the old "we've just been through this" glare.

"Yeah, some truant officer picked me up outside of McDonald's after getting breakfast with a group of friends. It was after school started. You know, they got pissy." My look was stone-cold sober.

"Actually, it was from your principal. They said they picked you up off school grounds with some girl. Something Jimenez."

That was a little tricky, because I don't tell my family about my girlfriends unless they've been around a while. And I *had* been dating the daughter of a Methodist priest, this Caitlyn chick for about a year at that point. I fucked her spirituality out of her head, ramming it into her headboard and had taken up hiding under her bed when

her parents got home, until a camp made her realize I was questioning her chastity. We had our problems but girls kind of just kept coming onto me and I couldn't say no. Still, nothing I couldn't handle. I handled them all quite well, actually.

"Yeah, she's just some friend, I gave her a ride, she's pretty nice."

His tone was uncertain. "Okay, well, if that's so, can you tell me how they didn't pick you up in Wildwood, but inland, and in the woods?"

This piqued my mom's attention. I felt the little hairs standing up on my neck but I got slightly erect at the same time. How much did he know? The layers of my web of lies unwound, surely something would happen to me, the black sheep. The accident child.

"Uhh, yeah. We took a detour coming back, we had some stuff we needed to talk about alone."

"What kind of stuff, Will?" God I hated when they pried.

"You know, relationship stuff. About Cait. I don't want to talk about it." That much was true.

"Oh well, you also know what your principal told me?"

"No, I don't, but you're going to tell me anyway, right?"

"He said that, when they caught you, you were, 'in the act'."

My mom buried her head in her hands. There were so many things wrong with that moment. I didn't find out till years later that I was conceived in a parking lot by another man in my mom's lack of judgement. Thinking back on it, I thought that that would make a difference. It did not.

My mother spoke, "Oh, boy, you are done. No more video games, no more car." I was in the middle of Bumblefuck, NJ. Those were the only things I had. I needed to divert this.

"Look, I was just making out with her. They were exaggerating. It's a complicated situation and Caitlyn and I are on a break."

My stepfather seemed to take my side in this. Maybe he's been through the same craziness as a child.

"Alright, if that is the case, we will just go clear things up right now."

I clenched my jaw but accepted my fate. The web of lies was growing deeper, but maybe, just maybe I could get out of this one. The ride over was silent, though I didn't expect much conversation and didn't really care to have it. It was just awkward. It got a bit more awkward when we passed by the turn-off for my school.

"Uh, I thought we were going to talk with the principal."

"That's not who picked you up, though, isn't it? Let's get to the bottom of this, why don't we?" *I don't know why you didn't just listen to me but go through all this effort anyway.*

A short while later we pulled up outside the city's police office headquarters.

"This is your last chance, you know. You can come clean about everything right here and you can save us the trip of going in there.

You could have saved us the trip of driving out here if you weren't trying to prove a point, old man. I said nothing as we got out of the car.

It had started raining at this point, and the sky was the same shade of gray as the waters of the nearby shore. I followed slightly behind him as he pushed open the front doors. I saw my stepfather approach the guy behind the front desk and they exchanged some words. After a moment, my fat fuck of a dad motioned me over and we went into one of the side rooms. This was going to be interesting.

A minute passed and the doors behind me opened again. A squat officer, looking a bit like he had more to deal with whatever I was involved in, moved to the other side of the office, a folder underneath one arm and a cup of coffee in hand in the other. It took me a minute to realize this was the cop who picked me up. He had a slight smirk on his face, whereas I could feel mine burning up.

"What can I do for you today, young gentlemen?"

My stepfather responded first.

"Well, I understand you were the one who picked up my son here earlier."

"Yes, that is true."

"Was there anything abnormal or unusual about what was happening when you found him?" A lump in my throat started to form.

"Well, nothing much, aside from the fact that they were, you know…"

Silence thickened in the air. Of course he knew. My stepfather just wanted to hear him say it. I was waiting for the bomb to drop, too."

"Well, uh- he was, uh. How do I put this…"

I was looking at him with a pleading look in my eyes. Surely he remembered what I had said about the abuse, right? His smirk grew more when I had a slight realization.

My dad, he was an EMT, and also a firefighter. He must have known some of these guys and they must have been dying just waiting to rat on his son. Because they didn't know the truth. About the things he would say and do when he had the reason. It didn't matter.

"He was, uh, found, *inside her*."

I stood up and walked out of the room. I could hear a chuckle as I headed back to the car. I was done with this crap. My stepfather caught up to me on my way there, and he was cackling under his breath.

"You are so done. Just wait until your mother hears about this. I didn't trust you, just wait until no one else does."

I'm not a bad person. I didn't want to be not trusted. I was just compelled to be untruthful. Call it mental illness, call it what you will, it wasn't how I thought it was going to go down. I tried to open up to my stepfather for the first and last time. I was crying as I told him I didn't know what I was, and I was trying to figure it out myself. He

asked me if I was a faggot. What a prick.

The rain had picked up a bit, but it was still in its early stages. That's when roads are most dangerous, when people lose control of their vehicles easy. I didn't see the truck as it pulled out in front of me. I did hear the tires screeching as my dad passed me. I felt for a brief instant the force of two tons of metal striking my back and I remember a dull throb as the world went black. This was the first time I died.

When I opened my eyes again, everything was dark. I couldn't see, and there was nothing around me. I was unsure if I had a form or not, I couldn't move to find out. I couldn't speak either, but when I thought I heard the words around me as if I had talked out loud.

Where am I?

Then, there was a response, a dialogue started from something, someplace else.

ཕྱུ་གུ, བཟོ་ཁྱེད་རང་དྲན ?
Child, do you remember?

What? No, who am I? Where am I?

ཕྱུ་གུ, ཁྱེད་རང་ས་ཕྱི ཞེ་དགས ལམ་ཁག, དང་ཁྱེད་རང ཕེབས ཁྱིམ
You are on the path that is the far back, on the road to your first home.

ཁྱེད་རང་སྔོ་ཕྱི ཕྱི་རུ ཚེ ཐུར ཐོམ་པ་རྒྱུག ཕེབས གར ཕྱི་རུ འགོ་འཛུགས། དྲང ས་མཚམས, ཀ་ཁོར་ཐུབ་འཁྱུད་འགྱིག. གཅིག འཁར་ལོ ཚོ་མེ་གི, འགོར་བ.
You walk along the path that is before and after, the beginning and the border of the wheel, Samsara.

Samsara? Wait- no, that means I'm- I'm dead?

འཆི་ཀྱི་བ ཡིན་ན་ཡང འཆི་བ་མེད, འདི ཐབས བར་དོ་ ཚ་ཤས གནས
Death but deathless, that is the way of the Bardo, the passing state, the place between states.

ཁྱེད་རང གེམས གཟིགས མཚོ་སྣོམ འདི་ ང, བཟོ་ མིན ཕེབས ཞེད་སྣང. ཞེད་སྣང ཕ་བས ཐར་གྱ་ལ.
Look upon the reflection and see your Self, but do not fear. Fear will not be your freedom.

Then, a light was in front of me, behind me, reflected off the glass that was but a fragment's distance from my form, and I saw it, myself. Or what it would be. There was nothing there. Great terror built in my chest.

མིན ཕེབས. དྲན མན་ངྔ་ར། དང རྒྱུད་དབང་.
Do not fear. Remember your Mantra and it will be your freedom.

What is my Mantra?

ཚོག ཉལ.
All words are lies.

I began to weep. The light dimmed down and I knew I had failed. I wasn't ready.

སྒྲུན་རས་གཟི་གས་
oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ.

And then the pain began.

"Clear."

There was a bright flash, and all the nerves in my body lit up at once. I saw the metal ceiling, felt the movement of four wheels beneath me, but then it started fading again.

"He's going again. He needs another. Now! [pause] Clear."

A thousand colors bloomed in front of my eyes, which rolled half-open in a blurred haze. I'm still alive. But what had happened? It didn't take longer for me to fall unconscious again, this time with a pulse.

Hours later I awoke with a jolt with diodes on my head and tubes in my arms. No one was around me. I was alone in a hospital. Alone again.

Moments later I realized it wasn't true. There was someone else there, standing beside my bed. An elder man and a stranger in a tattered business suit.

"Who-"

I struggled to move but the pain knocked the words from my lungs. The man leaned over.

"Hush now. I am **Nobody**. You can call me that."

Coughing, I exhaled a few words. Nothing choice, but I was curious.

"Is that your name, or not your name?"

"I don't think there is much a difference. Call me Nobody. Do you remember who you are?"

I struggled to find the thoughts. Head disoriented, I blurted out what I was just told.

"I am a lie."

I think he smirked. "Getting ahead of yourself, are you? It'll come back, give it time. Don't worry, you'll be right as rain in no time, soon as you say so."

I didn't have a moment to question what he meant, as he vanished when he was out of my sight. I tried to turn my head but a sharp pain followed. Things blurred again and I fell asleep for some time.

When I awoke again, there was a woman beside me. A nurse, dark hair and a face like a peach. As soon as she noticed my movements, she approached me and laid a consoling hand on my arm.

"It's okay, Mr. . You've been in a car accident, but you are alright. Can you talk for me?"

"Where- [cough]. Where am I?"

She looked down on my form and spoke again. "Shore Medical. Somer's Point. You're lucky to be alive."

I tried to sit up again but she eased me down.

"Not yet, hun. Let's chat. Do you know who you are?

"You tell me, you just did." I was disoriented and confused. So confused.

"Mr. William . Ring a bell?"

I suppose it did, but I couldn't be sure.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"That's right!" She smiled.

"Who is the president?"

"I don't know. Some asshole."

She snorted slightly but said nothing.

"How do you feel?"

I was getting tired of this, so I said what I said to get her to go away.

"I'm fine."

"That's great!" She beamed, her oversized mouth full of white teeth. "I'll get your things, then." She left in a hurry.

Odd. Don't people usually run a bunch of tests first? Keep me inside until they know I won't die right out front? Now that I said it, however, I *did* feel fine. Better than fine. I sat up and yanked the needles out of my arm. It looked relatively unscathed.

The machines started going off with various tones and alerts, prompting assistance from other staff. I was already on my feet, though, and they didn't see me until halfway down the hall.

"Sir, are you okay?" The voices echoed from behind me as I strolled to the front entrance.

"I'm fine. Don't worry." No one stopped me. I guess I really was all that fine.

Walking out in the street, barefoot with the scrubs blowing a draft between my legs, I quickly found a cab and hopped inside. The cabby took one look at me and shook his head.

"No, sir, you need to have money to ride. Money to ride!"

"Look, I don't have any money, but I'll pay you, just drive."

"Okay, no problem." He started the car and we pulled away.

Still odd. I didn't give him a destination, and I didn't know of one. So we drove for a few hours. Cabby never made a complaint about it.

Some time later he spoke up, but it was just to break the uncomfortable silence.

"So… you got a name?"

"Yes, I'm-" I stopped. I didn't really remember. So I said what I thought was the truth. And it turned out it really was.

"I'm **`Mr. Lie`**."

"Alright then, let me know where you want me to go, okay?"

I said nothing. I sat in silence until the sun dipped below suburbia.

All words are lies. And I'll be damned if I didn't use that to my advantage.

We drove all night and into the next morning before I thanked the man and left into the unknown.

All Work and No Play

“How long do you think he’s going to take this time?”

Katsuo scratched his chin and checked his watch. “Who knows. He certainly doesn't seem to be in a rush."

Yuudai Shibata and Katsuo Tanaka sat in their undercover car, parked a safe distance away from a nondescript apartment complex in Fukuoka. Yuudai was fidgeting with his wristband and looking out the car window every so often to glance at the building’s doors. Katsuo calmly sat in the car, checking his watch and phone occasionally while keeping a steady eye on the door.

A quiet beeping alerted Katsuo to his phone. Yuudai noticed a similar beeping from his. Both of them looked at each other for a moment before turning to their phones.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

Katsuo cocked an eyebrow at the message. Minori Iwata herself thought it was a piece of major news? What exactly was happening?

“Look. There he is.” Yuudai pointed as the satchel carrying man that Yuudai had met earlier came out of the apartment complex. Noticeably, however, his satchel was gone. Whistling a pop tune, the man got into his car.

Katsuo quietly started the car, and began to follow the car once more. Yuudai licked his lips, and pulled out the pistol in his pocket, checking that the gun was loaded.

“Put that away. We’re going to check where he lives, not kill him.” Katsuo glanced at Yuudai.

“Never hurts to be prepared, right? I’m not ruling anything out.”

Yuudai pointed out.

“Put it away. I don’t want you trigger happy, especially when you’re not going anywhere near the guy. He’s already seen you.”

Yuudai grimaced for a moment, but put the gun away. Katsuo couldn’t blame him. He would have been worried had he been in Yuudai’s shoes too.

Katsuo drove smoothly, but with a somewhat distracted air. What could Iwata possibly want? He wondered if the undercover agents had made any progress. He knew that the Foundation also had people in with the Dojin-kai, but he had no idea who they were or anything they had accomplished.

Maybe he needed to talk to Hisashi again, he thought. See if his contacts with the Dojin-kai knew anything that was going on with that group. Or would that just hurt his cover? Or would it be worse if he didn’t do anything at all?

Katsuo shook his head clear of distracting thoughts to focus on the task at hand: following the dealer. Suddenly, the suspect’s car turned left, down a smaller road, until it reached a small kendo dojo. The dealer parked the car and exited quietly, glancing around as he did so.

Tanaka stopped the car. This was something new.

A man came out of the dojo, and greeted the dealer, who produced the backpack full of money that Yuudai had given him. The newcomer looked at it, then smiled at the dealer, before taking the offered bag. After a few moments of conversation, the two entered the dojo together.

The detective turned off the car and pulled out his phone. While pretending to look at it, he used the phone’s camera to discreetly gaze around at the street surrounding the car.

The whole street was located in one of the more well-to-do districts of the city, lined with fashionable clothing boutiques advertising the latest American styles, and small cafes and shops scattered

throughout the area. Across the street from the kendo dojo was a small convenience store. The kendo dojo seemed almost out of place in this upscale neighborhood; a relic of an older time. It certainly seemed a little disused compared to the plastic shine of the rest of the area.

The detective focused on the last thing he saw, and walked into the convenience store. He glanced around. His only company was a bored looking cashier and an older man who was thumbing through some magazines.

Tanaka picked up a small box of candy as he walked to the register, still keeping an eye on the dojo across the street. The cashier mechanically checked out the purchase. Katsuo cleared his throat.

“So, that kendo dojo across the street. Is it any good?”

The cashier flicked his eyes to him for a moment. “I hear it’s alright. Mostly younger guys wanting to look tough.”

“Ah, okay. Know anything about the master there?”

“Wouldn’t know. Wouldn’t care. Here’s your candy, sir.”

Katsuo took the box back, and walked out of the store. As he passed between the doors, he casually dropped his hand behind him, sticking a small object next to the door of the convenience store, pointing straight at the dojo.

Tanaka entered the car and slid in smoothly, tossing the box of candy to Yuudai.

“Eat it, I’m not going to.”

Shibata seemed as if had a question, but thought better of it. He opened the box tentatively, but then set it down, staring into the box. After a moment, he looked back up into his mentor's eyes.

“What now?” The young detective asked.

Katsuo scratched his chin. “Looks like we’ve got a meeting.”

“Holy fucking shit, man. This is one hell of a payload.”

Naoki Koga reclined against his chair, almost wincing at the talk. All of these idiots wanting to look cool. As if watching a couple awful American gangster movies and swearing would boost your reputation.

Naoki ignored it though. Since his crew had started selling Spirit Dust, the money kept flowing in. And if that kept his crew happy and (relatively) quiet, he was okay with that. Even if meant putting up with the idiots. They’d learn eventually, or wash out like the rest.

The backroom of the dojo was filled to the brim with the members of Naoki’s individual gang, a collection of 12 *shatei* that Naoki had hand-selected. They ranged in age from old to young, some dealers, some enforcers, some only foot-soldiers. All faithful yakuza. All handpicked by Naoki himself.

And in the middle of them all was a neatly organized pile of money so large it seemed almost cartoonish. Yoshida hadn’t been joking when he talked about the price they were selling spirit dust for. And it had only been rising as they were selling the drug, Koga mused.

“So, after we give the oyabun his cut, what are we going to do with the rest?” The same man who spoke earlier asked. He grinned a toothy smile, all too telling of his youth. “I’ve got this motorcycle I’ve been eye-”

“Shut your mouth, you insolent twat.” An old man, covered in tattoos snorted. He shook his head in disgust, earning him some toothless grins from the older members. “Kyodai Koga is the one to decide, not a brat so young he’s barely got a tattoo on him.” The old man gestured to his body to make his point.

The youth sprang up from his seat and glared at the old man, his eyes burning. His hands went to his belt. “You looking to start a fight, you pi-”

“Hey.” A single word, full of authority, cut through the air like a razor.

Naoki folded his arms as everyone turned to look at him. “The

money goes to the family. We earned this as a family, we keep it as a family. Got it?" He looked around to meet the eyes of each of his gang brothers in turn. They met his gaze, or looked away in shame, in the case of the upstart.

A kyodai's word is law to shatei.

Naoki looked over at one man in particular. "Shiba-san. Count up the money, throw it in the safe, and make a record of it. Nobody's to touch it without me there."

Shiba bowed deeply, and ran off to find a cart for the money. The youth looked at him, somewhat longingly, Koga noted.

Naoki sat in his chair with perfect poise, and steepled his fingers in front of him. It was a very American gesture that he had picked up, but he enjoyed it. He considered the audience in front of him, and chose his words carefully.

"Your loyalty is unquestionable. Yes?"

A few confused looks, but nods and murmurs of assent in response.

"You are my brothers in arms, and I've helped this crew get to where it is. Yes?"

The shatei looked far more confident now, and nodded vigorously or vocalized their agreement.

"So. Then you all did what I told you to?"

They nodded, this time for sure. The shatei dealers produced small devices from various places, and held them up for Naoki to see. He gestured to the table in front of him, and they placed their devices on the table. The screens on the devices glowed in an indistinct way.

Koga leaned back in his chair, and swept his hair backwards. "Excellent." He couldn't help but grin at his crew.

Then, he heard a slight beeping from his phone, and froze. It wasn't his normal phone. He slipped into his pocket and pulled out his Foundation issue. On the screen was a single text message.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

He looked at it, betraying no sign of distress in his face, though his stomach turned. Was it one of the other undercover agents? Iwata couldn’t know about his latest moves yet, could she?

Whatever had happened, it wasn't likely to be good.

He looked up from his phone and put it away. He cleared his throat, looking up into the expectant eyes of his crew.

“Let’s get to work.”

One hour earlier

Commander Minori Iwata put on her coat, and walked out of the Foundation facility onto the streets of Fukuoka, muttering some goodbyes to the people she passed, who knew better than to engage her in this kind of mood.

There was a light rain, but it didn’t bother her too much. Rain was the least of her problems, as she stalked through the streets, head down, and mind full of thoughts.

All of these regional containment teams, and they had accomplished precisely jack shit. The rate at which spirit dust incidents were occurring was quickly growing uncontainable, but none of her teams had anything to report on with regards to investigation.

As far as she knew, spirit dust was a literal demonic substance, as some of the civilians they had amnesticized were saying. Nobody had any leads on where the substance was coming from, aside from the fact that the Dojin-kai yakuza were pushing it around. Where they got it from, nobody had any clue.

She glanced up, looking at the garish signs and ads of downtown Fukuoka, blaring some obnoxious drivel about beauty supplies or new appliances, or something else. She sighed. If only these beautifully deluded idiots knew what had to be done to keep them in their state of idle, ignorant bliss.

Her thoughts wandered back to the day. Her researchers couldn't figure out anything either, besides the fact that it was a plant with something weird about it. What she wouldn't give for an American base right now, with the kind of equipment they had…certainly better than this castoff junk they got when the Americans or Europeans were done with it.

She blinked through the rain, and shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She needed to relax a little. She had already chewed out a few terrified interns and containment team representatives. She didn't need anything else to cloud her mind for the coming days.

By the time she got home, the rain had picked up. Her drab apartment building looked even more drab than usual. She glanced at the potted plants lining the side of her apartment complex. They looked as silly as they usually did, little bushes in pots that had no business being there.

Minori chuckled a little. She really must be going senile. She was getting furious at a potted plant, of all things.

Minori opened the door to her first floor apartment carefully, as she did everyday. Sensing nothing wrong, she flicked the light on and entered her apartment. She closed the door behind her, and then let out a huge sigh, visibly deflating as her shoulders slumped and the coat slipped off of her.

It had been a long day. She was done playing her part for now. Commander Minori Iwata, the fiercely independent Foundation officer, shrugged off her carefully laid mask along with her coat, and simply became Minori Iwata, the very tired middle aged woman.

She strode through her mostly spartan living room, and made her way to the kitchen. She opened the top cabinet on the left, and drew out a bottle of Taiwanese kaoliang liquor. She needed it today.

She poured herself a glass, and settled on her small couch, deciding not to even take the effort to change. Idly, she flicked on the television, sipping her liquor, hoping that it might dull her senses enough to slip into sleep eventually. It burned as it went down, but

with each sip, she could feel its magic work on her.

Heh. Who needs Spirit Dust when the regular stuff works just as well?

“…and we bring you more on the death of Councillor Takeda’s son. Latest reports from the county coroner’s office have revealed an unidentified plant substance within his body that is believed to be some form of narcotic. Sources believe that-”

Minori didn’t hear the rest of the newscast. She was already on her phone, furiously texting, the haze of the alcohol already lifting.

“MAJOR NEWS. REPORT TO DESIGNATED SPOT AT 1400 HOURS TOMORROW. -MI”

Then, she put the glass aside, once again put on the mask of Commander Minori Iwata, Regional Containment Commander, and got back to work.

She supposed that the work never really stopped.

« Trip Hammer | Mainline Hub | »

Allegory Of The Two Bothers

Alone

Have you ever been Alone? Not just alone for a bit while others are out, or feeling rather isolated at the end of a relationship, but Alone. That special Alone that you feel at 1:25 in the morning, when the whole world is asleep. Nobody to call, no real place to go, even the depths of the Internet unable to turn up even a passing conversation. You suddenly realize how isolated you really, truly are.

The house is louder and quieter at the same time. You'll catch yourself turning on things just to have light, noise, something to fill the space, and sometimes that can work. At least, for a while. Still, that gnawing feeling of Alone keeps creeping in. You could even consider calling someone you know to be asleep, just to hear the sound of another voice. After a while, you'll start getting more…alert.

It's the first over-the-shoulder glance that brings it to the forefront. You'll feel stupid for doing it…but you can't stop it. Maybe you even justify it by looking at something to the side of you…but you're really craning around though your peripheral vision, trying to see what's behind. It's so stupid…but it's that itchy spot in your back that does it, you just keep having the weird urge to look behind you.

Keep doing it.

They only take prey when they're Alone. For some reason, eyes scare them.

Maybe because they don't have any.

Along Came A Spider

He cautiously made his way through the ruins. He had a name, but it had long since been forgotten. His name was now a word that had been written under a drawing in the margin of a journal he didn't remember keeping. His life had become one of service to the Foundation. Now the Foundation was no more, and he had returned to the site of his greatest failure.

Just what was the agent's greatest failure, he wasn't entirely sure. Perhaps it had been leaving the site without making sure everyone understood his instructions. Perhaps it had been failing to ensure that the robots had all of their moving parts protected. Perhaps it had been allowing his paranoia that the containment procedures on 359 weren't sufficient, and he had to see for himself, to get the better of him, which had been his reason for leaving in the first place. But whatever it was, within a day of his leaving the site, there was no longer a site to return to.

The news had come from one of the Level 1 personnel who arrived at 359's roost. The vine had somehow hitched a ride on one of the robots, he claimed, and had killed anyone who saw it. People had been sent to the lab with flamethrowers to attempt to contain it with minimal collateral damage, but to no avail. The more people it killed, the faster it spread. By the time the situation had reached the point where activating the on-site warhead would have been a viable option, anyone who had the security clearance to do so was already dead.

The agent had called in an airstrike on the former site, but the vine had already spread far beyond the site by the time it was cleared. Within a week, the entire American Midwest was overgrown.

He and the remaining survivors had erected a shelter, a massive steel dome with a glass roof to let sunlight in. He knew the plant couldn't put down roots in metal or glass, and the glass was too high for any vine to reach without roots for support. He had thought they

would be safe in there. He had forgotten the ingenuity of the plant.

He had lost track of the time the survivors had spent inside the dome when the attack came. The vines had crept over the glass window and smashed it with the rocks held in their roots. Next had come the Great Rain of Mice. Dead mice began to fall through the broken skylight, erupting with vines the instant they hit the ground. The survivors had been caught completely off-guard. Within hours, the dome had been completely overrun.

So now, dressed in a thermal insulation suit specifically designed to shield his heat signature from the plant, he returned to where it all began. He wanted to understand where everything had gone wrong. He had already seen that the plant had stacked various porous objects against the dome to reach the skylight.

As he climbed over the numerous skeletons, humans and otherwise, entwined in the mass of vines, he saw something sitting in the middle of the room. It was one of the robots that had been used to maintain the plant after Incident 307 had killed a D-class personnel. One of its arms had long since rusted and fallen off. As he approached, he could see a plant growing out of it, with its roots set into the rubber casing on one of its hydraulic tubes.

He prepared to turn back, when something at the other end of the room caught his eye. It appeared to be a light, but the sun had set hours ago. Against his better judgment, he made his way through the vine-strewn door. He immediately recognized the room he was in. It was the plant's containment cell, and the light, which was somehow still lit, was the hydroponic chamber where the original specimen had been contained. But now, there was something different underneath it.

The hydroponic station had been replaced by a table, with several glass terrariums on it. Inside each terrarium was a sizable colony of mice. As he watched, a vine snaked forward, lifted the lid off of one of the terrariums, and touched one of the mice, which froze on the spot. The vine wrapped around the mouse and removed it from the terrarium. *So that's how it's survived all this time,* he thought. *The damn thing is farming hosts!*

He turned to leave, but felt something tug at his leg. One of the seams on his suit had become caught on a thorn. Before he could decide the best way to disengage himself, the vine began to move towards the mice, pulling the seam out of the suit completely.

Instantly, the vines homed in on his heat signature and grabbed the suit with their thorns. He could hear them tearing at his clothes, as a particularly large vine wrapped around each limb and forced him to his knees. As he looked up, a single vine crept up to his face.

It was a plant. It didn't have a mouth. It didn't have a face. It didn't even have a head. And yet, for just a second, he almost swore it was grinning at him.

Also This All Happened On The Same Day, So I Don't Know Why He Said It Like That.

The following is the last recorded message from newly promoted Director Austin of Site-12. It is unknown if the director was suffering a mental break or if he was under the effects of an unidentified memetic effect released during the site-wide breach on December 25th, 2013.

Regardless, the site experienced the simultaneous activation of both the above ground and below ground nuclear fail-safes 1 minute and 43 seconds after the broadcast. There were no survivors.

if the audio player is broken so is the masquerade...

Alternate Character Interpretations

New York City

"Hey, Sal, got a cig I can have?" Mary-Ann Lewitt looked between her husband and her latest creation, sprayed on the wall of a vacant warehouse, and it was sprayed on the *entire* wall, at least 20 feet high. It was a bright red vulva with a hand, flipping off the audience, sticking out between the lips. It was painted entirely in menstrual blood, which had taken her months to collect; she called it "Period Piece: The Modern Age."

The Pakistani man frowned at Mary-Ann upon hearing her request, looking at her pregnant belly. "You're with child. It's generally not a good idea to smoke-"

"It's not for me, ya dimwit." She pointed up at her piece, wiping her bandana-covered brow with one hand. "I need a proper way to express how women are destroying their bodies with drugs and pills and plastics and lord knows what else." She dug in her pocket, taking out several dildos that, by all means, should not have fit in there. "I won't smoke it, I just need it to tie the piece together."

"I think it's fine as is!" He waved a hand at the Period Piece, smiling at her. "It's just saying that a period is the way a woman's body says "fuck you" to itself once every month. Maybe you could put a mirror over there-" He pointed to a warehouse opposite the wall- "or a sculpture of Eve or something, but really, it's fine!"

Mary-Ann elbowed him in the side. "You say that about all my work, Sal. It's getting old. I at least have the balls to criticize your shit."

"…did you really think that my Bacon Treaty piece was disgusting?"

"I thought it was disgustingly *simplistic*. But I did appreciate you trying to be 'Cool' in the sense that 'we agree'." Mary-Ann patted her stomach and sighed. "I'm hungry. Let's get some pizza or

something."

"How about we go to the old place? You know…" Salah smiled, pulling a map of New York City out of his pocket and pulling Mary-Ann close so that she could see the map, too. "It was right… here." He pointed to a spot on 32nd and smiled as the warehouse district faded away to be replaced by the urban sprawl of Manhattan. Mary-Ann rolled her eyes and bapped him in the gut.

"You're gonna get fat if you keep on relying on the Cartographer's stuff," she muttered, walking up to the pizza parlor as Salah put away the map. "A bit of exercise is good for you. You can't just rely on those candles forever."

"The City of New York says I'm not allowed on the subway anymore, remember? Gimme a break, honey." He walked up to the pizza place as well, and looked at the menu. "Veggie-lovers pizza sounds good."

An hour later, the pair of them stood in front of the entrance to the BackDoor. Mary-Ann had taken the map from Salah and had forced him to walk; he was visibly winded, while Mary-Ann had barely broken a sweat. "Now that's pathetic. I'm three months pregnant, and you can't even keep up with me." She looked around the alley and frowned. "Where the fuck is Chuck?"

Charlie came out of the wall, his pink hair done in a mullet today. He frowned at the both of them, toying with a nose ring. "Now is not a good day to be in the BackDoor. Just warning you."

"Why?" asked Salah, still panting for breath. "Did Gilligans get in again? Just give them to one of the Baileys; they know what to do with Gilligans."

"Not the Skippers," said Charlie. "The Critic's in town. She's looking over the Cartographer's new thing. You know, the Korea one?"

"The one that shows every person in the country who wants to dissent?"

"That's the one," he said, holding out a hand for their token. "You sure you wanna go in? It's gonna be Bedlam in there."

Mary-Ann handed Charlie her token and nodded. "We'll just avoid the Cartographer's place for now. We're probably going to head home, anyway, unless something comes up."

"Something *will* come up," muttered Salah. "It has the last five times the Critic's come into BackDoorSoHo. Why should it change now?"

"Point," said Mary-Ann, looking at Charlie. "You know where to contact us if shit goes down, right?"

"Yeah, yeah…" and with that, Charlie vanished into the brickwork. Soon after, Mary-Ann and Salah vanished into there, too.

Agent Ruiz Duchamp was not having a good day. His non-Newtonian shock armor was starting to rip at the seams, his gun jammed on the firing range this morning, he was getting cold sores again, his arch-nemesis was in town, and the barista at Starbucks put cream in his coffee this morning. He was lactose-intolerant.

Then again, as everyone in the MTF knew, Ruiz Duchamp never had good days. He hadn't had one since Milwaukee. He hadn't had a good day since his brother had defected to the Chaos Insurgency. He hadn't had a good day since he had met Nobody.

Ruiz was one of the few survivors of the Milwaukee incident, and ever since then, he had been ruthlessly chasing the shadow that was known as Nobody. He had almost caught up to her, once, in Dubai, before the scarf-wearing bitch had literally frozen him on top of one of the tallest buildings in the world. He survived, even though it took three days to thaw him out.

And today, the stupid motherfucker was here. In New York City. He knew exactly where she was, too, and he was going to take his entire platoon and kill that fucker dead this time. And there was nothing- not a fucking thing- Pico could do to stop it this time.

The van pulled up to an alleyway, and the task force stormed out,

surrounding a large spot of graffiti that was located in the Alley. With an audible sigh, Charlie emerged from the brickwork, arms crossed. "I'm not gonna let you in."

"We have tokens," Ruiz said, taking out a pouch and opening it onto the concrete. Several tokens with the words "ARS GRATIA ARTIS" stamped on them, some still stained with blood. "You kind of fucking have to."

"I ain't *gotta* do shit, Gilligan. Piss off." Charlie reached into the brickwork, and pulled out a detonator from a red piece of graffiti. The cord went back into the wall, merging seamlessly with the entrance to the BackDoor. "Or I blow this whole alley to the Oort Cloud, and then your friends can have a hell of a time explaining to the NYPD why an alleyway blew up for no reason."

The entire MTF raised their rifles at him, with Duchamp sneering. "Go ahead and try, Aussie."

Charlie shrugged. "Eh. I can just be painted again. But since pink spray paint is so damn hard to find…" He sighed. "I'm going to give my guys warning first."

"Of course."

"The Critic probably already knows you're here."

"Naturally."

"You won't kill her."

"Fuck you, paint huffer." Ruiz spat in Charlie's direction, but by then, he had gone back into the brickwork to raise the alarm. A subordinate of Duchamp's looked at him.

"Sir? How will we get in without him?"

"We wait." Ruiz grinned with a grim satisfaction. "We wait."

The Cartographer paced around his apartment, wondering where the hell she could be. She said 6:15 promptly, and it was almost

6:30… just where the fuck was she? Did she not think his masterpiece was worth critiquing? He had spent the last year working on it, and now she wasn't even going to show up?

"Son of a bitch!" York, the Cartographer, felt like flipping his cartography table. Didn't she think that maps would be considered art?! That little-

"Hello there, Mr. The Cartographer." He spun around, seeing a woman in a cloche hat, gray dress suit, and a red scarf standing in his display gallery. "I apologize for my sudden entrance. I take it I am not too late to see your piece?"

"O-of course not, ma'am." The Cartographer looked at his watch, and saw that it was exactly 6:15. "Come here, come here. The piece is right this way." York walked into the display room, and directed her at a map of North Korea. Once every second, blue dots appeared and dissipated in it. A countdown clock was in the upper-left hand corner, ticking down despite being made entirely out of ink, while another clock ticked upwards; the count on the second one started on December 17th, 2011. "I call it 'The Map of Dissent'."

"A rather uncreative name," commented the Critic, looking over the map. "I do admire the technique, however. It mirrors the cartographic techniques used in the Gojoseon period. I assume all these dots are dissenters?"

The Cartographer nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! Each one represents a single dissenter that can be found in North Korea, or at least, someone with dissenting thoughts. You can even zoom it in to a certain degree; I'm still working on the magnification."

"This clock," said the Critic, pointing towards the top. "It detracts from the work, somewhat, but it also serves as a nice juxtaposition; a pseudo-digital appliance in an otherwise medieval piece. What is its purpose?"

"The one counting down indicates how much time is left in the life of Kim Jong-un, down to the second. Once that clock runs out, he dies. The other one is how long it has been since Kim Jong-il died."

"Check your calculations," snapped the Critic. "Kim Jong-il's been dead for far longer than that — although nobody but the North Korean government knows, so I suppose I can't blame you *too* much." She reached into her pocket and took out a smartphone. "Apologies. I have to answer this mail."

The Cartographer frowned, and was about to comment on how rude it was to do that, when suddenly, chaos broke out outside of his window.

---

wow
much shibe
so cool

"For the love of-" Mary-Ann rubbed her eyes to clear away the Comic Sans as she stared at their dog, calling to Salah. "Honey, I think Gerry got his hands on Amaterasu again!"

"Is that font appearing around her?" He called back, chopping up carrots in the kitchen.

"Yeah! Tell him that if he touches our dog again, I'm gonna kick his-" Mary-Ann's phone suddenly rang, and she took it out of her jean pocket, sighing into the receiver. "What."

"M-A, it's C." Charlie was on the other end of the line, and he began to sing. "Sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip…"

"Shit! I understand." She clicked off the phone, and called to Salah. "Dinner's cancelled. We got Gilligans."

Salah stopped chopping veggies and stepped out of the kitchen, grabbing a pen off of his writing desk. Mary-Ann took up a metal slingshot, and looked around the living room of their apartment briefly. "Crap, where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The cricket bat we got from Marshall, Blackwood and Dark! We're gonna need it if they're packing heat!"

"One: 'if'? Two: We loaned it to Dickens, remember?" Salah picked up his own slingshot and made for the door. "Now, c'mon, we got some Gilligans to kill, again!"

"Let's do this." Mary-Ann grinned as she rushed out the door and up the stairs of their building.

The Critic looked through her purse for a very particular item, her attention now completely distracted from the Cartographer's work. "I do apologize, Mr. York, but I need to take my leave."

"Wha-who? Do we have the Gilligans on our back again?" He peered at the Critic as he covered his map with a tarp."They're after you, aren't they?"

"Such insistent terminology!" muttered the Critic as she took out an aerosol can. "Just call them the Foundation. I know you think that dignifies them, but really, the fact that you even know about them is humiliating." She went to the window, looking below her; a large crowd of anartists was armed with slingshots, bullets that shot guns, cream pies filled with something that was both acidic and vulgar, copies of *The DaVinci Code*, swords made out of newspaper, and pens. They were ready in case the Foundation Agents came this way. "You all down there!" The entire crowd turned in the direction of the Critic's voice as she threw down several aerosol cans. "Have a party for me, will you?"

The crowd took up the cans, and handed them to the unarmed members among them. Nobody smiled, and everybody grinned at the new gift. With that, the Critic made her way for the door. "Perhaps we can pick this up some other time, Mr. York."

"Perhaps," said York, looking over a map of the BackDoor that he had drawn years ago. "Perhaps."

Nobody walked out the door, and nobody was in the hallway a few seconds later.

Ruiz Duchamp broke the neck of some no-name anartist who had

tried spraying his visor with paint. It was ruined now, so he took off his headgear and started firing into the crowd. Around him, members of his Task Force died as their chests were penetrated by miniature guns flying at supersonic speeds, or their arms were chopped off by claymores made out of back issues of the New York Times. Ruiz still stood though. He scanned the crowd of bright, vibrant colors for any sign of grey-

There. Coming out of the apartment building in the back. That scarf gave her away immediately. Ruiz ran through the crowd, firing in front of him and gunning down innocent anartists in pursuit of his mark. Said mark saw him, and smirked in his direction before making her way down an alley. Agent Duchamp ran after her as fast as he could, not noticing the Pakistani man and the American woman on the roof above him.

"Salah, for fuck's sake, you don't have to make a bridge every time I need to jump a rooftop!" She frowned as her husband drew a basic bridge using his pen before letting her cross. "The baby will be fine!"

"Mary-Ann, you shouldn't even be doing this," he said the pen re-absorbed the spent ink. "You're pregnant, you should be staying at home in the panic room with Ammy and not out here, fighting the god-damn Foundation!"

"Oh, so just because I'm pregnant makes me a fragile woman now, does it? Ugh!" She rolled her eyes and took out her slingshot, taking aim at an agent that was just coming in through the breach in the gateway. She let lose a stone which grew in size as it passed through the air, eventually blasting a hole through the agent's leg. "Damn. Was aiming for his balls."

Salah got the message. "I'm just saying it won't be good for our daughter if you keep on over-exerting yourself like this." Salah started to draw up a chair when he noticed that an agent was running through the crowd, after a woman in… grey… "Shit! That guy, right there." He pointed at the rogue agent. "He's going after the Critic."

"Already on it," said Mary-Ann, loading up her slingshot with a cherry

bomb taking aim at the runner. "Just need to account for trajectory and…"

Ruiz Duchamp let off a shot at Nobody. "Hold it right there."

The Critic turned to face him, crossing her arms with a wry smile. "Hello again. How long has it been since we last met? 6 months? 7?"

"Seven months, 18 days, 15 hours, 24 minutes."

"Zero heartburn," quipped the Critic. Ruiz raised his rifle at her, and she put up her hands. "All right, I get the message. You want me dead." She tsked. "Ruiz, you are the very definition of obsession, you know that?"

"Shut up!" Ruiz fired a bullet that grazed her dress suit. "You killed a lot of good people in Milwaukee."

"For the umpteenth time, Ruiz, I did nothing. All I did was try and encourage a little fun."

"Half the city died because of your 'fun'!"

"Well, yes. But that bug's been worked out now!" She sighed. "Nothing I say is going to keep you from killing me, is it?"

"Not a fucking thing, Lady. Not a fucking thing."

"Very well," the Critic said as she typed one last messaged on to her smartphone before turning it off. "Give my regards to Pico, if you see him again."

"Fuck Pico, and fuck-" Ruiz blinked at the sound of whistling coming from behind him. He turned to see a small cherry bomb fireworks sailing towards his head. It landed at his feet, the fuse disappearing into the casing. For what seemed like the longest time, nothing happened.

And then the Cherry Bomb went off.

The last thing Ruiz Duchamp remembered before it went dark was the smell of fruit, the taste of wild cherry Kool-Aid, and his eardrums popping. The last thing he saw was a woman in a grey suit turn on her smartphone as she walked off into the distance.

Alternate Hypotheses

We gotta keep our own, don't we?

That's what my dear Momma always said. If ya got something earned, or somethin' that's yours, keep it safe. Don't let any o' them outside peepers come creepin' in, tryin' to make off with somethin' of yours. She wanted to keep away from them folks, to live with what we already got.

I kept care of Momma and Sue Ann fer all my life. Side by side, we lived'n peace, and sometimes comfort, if we was lucky. We each had our protection, an' used it well. But, sometimes it wadn't enough. Momma passed back in '48, bless her heart. Big storm knocked her right over, an' she never got up. Sue Ann got to be with Momma some years after, with a rusted heart.

But y'can't let yerself fall apart when some'n your own ain't around anyplace. I kept up, remembrin' them and keepin' to my own, like Momma woulda wanted me to. Keepin' it safe. The protector don't quite look like what he used to be, but that don't change a thing, now does it? Still keeps to me, like I do t'him. Y'all should've kept to yerselves, 'stead of headin' here.

You folks never learn. Comin' onto someone else's land ain't respectful, and then up and lyin' about it don't help. I chased yer buddies away, maybe they'll think twice about coming back. Anythin's possible. Lookit em' run. They go quick when they scared, don't they?

Now, uh, fer you. See, my protector's been gettin' on in his years, and he don't have the spring to his step what like he used to. Tellin' me he's tired, and wants rest. The man deserves to rest more'n anyone. But, I still need a protector.

You like beans? Aww, well you'll learn't love 'em, soon.

INCIDENT 1270-
On / /201 , several agents were performing routine reconnaissance into **SCP-1270**'s second floor. During this time, SCP-1270-1 suddenly manifested and began attacking personnel, injuring and fatally wounding . Following the incident, Agent Fowells, who had been with the reconnaissance team, was found to be missing. His current status is MIA.

Alto Clef Jr.: Fins of the Father

Death, some say, is an inevitability. The entire cosmos attempts to kill us; Meteors endeavor to crash into us, anomalies vie to redact us, the sun sends solar waves towards our humble planet, galaxies collide bombastically, and the paradigm terror of entropy dictates doom of a cold or hot end. This, I accepted without fear or anger. One day, however, I found a new aspect, a new chapter to death, a most unbearable mortality: turning into a goose with human legs while I slept.

My name is Buckchamp McFuckmeup, and it is short to say I was bumfuck terrified of what happened. I worked for the Foundation, I knew what happened to people who experienced anomalous changes while they slept. I was not prepared to be locked up in a “standard humanoid containment cell” for the rest of my avian life. So, I took the only approach that I could think of at the time: hope that nobody would notice. I slapped on a gasmask to mask my beak and head, and shoved my wings through my suit. Thankfully, it turned out my cover was as covert as one could expect from an anthropomorphic gosling; that is, rather. However, I found that things were quick to change under the influence of an anomaly.

The job was a response to an anomalous occurrence in a decrepit factory. As soon as we entered, the disrepair of the place was apparent, it's condemned interior flush with a veneer of ash and rust, gins and dynamos either in hefty disrepair or too obsolete to be useful; reminded me of my local laundromat… except today I forgot my quarters. The progression down the spacious machine house went slow, every now and then a spark of energy spurring a long dead tool to life (giving the squad a healthy spook and ridding them of a few bullets), but steadily in our search for whatever the fuck was in here. All we were told was that some teenagers broke in, heard something weird, and one of them died because a monster ate them "or something." By that information, we could capture this dust for being anomalously allergenic and I think the bureaucraps and I

would go home happy, but I was shut down when I brought it up. I was weighing the benefits of doing it anyway when I tripped over some anomalously large detritus and fell face first into an inactive furnace, meeting whatever "it" was face to visage after a tall drop.

It was a sight too peculiar, perhaps, to forget. In the middle of the small chamber lay a pie, cherry I think, untouched among the ash, charcoal, and coke rife in the forge. The pastry, I felt, resonated in the chamber, nay, my very soul, with an innocence greater than that of a puppy superimposed on a lollipop. I shook it out of my mind, realizing the cognitohazard for what it was, ready to call out my squad for containment. But I looked once more, gazing at it thoughtfully. I could call my team, get this stupid skip, and get home. But, I could also capture it, because fuck it and my team, I am a goddamn adult, and should be treated as such. Well, I thought I was. So I took a step. Then another. I kept stepping towards the pie, splayed perfectly in the center of the stove. I was nary a meter away from the delicious treat with my wings outreached when the tin suddenly stirred, and I whispered a prayer and a fuck for bad luck.

It rose up like a possessed child caught on a pulley system, slowly and surely, orienting itself in some way I inferred to be facing front. At first, it just stayed there, until I decided to resume my attempts at containment. It then slowly started circling me, occasionally scattering dust from the sides of the chamber and freakin me the hell out. So, I did what I could at the time to try and stop it: throw some ash at it, because pies taste terrible when they're covered in ashes. I thought it was worth a shot, and soon the burnt wood remains volleyed something surrounding the tin and dessert, a vaguely fishlike form about the size of a man lengthwise appearing from the void. Well, I would say it was vaguely fishlike, but I saw Jaws, and I knew what the fuck a shark looked like. It was a shark, and there was a pie in it, and I didn't want to be in a room with a fucking flying shark. So, I grabbed an outcropping pipe near the furnace mouth and started to climb out.

I was getting the fuck out of there like a tree when I stepped on the stupid pipe and I slipped off, falling to the side and making me all dirty and shit. Whatever, I reached for it again, but the furnace seemed to disagree with me. The rungs decided they had enough

shit, and their rusty smug body crumbled at my second attempt, and things started getting uncomfortably warm in there. Not the sexy kind, I wasn't planning on getting it on with a shark as much as my goose side wanted it, but the temperature kind. Flames started to lick the rim of the chamber, and I was trapped in with the dumb fish.

Note to self: Maybe omit some of this

This was it. Goose versus shark, bird versus pastry; I dashed towards the blur of dust, but my leg was caught quick by an invisible assailant. "Fuck, more?" I thought, quickly tripping and finding myself being dragged to the flames. Struggling, I kicked up another clod of dust with my wing, and I immediately regretted it. The thing was revealed further, more terrifying than I initially anticipated; it was, indeed, a shark in form, but in lieu of fins it had what appeared to be tentacles. With rope-like-appendages tethering me down, I decided to calmly assess my options. "WELL FUCK ME NOPE NOPE NOPE!" I yelled aloud, but this did not deter the beast.

> In fact, it obliged.

But I managed to shake my leg free after 3 hours (this I knew because I was at least some part rooster), and I kicked the abomination straight in the cherries. It's body understandably collapsed, slowly gliding into the wall like a remote control airplane that had the controller shotgunned and immolated. It crashed into the flames, and then all was silent… except for the flames roasting the creature. I had… lived. Even if it wasn't climactic, I commissioned, and subsequently decommissioned, my first skip. But I wasn't satisfied, oh no.

I had came there for a job, and I planned to leave with a trophy of said job. Plunging my wing into the creature's burning corpse, I felt for the pie, and quickly retrieved it. I blinked. The next moment, all that was left was a tin. I was terrified, and thought I had a hint of cherry on my tongue. Then, I blinked once again.

There was something on the bottom of the tin. Wiping away some of the jelly I was shocked to discover an aged and wet picture of Alto Clef; what the hell did he have to do with this? I licked yet more; the corpse of a whale… no, of a shark… became clearer- I searched my

memory for something that would link the two. Synapses burst, neuroms nyoomed, and it dawned on me: It was SCP-682, something my team had dealt with in the past. I was horrified; I dropped the tin, and then picked it up again. There was yet one last bit of jelly in the tin; grimacing at the ash now on it, I licked the tin clean. I dropped the tin one final time.

It read, "Good luck, son!"

But there just wasn't time to think about pies or shark/human mating, nor for shedding a tear for my lost lover; I needed to *get the fuck out of there because everything was on fire.* I had just the idea, however.

Taking what remained of Alto Clef Jr., I proceeded to fling it into the wall; it bounced off, and I took to action. Flapping as hard as I could to overcome my sheer mass (mostly muscles of course), I quickly rose to the same altitude of the tin. Triangulating my target, I kicked the tin as hard as I could, and glided to the rim of the furnace with the feeble upper weight. I was home free, if I could climb up. But, fuck, no hands. I started to slip. This was it. I embraced the ashy fate that I was entitled to, and let go, and my vision went dark amongst the fire and the flames and the coke.

No… No, it couldn't end like this. Not like this. I had so much to live for, so many people supporting me. Like… Fuck. Okay, the only being who really cared about me I ended up eating, so I had to use the energy their body gave me at the least. I got up; the ashes collapsed from my body, and I was subsequently lit on fire. In hindsight, the symbolism was painfully clear: I was a phoenix, born to rise again from the ashes of my failure. In the moment, the symbolism was painfully clear: I was fucking burning alive.

So I flapped my damn fucking head off like every good bird should. I reached the lip of the furnace; then the entry; finally, I reached solid ground. I had made it. And then a gigantic clockwork arm grabbed me and tore me from where I was, still aflame. I recoiled, but was suddenly hit by a wash of saltwater. I was no longer goddamn on fire! But, as a side effect, I couldn't breathe, as the shit got in my gasmask. And I looked up at my savior; there, holding a clockwork arm in his hands, was Commander.

I was reduced to tears. "C-commander? Oh my god, I'm alive! Oh Jesus fucking CHRIST I'M ALIVE! I FUCKING DID IT, I KICKED AN ANOMALOUS ASS AND LIVED TO TELL THE TALE!" I was screaming this when my compatriot let go of me, and let me crumble to the floor. "You've passed. Welcome to MTF Sigma-1.618, pride of the Shark Punching Center, the premier task force for giving sharks their just deserts."

ALTO CLEF JR.: FINS OF THE FATHER - FIN

Amnestic

I.

The President of the United States stood and
waited to be shot dead
the crowd shifting like the desert sand
not a woman or a man
said

The President of the United States spoke for
the people and their friends
and they stood at the podium for
they had to get to the core
and

The President of the United States stares
still alive their eyes dead
of the media men there were scares
and the wind ruffles their hairs
when

II.

the day after i watched it on TV,
the attempt and subsequent failure
i went to bed with uneasy thoughts
in my first dream i was standing on a hill with the sky blue as it ever
was and the grass a brilliant hue
there are mountains in the far distance
and theres two men on the hill
one strikes with a rock
one dies
one flees
in my next dream theres another man similar to the two but he's by a
stream in a misty forest
he is dressed very simply, in loose white robes

he bleeds out slowly
as the armies of god approach, of all faiths
but he is true

III.

I went into work to begin the project.
Things sure aren't what they used to be around here.
I attend my post
I pour my coffee
I press the button
She screams
I attend my post
I pour my coffee
I press the button
She howls for the pain to cease
I attend my post
I pour my coffee
I press the button
She begs for death
I believe, he says, the experimentation is complete.
Please apply amnestic now.

Not long after that I take a break.
I gently walk through the grounds
We're by these mountains, rising tall and far into the sky
And they are speckled with these autumn trees bright as salamanders
And it's evening so the moon's just starting to rise over the horizon.
The soft violin concerto of the crickets soars like an eagle over the grass
Rising to that rising moon in symphonies from the heavens.

I could build a cabin here, I think
I could build a cabin.

IV.

And I was but there too when I saw the Lonely Wanderer stumble in.
And the people did rejoice, for he brought wondrous new gifts down upon them.

But old Shem.
He did not rejoice
"I reject the Lonely Wanderer and his heretic teachings
They are not the way of the Lord"

And the Lonely Wanderer whipped the crowd into a furious frenzy
Sending them to rain blows down upon Shem.
"He does not believe in my teachings
He is a false prophet and must die"

The people experienced a good harvest for forty days and nights
Until the Lonely Wanderer began his trek back to the north
To the shining lands of Charity
From whence he came

And the people were happy.

V.

Please state your name for the record.

SCP-XXXX-20.

Now
Why did you kill those farmers?

Of course not!
There weren't any of the Ubula left
After the village was attacked by Mokèlé-mbèmbé.
I still regret not being able to bag that monster
When I had the chance.
It is a persistently elusive creature…

Interesting.
Well, you are obviously not on the moon.
You are in a facility operated by the Psychiatric Crisis Intervention Foundation.
It appears you have experienced a major delusional episode.
What do you remember from last night?

You know, there are some people out there who believe that,
If we wish something didn't happen hard enough

It really didn’t happen.

Is there no one else there?

Many species of ant will
Accept other ants of the same species
Into their colonies
Even ones from the outside.

I have one last question for you today.
You mentioned the fortress in the background briefly
But could you elaborate more about it?

They were
disgusting…

VI.

I've been thinking about stories a lot recently.
They've been on my mind
And I've been noticing recently
Many of my own kind.

Ways that things differ
They weren't there before
Thirteen men huddle for warmth
As darkness turns to war.

VII.

SCP FOUNDATION AMNESTIC USE GUIDE

CLASSIFIED

The following revision to
this document (version 7.8)
was approved by the
Ethics Committee on 07/21/2013 for
use by personnel at Research Site-45

Disclaimer: This is NOT to be used as a training manual. Training manuals are given during the actual classes. To request training, please send an official request to your immediate supervisor. Take note that this is a site specific document, please refer to your on-site protocols regarding amnestic use.

The purpose of this document is to provide Foundation personnel with a quick reference guide as to the usage, effects, and protocol regarding amnestics. An amnestic is an amnesia-inducing agent that can take many different forms. For the purposes of the Foundation, it is mainly used in suppressing sensitive information by expunging

intangible memories. In most cases, they are applied post-incident.

The use of amnestics is decided on a case by case basis unless the authority of higher clearance levels is invoked as explained in the following pages. Amnestics are considered one of the most powerful tools in use by the Foundation. Great care and proper training is mandatory in the handling and application of amnestics in an appropriate manner.

The abuse of amnestics is strictly prohibited and will result in disciplinary action, demotion, or both. In all cases, the Ethics Committee has the final word on approval and decisions regarding amnestic use and misuse respectively.

If you would like more information or to report suspected amnestic abuse, please use the online submission form below. All submissions will be sent to the Ethics Committee Amnestic Review Board.

[OPEN SUBMISSION FORM]

Amnestic Inquiry/Incident Submission Form

CLASS - A

Visual Code: Single Black Stripe

Clearance Use: Trained Level-1 and Above

Delivery Methods: Aerosol

Effectiveness: 6 - 12hrs

Usage Protocols: Approved for General Field Use

Side Effects: Sedation, Headaches, Nausea

Detailed Description: Gaseous Class-A is the most commonly used amnestic in the field. The main benefit when using Class-A is that it can be administered to not only one, but many individuals. In some documented cases, Class-A has been used on entire populations with the aid of aerial application. Other applications also include 40mm cartridges that can be launched to deliver Class-A into an enclosed area or room, as well as small handheld aerosol sprayers for single use.

Because of its chemical composition, accidental overdose is extremely unlikely with minimal training on Class-A applications. This safety feature allows Class-A to be used liberally as an inhalant. It is also convenient in use as it requires little to no follow-up on affected individuals, as it has a 98.7% success rate. Class-A is ideal for use by field agents, rapid response teams, and MTF groups.

The only concern when using Class-A is accidental self-application. Personnel trained in the use of Class-A are instructed in the use of application devices as well as environmental conditions that may cause an incident. It is recommended that at least one other Foundation employee be present during the application of Class-A as to facilitate the continuation of duties in case of accidental self-application by a user.

CLASS - B

Visual Code: Double Aqua Stripe

Clearance Use: Trained Level-2 and Above

Delivery Methods: Oral, Injection

Effectiveness: 20 - 72hrs

Usage Protocols: Approved for General Field Use

Side Effects: Sedation, Prolonged Paresthesia, Migraines, Blurred

Vision

Detailed Description: Chemically, there is little difference between Class-A and Class-B. The main difference is the application; Class-A is inhaled, whereas Class-B is either ingested or injected directly into the bloodstream. Used in this fashion, Class-A is allowed to have a larger effect on the body than it would normally have. Class-B commonly comes in the form of dissolving tablets or liquid.

The most common delivery method is by dissolving Class-B tablets into water and allowing the individual to ingest it. Use of Class-B is also commonly employed in ballistic syringes and launched via compressed gas. Class-B is just as safe to use as Class-A, making it ideal for use in many departments. Class-B also has a record of far fewer accidental self-application incidents than Class-A, due in part to its delivery and storage, allowing for a single user to administer without the presence of additional staff.

CLASS - C

Visual Code: Triple Bronze Stripe

Clearance Use: Level-3 Authorization and Above

Delivery Methods: Injection

Effectiveness: 4 - 9 Days

Usage Protocols: General Use for Post-Interrogations/Detainment at a Foundation Controlled Site

Side Effects: Sedation, Slight Paralysis (Medical Attention Required)

Detailed Description: Unlike Class-A and Class-B, Class-C is a much more potent variant. As such, the after effects and risk inherent to the application of Class-C requires the aid of Foundation medical personnel. Persons must have medical training to

administer Class-C via syringe directly into the bloodstream. Class-C is mainly employed to detained individuals so that Class-C can be used in a controlled setting. Afterwards, detainees may be released only after being cleared by medical staff.

Class-C is not approved for general field use and may only be requested by investigators, interrogators, and any other Level-3 approved usage. Class-C has a 92.8% success rate, and may require follow-up examinations or doses. Personnel are prohibited from using Class-C on a single individual more than four times.

CLASS - D

Visual Code: Checkered Olive Band

Clearance Use: Requires at Least Two Level-3 Personnel Authorization and Supervision to be Administered

Delivery Methods: Injection (2 Stage Dose Through IV)

Effectiveness: +3 Weeks

Usage Protocols: To be Used to Counter Effects of Anomalous Psychoses and/or Memetic Incursions

Side Effects: Sedation, Paralysis (Post-Incident Rehabilitation Required), Possible Brain Damage

Detailed Description: Class-D once held a lower designation until it was superseded and replaced with a more appropriate amnestic (see Class-C) for use on detainees. Before that, Class-D was employed regularly with limited success in individuals as many adverse-effects of the brain after application were found to be inadmissible by the Ethics Committee. Thus, Class-D was reviewed and found to be more appropriately used in cases where brain damage or a major chronic chemical imbalance was already prevalent in the individual.

These cases usually involve anomalous mental effects and/or memetic incursions of the mind. Because the effects of memetics can be largely unknown, the use of a potent and riskier amnestic was approved as an option as to counter/control the effects. Class-D can only be employed by medical staff in a controlled setting. Level-3 supervision is required as to facilitate the protection of medical staff from the patient if needed.

CLASS - E

Visual Code: Vertical Salmon Bar

Clearance Use: Level-4 Request Pending Case Decision by the Ethics Committee

Delivery Methods: Injection (Multiple Stage Doses Through IV)

Effectiveness: Complete Recall Expungement

Usage Protocols: In Situations Where the Individual's Identity is Deemed to be a Threat.

Side Effects: Sedation, Long-term Paralysis, Possible Brain Damage or Catatonic Symptoms (Post-Incident Rehabilitation Required)

Detailed Description: Class-E can only be given by medical staff in a controlled setting after a formal request has been submitted by Level-4 staff and approved by the Ethics Committee. Upon administration, medical staff will be required to oversee the individual during recovery. Only 0.02% of individuals entered a permanent vegetative state after being administered Class-E. In these cases, the individual will be remitted to an appropriate civilian hospital indefinitely.

[LEVEL-4 ACCESS ONLY]

Additional Details: Class-E is not an amnestic. It is

intentionally designed to put the individual into a drug induced coma permanently. It is to be used in cases where termination of an individual is not possible or preferable. Foundation staff of Level-3 or lower are not permitted to know the actual purpose of Class-E.

For all intents and purposes, Class-E rehabilitation is to be interpreted as entirely possible and any observed adverse effects are to be explained as being the rare exception rather than the desired outcome. Persons administering Class-E may only do so once during their employment as to prevent suspicion.

CLASS - F

Visual Code: Solid Silver Band

Clearance Use: Level-4 Authorization (Human Trial Testing)

Delivery Methods: Injection (Multiple Stage Doses Used in Conjunction with Other Psychotropics), Visual/Audio Stimuli, Electroconvulsive Therapy

Effectiveness: Memory Recall Expungement and Identity Reconditioning

Usage Protocols: Experimental Use Only Pending Formal Review

Side Effects: Sedation, Short-term Paralysis, Increased Susceptibility to Visual/Audio Stimuli

Detailed Description: Class-F is currently in Alpha stages of testing. All data on human trials are currently under review by the Ethics Committee. In all human trials, 83.9% succeeded in complete retention of their respective reconditioned identities. The entire process approximately takes 5 days of continuous conditioning and therapy to produce the desired effect.

Class-F can only be administered under the direction of psychology and medical staff in a controlled and completely isolated setting. Class-F is administered with a combination of other psychotropics to allow the individual to accept external input for reconditioning with limited subconscious resistance. External visual and audio stimuli will need to be personalized based on the individual's original psyche and their resulting fabricated identity for maximum probability of success. Coupled with the additional aid of electroconvulsive therapy, Class-F is very effective in identity reconditioning.

Afterward, individuals may be released into the general population under minimal observation. In regards to specific SCPs, Class-F has been discussed as a passive and safer alternative to physical containment.

[O5 ACCESS ONLY]

CLASSIFIED: ENNUI PROTOCOL

Visual Code: Puce Icon

Clearance Use: Unanimous Decision by O5 Council

Delivery Methods: Unknown

Effectiveness: Unknown

Usage Protocols: For Emergency Use Only

Side Effects: Unknown

Detailed Description:

> *To Whom it May Concern,*
>
> *If you are reading this, then something horrible*

has happened and despite your best efforts, this is your last desperate option. To be honest, there is no way to know what will happen. Whomever in their infinite wisdom made this, hastily scribbled the instructions on a notepad in the O5 office so very long ago.

These instructions for the so-called Ennui Protocol explain the necessity of a unanimous decision by this council, a long code consisting of all O5 private employee numbers in reverse order typed into our work terminal, and that it should be referenced somewhere so we can find it again. This way we don't forget about it in situations like this. We assume it affects everyone in some fashion… we hope.

Don't bother looking into it. Whatever the actual device or agent or cognitohazard or memetic phrase or some other abstract thing is, it's hidden very well somewhere in the bowels of Research Site-45 and the people who put it there are either dead or have long since forgotten about it. The truly bewildering thing is we don't even know how many times we've used the Ennui Protocol before this. We have to relearn it every time it seems. Even as I am writing this, we are preparing to invoke it off-site. So I am attempting to convey all the little clues left here and there and consolidate it in this handwritten note for either my future self or other O5 council members.

Apparently, there are things that even us O5 hide from ourselves. The only thing we know is that this has worked before. Good luck and God's speed.

Secure. Contain. Protect.

-O5

An Alchemist Goes To War

JAN 1 2018 01:17:33 AM UTC, Toronto, Canada

Ruslav Diaghilev took a deep breath, and closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of the universe around him. That, and the chatter of the radios on his companions vests. The eight members of his personal Departmental MTF sat in the back of a standard Foundation transport.

“Sir, are you sure about this?” Agent DuMourne said. “I have no objections to storming this place, but I’d rather not put you in danger.” Agent DuMourne lifted his rifle, checking it for the fifth time, since they left the site.

“I am sure. Do not worry about me, Agent. I am able to handle myself,” Ruslav said, with a quiet smile.

Agent DuMourne squinted his eyes for a moment, before shaking his head, and looking at the other members of the assembled Mobile Task Force. “Alright then. Oathkeepers, sound off ready status.”

Around the transport vehicle, murmured assent was given, one by one. The various clacking of military doodads was their constant companion as the men and women in the Mobile Task Force readied themselves for combat.

Ruslav adjusted his own gear, hand slipping over the pouches and pockets of his vest. Gone were the flowing bottle green robes of Elder Mastery, replaced instead by sensible mottled grey fatigues.

“You requested this from the armory, right?” Agent DuMourne said, offering a semi-automatic pistol to Ruslav. The captain looked hesitant to be handing the weapon to Ruslav, but relinquished it to his hands.

“*Da*, thank you captain. I didn’t have time to sign out a weapon

myself.” Ruslav ejected the magazine, checking for ammunition, before retracting the slide a quarter inch to check for a round. He nodded at the empty chamber, and racked the slide, chambering a round, placing the semi automatic in the holster at his hip. “Spare magazines?”

Agent DuMourne handed over the three spare magazines that Ruslav had requested, which dissapeared into the pouches on his belt. “We’re two klicks out. Let’s go over the plan one more time,” Agent DuMourne said, leaning forward over the central console. Displayed on the touch screen was a three dimensional map of 2732 Maple Garden Way, the secondary headquarters of Ledenoff Technologies.

“According to intel, this is where the assholes who made **3622** are holed up. The Director requested we accompany him on a little sight-seeing. Our orders are to cover the Director as he ascends to the 13th floor, and disables any potential threats from his department. Assuming everything is clear, we storm the 13th floor together, and neutralize the threat.” Agent DuMourne tapped on the loading dock, and the image zoomed in. “This is our only viable entrance. Amnestics are approved if necessary, but you’re all aware of the level this is restricted to. Director, what kind of threats are we facing, exactly?”

Ruslav leaned forward, and gestured, invoking the Fulminous aether to manipulate the image slightly. He gestured to the entrances around the stairs, “If this is who I think it is, there will be wards of water and earth here, and here.” Ruslav gestured to the windows of the thirteenth floor. “I suggest you do not look out the windows once we arrive on the floor. They are most likely warded as well.”

A knock came from the driver’s cabin, “One minute.”

Ruslav nodded, and drew forth the crozier to his right hand. “If you encounter anything you feel is anomalous, do not hesitate to call me. Most likely, there are alchemic constructs within the building. I would…not suggest fighting them. Bullets may slow them down, if they are corporeal. Aim center mass.”

The transport van pulled to a hard stop, and the back door opened

with a jolt. Agent DuMourne flipped the tablet off, and pulled the balaclava up and over his mouth, gesturing. The rearmost two agents slid into the darkness surrounding the office building, sweeping the area, and gesturing to the rest of the team.

Agent DuMourne, Ruslav, and the others disembarked into a loose formation, striding with confidence towards the door, weapons ready but not leveled. Ruslav drew the pistol from his left hip with a practiced motion, and checked the safety, approaching the rear service entrance.

Agent DuMourne gestured at the nearest Agent, who knelt in front of the door, fitting a small device up against the lock of the service door. A few moments later, a soft click permitted them into the building.

Overhead lighting bathed the lobby in a soft yellow glow. The floors were a neutral white linoleum, the walls covered in marble-patterned green stone. The lights were low, the building mostly shut down for the night, except for a few people burning the midnight oil.

Two security guards sat at the nearby desk, looking bored. Neither of them had noticed the group of heavily armed agents slide in the back entrance, and Agent DuMourne held a raised fist.

With practiced ease, the MTF slid to their knees, and Ruslav heard Agent DuMourne's voice in his earpiece, "Your call Director. What do we do?" His voice was a barely-perceptible growl picked up from his throat mic.

Ruslav took two steps forward, and gestured with his right hand, holding his crozier. The aequeous and aeronous aethers swirled around the two guards, lulling them to an easy, and deep sleep. "We let them get a good night's rest. My knees are not what they were. Elevators?"

Suppressed chuckles emanated from the gathered agents, as Agent DuMourne took the lead, fanning the men and women of the task force out over the lobby. Ruslav jabbed the up button with the end of his crozier, humming quietly to himself.

“So, what exactly are we expecting up there?“ Agent DuMourne said, rechecking the various bits of havoc strapped to his frame.

“I do not know. Probably something completely and needlessly dramatic. That’s how these things always seem to go,” Ruslav said, smiling slightly as the dull chime of the elevator car announced its arrival.

The agents shuffled into the car, two members staying on the ground level to cover their exit. Ruslav jabbed the button marked 13, and the soft Muzak of the elevator encompassed them.

A tense few seconds passed, before the door chimed again at the 13th floor, opening to reveal a solid steel security door, directly in front of the elevator shaft. The doors to the elevator made a quiet grinding noise, and stuck open.

Ruslav raised an eyebrow, as Agent DuMourne reached out to probe at the door in front of them.

“I’m not sure why this is here, but it doesn’t seem anomalous. Is this your area, director?” Agent DuMourne asked politely, stepping back.

Ruslav stepped up to the door, and extended his senses, sensing nothing beyond the usual Ferrous aether escaping the metal surface. “No, but I can help either way. Stand back please?”

The agents quickly pressed themselves against the back of the elevator, as Ruslav took a breath. His hands circled up and down, until he ended with a quick rushing motion, dragging both the Aeronous and Igneous aethers with him, combining sharply on the other side of the door, causing a heavy backdraft, sucking the door out with his shoulder charge.

The heavy metal door careened into the far wall, neatly cleaving the waiting Terronous Aetherial construct in half. The heavy stone body of the entity fell in half with a heavy thud on the carpeted floor. Ruslav blinked a few times, and laughed quietly to himself, “Well, that’s convenient I suppose. Agent DuMourne, you and one with me. The rest sweep.” The team stepped forward into the green and grey marble elevator portico.

Agent DuMourne nodded, and split the team up, flanking the Director along with two other agents, as they approached the heavy glass doors to the office. Stenciled into the glass was the logo of the company, and the words ‘Caveat Alchemitos’ hastily scrawled in sharpie. Agent DuMourne pointed at the writing, “Is that latin?”

“Beware Alchemists. Like I said, needlessly dramatic,” Ruslav said, placing his hands on the door, which practically reverberated with the aethers contained within them. “Illusion….misdirection…” He turned his head, and grimaced. “I believe I know who is here. On the other side of this door will be several jiangshi, I would imagine. Have you been briefed on them?”

Agent DuMourne shook his head, “Jianshi? Cliffs notes.”

Ruslav rolled his hand, “Chinese vampire. Well….zombie might be more accurate. They hop to move around. Do not let them touch you, bullets do not work very well, unless you completely destroy them, or shoot their brain. If you have them, I would suggest shotguns, or grenades. I believe at least one will be an alchemist.”

“Not the strangest thing I’ve ever had to deal with I suppose. How do we do this? Can we just walk in?” Agent DuMourne activated his microphone, and radioed to the other members of the team. Two of them trotted back over, and exchanged weapons with Agent DuMourne and the other, swapping the large caliber rifles with semi automatic shotguns.

Ruslav shook his head, and laid his hands on the door, “A moment. I will deactivate his wards. As soon as I do, he will know we are here. Be ready.” Ruslav concentrated, and pressed his senses deep into the glass, feeling the swirling and somehow sickly aethers trapped inside.

If the flows could make noise, these would be screaming, as he gently tugged on the loose flows, undoing the ward. After several moments, he’d loosened it enough for them to be nothing more than a warning, and he stepped back. “Ready?”

Agent DuMourne nodded, “Ready.”

Ruslav pushed both hands out with a swift draw of the aethers of air, water, and fire. A microscopic layer of ice formed inside the glass, immediately followed by a flash of fire, causing the glass to shatter spectacularly, directed downwards and back by a gust of wind, blowing the shards of glass into the office.

Ruslav gestured forward, and the four Foundation members crossed the threshold.

The moment they crossed the doorway, everything changed. The air grew thicker in an instant, and the sky visible behind the windows changed from a black cityscape to a red and silver mass of stars and torchlight. In the distance buildings teemed with beings from all over the universe, as Ruslav's senses immediately told him where they were.

The office building itself hadn't changed, the desks in front of him still festooned with post-its, monitors, computer equipment. Except for the alien skies and change of dimension, it was the same as it was before.

"Alagadda. This…is worse than I expected." Ruslav slipped the handle of his crozier back into his belt, and took a step forward, his handgun in both hands, as the task force members tenatively followed him.

"What are you talking about, Director?" Agent DuMourne said, his eyes widened slightly by the change of scenery, and his body language tense.

"We are no longer on Earth, and I'm not sure that—" Ruslav was cut off by a shrieking form hopping from behind a desk, hands outstretched yellowed fingernails extended towards his face.

In the blink of an eye, Ruslav's hands blurred up, sending two rounds through the creature's chest, putting a third through its head, as he stepped forward, panting slightly. "*Bozhe Moi*. That certainly woke me up a little. Everyone alright?"

Agent DuMourne stood slack jawed at the reaction speed of the

Director, checking the body for movement before gesturing one of the agents to cover their exit. “I have to admit, I didn't expect you to use the gun, over alchemy.”

Ruslav grinned, and snapped his fingers, setting the body of the jiangshi at their feet aflame. “Six of one, half a dozen of another. Whatever works.” Ruslav strode into the office, gun raised. “Cover my back, please.”

The agents and Ruslav cautiously walked forward, turning the corner to the main floor of the office. The lead agent dropped to one knee, and let out a roar of a blast from her shotgun, as another of the jiangshi leaped towards her face. She dropped prone as the creature continued its vector, now dead, and landed behind her.

They repeated much of the same, encountering two more jiangshi as they approached the wood paneled door leading to an office, at the back of the cubicles. “I believe, this is my department, ladies and gentlemen. Behind that door is our target. Please cover my back while I inquire.” Ruslav said, placing the handgun back in his holster, drawing the crozier once more.

Agent DuMourne nodded, and took up position near the door, as Ruslav walked up, placing both hands on the door, and pushing them open with just his own strength.

The doors opened smoothly, to reveal an elderly chinese man sitting behind a desk, his hands twitching slightly, mostly extended in front of him. Behind his eyes were the weight of eons, as his face curved into a snarl of recognition. “Diaghilev. I should have known you would never be satisfied with simply ruining my existence forever.”

Ruslav sighed heavily, and fixed his heavy lidded gaze upon the withered half-jiangshi in front of him, “Zhang Guolao. I did not expect to find you here, but your misdirection was unmistakable. What brings you here, ghost?”

The ancient creature in front of him rose, the joints of his elbows and knees cracking as he got to his feet, “Freedom. The first greedy peasant who dug up my tomb put the ring on.” On Guolao’s left hand, a deep green jade ring glimmered under the lights. “From

there, it was only a few weeks before I wrested control enough from He Qinshi to pull enough energy together to create a portal to Alagadda."

Ruslav nodded slightly, "So far, all of this makes sense. You get free, and immediately do the most obvious and cowardly thing, run to Alagadda. Did you immediately request the Scarlet King's aid? Offer him power, an agent, perhaps an introduction to the Leviathan?" Ruslav's voice grew progressively harsher as memories of the past surfaced in his mind.

Zhang Guolao's dry throat rasped with some horrid approximation of laughter. "My master will no doubt be overjoyed when I return to earth, and present myself at its service once more, but no. An old… mutual acquaintance of ours contacted me once I was here."

Ruslav spun his crozier in a slow vertical circle, the baffled cold iron making quiet whistling noises as it moved. "Well. That confirms what I was suspecting at least. By the way, I sealed your master on the bottom of the ocean almost one hundred years ago. The Leviathan is effectively dead. I'm sure you noticed the lack of aethers flowing through the cosmos."

Guolao froze, his eyes narrowing, as the baleful jade fire within the pupils guttered to a spark. "You are lying."

Ruslav shrugged, and spun his crozier in a circle again. "Come find out. You cannot exactly feel the flows from here, I would imagine. Even sealed, the Scarlet King is putting off enough aether to blind anyone other than an Elder. In fact, I'd be surprised if you could even form a portal at this point. Not that you were ever a particularly gifted alchemist, Zhang. Relying more on your reputation and skills with herbs than anything else."

Guolao growled, and his fingers moved with involuntary spasms. "I will kill you for this, return to earth, and destroy whatever remains of the so-called 'college'," Guolao said, gathering the aethers around him.

Ruslav's eyes hardened, his mouth contorting into a tight line, "There is no college, Guolao. Your schemes saw to that. I am here

to help you, regardless of that." Ruslav raised his crozier, and pointed the heavy head at the wizened jiangshi in front of him. "I made a mistake in the past. What we did to you was…wrong. But now you need to come with me, for containment."

Guolao's face contorted, as the spirit of He Qinshi took over his body, flying through the air towards Ruslav. The director contorted his body, letting the ancient half vampire fly past him, swinging the heavy metal of his crozier down on the creature's back, eliciting a shriek of pain. As he struck, the stored fulminous aether inside the heavy mace tore its way free, streaking through Guolao's body, and leaving it smoldering on the floor in a shivering heap.

"Well, I suppose we could do that instead." Ruslav said, as the two task force members trained their guns on the prone form of the maleficent alchemist. Agent DuMourne gestured, and the other agent closed in, prodding the body with the toe of her boot.

Guolao twisted like a serpent, drawing the agent in, and pinning her against a desk, eliciting a shriek of protest from the trapped agent. He screamed aloud in middle chinese, as He Qinshi forced him to draw out the life force of the MTF member in his grasp.

Ruslav strode forward, and drew together the aeronous aether, delivering a hard kick into the ribs of the agent, sending her careening down the hall in a gust of wind. Qinshi hopped after her for one preternaturally quick hop, before turning, and streaking towards Agent DuMourne.

A roar of chemical fire streaked out of Agent DuMourne's shotgun, as the buckshot tore into the flying form of Zhang Guolao. Alchemy and supernaturally strong muscles meant little in the face of physics, and the lightweight alchemist hit the ground hard, pouring blood from a ruined knee. He tried to rise to his feet, putting his weight on his good knee, as he rounded on Agent DuMourne who was chambering the next round.

Ruslav took two bounding steps, and gathered together every flow he could. The aethers of fire, air, water, earth, metal and electricity came willing to his call. He reached inward to the luminous spirit that dwelled inside him, and called for aid, *Master Al-Hayyan. Help me.* A

quiet voice spoke back, in an amused lilt, *Always.*

The aethers of space, and time, gravity and magnetism came to their call, drawing the energies of the fabric of the universe together. A miniature sun formed in the hands of the furious director of the Foundation's Alchemy Department, as he slammed his hands together in a calamitous detonation. Guolao's head, shoulders, and upper body simply drifted away, the very forces holding him together drawn into the microtear in reality that Ruslav had formed. Even sound itself couldn't escape the tear, and everything in the office went silent for several moments.

Agent DuMourne kept his gun level, watching Ruslav pant in the aftermath of the rapid combat. "Swathi, are you alright? Director, status?"

Ruslav nodded, swallowing hard, as he caught his breath, "I am fine. Do you have a containment box?" He reached out a hand, picking up his discarded crozier.

Agent DuMourne slapped a collapsible cube into Ruslav's hand from the pack on his belt. He gingerly folded it around his fingers, and drew the jade ring off of Guolao's finger, snapping the box closed, with an electronic hiss of vacuum. A quiet *woosh* sound could be heard, as chemically inert foam filled the interior. The containment foam would dissolve on contact with the chemicals back at the lab. Ruslav snatched the small wodden box hanging from a string on the corpses belt, and wound the snapped thread through the small ring in one corner of the cube. He handed the device to Agent DuMourne, who clipped the entire assembly to the back of his belt, snugging it tight with a bit of nylon webbing.

"Let's go, Director. We've already got at least one agent down. I'd rather not stick around." Agent DuMourne stalked forward to the prone form of his team member, checking for a pulse, and letting out a sigh of relief. "Scratch that. One agent injured. Let's go."

Ruslav stepped forward, and nodded, pulling a heavy cylinder off his belt, and handing it to Agent DuMourne. "We shouldn't leave this place intact."

Agent DuMourne nodded, slipping the tiny explosive disks out of the sleeve, and tossing them to the corners of the office. He lifted the downed agent to one shoulder, and spoke quickly into his radio. A third agent came jogging up the center aisle, and took the remaining charges, distributing them without preamble.

They made their way back to the entrance, and Ruslav held up a hand, “A moment.” He moved his hands in a complicated weaving pattern, his fingertips moving as if making a cat’s cradle. His eyes closed, and he drew in the fulminous aethers collected in the electronics around him. He took in a breath, the flows nearly overwhelming him as he gathered together a storm in and around himself. His eyes flew open, and forked lightning manifested from the drawn aethers a few inches above his hands. He punched his right arm forward, hurling forked lightning into the office, frying all of the servers and computers in the office. The fulminous aether greedily leaped from machine to machine, as Ruslav’s will and mastery guided the flows.

Ruslav nodded, and turned to the agents who stood wide eyed at the display of alchemic might. “As I said, Agent. Whatever works. We should go.”

Agent DuMourne snapped out of his trance, and nodded, flicking the switch on the top of the cylinder until the display said “0:15”. He turned the top a full 360 degrees, as the safety seal clicked. He tossed the device forward, and waved them back through the doors, “Move people, let’s go.”

The three Foundation personnel slipped back through the portal to Earth. The five of them ran down the hallway, sprinting for the far side of the building.

Agent DuMourne waved at his people in the hallway, one bleeding from a wound on his arm. Several stony bodies had joined the first, and the other agent was nowhere to be found. “Move! Sliders going off in Ten!”

The agent broke into a limping run, as he cleared the far side and took shelter behind the columns leading to a side corridor. The rest of the agents ducked around the corner, and huddled together. The

agents ducked and covered, as Ruslav stood, condensing the aethers around the gathered personnel in a near impenetrable shield of air, and gravity.

Several seconds ticked by, and the building was rocked by a shockwave as the tiny ultra-compact plastic explosives detonated on the far side of the portal. The explosion raced along the office towards the assembled team. The moment it touched the threshold the portal collapsed leaving nothing but a smoking set of shattered glass doors leading to an empty and unoccupied office space.

Ruslav dropped the shield, and relaxed, cocking his head to one side. “Well. Anticlimactic, but I’ll take it. Captain, if you could radio our exit?” Ruslav walked over to the panel and clicked the elevator call button.

Agent DuMourne blinked a few times, and shook his head, radioing to the team downstairs to prepare for extraction. “Director, one question?”

Ruslav nodded, “Mmmm? What is it?”

Agent DuMourne thumbed back at the assembled agents, “That shield could have protected us, why did we break for cover?”

Ruslav shrugged, and smiled slightly, “Oh, it wouldn’t have. We would probably have been smeared to paste.”

Agent DuMourne’s mouth fell open, and he leaned in, “Then why the hell did you even put up the shield to begin with?”

Ruslav walked past Agent DuMourne and into the elevator, waving for him and the team to get in, “It made you feel better, yes?”

Captain Agent DuMourne stared for a moment, unsure if he should be angry or amused. *Alchemists are weird.* He thought to himself, as he boarded the elevator, descending towards their extraction vehicle on the street below.

“Tell me again, where you found this thing?” Dr. de la Vega held up the containment cube in the intake wing at Site-72.

“Flea market. I got lucky. Walked past a stall, wearing a thaumic ring. I think I had it on after the mission in Java. Started buzzing like crazy, and I picked it up immediately. “ Agent DuMourne steepled his fingers, and rested his chin on the intertwined digits.

Dr. de la Vega frowned, and placed the cube back down on the table, “And where did the seller claim he got it?”

Agent DuMourne shrugged, “As I said before, he claims his grandfather found it in some tomb in China. He was just hawking it for extra cash. I didn’t ask too many questions, I figured that’s more I&A’s shtick. I slapped it in a cube, and brought it back to the Site. The only thing he told me was ‘don’t wear it’.”

Dr. de la Vega looked Captain Agent DuMourne in the eye, and shook his head. “Fine, fine. We’ll do a proper investigation once we figure out what it is.”

Agent DuMourne nodded, and stood, exiting the intake lab, and heading towards the barracks. He tapped a few buttons on his watch, and made a call. “Director? Yessir. Level 4, as requested. Yessir. Thank you sir.”

…Sometimes, the information we redact has nothing to do with need to know, or protecting the world, or something so grand. Sometimes we’re just covering up the mistakes of the past. Guolao was a mistake. I shouldn’t have let Flamel do that to him and Qinshi. Maybe they were evil, but even evil deserves mercy eventually….

-Excerpt, Personal log of Director Diaghilev, January 2018

« SCP-3622 | An Alchemist Goes To War

An Angel who has Forsaken Sympathy

Stars shine down on the first night. The congregation has gathered outside to sing joyously to the stars, their voices twisting together in acoustic pentamerism. Twenty four joyous bodies sang, young and old together, though one was absent from their number. An angel from the stars had come to make their bodies right, tended his first patient this very night, and so they sang. Gathered around a great fire, their limbs twisted in ecstasy cast about a great tentacled shadow as though the darkness matched their rapturous dance.

> This is the revelation of the Star Surgeon, which the *inward-facing* eye saw, resonant within my void. The forms do not fit inside wordshapes and *MUST NOT* be read if you are growing a soul. Blind is the one who does not speak aloud the words of this prophecy. Fumigant is the one who listens so that his eyes bleed. It is inevitable: It has already happened.

Stars shine down on the second night. Twenty one happy throats matched the happy harmony, and lamented that they had too few arms. No one had entered the church but those that the Angel had beckoned to be cured, and made right. None had left. A beautiful man from the congregation collapsed to his knees as the chorus climaxed, clawing at his throat, screaming that he couldn't feel his smoke duct. Eyes bloodshot, for the worship had never abated, his brothers and sisters drug him near to the church doors - surely the surgeon would fix him next; he had it really bad.

> In the day that the door opened to Yellow and to Red, and to White, and to Black, the Surgeon was made to see the VOID without and with Anguish undertook exile. And he dwelled in the lands of Shalmaneser, son of Ashur-nasir-pal five and five star-lifes. And all the smoke-beacons he there made were 5ive hundred hundred and twenty: and the BLIND IDIOT WORLD COLLAPSED.

> And he dwelled in the lands of Zhōu Dìng Wáng, son of Zhōu Qǐng Wáng. And the stars in the sky numbered 5^{555}.

Stars shine down on the third night. Thick black smoke pours from the building, but there is no fire hot enough to burn those who live IN WITH the stars. Sixteen congregants litter around the fire, their bodies exhausted from hauling wood from the nearby forest; their lungs ached from singing. A young girl, only $5^{1.75}$ years old, leads the next dirge, her voice honey sweet. She laments with cherubic tones as her bleeding fingers compel the wooden guitar to sing. Why was her body all wrong? "Soon, soon, the angel will make me right. Five arms, five minds, and my inward-facing eye will open."

> And he left from the lands of Zhaoxiang, son of Huiwen. And he dwelled among the lands of Ptolemaîos Philádelphos, son of Ptolemaïos Sōtḗr. And no smoke-beacons were left to stand: heretics broke them and killed them. And he dwelled in the lands of Robert, son of Hugh Capet. And the stars in the sky numbered 5^{5555}.

Stars shine down on the fourth night. Starlight and firelight scarcely meet through the billowing smoke. The bonfire burns low, three congregants remain to stoke the flame, their voices hoarse and cracked, eyes straining to remain open as bodies slump, collapsed to the cold ground. The doors had stood open since mid day, and inside, through the billowing smoke they caught glimpses of their brothers and sisters whose bodies had been made right. The grace and beauty of it- pulling their forms along on their five grasping, writhing hands. They no longer had their outward-facing eyes, and their chests had hungry maws, ready to gobble down their deepest desires. Out from the church they crawled, arms stitched into beautiful pentaradial symmetry. Legs, so obviously extraneous, had been cut free and the wounds stitched closed by an expert hand. Pitch black smoke streamed perpetually from the distended mouth on their faces. Hands with grips of iron pulled another inside.

> And he was removed from the lands of François Fillon, son of Michel Fillon, to dwell in the captivity of thirteen kings. And with Anguish he broke his bonds and dwelt among the lands trwoll plr mlgn thei. And he set five and

> twenty smoke beacons from ready kindling. And their smoke occluded him from the eyes of the thirteen kings thereafter. And there he dwelt until the stars in the sky numbered 5^{55555} and he returned to the land of Yellow and of Red and of White and of Black and taught himself all that he knew.

Stars shine down on the fifth night. A black cloud through which the stars can see. **`The doctor`**, with no work remaining for him, left the backwater shanty church. He had thought very little of the place when he arrived, and truly thought little of it after. He found it queer, only, that so many people having such a similar reaction to the Pestilence would willingly quarantine themselves in the wilderness like this.

`<<Part 1`

An Arm and a Leg

Kit lay on his back, staring up at the ever-changing clouds of a British Summer afternoon. Maybe it would rain, later, but right now he couldn't smell it – couldn't sense anything of the weather other than the clouds so far above him.

'I'm looking at the shape of tiredness,' he thought, languidly.

That uneven, rarely repeating pattern of clouds was a herd of tiredness threatening to trample the city.

Well, that would suck. But then again, insomnia for one person alone was the very centre of a suckpool. Despite his dragging weariness and the sploshed bruise across his face – interestingly, itself the colour of tiredness – **Kit had a house on fire, that day.**

As he stood, he absently brushed mown grass from his rumpled clothing. Upon looking around, he was slightly surprised to find that the grassy area had become infested with picnickers – families, couples, friends. The smell of BBQs was tangy in the air.

Kit ignored **squealing children** and parents protesting as he stepped and tripped over picnic blankets, having to make his own pathway out of the chaos because the small section in the middle of the city wasn't really designed for such things as people trying to enjoy the broken summer day.

Once he was through the maze of picnic-havers, he checked the deep pockets of his coat and gently stroked what he found within them. Good. They were still there, waiting.

Stepping into the city proper, Kit took the twisty-turny roads, trying to avoid tourist traffic and the more well-trodden streets. A hidden and barren junction of alleyways and then exhausting climbs (well, for an insomniac, pack-a-day smoker) took him to Muesli Mountain. From

there, he walked through an old graveyard and into an even older park that was overgrown and smelt musty, of damp wood and churned soil.

He took himself off the pathway and walked towards the back of the area, taking a deep breath as he found the correct tree, marked with a nearly indeterminable infinity loop near its base. He used to be self-conscious fulfilling this ritual, but the things rattled mercilessly in his pocket and the sweat on his palms reminded him of his task.

He just had to get in, find his target, and get out. Easy-peasy, lemon-squeezy.

Reminding himself of this, he put his hand on the trunk of the tree and closed his eyes tight. A middle-aged couple walking their dog nearby gaped and then hurried along, muttering about ‘damn stoners’.

Kit let the breeze ruffle through his hair and matched his breathing with the faint life pulse of the tree, once the world was silent enough around him that he could hear it, though it always seemed to be more with his head than with his ears.

The chant, at least, was only in his head for sure.

‘Imagine a market here. Imagine people yelling their wares. Imagine the man who wants preemie pies. Imagine why someone not made of tin may want a heart. Imagine why someone with a brain of their own may want the still-pink brain of a young woman who had killed herself. Imagine how courage may look, feel, and smell, if you could bottle it. Imagine yourself there, and sell them your sacrifice.

I, Kit, willingly wish to visit the Meat Market. I accept my fate and do not hold the Market libel for any maiming, crushing, murdering, dismemberment or defenestration that may happen to my person whilst visiting. I have your sacrifice and I wish for…’

What did he wish for? He could ask for anything. Didn’t mean he would get it, but he could ask. But his outstretched hand was trembling, and he was sweating buckets. The bruise on his face ached with every distant heartbeat.

‘And I wish for Bloom.’

The world went silent around him. No breezes, no birds, no strangers’ footsteps. Then it span and he lost grip on the tree, slamming into the ground which had gone from grass to cobblestone paths. His ribs ached as he struggled to catch his breath whilst waiting out the dizziness.

He put out his hands to lever himself up, and they were nearly trodden on by someone with very big feet that had no toes. The owner of the feet grumbled about ‘outside trash’ and Kit waited until they had moved on before scrambling to his own feet.

Regardless of how many times he had been here before, the change always amazed him. The park was gone, instead replaced with an area with stalls as far as the eye could see, and probably further than that. Manning these stalls – and they were always men, Kit had noticed – were beings that called out their wares. They all spoke in English to him, with a variety of accents, but, from what Kit understood of this place, English was not what everyone else heard.

The clouds in the sky were gone, replaced with a domed roof that seemed to go on and on, carrying the acoustics of the market. Entities jostled for space and for attention, with some stalls serving more as pop-up stores, whilst others were little more than folded tables with a few items spread on them.

Some had banners – some didn’t have as much as black marker on a piece of card. Kit squeezed into a space he could find between ‘Pied Piper's Preemie Pies’ and ‘Bob’s Meat and Two Veg’ whilst he found himself still recovering from the dizzying sensation. A voice nearby called out in an East London accent, identical to his mother’s, causing profound nostalgia and a flinching pain in equal measures.

Those who didn’t know the way to the Market still saw the illusion of the park (or was it the Market that was the illusion?), with Kit’s human body slumped in front of the tree, as if sleeping – or collapsed. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out he had limited time in this place, if only for the fact that some Good Samaritan would eventually rush to his side and try to rouse him. If that happened, he

would be dragged from this place, whether a deal was struck or not.

So, Kit doggedly got to the business of moving towards one of the more unassuming stalls that he knew offered Bloom in exchange for anything of a human, with the quality dipping based on what one had to exchange.

He slipped past ‘Vincent’s (slightly used) Vulvas!’ and ‘Here’s Looking' at You, Kid!’ before reaching his destination, mumbling the occasional ‘excuse me’ and ‘sorry’ to the **variety of creatures** that had followed their own unique rituals to come into this world.

He was glad to find the queue wasn’t really a queue at all – someone stood at the table, with just one very tall bipedal creature with huge, hunched shoulders ahead of him, waiting for the last transaction to finish up. When the being turned around to see what the tiny human behind him was doing, Kit saw they had no face, yet they still managed to grunt, though if it was in greeting or disgust, Kit couldn’t be sure.

When the tall thing reached the front, they took a machete from the pocket of their long, dark coat. No-one seemed shocked or even surprised at the action, not even when the being bent himself down and began to chop at their ankle. Only the noise of the blade slicing flesh, cutting tendons, smashing through bone, was present, rather than the screams of anguish and noises of panic that would be displayed within the world of humans.

Even Kit was becoming somewhat immune to the sight of extreme self-mutilation, although words flashing through his mind such as ‘sinew’ and ‘throbbing gristle’ still offered an element of disgust.

Kit’s own shin ached in sympathy, then he realised the being was literally radiating pain – sharing it out amongst creatures within a certain radius, as some now walked with a slightly uncomfortable limp whilst others shot daggers at the thing, clearly not impressed by their technique at dealing with the pain.

It seemed like a wise idea, really – rather than **absorbing all that pain on ones’ own,** share it out in small doses to those

around you. Still, it all seemed rather invasive without asking permission, first.

Job done, the tall being dumped its butchered foot on the table. Kit wondered if he would ever be so addicted that he would willingly cripple himself, and, in a sudden moment of realisation, he figured out why exactly the creature in front of him didn't have a face. He would never get that desperate, right?

The sale in front of him concluded, and the tender was doing a poor job of cleaning up the blood that had pooled on the table, and had apparently pooled there many times before, if the stains were to go by. Maybe that was why he didn't exactly seem to care, and why this table wasn't as busy as some.

Beckoned forward by the seller, a squat man who seemed human enough, with a bald, greasy head and tiny eyes, Kit grabbed his 'sacrifice' from his pocket and approached, spreading them out onto the table. The man eyed them with disinterest. He got countless numbers of this cheap tat every day, but no-one could afford to turn down a customer who may one day be desperate enough to sacrifice an arm and a leg, so he dealt with these piddly offers the best way he could.

Picking them up one at a time, making a big deal about checking their cut-marks, how decomposed they were, even their temperature. Kit knew there was a market for everything here, from the fresh to the totally mummified, but fresh tended to sell better – so did the ones with neater cut marks, and lighter skin tones.

He looked down at the table as there was a series of clattering noises.

"We don't take the ring-things here. Take back to human world, maybe they give you money, cash."

The man spoke in a definite Russian accent, sharp and blunt, but with slang he had probably picked up from working here. They used the slang that the alleyway world did too, which Kit was slowly getting the hang of, for the good it did him.

“That’s fine, fine.” He muttered, simply, collecting up the rings that had been removed from the fingers and slipping them into his pocket. Two plain gold bands – or maybe just gold-plated – and a silver ring with a low-quality diamond. Cash wasn’t really forefront in his mind right now, but he was sure it would be next time he needed tobacco.

“Okay, kitlet. That’s a lock.” The man said, and Kit let out a breath that he didn’t know he had been holding. So far, he hadn’t had a no to anything he had brought in as a sacrifice, but Lady Luck wasn’t exactly known to be a friend of his, so he expected that to be challenged, one day.

The Russian reached inside his trenchcoat and got out a tiny vial, letting Kit see the goods inside – Kit examining it just as closely as the seller had done with the fingers, looking at its quality. The colour of the petals – purple, with a hint of blue at the end. Good stuff then. Not top of the line, but good. They curled in slightly, so he knew it was freshly produced – however it was produced – and it would last him a while. An increasingly short amount of time, but he didn't really want to think about that just then.

“No touch, no smell,” the seller recited, as if Kit was going to ask, when he knew better than that by now. Kit was entranced by the flower as he had been so many times before, but snapped out of it when he paused to actually count the petals.

“…Four? Only four?! I gave you…” His shaking hands spread the dismembered fingers across the seller’s filthy table. “…Six. Six perfectly good fingers!”

The seller smirked, Kit’s shaking hands speaking volumes, telling him he could have offered him less and Kit would have been convinced to take it. Still, he wanted his prey customer to keep coming back for more.

“Supply and demand, kitlet. Come back, an arm, a leg? Maybe we talk.” The man shrugged.

“Fine.” Kit muttered, curtly. “That’s a lock, you…” He thought better of cursing the man out, knowing it wouldn’t do anything worthwhile

anyway. Instead, he snatched the small vial before any more deals could be discussed – and before he could change his mind and storm off to get a quote from the stars elsewhere.

Kit disappeared into the crowd, little more than a speck on most people's radar, apart from a set of dark blue eyes watching from in between two stores.

"Oh Kit… What have you got yourself into now?" The voice whispered, forlornly, before the eyes – and their owner – sunk back into the darkness to watch the rest of the Market from the shadows.

« **Twenty Minutes** | **Hub** | **Kit, The Storyteller** »

An Armenian Bodybuilder Exercises His Legal Rights

It was refreshing to have bruises on my skin.

My mouth felt slightly off. I reached up to my jaw, then clicked it back into place. I spat out blood and a few teeth, then felt hard matter extrude from my gums anew. The bruises faded away, returning to the colour of simple flesh. I grinned.

At this, my opponent was somewhat taken aback. He responded with another punch.

Heat flowed around my abdomen; the demigod's fingers ripped between my ribs and punctured my lungs, my previously inhaled breath now whistling through the open wound. He pulled back, then struck again, this time slicing my heart and stomach. My eyes widened, I felt blood and gastric juices start to pour into places blood and gastric juices should not pour into. Another blow popped my left eye; then my opponent took a step away.

He watched, intrigued, as my muscles rippled and realigned. The pain used to bring me to my knees; now, with my steeled mind, there is only extreme and excruciating discomfort. My diaphragm spasmed and I coughed up blood and misplaced vomit, then my gut tightened and I threw up vomit and misplaced blood. The wounds re-knitted, my stomach and heart sealing; then my lungs, which felt as if on fire as I drew a deep breath. I stared into Perseus' face as I felt a lens pull itself into existence, and felt my eye reinflate with vitreous humour.

Perseus grimaced.

"Well then. It seems I was mistaken. Which member of the pantheon were you looking for again?"

"Hephaestus."

"You think… you're a son of Hephaestus?"

"Yes."

"With your body and build? The god of craftsmen? I'd think you to be one of Ares' boys."

"My body is of his, for it is a work of art."

I flexed for emphasis. Perseus smirked a little.

"Maybe a son of Narcissus."

"I don't mean to brag. This is not my opinion on the matter."

"Then whose is it?"

"Professor Mared Gretchen's."

Perseus' eyes widened at the name.

"Old Mared sent you?"

"If that is what you will call her, then yes. You've met her?"

"No. She is, however… quite well known in our circles. She is known to override."

"Override?"

"Override and overwrite. The tales of Old Mared are… genuinely mythical, even to people like you or I."

"I've not heard such tales."

"Well… we try to keep them under wraps. They are mostly embarrassing to the rest of us. She kicked Zeus in the balls once."

I felt an eyebrow raise involuntarily. Perseus scratched his neck.

"Regardless… I cannot personally hold audience with Hephaestus, but I can certainly find someone who can. Your negotiations from there on will be your own. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Then let us exchange phone numbers."

I passed a slip of paper from my pocket to him, he passed one in return. He looked over my body, still slightly damp and red from blood, then nodded.

"It was good to meet you, Khoren."

"And you, Perseus."

Perseus started to walk away, then turned over his shoulder.

"If you don't mind my asking, why do you want to meet him?"

"Besides being my father?"

"Well, yes."

"He owes my mother a lifetime of child support."

Perseus chuckled lightly and walked away.

I selected the contact labelled "Prof. Gretchen" on my mobile phone, then called. After three rings, the Professor answered in her grandmotherly British accent.

"Khoren, my boy, my boy! How goes the epic quest?"

"I've got to say, Professor Gretchen, substantially better whenever I mention your name to people."

I heard her laugh; big, booming, gut laughs that I'd seen many times before.

"Good to hear they haven't forgotten me over there! The amount of drinking that went on at their parties, surprised they manage to remember their own names. Where are you up to?"

"I've made some progress with things. I'm mostly just calling to clarify something."

"Hm?"

"Did you ever kick Zeus in the balls?"

That big, booming laugh again, which I tried to interrupt.

"Really though. Did that happen?"

"Oh, absolutely. His fault for hitting on me. At the time, of course, he didn't know I swung for the other team, but he kept pushing and pushing. Clearly quite inebriated - normally a reasonable enough chap, but cannot stomach his alcohol. Goes straight to his head. Incapacitated him long enough for me to run out the back door with Eris and Athena though. Honestly, Eris throws much better parties, and Athena can do that thing where you tie a knot in a cherry stalk with your tongue."

"But you never met Hephaestus?"

"No, no, no. A few thousand years of turning down invites to sit indoors working on your next big piece, eventually they stop bothering to ask you at all."

"I see."

"Hm? What's wrong, boy?"

"I'm not sure why you didn't tell me this before I left, Professor. It might have helped a bit."

"Khoren, you get to my age, you gather enough stories to fill a hundred phone books. I could bore you to your death and mine with all the things I got up to with just that pantheon. And anyway, this is your quest, not mine. If I could just give you an address, it wouldn't have any meaning, would it?"

"It would certainly make things a lot easier, though."

"All I say is that nothing is easy, and the best things are the hardest. Gotta go, Khoren; have an appointment with a poker player."

"Thanks, Professor. Talk to you soon."

Perseus didn't end up calling; instead, he texted through an address, a date, and a time. I sent him my thanks in response. It was still not for another two days that he would arrive. I sipped my coffee lightly, enjoying the sun.

A loud bang echoed around the corner. The source then drove out; a brightly coloured van made a hairpin turn and rocketed past the cafe, followed by a pursuing large black van labelled "σκληρά κρούστα πιτσαρία". The sputtering of their engines faded off into the distance, and the patrons returned to their newspapers and beverages.

I felt some concern.

It was an uninteresting building. It looked like any other in the vicinity.

What was concerning about it was that I recognised the psychedelically patterned van outside.

Still, I had arrived to the meeting half an hour early. I read to pass the time; a small pile of visitor's pamphlets lined my hire car, and I slowly made my way through. Twenty five minutes later, a man wearing large sunglasses and a girl of school age exited the building, seemingly in deep conversation. They returned to the van, the man starting the engine with a low rumble, and then drove away.

The black van parked around the corner pulled out of their hiding place and drove to tail behind. I felt a deep itch in my shoulders, though I wasn't without a contingency plan. I confirmed the presence of the cold, heavy metal in my pocket. It was a short wait for the black van to leave from my sight; then, I opened the door of the hire car, stepped out, and closed it with a thunk.

The front door of the building was made of some heavy wood, not quite matching the rest of its construction. I knocked it solidly, then waited some time, before a man pulled it open from inside.

He looked young. He was dressed in a bright neon t-shirt, a pair of

jeans, a simple silver chain around his neck, and a tattoo covering the majority of his right arm with a hammer. The man looked up at me, then cocked his head slightly.

"Khoren?"

"Yes. I'm here to see-"

The man suddenly moved, hugging me around my midriff.

"My son, my son! Home at last!"

With some reaching, he put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my face. Looking at him closer, there was black stubble around his chin, and his right ear was pierced in three places. This was not the image of Hephaestus I had in mind. He slapped me on the shoulders, grinning and turning.

"Come on in, and close the door behind you."

I turned, pushed the door closed, and followed my father into what appeared to be a workroom. An anvil sat in the corner, which caught my interest; then I noticed the thick layer of dust along its surface. In the room's centre was a wooden table covered in paint and surrounded by similarly styled stools; on it sat a bowl of potato chips, which Hephaestus took a handful from and munched audibly. He looked up at me.

"Have a seat, have some chips. Some friends brought them here - really interesting flavouring, impressive stuff."

I sat across from him, picked a chip up, and crunched it around in my mouth. It tasted like strawberries. As I chewed, my father started to speak.

"I know what you're going to say: I don't look like all the pictures."

I swallowed and gave a response.

"I will admit, I was expecting an old man working at a smith."

"Not as much smithing these days as there used to be. Us gods

latch on to whatever gets us the most people within our purview. I've always been in charge of blacksmiths and fires, but these days being the god of artisans gets me a bit more attention. Quite a bit more, in fact. People keep asking me for favours - minor miracles, you know - and I really can't help but oblige."

I kept silent. Hephaestus sighed.

"But that's not why you're here."

"No."

"Right. Well. Tell me what I've got to sign."

I pulled out a packet of paper and offered it to the man across from me, along with a pen.

"Read it thoroughly."

"I don't need to. Your mother was a lovely lady, but despite what she's probably led you to believe, she was always much more interested in me than I was in her. That got her into trouble; as far as I see, this helps her out of it."

Hephaestus signed the paper with a flourish, passing it back to me along with an envelope. I took them both, looking at the front of the envelope. It was addressed to my mother.

"If you could pass that on to her I'd appreciate it. She should be more forthcoming with a few things after that. I would tell you myself, but it's the sort of thing that she'd want to say herself. Oh, and also, give her this."

Hephaestus pulled out a small ring from his pocket, then passed it over to me. It looked like weaved silver and gold. I placed the ring and the envelope in my right pocket, then folded up the legal document and placed it in my left. I stood, looking down at my father.

"I appreciate your understanding in this matter."

"Your mother really must have changed, she's raised you to sound

like a lawyer."

"No, she's not changed much, I think. I never quite fit what she wanted from a son."

"Bah, to hell with her. Anartists are a fickle folk, I'm sure she loves you all the same."

I bowed to Hephaestus.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Dad."

He stood, showing me back to the door.

"The pleasure's all mine, Khoren. Come back if you're in the neighbourhood again."

I left his house, strode back to the car, and drove away without looking back.

That was the one time I saw my father while he was still alive.

« Oops | **`Hub`** | **Coldposter »**

An Audience

The walk always took half an hour. Half an hour there, half an hour back, from the outside. But it always felt longer when he actually walked the tunnel. It felt like time was being stretched out, that his quiet footsteps would softly echo for endless miles.

Tonight was a long, long walk. He could feel the weight of the earth pushing down on his shoulders. The air in the tunnel was cold, the smooth concrete walls frigid to the touch. The only thing to pierce the darkness was the bright cone of his flashlight.

This was a very old place. Very old indeed. It didn't look it. To the eyes it was just a maintenance tunnel, bare concrete, an occasional exposed pipe. There was time stored up in these stones, soaked up like a sponge, filling the place as it slowly oozed out of the cracks in the walls and rust on the pipes.

His flashlight bobbed. He kept walking. Time passed.

Then, finally, already, the arch, where there would have been a door. There was no door anymore. The words carved on the lintel had been worn down long ago. Words had little power here. He stepped through.

He reached the hall, though he only knew it from the breeze, and the feeling of the walls dropping away into the shadows. There was only darkness there. He kept walking. His footsteps did not echo.

Shapes stirred in his peripheral vision. Ghostly lights flickered to life. A graveyard of broken and cracked computer monitors shed their sickly light. Nothing was ever displayed. All around him he could see the dim outlines of scrap wires and old circuit boards and junked towers. He could hear rustling and laughter from the shadows, occasionally see the glowing reflection of an eye. And then there was the throne.

The great seat amidst the rusting, decaying garbage was occupied. As it always was. The form of the king was tall, thin, shapeless and still shaped, somewhat like a man, wearing a pale face and dark clothes. A courtesy. The king wore no crown. The king had no need for one.

Around the throne sat the king's attendants, waiting at attention, their faceless faces smiling for eternity. They turned to watch the man as he approached the throne, their empty eyes looking as one gaze.

The man stopped. He bowed, and then righted himself.

The king bent down, extending a hand of long, bony fingers. The shadows around it crept and grew like the roots of some gnarled, ancient tree.

The man took a paper bag from his coat pocket. From it, he counted out twenty-one pebbles into the king's bony hand. The king's hand closed and the king sat straight again.

The man was free to leave now. He did. The walk back felt shorter this time. He shrugged off the thought.

Twenty-one pebbles for twenty-one children who would be gone by the morning. Maybe not this morning, maybe not next, but some morning. Twenty-one children, delivered every year. That was the deal that had been kept for a long, long time.

Deals have to be kept.

An Average Life

Larry Robbins had never been a particularly active or happy man. He went to work, he worked, he went home, and he slept. On certain days, he'd go out to bars and talk up a girl, take her home, enjoy her company, and then never speak to her again. On others, he'd go out to eat with an old college acquaintance, or call one of his brothers or sisters—it was a large family and there were many to choose from—and talk for a short while.

All this made it more unusual when, almost out of the blue, the woman had began flirting with him in the elevator. More so, she stopped by his desk once or twice to ask for things she already had, did her best to look seductive for him, and, more than once, allowed her hand to trail over his as if by accident. With the signs obvious, Larry had no choice but to make her formal acquaintance and, eventually, take her out for a night on the town.

He found the company pleasurable, in spite of his initial unwillingness in the whole affair, and after dropping her off back at her home, found the invitation of a second date appealing. The next Wednesday, he found himself anticipating her arrival at his desk after work. They met, exchanged pleasantries, and went to her flat for a night in and warm food.

Her cooking was exceptional, and Larry was finding himself more and more enamored. When she proffered herself, he graciously accepted, and the next morning, his desk seemed brighter and more inviting. His officemates made note, good naturedly ribbing the twenty-eight year old, especially when he noted that his third date would be coming up within the few days.

The restaurant he took her to was more expensive than he could comfortably afford, but Larry didn't care. She looked ravishing in her burgundy dress. He had the chicken; she had the fish. They split a piece of tiramisu. All the while, Larry found himself falling more and more in love with the strange, wonderful woman who had pushed

herself into his life so abruptly.

Within a year, they were married. Within another year, their first child was born.

A week later, the doctors diagnosed his beloved wife with renal failure. There were possibilities for finding a transplant but, due to her mixed heritage—his wife's grandmother being Indian—the chances were more slim. Of course, he immediately volunteered, but the doctors told him it was a long shot.

It was with delight that they told him, in voices almost disbelieving, that he was a match. He was crying over his wife's smiling face, holding their new born daughter between them, when he told her the news. They would be together forever.

The operation was a success. Within two months, they returned home with their quickly growing little girl. Her parents and his siblings rotated through the home, meeting and fussing, delighted for the couple. The doctors were pleased to announce that not only was Larry's other kidney functioning normally, it was apparently much stronger than they anticipated, adapting to the absence of the other and increasing its function drastically. Not only that, his wife was responding very well to the transplant. Things were well on course for a wonderfully happy future.

A month after he returned to work, Larry was offered a promotion: Assistant Manager. It would mean an honest salary, good benefits, and additional vacations, but it would also mean time away from the new family he was building. His wife encouraged him to take it and, eventually, he did. His direct supervisor turned out to be very understanding of the young father, allowing for more time out of the office than he might otherwise. He, as a father himself, understood Larry's situation quite well, and was extremely supportive, though firm.

When Larry went in for a checkup a year after the transplant, the doctor was different. He asked Larry if he'd had any unexpected side effects or problems that his previous physician had not warned him about. Larry replied a negative, stating that he felt better than he had in quite some time. The doctor nodded and instructed Larry to

roll onto his side for an ultrasound, to check for scarring problems. Larry did as he was told, feeling the cold gel and the strange hum of the machine. When he was finished, he cleaned himself up, and the doctor took some blood and gave him a clean bill of health.

Oddly enough, the file must have been lost, because the hospital called him reporting that he'd missed his checkup. When Larry explained, they apologized, thanked him for his time, and told him they'd notify him if there were any further problems.

His manager at work, discreetly, mentioned that a friend of his, a Mr. Carter, was looking for someone to work on an overseas account. Larry was unsure of the implication until his manager mentioned the pay and that the job would be local with little travel. He clapped Larry on the shoulder, told him the job would be his if he wanted it, and then gave him his blessings, pushing a card into his hands. Larry stammered a thanks, telling his manager that they should still meet for lunch as often as possible, and called the number on the card.

The voice on the other end sounded pleasant, though professional. When Larry introduced himself, it turned almost chummy. He instructed Larry on where to come for the interview—a formality alone—and mentioned just how much he'd heard and how greatly he was looking forward to meeting him.

The interview was in an old office firm, barely three blocks from Larry's family flat, and was carried out by two men in professional looking suits. They asked him a series of questions, sounding almost bored, while occasionally writing down some notes. After a few minutes, they showed Larry out and instructed a dour looking secretary to show Larry to Mr. Carter's office.

She led him up two flights of stairs, taking him to a wooden door at the end of a well lit, cozy feeling hallway. Knocking twice, he heard a voice from inside asking him to enter. Walking in, a man, probably in his mid-forties, stood and smiled, gesturing for Larry to take a seat. He offered a drink, which Larry graciously accepted, and they talked.

He introduced himself as the current Mr. Carter, mentioning that his associates, Messrs. Marshall and Dark, were also anxious for his

employ. They talked about the work he would be doing, the different people he would be working with, and the staff he would be assigned. When Mr. Carter noticed that he hadn't touched his scotch, he encouraged a drink, proposing a toast to a new association.

Larry raised his glass, drank deeply, and promptly collapsed to the floor unconscious.

When he awoke, he was extremely groggy. The lights above him—far too bright after such a deep sleep—reminded him of the surgical table in the hospital from his transplant and, as he tried to raise his arm to shield his eyes, he realized they were restrained. A second attempt produced the same result.

A voice at his left drew his attention, and as he looked at the suited man smiling down at him, he felt a twist of dread in his stomach.

"We thank you for accepting our offer of employment, Mr. Robbins. We hope you'll be with us for a very long time."

As he looked, two doctors came into view on either side of the bed.

"Gentlemen, start with the same kidney. After that, we'll start testing to see what else grows back. Mr. Robbins here is going to be a very good investment indeed."

The drugs began to pump into his veins again. As his vision blurred, his last thought was of his family, less than a mile away, and then blackness.

An Evening With Bright

One fine day in the Foundation, Dr. Bright finds the need to clean up some small problems. A researcher has been asking questions, and, worse, questioning Bright. And so it is that Dr. Jack Bright calls Dr. Heiden to his office, for some… discussion.

Heiden is ushered into the room by an old man, the young doctor is clearly incredibly uneasy. "…Dr. Bright, you requested my presence?"

"Heiden." Bright smiles lightly. "Please, take a seat." Gesturing at the comfy looking chair across the desk from himself. Heiden takes a moment to look around the room uncomfortably before sitting in the chair.

"Hold on just a moment, please." Dr. Bright pulls out a small remote from his pocket and begins clicking buttons. The red lights on the cameras in the office go off, the door locks shut, and all other machines go dead. "There. Much better."

Heiden gulps nervously before saying "…yes, sir." Bright's actions did absolutely nothing to settle Frederick's raging nerves. Somehow he suspects that was intentional.

"Now then, there will be no recordings if you choose to be insubordinate. For the record, my cane is in the corner behind you, and my hands are empty. I am doing this in an attempt to provide an air of open conversation, that seems to be needed." He nods his head solemnly, before continuing. "Now, it seems you may have some unresolved issues with me. Shall we discuss these?"

Heiden's mind races… but once again, honesty remains Frederick's policy. He takes a moment to compose himself before speaking. "Yes, sir. On my first, ah, incident with the Foundation, I encountered SCP-963. It was used to subdue a prisoner, an armed android with which I am sure you are familiar."

Bright nods his head. "Sonia Velamour. She was 29, had no siblings, and her parents were deceased. She once loved a man, and he turned her into a cyborg. Yes, I am aware of her, go on."

Heiden stares at Bright, taken aback by the information. "… yes. I initially protested this action, but as it was undertaken in the heat of a combat situation, it is understandable that my protests were ignored. I inquired as to the nature of SCP-963, and was offered access to a redacted file containing a briefing on the object. I am an ethicist by vocation, Doctor Bright, though my - "

Bright snorts. "It is a devious and despicable item."

Heiden seems caught incredibly off-guard by this statement. He fumbles for a moment before continuing. " -ah, well. My review of the file included sections regarding retaining brainwiped bodies for future use - actually, four."

"That is correct." Bright touches the teardrop tattoo under his eye. "I found it wiser to keep bodies on hand, instead of trusting to the fickleness of fate to provide me with new ones should an incident arise. By keeping these bodies in stasis, I have found myself capable of extending their life span."

"To be frank, sir, this is among the most hideous crimes I have ever seen systematically inflicted upon a group of people, D-class or no. I have tremendous difficulty justifying it to myself and as a result, I may have behaved in a manner inconsistent with the attitude expected towards senior staff." Heiden coughs, still nervous about sounding off to a superior. "…to cut directly to the heart of the matter, sir, what entitles you to their bodies?"

Bright smiles …ah… brightly. "Ah, yes, entitlement. You are aware that D-class are executed on a monthly basis, yes?"

Heiden nods. "I am aware. I genuinely believe that death is preferable."

"Well then, let us take a look at my bodies. Do you have any issues with my usage of simian bodies?"

"I am… unnerved by it, I admit, sir." Heiden ponders a moment, and his speech lapses into a more informal pattern. "It's not… it's not as visceral, though. It doesn't keep me awake at night. It's just another mildly disturbing thing that happens at work."

"Then that takes care of two of the stored bodies." Ticking off two fingers on his hand. "Let's move on to this one. Hank Ashton, 42, convicted pedophile and child killer. He enjoys strawberry ice cream, and the reflection of his knife in a young girl's eyes before he cuts her throat."

Heiden nods. He sees where Jack is going with this. "He deserves to be dead. Unless exposure to SCP-963 has been proven to be identical to a brain transplant- and considering the nature of SCP-963, I doubt proof is forthcoming anytime soon- I do not believe use of the object to be justified."

"It is identical to a brain transplant. The recipient's brain is completely wiped clean."

"I'll not press further after this one question- but how are you certain? The device is a twisted, disturbing thing. What happens to the 'data' that is wiped?" Heiden just wants to be *sure*.

Bright wags a finger at Heiden, hoping to explain. "Think of it as a computer. All the files are moved to the trash bin —" he taps 963 — "and new files are overwritten. While there may be some small indications the files were once there, you have to work to find them. Sadly, a poor copy is kept in the trash can. It is why I keep myself out of there, as much as possible."

"I… the consciousness never *dies*, then. It's just sequestered away?" It just sounds so…ugly, to him.

Bright shakes his head. "The consciousness dies, but the memories remain."

"So… it's as if you piggybacked your consciousness on a corpse." Heiden regrets how crude that sounds, but he's trying to fit it in his head.

Bright snaps his fingers. "Exactly. All the functions become mine. Even the ones you don't think can be changed. Every body I am in beats with the same pulse, breathes in the same manner, walks with the same steps."

Heiden frowns. That's… *bizarre*. Wait, where does he work again? "Acknowledged, sir. My conduct towards you was based on an understanding of SCP-963 that was mistaken, and for that I apologize."

"Good. But even were it not mistaken, there is another reason why I…deserve… these bodies."

Heiden tilts his head to the side slightly. "…I don't understand. Continue, sir?"

"I am the Foundation." Bright stares at Heiden, a slight smile on his face. In his eyes… well, you read the report, and the theories, right?

Heiden got a *heavily* redacted version of the report, it seems. He stares at Bright, feeling more than a little stupid. "You… you are the Foundation?" The only theory he's hearing right now is 'crippling megalomania', on the level of 'I am the Law!'. "Sir, the SCP Foundation, while I am aware …requires the work of minds such as yourself, is - as far as I know - a collaborative effort of many. To be blunt, I don't understand."

Bright stands up, and begins to pace, gesturing with his hands. "Currently, you are a junior researcher, and I am a Senior Staffer in charge of personnel. That means, I pick who comes on board, make sure they can handle the rough stuff, and in general, turn them into people capable of becoming Senior Staff, whether they know I'm doing it or not."

Bright continues. "In 25 years, you will be a Senior Researcher, possibly with your own site to handle, definitely with many new researchers, trained by me, under your wing. I, will be the Senior Researcher in charge of Personnel."

"In 50 years, you will, god willing, be ready to retire, and leave your work to a trusted researcher, who was brought into the Foundation

under me. I will still be the Senior Researcher in charge of personnel." Bright focuses his gaze on Heiden, making sure he's getting it.

"In 75 years, if you are still alive, you will be suffering from dementia, and other mental deterioration, barely in control of your own bowels. I, however, will be in a body as young as they give me, training a new generation of Researchers."

Heiden, with dawning horror, realizes what Dr. Bright is driving at.

Bright stabs a finger at his desk, to make the point. "In 100 years, you will be dead, and the researchers you taught will be nearing retirement themselves. I will know who to replace them with."

Bright's voice remains calm and collected, as if discussing a new assignment. He doesn't seem to actually care about any of this, it just needs saying. "In 200 years, your name will be known only by diligent researchers, one name among many of those who have been researchers for the Foundation. I… will still be a senior researcher. From time to time, I will sit with a glass of wine and remember those who have passed, but the list will be long."

"1000 years from now, no one but I will remember you existed. And… I will still be working with the Foundation to protect humanity. Do you understand? I am the Foundation. I shape its future, and I keep it on task. I'm needed, despicable as it might be. Do you see?"

Heiden lets a long silence pass. "Why must it be you? 963 was held by someone before you, and in time, it will be held by another. Do you *want* this?"

Bright shakes his head sadly. "No one held 963 before me. It was created for another man, but he failed to make it work. I am its first, and only, resident. There is no escape from 963." Jack considers the question for a silent moment. "Do I want it? No. But who else am I supposed to trust to get it done?"

Uneasily, Heiden continues. "You don't have to run the Foundation, Dr. Bright. You're not Atlas - no human is. Trust that there are people who can get the job done. In your time here, you can assure

many. But it is not one man's responsibility to save the world."

"What else do I have? If I leave, they will mark me as an SCP, and hide 963 away where it will take a long time for someone to find it." He knows someone eventually will. Part of the curse. "Do you think I can live a normal life? I cannot have children of my own, only those of whatever body I wear. Hell, when it comes to sex, do you know how hard it is to have something touch you, but never your partner, not even for a second? The positions get wild enough I have to pay for it. The Foundation is my life. And I will make it wonderful." Bright smiles. It isn't all that reassuring.

"You… you really can't be rid of it, can you?" Heiden pauses but a moment. "I, ah… my condolences to you, sir." Heiden doesn't know what to say. He feels like a bastard.

"Never." Bright lifts the remote. "Are we done?"

"I believe so, sir." Heiden's head hangs low.

Bright hits the button, and everything hums back to life. "Dismissed. Don't dwell on this too much Heiden. I have big plans for you."

Heiden rises, his posture straightening as he stares straight ahead. "Yes, sir." He turns and walks from the room.

And Jack Bright watches him walk out the door, his smile widening. "Such very big plans."

An Evergreen Affair

The Administrator was never one for ceremony. When she had founded it all, more than a hundred years ago, she did not ask for contracts written in blood under flickering candlelight, or sacred oaths sworn with a hand over the bible during a thunderstorm. She had simply gotten to work.
And that was why it all ended in a dreary little park in East London. The place meant nothing to either of them, and it was of no particular importance to anyone. And that was why she had chosen it: because it was meaningless.

As she sat on the swing, listing back and forth slowly in the gentle night's wind, she wondered if she was being petty. The Governor would hate that it ended here, and not in the room where it all began in Site-001.

"It's been a while."

She did not turn to look at her. She found herself unable to. "A hundred and three years, by my count."

The Governor sat on the swing next to her. "The negotiations are over. All Foundation assets and anomalies are now under the control of the Chaos Insurgency. The O5 Council will shortly be liquidated. As for most of your personnel? We'll keep them on in the same jobs, for the most part. Maybe we'll even say they still work for the Foundation. The fall of the Foundation has affected, at the most, a hundred people."

The Administrator pushed herself pathetically against the ground, giving a slight little swing. A family of foxes scampered across the grass in front of them. "What'll you do now?"

The Governor shrugged. "Same as you, I'd imagine."

"So this was all for nothing."

“It was for us. For what we had between us. So, yes, it was for nothing.”

The Administrator reached out and ran her hand over the Governor’s face. One half had grown old and weary and lonely, while the other remained as it had the day she was shot.

“Why?”

The Administrator did not answer that question for a long time. “Love is poison. I would have let the world burn a thousand times over to save you. So I made the right choice before I could make the wrong one. Everything I had to do after that was so much easier.”

The Governor held the pistol in her soft, warm hands. “This is the same gun, you know.”

At that, the Administrator simply sighed. “I’m not going to apologize. Ever.”

And the Governor shot her. The shot was muted, pathetic, and the family of foxes barely flinched.

The Administrator folded forward, and if not for the massive hole in her forehead, she might have looked asleep.

An Excerpt from Goodbye Ghost

Act 2, Scene 2:

James: *(Crying)* But can't they help you in some way?

Butt ghost: There is no cure for butt cancer.

J: But what will I do without you?

BG: James, you've never needed me in the first place

J: What do you mean?

BG: Inside of you lies the power, not me. I'm only a spirit that haunts the posteriors of mammals.

J: I can't let you go.

BG: You already have. *(Gestures to the framed photo of James with his arm wrapped around a yield sign.)*

J: It's not what you think!

BG: No, it's what I know.

J: But butt ghost…

BG: Shh, don't speak. You've broken my heart enough already.

J: I can't let you go.

BG: You had no trouble letting your *other women* go!

J: That was years ago, Butt Ghost!

BG: A butt ghost never forgets.

J: You forgot me once.

BG: I had to go soul-searching, James.

J: And what did you find?

BG: I found my spirit place. The air was still and the water was cool. I felt a presence. I turned to look, but no one was there. I was alone. The moon overhead gazed down at my prone body. I felt nothing and everything at once. And that's when I realized, my people need me.

J: Ankle ghost will be fine.

BG: It's not just Ankle Ghost anymore, James, it's the world.

J: What does that even mean?

BG: They're revoking ghost licenses everywhere now.

J: No!

BG: It's true.

J: But what about your estranged relationship with your brother?

BG: Ghost Butt will either have to get out of my way, or join me.

J: How?

BG: James, you know me too well to question my ability in dealing with these issues.

J: Very well. I can only hope you don't fail.

BG: Failure is not an option.

J: Good luck.

BG: Thank you.

J: Here take this. (Passes plunger)

BG: I will not let you down.

J: Goodbye, Butt Ghost. *(Salutes)*

BG: Goodbye, James. *(Flushes)*

Something even the loneliest man can relate to, Goodbye Ghost brings us to realize our own mortality and the importance of our relationship with our friends, regardless of corporeality. - Foundation Tribune

Play of the year. Period. - CI Review

Guaranteed to make you both laugh and cry, the Butt Ghost's performance is the best of the the year, if not the century. - Time-anomaly Magazine

What the FUCK is this shit? - O5-7

An Faq Part Two; Or, Your Hume Questions Answered

Do you, too, have a question (or questions) about Humes? Put them down below and they will be answered.

Q: What do areas of high (or low) Hume concentration look like?
-Dr. S

A: An area of low Hume concentration is a very strange place indeed. Without the stability of ordinary reality, regular humans can alter the area to their whim, granting temporary reality bender-like abilities. These should not be confused with the real thing, of course; they are merely a projection of a higher-Hume frame of reference on a lower-Hume environment, and the 'abilities' vanish as soon as the subject leaves the area. In addition, since reality is much less dense in these areas, the incidence of spontaneous anomalies and universe breaches are significantly higher. However, these anomalies/breaches do *not* vanish when taken from the vicinity. The reason for this is unknown at the current time.

An area of *high* Hume concentration, on the other hand is a very strange place. To normal humans, it appears vivid and overpowering, a place of a superworldly aura. Remember how the Himalayas have a high Hume concentration? This applies to all mountains—there's a reason they're often sought out as a place of enlightenment. To reality benders, on the other hand, these areas are flat, grey, and earthy. Since the Hume concentration in these areas are usually close to (or higher than) the reality bender's own levels, they have significant trouble exerting their powers in these areas; in some cases being completely restricted from affecting the area. As such, reality benders tend to avoid these areas, instinctively or otherwise; the currently-in-construction Site-35 (augmented with special Scranton anchors and located in the Himalayas) promises to act as effective containment for reality benders when completed.

Q: Is it possible for a regular human to become a reality bender?
-Dr. S

A: Yes; and there are many, many rituals and gimmicks that promise to do so. However, the list of actual techniques to do so is very small; and is currently being compiled

Q: Is it possible for animals to have hume fluctuations as well?
-Dr. S

A: Yes! At least one cat is suspected of it, as well as several dogs and some fleas; there is evidence coming in that certain whales may be capable of it as well. It is also hypothesized that inanimate objects are capable of this, but testing has been difficult and the hypothesis is unproven.

Q: Do we have any methods by which to test for Hume fluctuations at a great distance, such as interplanetary or further?
-Dr. K

A: At the moment, no. As I understand, a great many options on this front are being tested, but until then, we can only measure Hume concentrations locally.

What are our options for detecting reality affecting entities at such distances?
-Dr. K

A: As mentioned above, effectively none.

Does being in the vacuum of space alter the nature of Hume variance in any way?
-Dr. K

A: Short answer: No. Longer answer: space is a little strange. Its baseline Hume concentration is slightly higher than Earth concentrations, with the same variations seen on Earth. In fact, it is hypothesized that most of space has a Hume level equal to (or lower than!) Earth's norm, and that galaxies and clusters act as Hume

concentration areas in the same way that mountains do here on Earth. However, this is only an educated guess until we can find an actual method of testing it.

Are large and low Hume ratings expected to remain unusually high or low in parts or organs of a reality bender when detached or their user becomes deceased? Are there different Hume concentrations in certain organs rather than others? If so, which?
-Dr. R

A: A good question, and one we haven't studied much at this time. Preliminary results seem to indicate that all organ Hume concentrations are higher than the baseline, with the heart, liver, and brain possessing the most concentration; but these levels are not as large as those present in the reality bender when alive. As the reasons for this are unknown, and as the possibility of some freak Hume fluctuation or contamination cannot be crossed out, all of this is speculation at the moment, and needs to be verified by further research.

Are there any noise or interfering "background signals" when measuring Hume concentrations in areas supposed to be "clean" of reality-bending effects?
-Dr. R

A: Yes! Basically, what we've seen is that in a completely isolated area freed of outside influences, the baseline Hume concentration seems to fluctuate up to +/- 9 centiHumes. So two readings taken in the same place in different times can yield significantly different Hume concentrations. The reason behind this phenomenon, by the way, is unknown at this time.

Has any cognitohazardous, infohazardous or memetic effect been related to alterations in Hume ratings? (To clarify: this is a question on the respective effects these agents have *on human psyche and brain chemistry*, and not on the various anomalous effects affected individuals may display after being exposed to them; that is, can information alone and its knowledge change Hume ratings?)
-Dr. R

A: No, none of the above materials or effects have been linked to Hume concentrations. It appears that these effects do not affect the local reality, instead creating changes solely in the affected person's thought processes and brain. However, the anomalous effects displayed *after* exposure can (and have) multiple effects on Hume concentrations (see **SCP-1425** for more information on this.)

Finally, this is partly a request. Several medical doctors and health officers of the Foundation Medical Branch have requested access to miniaturized Scranton Reality Anchors to test their prolonged effects on human beings, particularly on possible relation to altered mental states and the general well-being of operators and civilians. Is there any way to request access to them for testing purposes or have these matters been looked into already? In case this has been tested, when will you publish a paper on it?
-Dr. R

A: Well, from what we've seen on personnel working on **SCP-2000**, Scranton anchors don't seem to have any negative effects in the short term. All such requests for long-term testing would have to be funneled through the Ethics Committee, and all papers produced thus can be published on the SCP Foundation's internal servers (basically the Foundation's private arXiv.)

Have any locations or objects with zero or negative Hume values been discovered? What might such values represent?
-Dr. T

A: As of yet, no. In nature, the lowest Hume concentrations we've ever encountered have been in the vicinity of ~.27/.28 H; which, while low, is still quite far from an "absolute zero" concentration. Artificially, we've been able to get concentrations down to .15 H; again, low, but still quite far from that perfect zero. While it is *theoretically* possible that a zero Hume concentration can exist, it is incredibly unlikely that such a thing can exist naturally in nature or can be artificially created without massive repercussions, as such a thing would not be considered "reality" as we think of (or experience) it. As for negative Humes…we haven't even put any negative numbers on the Kant counter dial, so how would we even know what we're measuring? (And that's ignoring the fact that negative Humes

would probably indicate that something's gone *horribly* wrong in the general structure of the universe, and that, as such, whoever's holding the Kant counter should probably be getting the hell out of Dodge.)

It has been mentioned that the SRAs work via "siphoning off" reality from other universes, for lack of a better term. Are there any effects, negative or otherwise, that are known or theorized to be caused by the SRAs outside of their desirable primary effect?
-Dr. N

A: For the universes we're siphoning the reality from, probably quite a lot of negative effects; including, but certainly not limited to: generalized reality breakdown, an increase in anomaly instances, increased reality transparency, an upswing in nonlinear time areas, chronological anomalies, spontaneous localized reality collapse, and a whole host of other things that we haven't even considered. That's why we calibrate our SRAs (nice acronym; I like it) to only drain reality from dead universes. These include universes that are already in their last legs, i.e. undergoing heat death; universes that have been through one of the -K class scenarios (except for IK, for obvious reasons) and thus have no surviving life; and universes that, for whatever reason, had no life, sentient or otherwise, to begin with. While the SRAs likely hasten the death of these universes, it's generally considered an acceptable trade-off since these universes generally have nothing worth protecting, and since there are an infinite supply of other, identical, universes floating around as well. As for other effects of SRAs in *our* universe…that's a good question, and one that definitely merits a long-term study. As mentioned above with SCP-2000, short-term exposure to SRAs do not appear to have short-term detrimental effects, and no long-term effects have been observed. As for any actual long-term effects from short-term exposure, or effects from long-term exposure…your guess is as good as mine.

One of the junior researchers in my department recently theorized that Hume levels propagate in the form of 'reality waves'. Is there any merit to this theory? If so, could an object become 'out of phase' (invisible and incorporeal) with normal

reality if its 'reality waves' were out of sync with its surroundings?
-Dr. F

A: From what I can make of it…no. I mean, as quantum physics tells us, *all* particles have a wavelike nature (and all waves have a particle-like nature.) While there are ways to become out of phase with normal reality, these methods don't directly involve Hume manipulation—you could just pop into another universe, or try to stay in half this universe and half another, or you could change your matter state, or stuff like that. But while these things are cool, they do not, sadly, involve Humes.

What is the average Hume level in vanilla humans? In normal reality?
-Researcher W.

That's a very good question, and one that we've already answered in this paper!

Are there any known reality-benders who can increase or decrease the Hume concentrations in themselves or the surrounding reality at will?
-Researcher W.

Under the Hume-centric definition of reality bender, all known reality benders exhibit this property (with the possible [?] exception of **SCP-343**.)

If an entity with higher-than-average Humes is a reality-warper, what happens to entities with lower-than-average Hume levels?
-Researcher W.

Good question! Not much research has been done on these people yet, but the initial results seem to indicate that they are unable to push back against reality, leading to lives that end up being…well, whatever reality wants them to be. These are the stereotypical "charmed" or "cursed" people, and their lives usually end up resembling certain stories or tropes. Out of the five people the preliminary tests followed, one recreated the original Grimm brothers version of "Cinderella" down to the dialog used, one had a string of

unusually terrible bad luck (among other things, they owned several thousand dollars worth of shares in Enron, were struck by lightning five times, and lost a finger when their cell phone batteries exploded), two were middle managers, and one had served as an O5 for over fifty years. What this means is still hotly debated, and more research must be done.

Since Hume concentration determines the ability to manipulate reality but not the individual states of objects within the area, then SRA's can't actually negate anomalies, right? As in, they can prevent reality benders from making further changes, but they can't actually negate existing anomalies that do not actively require low hume settings or changes in said settings.
-Researcher T.

Right. SRAs can only fix the ambient Hume level in its area of effect. Most anomalies cataloged so far are not exerting Hume influence on the surrounding area, or indeed demonstrating Hume variance at all, and so SRAs cannot be used as a one-size-fits-all negation device.

First, what is the relationship (if any) between Humes and Thaumatological processes (`as outlined in those seminar transcripts we got from the` GOC)? Can said possesses interact with Humes? And finally, does the "Type Green" designation that the Coalition's headgear gives to reality benders have anything to do with their higher hume content?
-Dr. Sh

As of this time, research into (obviously inferior!) GOC reality-cum-bender meterology has not yet been implemented. If one's musings are inclined towards such topics, it might prove a fruitful field of further figurations. As for type greens…well, despite the (obviously inferior!) terminology, they are effectively reality benders; as such, all previous musings on the topic can be applied with little to no problems.

Are Humes composed of matter? And if so, do they have mass? What state of matter are Humes?
Dr. -Ws

As far as we can tell, individual Humes are both massless and infinitely massed.

This is not correct. Humes are not a particle; they are a measurement. See below.

Wait, I thought Humes were how reality stability was measured (like degrees and temperature), but now you're telling me they're particles?
-Dr. Sh

You are correct; Humes are a measure of reality, not a particle. The previous answer was in error. See above.

I'm curious how these two concepts would interact, and indeed whether they are even reconcilable or whether, like some other pairs of theories (I forget which, relativity and quantum mechanics maybe?), they could both be accurate representations of the universe and yet contradict each other: the concept of Hume levels that can be measured on a linear scale, and the concept that the universes within the multiverse are layered on top of one another, with any universes "below" another one constituting what that universe considers "fiction". (Though if you look into the premises behind `Operation OverMeta`, they clearly aren't arranged in a neat stack, but more like a fractallizing, spiral web.) So:

Q1: As you go down the stack from most real to most fiction-within-a-fictional, would you see a trend in natural Hume levels declining as the realities get less and less real?

Q2: Do humans created via `SCP-1304` exhibit abnormal Hume readings? Could a character use a device similar to an SRA to pump themselves full of an *insane* number of Humes and jump to a higher layer, effectively becoming an author-god to their home universe, but feeling no more powerful because the universe they can now rule just by rewriting it is nothing but a fiction to them?

What if a real person tried that?

Rambling1: Or could it be the other way around? Perhaps "fictional" universes and the "real" universe existed independently of each other from the start, but those we see as "fiction" are able to bleed into the minds of our world's authors because they're even more real than ours? That would certainly make SCP-1304 make more sense.

Rambling2: The potential discrepancy between the theories of linear Hume measurements and layered realities arises when you connect them in reference to universes that aren't stacked, but rather tangled up like a web, as I mentioned earlier. For example, what if I wrote a story about three men, Abel, Brian, and Chris, and said that each wrote a story, and that Brian was a character within Abel's story, and Chris a character in Brian's story (therefore his reality is, to Abel, a story-within-a-story), and yet Abel is a character within Chris' story. How can the three have Hume levels corresponding to their relative levels of reality when each one is simultaneously above and below the other two? Or would they end up all having the same Hume levels? Would the Hume levels be thrown into turbulence by the three realities competing for influence over each other due to their circularly-referential natures?

Could that be the source of the anomalous fluctuations in the real world?
-Mister J

Humes have as much relation to metafiction as fish do to…not-fish? Humes only serve to describe individual realities, and cannot be used to compare separate realities due to their inherently subjective nature. Thus, there is no contradiction between metafiction and Humes; however, Humes also cannot be used to make any observations or assumptions about metafictional constructs.

Q: East Asian thaumatologists such as *Taoists* or *Shugenjas* prefers to live in the high mountains. Isn't it contradictory to your explanation?
- Dr. Relpek from Korea

A: While high Hume concentrations make reality bending more difficult, they do not make it impossible. In this case, reality benders

who live and train in high-Hume areas got the equivalent of strength training. This made mountains an attractive place to live for reality benders, as it provided a way for them to improve their skills. The practical 90th percentile limit is 6000 metres; however, even after this point, reality bending is possible, if prohibitively difficult. Only at a concentration of 100 Humes is reality bending completely impossible.

Q: Then, why the Western thaumatologists didn't do that?
- Dr. Relpek

A: Most Western wizards were frauds, liars, or not reality benders. While some wizards may have went to mountain ranges such as the Alps for similar reasons, it never developed into a persistent tradition.

Q: What does a 0 Hume universe look like? How about a 100 Hume universe?
-Dr L

There is no absolute Hume scale. This means that a global Hume level of 0 is just the Hume level of the pocket universe we've chosen to be 0. It is the differences between local Hume levels that is responsible for Hume-based phenomena. A universe that has been globally set to an arbitrary value (see below for more on this) will look like our own, only with a greater or lesser imbalance in localized or individual Hume levels (meaning more or less reality bending).

Q: Hypothetically, if the foundation was able to somehow change the universe's Hume levels to 1 for every person, place and thing, would all anomalies cease to exist or at least stop being created?
- An Intern

No; as mentioned above, it is the differences between localized Hume levels that result in Hume-based phenomena. It has been hypothesized that there is some inherent feature to reality benders that causes them to create a Hume imbalance in their surroundings; without addressing this feature, a Hume imbalance will still exist. In theory, if EVERY part of the universe was fixed at 1 Hume forever then all anomalies that involve Humes would cease to be

anomalous; however, we have no ability to even comprehend what would be necessary to fix all Hume readings at the same level, and we have not been able to establish that all anomalies are due solely to Hume-based effects.

This is a good time to announce that, following extensive study, the global Hume scale has been renormalized to a scale of 0-100! To see this in action, please visit the original paper here. For historical reasons mentions of centiHumes on this page have not yet been changed; however, please multiply them by 100 to get the proper Hume levels.

Q: I've seen above that an entity which hume level is below average lives a really spectacular life. Is SCP-503 one of these examples? Or is it an independent anomaly?
-Dr Hal

Unfortunately, we have not studied SCP-503, and cannot draw any conclusions either way. More research in this area is definitely needed.

From:	Dr. Bob Graha	**To:**	Doctors James Caldmann and Carlos Rzewski
Subject:	Regarding Hume sturbances		

Q:

If Humes are altered in such a way that they become distorted and malformed (if possible), can it alter reality? If so, will it create anomalies (be it in phenomena, physical objects and/or entities,

memetic anomalies, cognitohazards, etc.), alter certain objects, directly respond to pre-existing Hume-altering anomalies, or just straight up end the world?

Apologies for the rather long question, but I am doing some crucial research right now, and it would be appreciated if you could respond as soon as possible.

In a word, no. Humes are just a measurement scale. What you're proposing is analogous to modifying a Kelvin and making temperature end the world or something. Humes aren't a particle; they're a unit.

An Impenitent Thief

« **A Convincing Lyre** | **Hub** | **Our Mutual Guide** »

"Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee
Lousy…"

I hate that song so fuckin' much I could almost die. In fact, I just almost did.

I freeze, one foot in the air, sweating inside the heavy sound-dampening suit. I slowly lower my padded boot to a clear spot on the floor, trying to avoid the metal shards and wiring. Breaking the rules - that would have been a fuckin' stupid way to die.

Rules are the first thing you learn when you arrive here, after they process you. Not guard rules (although they beat those into you pretty quick): skip rules. Everyone talks about 173 - but not trying to scare the newbies, trying to teach them. Follow the rules and maybe you'll walk out alive.

I look down the hallway to the **tangle of copper wires**, slowly swaying like long grass in an afternoon breeze. This little fucker has rules. You can move, if you're quiet. You can make noise, if you stop moving. But if you make noise and then move? You're dead.

Still, 14 decibels is so quiet - softer than a whisper. Even with the suits, even with the Silencer dampening all sound from the other end of the hall, a chunk of metal underfoot might have been too loud. And those chunks are what it did to the drone. I need to tread carefully.

Zhao looks at me, trying to work out what's wrong. I give her one slow blink for 'okay' - we have a system for when we need to be silent, even without our hands free. The foam baffles we're carrying are bulky, unwieldy, but they're the only way to recontain the skip so

we can move it to a soundproof cell. Zhao nods back at me, slowly, and we resume our careful, ponderous walk towards the skip.

She's always been a mother hen, Zhao. After they put me in Eta-11's custody for SCP-092 testing, she was the first to treat me like a real person. The first one to ask my name, not just my number. Doesn't talk about kids of her own. But she was fussing over that terrified girl we found earlier tonight, before the breach alarm went off. The girl who was asking about 012. Another skip with rules, except the rules won't keep you safe. If you see it, you're dead.

Walking so slowly stretches things out endlessly. There's too much time to think. I have to keep watching the skip to remind myself to focus. Funny though, when you look at it for long enough, it almost seems peaceful, like a horse's mane, or long hair shimmering underwater. It's been forever since I had long hair.

"I was not brought up that way…"

I really can't get that song out of my head. Sandra Dee, what an awful name. I never told Zhao my real name - I never told anyone here. That name belongs to someone else - a kid that lived outside these walls. A kid who liked to steal, did some stupid shit, and paid for it.

I regret what happened, after. But I don't regret the stealing. I still do it, sometimes. Just to keep in practice, for the feeling of getting away with it. A little extra food, or some cigarettes, when I was in the cells. I don't take anything from the team, though. They aren't like the rest, so they don't deserve it. Although they'd probably blame me anyway if something went missing - they're always watching me like they know I'll try something. Always talking about me, like they were to that girl tonight. I saw how she looked at me, when I came into the den.

I did take something tonight, not from the team but from site security. A mini flashlight - when I saw it earlier tonight, during the bug-hunt, I wanted it. The big bunch of keys it's attached to might be interesting too, but it was the flashlight that grabbed me. I can feel it pressed in the pocket of my uniform, under the padded suit. I

definitely don't regret taking it.

There were thieves in the bible, I remember suddenly. Two of them, crucified with Jesus. One of them asked Jesus for forgiveness, the little ass-kisser. The other one didn't say anything. Did he have any regrets? I wonder what he thought about, nailed up on a cross for everyone to look at and gossip about. Up on Mount Golgotha. Funny, that's the name of 012 as well.

I need to focus again. We're moving so deliberately, one eye on the noise meters flashing on the inside of our visors, so aware of the danger. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, knowing you could die any time.

"I know what you wanna do…"

The worst thing is, the name is a joke at my expense. After a while in testing, they started calling me "D". I guess I'd lived long enough to be more than a number, but less than a person. And when the others finally asked my name, I wouldn't tell them, so "Dee" stuck. What do you call something that you pick up off the street, and adopt, and give it a new name and a place to sleep? Right: a stray.

The skip is only a few feet away now. Zhao nods again, and we lower the baffles to the ground, and start to join them together, making a soundproof box. Perfect teamwork.

They say I'm part of the team, a full MTF member, but I know that's not true. They still know where I came from. Every time they do something for me, every meal or rec break or talk with me, feels like charity, feels patronising. And one day, when the last of them get too old and Eta-11 gets shut down, they'll get amnestics and retirement with their families. What will I get?

The tendrils are still waving, scratching against the floor and moving the skip around. It looks sharper, up close. More metallic, more alien. From here the wires aren't floating, they're reaching. Searching. Hunting. But they're pushing it across the floor, right towards the box, exactly where it needs to go.

And then the Silencer malfunctions, and all hell breaks loose.

The beeping blows the sensors way past 14 decibels. Zhao and I are frozen in place, but suddenly I see movement. Just a head stuck around the corner to see what's happening, but the skip is so fast. A dozen wires shoot lightning-quick down the hall, bursting through the foam baffles. The guard has no time to react before they grab him and haul him into the corridor, twisting snake-like around him as more and more tendrils flow down to join them. And then…

I have to watch it. I can't turn my head or close my eyes. I try to turn my mind off but I have to watch it shake him and shake him.

It doesn't last long, less than a minute. The copper snakes trail back in to the body of the skip, just a couple of feet across again. They draw back through the holes in the ruined baffle and I try to think what we can do. And then, after an age, once it's safe to move again, I look at Zhao.

She's gone. She didn't see it, but she watched me see it. Her breathing is shallow and her eyes are unfocused - she's lost it. It's been too long - she's forgotten how it feels to have death breathing over your shoulder. She is motioning feebly to abort, but what the hell will we do then? Godammit, why did you have to choose today to pussy out, you weak bi-

Jesus fuck it's on my foot! The skip has shuffled right onto my padded boot. My breath catches in my throat and my tongue turns to sandpaper. I can feel the copper wires scratching against my calf, the thick fabric warped and stretched by the movement. It feels obscene. This fuckin' thing is so wrong, why can't they just destroy it? It seems to sit there forever, blindly waving, and I just want to scream, to kick it away, to end it all in a moment of blessed release.

And then it's off me, and I can breathe again. My mind is racing, but it's all about how the Silencer's broken, the foam's broken, Zhao's broken. We're fucked, we're fucked, we're - no, shut up. I have to think about what to do. I have time to think - I'm not moving, and I won't make any sound inside the suit.

The suit! The tendrils didn't pierce it, because the material has some give. And it will block enough sound to let us get a new box around the skip. All I have to do is drape the suit over it, and then wait for

backup.

I start loosening the fabric ties - no noisy zips or velcro. I'm not looking at Zhao, she may as well not be here. Once the suit is off, I feel very exposed, even in my uniform. My skin prickles and the sweat on my face is cold. I can't look at the sensor anymore, so I can't afford to make a sound. But the skip is still close - I just need to lean over and cover it without any noise.

"Just keep your cool…"

Godammit, that song! Of course, right when I need to concentrate most, that "gift" from my so-called teammates comes back to bite me. I'm trying to breathe silently, but I can feel my jaw clench.

Turn me from a lab rat into a stray mutt they've adopted, and they expect me to be grateful? Expect me to risk my life for their broken task force that no-one gives a shit about? Expect me to save their asses when they can't do the job themselves?

My blood is boiling. I'm leaning as far out as I can, weight all on one foot, reaching out with the suit in both hands, when it happens.

The flashlight in my pocket slips out, and the ring of keys tumbles to the floor.

In that moment, as I lose my balance and know that I am dead, a memory hits me from fifteen years ago.

Raised voices. I come out to see half the squad arguing with some pencil-neck from RAISA. Daniels, Smith, Stepovski, even Hennessey is bellowing. The info-sec rat is flanked by burly site guards, and things feel ugly. Then the Commander comes in. He takes the RAISA papers, waves the rat away, reads them and then looks up. At me. And the Commander says, clearly and slowly: "I'm afraid that your records are out of date. This woman is an MTF agent, and under my jurisdiction. You have no authority here. Agent… Agent Dee, you may return to your post."

That's the last thought I have, watching the keys drop, feeling myself fall. I remember feeling proud.

And then Zhao's hand comes from nowhere, sliding under the keys, catching them, muffling them in the soft glove of her suit. I'm not falling any more - Zhao is crouched, her other hand against my collarbone, holding me in balance. She looks up at me - I see her eyes scan left to the sensor - and gives me a slow blink. And Zhao gets up, takes the suit from my hands, and wraps the skip as carefully as a baby.

Once it's in a new box, and wheeled silently away to a new containment cell, I look over at Zhao. She takes off the hood of her suit, and sinks slowly to the floor - it looks like she's crying. Weak as shit, I start to think, but then my legs turn to jelly and I'm sitting on the floor next to her and somehow there are tears on my face too. Zhao hands me the flashlight and the keys without a word. She just puts an arm around my shoulders, and we sit there for a long time in silence.

What do you call a group of people that you mostly can't stand, but they're the only people who really know you, and you owe them everything? Oh yeah: family.

Afterwards, the Commander requests a commendation for us. He saw the whole thing, but couldn't risk approaching once the Silencer died. He says H and Mike did a good job containing the other skips, and we've all earned some down time. Ha, that was basically the first up-time we've had in two years.

So how strange is it that all those auditory skips broke containment at the same time? It's like someone *wanted* us kept busy. I almost suspect the Commander of trying to keep the MTF in business. Why would anyone do it otherwise?

It's not until the next day that we find out SCP-012 was stolen.

An Old Woman and her Garden

An old woman fought loneliness with her garden, passing the time between naps by singing to the things that grew there. She loved every one of her crops, from the tiny sprouting needles to the hard stalks that swayed and flexed above the ground. They shined white in the day, and at night the small patch gleamed against the side of her house like teeth in a massive jaw.

The old woman had lived by herself for many years. Her house would be small if she had a family, but because she was alone, it was the perfect size. She filled the house with things—figurines, *National Geographic* back issues, litter boxes for the dozen cats that came and went—until she was snug inside.

She had lost her husband years ago. There was nothing left of him except for many thousands of dollars, tucked away in an old coffee can. The old woman clipped coupons and shopped at discount stores. She folded her leftover newspaper and shopping bags and stacked them until they reached the ceiling.

The old woman never grew anything except bones in her garden. She had never tried to plant anything else. She didn't know if regular things would grow from her soil, and never thought about it aside from brief moments of curiosity. She never tried to plant bones anywhere else, so she never found out if her house was special or if she just had a talent.

It had started by accident with Osiris, one of her cats. He died one night—an ancient, scrappy beast who moved on peacefully. She buried him before his body was cold. Almost two weeks went by before she noticed it: a sliver, eggshell white and sharp as a pin.

She didn't know what to do, so she laid down plant food and watered it every day. Over weeks, the sliver grew and grew. Eventually, a pink cap formed over its end. The old woman expected the cap to become a flower, but little by little it took shape and

became a joint. Another bone grew out of the joint, and after a few more weeks there was a kitty's arm, skeletal but easy to recognize, claws gripping the earth. She cared for it, like all her beloved pets. Rough cords grew little by little from the base of its arm to the ends of its fingers. She knelt beside it night and day, singing songs and petting it gently, so it would know it wasn't alone.

During the months that it took for the arm to grow, the old woman tried planting bones of other kinds. Chicken bones. Bones picked from mice the other cats left at her doorstep. Bones from birds she found rotting on the sidewalk. Even the bones of a small deer she found at the side of the road. Some of them grew, but none as well as Osiris.

She tried putting down blood flakes and hair and eventually ground beef straight from the grocery store. She poured chicken broth and carrot juice and raw eggs into the soil. Still, most of the crops turned dull yellow, like rotten teeth. They became brittle and collapsed without taking root.

Osiris got healthier and healthier. One day she saw the arm moving, straining for a chunk of tuna she had left there. She rushed to dig him up. Osiris shook himself off. Clumps of dirt stuck to his mossy coat. He opened blank, white eyes as dull as quartz. He yawned and she saw a set of perfect granite teeth.

It wasn't quite Osiris, she knew that. But it was close enough for her to take it in. The thing would lay beside her at night. It wasn't warm, like Osiris used to be. It was damp and smelled musty and it didn't purr, but the old woman knew that it was hers. It brought her presents—rats and raccoons and, occasionally, dogs that it somehow dragged from the neighborhoods around her house. She never planted any of these because she was afraid that if they grew up, they would remember what had happened.

As time went by, it became harder and harder for the old woman to take care of herself. She began to forget which of the crops in her garden had been there the longest, which ones she could expect to blossom into life, which to uproot and hide in her shed. Eventually she couldn't remember how many there were, and became confused at all the holes appearing in the dirt.

It was after she actually saw one emerge on its own—a bat that she didn't remember planting—that she knew she needed help. An old woman shouldn't have to finish life alone. She thought about it for a long time. It wouldn't be easy to get what she needed, but the old woman was alone and had little left but time. She considered sneaking into a hospital or a university, but she had never been one to break the law and didn't know how to begin going about it. So the old woman started her old rattling car and drove around, always late at night. It took a long time, countless miles along lonely roads, but she found what she was looking for eventually. It was very late at night when she saw the pickup truck, flipped over, lying crumpled at the bottom of a small ravine.

The old woman stopped her car and made her way carefully down to the wreck. Hope started to flood from deep inside her, filling her up, making her warm. She'd found exactly what she needed. The young man hung upside-down, trickling blood, face cast in a delicate sleep. He was beautiful. It was hard work, on her hands and knees, hacking away at the seat belt with her rusted garden shears. It took a while, but she got him down eventually, careful not to let him fall on top of her. Dragging him up the hill was even harder and she was afraid that someone would stop, would see her and take her to jail; but the old woman did not give up and eventually she got him into her passenger seat. The rest was easy.

She planted him in the patch of ground behind her house and waited. She mixed the soil with steak, and tomato juice and bacon and sometimes beer—everything she could think of to make a man grow. She bought a portable radio and played music for him, always singing along. At night she held his bony hand and knew that the loneliness was almost over.

The old woman gradually cleaned her house. She hired a truck to take away the magazines and shopping bags. She bought a machine to shampoo the cat smell from her carpets. On the night her new husband stirred she was there, waiting. She helped him up and gently brushed the dirt from his cool skin. She looked into his dry white eyes and pressed his rough cheek to hers. She took him by the hand and led him inside.

She showed him around the empty house—nice, but now a little

cramped. As she led him down the hall to the bedroom she told him about how they'd have to renovate. They needed space for children, if they were going to make it a home.

An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then

< Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive | *DNM*

- | - | -

From: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*
Subject: **An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 18, 2022 2:10 PM EST**
To: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*

Hey Layla. Montenegro is lovely this time of year. 64 and sunny right now. Since we're both doing a lot of sitting around on our asses waiting for our various Chosen Ones to appear again, I thought I'd look back at what we were doing just five years ago, before Kate and our pal **Thaummy** fucked everything up. Look at all this trivial shit we got to care about before it all went south.

I had an article in this one! It was about using radioactive tracer particles in **2972** and **2830** to see if we could hunt down Penrose. Not necessary these days, obviously. Haven't seen him since he did us a favor with that pastor a few years back.

Back issues upon back issues of this one and nothing before last year mentioned Thaumiel. We kept this shit under wraps for way too long. Once she started visiting

us, elevating our backwater Task Force to the forefront of the global Foundation mission, we should've had our best folks working on the Aleph problem. Now half the world knows. Christ.

Hey, you're in that Narf thing's range! Spotted anything with that? I know a lot of low-priority skips are slipping through the cracks with the crisis.

I hope this gets through to you. I know even email is starting to get patchy thanks to the fucking Aleph Screwjob. Shortwave with everyone listening just isn't the same. I love you so damn much. Don't let the Northwest rain get you down.

—Titus

From: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*
Subject: **Re: An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 18, 2022 7:59 PM EST**
To: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*

You're probably gonna want to try plaintext. I'm guessing the PDFs you sent weren't supposed to look like this?

Until IT gets that DNS routing thing that doesn't send stuff right through the middle of NA and the center of the Aleph…situation…it's best to just avoid complex information.

And I miss you too, Titus. Though, of course, if Thaumiel really is done talking to us and the pencil-pushers are right, physical distance is probably a few years away from not mattering. Or something.

Of course, it's hard to tell you the exact implications of the Aleph force, since **072** is bringing up the old cover-story scary campfire tale schlock instead of the collected research on my terminal. If anyone over there can get the latest updates from the committee, send them our way? Lot of time for reading while we're on McTiriss stakeout. She knows how to take her damn time, that one.

- your Layla

From: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*
Subject: **Re: Re: An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 19, 2022 11:01 AM EST**
To: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*

Never mind. Thaumiel just told me it's all…She said we're in a simulated timeline she was using to test a solution to the Aleph problem. She said she didn't know what would happen to us when she put it away or if we were real.

She said she was sorry. She cried. She went away.

So. Love you, babe.

In the Aleph Room, in 2017, Mary Nakayama closed the emails and filed another branching path of probability as a dead end, a doomed universe. Another course of action that wouldn't work. Another splinter future she was using to test a fix.

It's been years. Years of secrecy. Of tentative tests, manipulating whole pocket worlds. Stuck in this **fucking room**. Trying to stop the terror she's about to cause.

"I didn't mean to break it," she says, to no one. "I just wanted to keep everyone safe."

She's been sitting at this replica of her old desk, peering into possible futures and seeing disaster in every one[123456], since she ascended. "Ascended." She was a manic 27-year-old who saw a hole in the universe and decided to use it for herself instead of doing the right thing and sending it up. Now she was paralyzed with power. Stuck in this place that contains all places, thinking about what to do.

It was time to stop waiting. It was time to stop hiding.

She stood up and looked at the confines of the room. An office with no windows that shifted and moved to show her whatever information she needed. A terminal that only told her the ways things would go wrong.

A prison for a stupid girl who thought she could play God, she thought. *I need help.*

On May 18, 2017, Mary Nakayama left her prison.

This is what happened next.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

- Revelation 4:1-3 (NIV)

- | - | -

< Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the

Footnotes

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

An Unconventional Tail

Electro-swing had never appealed to Agent Quinn MacAllister, but it's what she and her partner were stuck listening to in the car— unlike Crowley and Aziraphale, tapes in their car didn't transmogrify into *Best of Queen* when left unattended. They turned into tapes by bands she had never heard of- Caravan Palace, Whitney, Goldfish. She swore that the music professor at Wright State had cursed their vehicle during that botched exorcism in the student union.

Life in the UIU had never been glamorous— mostly paperwork and looking into alligators in the sewers— but this felt like a brand new low for her. Darnell- her partner- had easily seen worse, but even he was groaning at the prospect.

"Let me get this straight," he grumbled, undoing the cap on a bottle of chilled coffee. "These people dress up in hot, sweaty mascot costumes, to hang around with people who dress up in equally hot and sweaty mascot costumes?"

"And there are apparently enough of them to warrant multiple conventions, nationwide," Quinn affirmed. The tape had started its next track— *In the end, you're just a friend, we'll take it day by day*— "But, I think it's mostly harmless."

"So, why are we being called out here?"

Quinn's fingers drummed the steering wheel as she passed a sign that said "Indiana— Five Miles". "Because the director thought that we did an inadequate job on the last assignment."

"Not our fault that Ohio University has more ghosts than students," Darnell sipped at his drink. "Shit, we should be getting *medals*, not assignments to…" A look of near-sickness crossed his face. "I really don't want to say it."

"Assignments to furry conventions," Quinn rolled her eyes. "It's just a

bunch of kids and nerds. Worst we're going to see is a guy who holds onto a *Lion King* dakimakuras a little tight—"

"Daki*what,*" Darnell spat, nearly choking on his coffee. "What the fuck is that?"

Quinn decided not to tell him, for two reasons: 1) to spare him from the horror, and 2) in order to see the reaction on his face when he did figure it out.

"Mac, I'm fucking serious," Darnell insisted as they stopped at the toll booth on the way into Indiana. "What the fuck is a dakithing?"

Quinn had to hold back a laugh as the chorus to the song came in.

When they went into the hotel, a slightly muscular man wearing a pair of cat-ear shaped headphones and a casual set of clothes looked them up and down. "Can I see your badges?"

Quinn raised a brow, and then her badge, before her partner did the same. "How did you know we were FBI?"

"FB- oh." He looked crestfallen, waving his hands around. "No, no, see, people have badges for their furso— *characters* so we don't have to call each other by real names. I thought you were here for the convention." He gave a series of several awkward laughs. "Um, yeah, you guys are set up in the Richard Griffin Room, second floor."

"Thanks," Darnell said, putting his badge away and starting to the elevator. "I thought you said that it was just kids here?"

"I mean, people have to grow out of it. Why?"

"That guy had a wedding band, and I think I saw some gray hairs." He massaged his wrist. "Remind me to ask if the drinks here are free for us."

"Noted," Quinn said, pressing the button on the elevator. When it came to the ground floor, out stepped a large wolf, with dark black fur and deep, red eyes, looking at Quinn as if it was about to tear her

throat out.

Quinn recoiled, her heart going into her throat, skin going clammy. She went for her gun in a holster located under her jacket— but Darnell put a hand on her wrist. "What the fuck."

"Quinn, calm down," Darnell grinned. "It's a costume."

She got a second look at the wolf, and realized that the eyes were plastic and the tail was slightly dangling. The size of the limbs were the biggest giveaway— wolves had far thinner legs than this, and this thing looked big enough to hold a person. Following it out of the elevator were several others, all on two feet instead of four- a white cat with a star design over one eye, eyes red and purple; a blue wolf of some kind, cloth horns coming from his head; a fox with… noticeable assets, and a flirtatious look permanently plastered on her face. Quinn was transfixed on the wolf. "…how do you see out of that?"

"Poorly," the wolf responded, before walking off with its friends elsewhere.

Quinn jumped into the elevator and hammered the button for the second floor, her face gone white. Darnell joined her, a hand over his mouth as he tried not to laugh. "Shut. Up."

"Jesus *Christ*, though!" Darnell laughed as the elevator began to go up. "Your *face,* Mac!" He laughed into his hand and leaned against the wall of the elevator.

"Who the fuck makes a costume like that?!" Quinn gesticulated.

"Why?" Darnell snickered, his face starting to hurt from the grin he was giving. "Do you want one for yourself?"

"I want them put on a watchlist."

"Tell me what a Dakuramen is, and I'll see about it."

Quinn rolled her eyes and stepped out of the elevator the instant it *dinged* onto the second floor. There were a pair of goons by the door to the Richard Griffin room that she recognized as Agent Chalk

and Agent Cheese. They looked like they could be twins— same haircut, same unamused face, same blue eyes, same earpieces, same suit. They were unrelated, but Quinn knew them— old partners from an art crime task force.

"Don't antagonize," Darnell said, walking out of the elevator and towards the agents. He got out his badge and displayed it, Quinn doing much of the same.

Chalk looked them over, and smirked at Quinn. "Big Mac," he said. "on the Short Bus, with the Little Leagues."

"Can it, Chalk," she snapped.

"Or *what?*" He grinned. "You'll wave sage at me? Hold a cross up in my direction? *File paperwork?*"

"Mmm, no." Quinn replied, pursing her lips. "Well, yes on the last one. I'll just report you to the head of operations here for *unprofessional conduct*. Christ, man, you're almost forty. Get a life."

Chalk went as pale as his namesake, and opened the door to them. Inside, she heard someone whose voice sounded like seniority gesticulating to a crowd of assembled agents.

"…one sicko poured chlorine into the hotel, so now, yes, we have to be here *every year*
for the foreseeable future." The speaker was one Agent Herschel Beauregard— Quinn also recognized him. Head of an anti-terrorist task force, which wasn't good. "I would like to remind all agents to avoid unnecessary contact with the civilians, convention-goers or not. Should one approach you, do not acknowledge them. Making physical contact with you *can* be considered assaulting an FBI agent, should it come to that—"

The closing of the door alerted Beauregard to the entrance of the UIU agents. The entire task force looked at them, silent, before a snicker came out from the back. Beauregard laughed, "And Mulder and Scully are here, all the way from Ohio!"

Quinn crossed her arms with a strained smirk— Beauregard was in

the know about the anomalous world, so a few jabs could be forgiven. A *few.* "Congratulations. You are the one-millionth person to make that joke. You win my eternal scorn."

"I haven't won that already, Agent MacAllister? As I was saying," he turned to face the rest of the agents, expression once more growing stern. "If you have inclinations that correspond to those attending the convention, please, do that on your own time. Right now, you're on assignment." He adjusted his glasses. "One last thing— we're going to be working with a security firm for the duration of this. Gasleck Security Solutions going to be taking up residence next door in the Martin Knight room…"

Quinn turned to Darnell, and frowned. "Gasleck? That's…"

"Skippers." He turned away, letting out a soft "Fuck."

"At least they're not using SCP in every damn front organization anymore," Quinn put her head in her hands and moaned. "How long did that take them? Ninety years before someone started connecting the dots?"

"This one's worse, though. Look up what 'Gasleck' means in German."

Quinn would later do this, and, for only the fifth time this year, would regret the choices in her life that led her to this career.

After the briefing had ended, the two agents were greeted by a petite woman with slightly tanned skin and red hair. She was wearing a suit with sleeves that looked like they were too long— Quinn could see scar tissue coming out from underneath them when she shook hands. The woman smiled behind her glasses as she led them to a table. "Our usual liaison is indisposed— he's stuck in a bare room with an open door."

"Same thing happened to one of our teams," Darnell said. "I'm Agent Christman, this is Agent MacAllister."

"Dr. Katherine Sinclair, Occult Studies." She pulled the chair out and

sat down opposite them. "What do you know of the occult?"

Quinn looked at Darnell— the look of concentration on his face showed that he was digging in his brain. "We've confiscated the odd grimoire or two. Neither of us can do anything described in them, but he's pretty good on the details."

Dr. Sinclair nodded and placed a folder on the table, opening it up to a photograph of a cat— or something cat-like, standing on two legs. Its entire body was covered in swirling designs of blue woad, its whole form hunched over, and its eyes were black pits. The photograph itself was in a forest, dense, and the foliage seemed to be glowing. It took a while for Quinn to pick this out, but there were eyes in every dark corner of the picture.

"What do you make of this?" Dr. Sinclair asked.

Darnell looked over the picture, and picked it up, before placing it on the table once again. After wracking his brain for some seconds, he started speaking. "Creature is similar to the one found in UIU case file 1973-45, Codename: "Wait Til Martin Comes"."

"Two dozen teenagers found dismembered on a retreat in the Ozarks, with the sole survivor, One Nathan Proctor, claiming to have seen a hulking cat tearing them apart, covered in blue paint. Single photograph was taken, depicting the entity as it fled the scene. Proctor was allegedly spared because they had brought their own cats to the retreat with them."

"Occult symbology was found corresponding to a Celtic demi-deity known as— am I allowed to speak its name?"

"It's not a very powerful one," Sinclair nodded, her expression growing more surprised by the second. Her eyes were starting to protrude from behind her glasses.

"Corresponding to a Celtic demi-deity known as Irusan Cat Sidhe. Also known as the King of Cats, Monarch of Familiars, Lord of Pucas…"

Quinn held up her hand. "That's enough." Turning back to Sinclair,

she said, "I've heard him go on for hours about a cursed Bowie knife."

Sinclair folded her hands, and looked at Darnell with no small measure of admiration. "That's one hell of a memory you have there."

"Anyway. Irusan," Quinn looked over the photograph. "I take it that's what we're here for? A literal cat god among a sea of people in animals?"

"It could be worse," sighed Sinclair, her face betraying a nasty memory coming to mind. "One year, Bast decided to crash Anthrocon. She's a god of cats *and* fertility. There were—"

"Stopping you *right there*," Quinn held up her hands, before the conversation got to the point where she was begging for brain bleach and anti-vomiting agents. "So, where is this Irusan? And what does he want here?"

"What does any obscure god want? Worshipers, sacraments… sacrifices." Katherine rubbed her arms, her eyes flitting down a bit of scar tissue that appeared to have an "I" branded on it. "Gods like him are starting to go extinct— the only reason he's really around anymore is because he was in a video game. Not even joking."

"So, basically," Quinn thought aloud, "the objective here is: find the god, find those who worship him, neutralize both. Preferably before the civilians downstairs find out that cats have more than one way to skin them."

Both Darnell and Katherine's palms met their foreheads; the former had a bit more force behind it. They groaned, and Katherine muttered something about "fucking pear trees".

"You get *one*," Darnell sighed, hand sliding down his face.

Half an hour later, the two FBI agents and the mage were on the convention floor, surrounded by synthetic fur and overly-excitable nerds. In the background, there was techno music playing, with

lyrics including 'They just want to'("What the fuck does that word mean?" Darnell asked.) me with their bad dragon ("You don't want to know," Sinclair replied.)'

"Furries have no taste in music," Quinn's shoulders sank as she let out a soft groan. "Christ, fucking techno. Hear one song, you hear them—"

"HUGS!" exclaimed a blue-and-white tiger, popping out from the crowd in front of Quinn. She just flashed her FBI badge at him, as well as a stern *look*, before he melted back into the crowd.

"In addition to being cursed with being followed around by bad music," Quinn grumbled, putting her badge away and rubbing her head with the other hand, "I'm being accosted by people who think they're animals. Great."

"You know," Darnell mentioned, looking at an artist's table with some degree of curiosity, "I originally was going for a cultural anthropology degree. If these guys were around back in the day, I would've had one hell of a thesis."

"They've been around since the 80's or so," Katherine explained as she took out a small wooden rod. "The internet has just made them more prominent."

Quinn just gave her an incredulous look. "That some kind of magic thing? It's not going to turn us into newts, is it?"

"Even if it did, you'd get better," she shrugged, bringing it into both hands. "And no, it doesn't. This thing is designed to do one thing, and one thing only." She took the rod in her hands, and with a sharp *crack*, broke it in two. "And that is set off every fire alarm in about three-hundred yards."

At the instant the wood split, the fire alarm went off, and a confused horde of convention-goers made their way to the nearest exits. "All right," Sinclair said. "Look for anyone who isn't leaving, or who is reluctant to leave."

"Oddly specific… magic thing." Darnell frowned. "Do you need to

use it a lot?"

"…we're the Foundation. You should know the answer by now." She nodded and looked around the convention hall. "Eyes peeled."

"Never understood where that expression came from," Quinn said, before her eyes darted to a man at the back of the hall, retreating into a ballroom. "Hey, Darnell."

"I saw it," he said. His pistol came out of its holster, and he ran to the doors.

Sinclair and Quinn followed after, Quinn's own holster emptying into her hand, and the safety on her pistol going off with a *click*. Sinclair, for her part, was producing from her coat a large, metal ring that was in the shape of an all-too-familiar symbol— two circles, with three lines pointing towards the center. "Seriously?" Quinn chided.

"It's a phylactery," she shrugged. "Not our fault the people in R&D are vain."

The two agents kicked open the doors to the ballroom, and inside, found a dozen people. They were all clad in grey, tabby-colored robes, and they were all chanting an incantation in an ancient tongue that none of them could, or wanted to, understand. "F'im fey Irusan, F'im fey Cat Sidhe, F'im Fey Irusan, F'im dh'fey ra…"

They were grouped around an enormous, slumbering calico, with an inflatable pool next to it serving as a bowl of milk. The calico had blue whorls of woad painted onto its fur, and smelled heavily of catnip, dead mice, and self-confidence. It slumbered, still, gaining power from those around it.

Quinn frowned, and held up her badge. "FBI. You know what that stands for?" The figures turned to look at her. "It stands for 'anyone who doesn't want to die a virgin, leave now'." Three of the figures got up and fled; Quinn saw, to her chagrin, that they were wearing the visages of foxes and wolves and tigers underneath. "Anyone who's *not* a virgin and has something left to live for, you get out too." Six more left, leaving only three figures, who Quinn couldn't help but pity. "Fucking millennials."

Sinclair stepped in, pulling out another rod. She shook her head, bit her thumb, and rubbed blood on the stick, before throwing it into the air with a cry of "Nathair athrú bata!"

In mid-air, it changed into a boa constrictor the size of a car, and landed with a *thud* next to the remaining cultists, who fled the room, their robes being shed and exposing their costumes. Darnell just gave Katherine a mystified look, eyebrow raised at an almost painful angle."Was that—"

"Yup. There's an entire school of magical theory based around that, believe it or not."

"Anyway," Quinn grumbled, taking cautious steps around the snake and the cat; the former had begun to revert into a rod. She inspected its face, and found that the cat had two sets of eyes, and what appeared to be an extra mouth in its forehead. "…if I was an idiot, I'd say we euthanize it."

"Dealt with gods before?" Sinclair asked.

"…there was this one time back home." Quinn's shoulders dipped, and her voice wilted. "Never again."

"I read the incident report," Sinclair replied, her mood briefly somber. "Let's get this over with." She came close to the cat, phylactery in hand, and pressed it up against the god's forehead. She began singing softly, in Gaelic, a siren's song that the agents had to actively resist listening to.

Unfortunately, it wasn't very effective against the cat. It came awake, and batted the doctor away, the phylactery still attached to its forehead, the spell incomplete. Sinclair landed against the wall with a sickening *crack*, and lay still.

"Shit!" the two agents cursed, the syllable leaping off their mouths in synchrony. They drew their weapons, and fired into the cat's hide, watching as the fur just absorbed the bullets.

The cat rose to two feet, and laughed, running out the room, its form changing and shrinking as it did. Its face became more plush-

looking, its eyes duller, and its fur took on the texture of plastic fiber.

"…well, fuck," Quinn said. She ran towards Sinclair, who was on the ground, nursing her arm.

"Fuck," she winced, standing up. "I think it's broken. And doing magic with a broken arm is not a good idea- interrupts the flow of energy, and— nevermind."

Quinn took off her jacket and fashioned a sling for the doctor. "It got away. It could be anywhere in the hotel by now."

"Son of a bitch," Sinclair said as she stumbled towards the door, Darnell coming over to heft her up. "I'll be fine, I just need to see a doctor. You two have to contain it. God help us."

"How?" Quinn asked. "It looks just like any one else here, now."

"…there's a song, or rather, a cadence, that's linked to the binding spell. I can sing you it, and maybe you two can come up with something. I don't suppose- ow!" She winced as she went over the threshold of the ballroom, foot catching on some raised carpet, "That you two are any good at karaoke?"

"Couldn't we find the song somewhere?" Quinn asked; fire trucks were beginning to surround the convention center, and firemen were coming in. Quinn lifted up her badge, as Darnell gave some bullshit explanation about Sinclair being trampled by the crush. "Or one like it? The lyrics don't matter, it's just the cadence, yeah?

"…you have that app that lets you find music based on singing?"

"Darnell does." They limped past the firemen, and Quinn nodded at her partner, who produced the phone and the app in question. "Sing it."

Sinclair hummed a few bars into the microphone, and within seconds, the phone chimed and brought up a song. "What is it?"

"…Quinn," he said, bringing up the phone, "You're not gonna like this."

It took half a minute for Quinn to realize what she was seeing. It was an electro-swing song. One that she was fairly sure she had on a cassette in her car. "…I hate the way the universe works."

"Join the club," Sinclair laughed, before gasping and wincing in pain. "At least you don't have to live with it every day."

"Can't believe we're doing this," Quinn said as she came down the elevator that evening. "Going to a rave full of people in-" she hesitated on the term- "fursuits to catch a cat god, all because a magician broke her arm."

"The skippers have tech that's going to repair her arm within the hour," Darnell replied with a soft roll of his shoulders. "I agree that it's dumb we have to do this, but it's either this, or the death of hundreds of people."

"Right," Quinn said, passing by a poster that stated a band that was coming to play at the convention had had their act cancelled; a brief glance showed it was the same band that played the song that was going to trap the cat. "…this could all have been avoided so easily."

"Anyway. Let's do this." They walked through the hall, and at the ballroom doors, they were stopped.

"Room's full," said a tubby man wearing what was clearly a rent-a-cop suit. "Fire code and all that, sorry."

"FBI," Quinn said as the two agents brought up their badges. "There is a dangerous person of interest in there."

"Well," the guard said, his mouth splitting into a Cheshire Chelsea grin. "This charade can be dropped, then. Master Irusan will not be stopped. His bacchanal shall-"

Three seconds later, Darnell was wiping nose blood off of his fist, and Quinn was cuffing the "guard". "We might be too late," Darnell said. "We gotta get in there."

"Agreed," she said, opening the door. "Didn't even bother to lock it."

"…they really don't need to," Darnell said, eyes wide as he looked over the crowd. In the center, surrounded by enamored men and women, stood Irusan, still having assumed the form of a simple human being in an animal costume. People around him waved to the rhythm of its cat song, which was only broken, briefly, by the entrance of the agents.

WELL, it said in a booming, mental voice. *COME TO WORSHIP? TO FIGHT? OR TO CONTAIN?*

"…we come to arrest," Quinn frowned. "By the power invested in me by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I say: *hit it, boys.*"

The speakers in the room blared to life, blasting **`Lone Digger`** by Caravan Palace. "It's the twenty-first century," Quinn yelled over the music. "We had our tech guys rig it up hours ago. They just needed our signal to confirm you were here."

The cat god looked around in something that could be approximated to horror with its blank, plastic eyes, and it held its head, the phylactery still stuck to it. It looked like it was being sucked in, before it let out a command directed at its followers, heard by Quinn and Darnell like a headache: *DESTROY.*

Instantly, one-hundred people began throwing themselves at the speakers, and the agents. Darnell went down thanks to a tackle from a particularly strong… Quinn didn't know what that was. A hyrax? She managed to dart through the crowd, and come up to Irusan, who was starting to shrink.

BITCH, it screamed. *I WILL SMITE YOU AND YOUR KIND FROM EXISTENCE. FELINES WILL FOREVER SHUN AND ATTACK YOU.*

"I'm more of a dog person anyway" Quinn snarked. "And besides, to do that, you need power. The most power you'll be having soon are the lights in your cell."

The cat's form changed, and with a loud *roar,* the music cut out, the lights flicked, and Quinn felt the unmistakable surge of an EMP on her skin. Standing before her was a much smaller version of the

abominable cat she had found earlier in the day, its twin maws gaping. *This is a rave. Let's fucking dance.*

"Darnell!" Quinn called. "He pulsed the music! Get it back up!"

"Trying!" He said, shoving his way through a crowd (pack?) of wolves.

Quinn, for her part, took out her gun and aimed it, point-blank, at the cat. She fired, and the cat's head recoiled, only to slowly slide back forward, bullet in his teeth. "…that is so fucking cliche. Couldn't you have at least had a hole in your head?"

Cliches are all I have left! The cat yowled in her mind, the voice having grown weaker. She felt scratch marks appear on her arm, and saw blood start to seep through her sleeve. *My stories are* **burnt!** *I only exist because of a me-damned* **video game!**

Meanwhile, another yowl, another cut, *YOU get to exist without needing your story to be told. Humans are the only self-sufficient sapient beings on this planet. How is that fair?!*

"You want a story?" Quinn asked, dodging a swipe of his claw. "Fine. Once upon a time, there was a very grumpy cat named Irusan. It- fuck!" she dove underneath its jaws as Irusan snapped at her. "It decided to trash a convention of nerds that tried to dress up like animals—" A gunshot to his side was followed by her crying out, "*Darnell what is taking so long?*

"I got fucking bitten by five people!" he yelled back, delivering a punch to a foam-covered coyote head.

Quinn was grabbed by a massive paw, and bit the cat's hand to get away from it. She was surprised that blood was drawn, and even more surprised when it was dropped. She continued talking as the cat's hand healed. "It decided to trash a convention just for the sake of getting new worshipers, making my life, my partner's life, the Skipper's lives, and the lives of everyone here miserable in the process." She weaved her way behind him, and said, "Then, one day, he got neutered by an FBI agent." Quinn punctuated this by making the lowest blow one could on anything male— a swift,

upward kick between the legs. All this got her was a sore foot. "… mmmmmooooother fuuuuucker."

Points for effort, Irusan grinned, his head turning around one-hundred eighty degrees, followed by the rest of his body. *Now, animal companions mine, rend them limb from limb, and you will receive your reward!*

Quinn was grabbed from either side by cartoon-faced animal-dressed psychopaths, who began pulling at her arms. She didn't quite think that expression was going to be so literal. Then, something came to mind, one last, desperate thing. "…you *really* want to get my blood on your fur?"

The people pulling against her stopped their efforts, paused for thought, and let her go. "Hell no," one of them, a rather graceful looking border collie, said. "I paid a grand for the head alone."

Irusan looked perplexed by this. *DESTROY!* he commanded, once more. The furries just stood there, looking at him, then at their costumes, then at Quinn.

Agent MacAllister grinned. "Nothing comes between a nerd and their cosplay."

"I got it up!" Darnell yelled, and with an audible clack of a key, and the music started blaring from where it stopped, the near-indecipherable, mondegreen-filled chorus.

With a final *howl*, the cat's began to sink into the symbol, and finally, in a puff of dislogic, vanished into the metal ring entirely. Quinn grinned as it rattled on the floor, clapping her hands… which then turned into a frown. "…and in five…"

Foundation agents stormed the ballroom, two of them throwing Quinn and Darnell a gas mask each, before they flooded the room with a brain-wiping drug and knockout agent. The furries around them fell to the ground, some of their heads cushioned by the foam around them, others not so much.

Quinn and Darnell exited the room, only to find Sinclair waiting for

them, her arm mended. "Okay, I have to ask," Quinn said. "Why is it you call us on these things? We're not well-equipped, we can't shoot fireballs out of our noses, and I've not touched an assault rifle in six months."

"On these assignments?" Sinclair looked sheepish. "Quite frankly, Agent MacAllister, when it comes to containing an anomaly in a crowded, civilian setting… the Foundation doesn't have the best track record of minimizing casualties. I think the only causalities in this hotel are going to be the bedsheets."

"…I'm done," Quinn peeled off her mask. "Do we have to stay here for the duration? Because I would take chasing down a currency-eater in Cincinnati any day over this."

"You're stuck here," Sinclair affirmed, "But the drinks are free."

"Thank god," both the agents said at the same time. "You gonna come drink with us?" Darnell asked.

"I have to contain the phylactery, make sure the task force doesn't stomp anyone to death, and then… I have plans." Her eyes glanced downward at the ground on the last statement. "Well. Good job, you two. Pats on the backs, gold stars, et cetera."

"Right," Quinn said. "Whatever. I hope they have really fucking good mojitos here…"

The conversation turned to alcohol as Quinn and Darnell left the room. Sinclair, for her part, produced the panel schedule from her pocket and looked it over. The convention wasn't over yet- there was still the panel on selachian anatomy, another on fursuit building, a guest speaker, free STD testing, a screening of Zootopia— "… wait," she looked at the fourth event and rubbed her head. "Well, at least they're being careful."

An Unusual Incident

Robert Baxter was a punctual man. At 9:00 o'clock every morning his butt was in his undersized office chair. At 11:00 he would replenish his coffee. Lunch was at 1:30 sharp, no exceptions. A tuna and croissant sandwich with chips. At 3:00 he walks around the office on his way to the coffee machine, stopping to chat with whoever looked like they were receptive to it. Usually Julia, God bless her. At 5:00, with all his work done for the day, Robert is out the door, no, he wouldn't like to go for a drink after. He prided himself on his sobriety. Fifteen years strong, starting the day he got this job.

If you asked his coworkers what they thought about him, the answers are pretty much all the same. Oh, Robert is a good worker. Always here on time, never misses a day. Good for a joke too, isn't that right Julia? Sure, sometimes he's a bit of a straight edge, but hey, you can't blame the guy. Not after the car accident.

His ex-wife has something a little different to say. If you can get past the ranting about his self-destructive and indulgent nature, she might admit that he was a total sweetheart when they first met. No, she isn't mad at the new Robert, just the old one, the Robert who got behind the wheel of an SUV while blasted out of his mind and ended up fighting for his life in a Massachusetts hospital. She's happy that he got his life back, but makes it clear she is finished with him, thank you very much.

On an ordinary Friday morning, Robert drove down to the office, located in a well-hidden business park. He maneuvered into his favorite spot – no assigned parking here- and headed into the building. The elevator was on the top floor, so he had no choice but to wait. Robert hated waiting, especially for anything out of his control. Time, he had once theorized to his soon to be ex-wife, was mankind's greatest enemy. We either have too much of it, or too little, and once it's gone it never comes back. Life is a struggle

against the constant advancement of time; deadlines, age, even relaxation. *All people*, he told her, *despise Sundays, because we know in the back of our minds that it comes to an end sooner than we want*. His words were slurring together at that point, but he was still proud of his attempt at philosophy. *Not bad for a business grad*, he'd thought while slamming down another shot.

Arriving at the fifth floor, Robert met his first obstacle; the lights were off. He had seen some of his co-worker's cars, so he figured the whole floor must be having trouble. Navigating his way through the darkened hallway he grappled at the door to the office he worked in.

"Hello?" There was no response as he peered into the room. The blinds were down, so only a small amount of light was seeping through. He was groping around for the switch when he remembered: today was the fourteenth of September. It was his birthday on Sunday.

Of course he had forgotten, he had been working too hard on the Peterson presentation to even think about celebrating. Despite his insistence to the contrary, his co-workers always threw him a surprise party. No doubt they were all hiding around the office now, waiting for him to walk in. There would be a cake (chocolate) and drinks (non-alcoholic). Susan probably brought in her famous salsa, she knew how much he liked it.

Steeling himself for a non-productive workday, Robert flipped up the light switch and braced for the explosive cheer. There was nothing. In fact, there wasn't anybody at all. The office was deserted, with chairs strewn about the floor. A half hung "Happy Birthday" banner fluttered next to the AC unit's vent. On the floor next to the cubicles he could see the demolished remains of a once delicious looking chocolate cake –a large footprint impressed on the moist lump- and beside that a single shoe. There was a large splatter of what appeared to be seedless strawberry jam on the boss's office door.

"Guys, come on." Motioning to the mess, "I hope you don't expect me to help clean that up."

Silence.

“If this is a joke, I very much don’t appreciate it.” He paused. Time to appeal to authority. “Henderson is going to flip when he comes in.” Still nothing.

He left his coat on the rack but kept a firm grip on his briefcase as he moved towards the reminder of the office. *If I can reach my desk*, he thought, *I can get some work done. These clowns can wish me happy birthday like normal people.*

He never got that far. Turning the corner at the cubicles he encountered his second obstacle: Julia. Or rather, what was left of her.

Robert didn’t scream, but rather let loose a sort of guttural moan. One half of his brain yelled at him, *turn the hell around, get your ass out of there, whatever did this to her will be back to get you*, and the other half of his brain demanded he make sure she wasn’t actually dead. Robert thought this was a stupid notion, since she was thoroughly torn in half. So, he turned around and headed for the door. He didn’t get very far.

The third obstacle looked like a man. That’s as far as the similarities got. Instead of clothing or even skin, the thing was pitch black. It was blocking the exit, and sensing Robert approach, lifted its head, revealing a swirling chaos of shifting features. Eyes would appear and disappear; a nose might expose itself only to be replaced by the black void. It stretched a hand out as a mouth appeared on its head. The hand grew longer and more distorted as the mouth opened, revealing a set of gums but not teeth.

What the fuck is that. Robert wasn’t exactly the worlds quickest thinker, but he could recognize a bad situation when he saw it. He chucked his briefcase at the creature but watched as it sailed past and crashed into the door. The thing turned and reached for the briefcase. Robert could only watch as it pawed at the clasp. Finding purchase it ripped the two sides apart and the contents spilled to the floor.

Robert didn’t stick around to join the briefcase. He booked it towards the back end of the office. Almost immediately his chest began to burn, and his legs threatened to spill out from under him. He hadn’t

been in shape before the car accident, and the injuries had left their mark on his physical abilities. He kept going, balancing his longing to stop with his desire to not die. Passing the conference room, he didn't pause to look inside. He could see the blood on the walls.

He ducked inside the closest bathroom door, which happened to be the women's and locked the door. Hiding inside the last stall, Robert lifted his feet up and huddled on the toilet. Taking a few moments to inhale he was struck by the absurdity of the situation. *I'm an office man goddammit*, he thought, *this isn't supposed to happen to people like me.*

The image of Julia, mother of three, all ripped up sent him diving for the toilet. It was now that the tears began to flow. *I'm going to die here. Oh God in heaven I'm going to die here.*

For the next half hour Robert alternated between shrill crying and silent weeping. Every time he thought he had run out of tears, his body proved him wrong. *Maybe it left, maybe that thing decided to le-* a slam on the bathroom door interrupted him, followed by a piercing screech like nails on a chalkboard. Remembering Julia and the briefcase, Robert braced himself. But the door never opened. He could hear the door handle jingle a little, then silence.

Now that the tears had stopped flowing, Robert decided to think about the position he was in. *You are a natural problem solver*, he remembered Henderson telling him after an enormous client pitch went south. *I have no doubt you'll rise to the occasion*. And Robert was mad. He clenched his fists in a somewhat dramatic fashion. He was an obese man in his late 40's, reduced to hiding in a women's restroom. But he was alive, and safe for now. Not only that, but the creature outside hadn't displayed any clear signs of intelligence. *Maybe I've got a chance after all.* He had no idea how fast it could move, but the fact that it hadn't caught him during his escape was a source of hope. Calling for help on the phone would be too risky. The bathroom had no windows, so there was no chance of getting assistance that way. *The front door is my only way out*, he thought. He stood up and stepped out the stall.

There was a knock on the bathroom door. The door handle shook a little, but the lock held tight. Then a voice.

“Can I help you… there’s something…wrong.” Robert almost screamed. That was Susan the receptionists voice. It sounded stilted and unnatural, but there was no mistaking. “Robert… please…she’s dead.”

All his earlier bravado vanished. The corner floor of the restroom suddenly felt very comfortable. The thing that sounded like Susan moaned behind the door. Then fell quiet.

Robert’s wristwatch displayed the time: 11:00a.m. He stayed in the corner for the rest of the afternoon, only getting up to drink out of the sink. His thoughts flipped from hyperactive rambling to shocked silence. And as time went on his mind began to drift…

Agent Calverez tossed the ball. It hit his small office wall and fell straight to the floor.

“Goddamit.”

A bald head peeked inside the open door. “No bounce huh?”

“Of course not. These are pieces of shit.”

“Don’t let Donsley hear you say that. She submitted the idea for the stress ball distribution.”

Calverez sighed and rubbed the back of his head. “Of course she did.”

Agent Alexi stepped into the office proper. “Look, this may be premature, but I’ve got something interesting. One of our boys picked up a local security guy. Says he works for an office complex in the sticks. He’s been ranting about some weird shit going on.”

Calverez leaned forward. “Are you serious? That’s the best you’ve got?”

Alexi smiled. “It’s a little more interesting than that. According to the guard, the employees of one of the offices have locked themselves in. He can’t open the door with his key, almost like its jammed from the other side. Nobody replied when he knocked on the door, and

from the parking lot it looks like the lights are off too. But he swears he can see something moving around in there."

"So? Maybe they went home."

The smile got bigger. "While leaving their cars at the office?"

…until he awoke with a start. His wristwatch was beeping at him. It was 4:55. Time to start packing up and go home.

"This is my new home now." He muttered to himself. "I get to live where I work, and work where I live!" This caused him to laugh out loud. *Oh God I'm losing it.*

A knock on the door.

"Go away." Robert managed to croak out.

"Hey buddy, I'm just checking up on you. Its closing time you know." Robert sat up alert. That was Mike, the accountant. He was still alive! A thousand thoughts bounced around in his skull. Maybe he had come in late, and the monster had left; maybe he had survived and come back with help; maybe this was all just a horrific nightmare he had just woken up from…

He reached for the door handle but stopped. There was a sound coming from behind the door. It was *wet*.

"Hey Mike, are you okay?" He asked through the door.

There was a laugh. It lasted too long to be comfortable. "Of course I'm okay Robert. What, do you think I'm lying to you?" More laughter.

"No, it's just that there's been some stran-" Robert wasn't able to finish before Mike's voice started to scream at him.

"WHAT, DO YOU THINK I'M ACTUALLY A DISMEMBERED HEAD BEING PUPPETTED AROUND? ROBERT THAT IS JUST SILLY!"

Blood was beginning to seep in under the door. Robert was already

back in his stall. Despite his best effort, the tears would not come.

Outside the door, the thing that sounded like Mike began to count. It reached 4,000 before stopping.

The four agents met in the briefing room. Agent Levi brought snacks. Finishing his donut, Alexi laid out the info they had so far. Donsley looked over everything with extreme scrutiny. Finally, she nodded. “It’s at least worth checking out.”

“Not like we got anything better to do” Calverez muttered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Nothing ma’am. Are local police incapable of handling this?”

“Alexi and I both agreed that if we suspect anomalous activity, we are obligated to check it out.”

They laid out their plan. Agents Levi and Alexi would sweep up to the fifth floor, checking the other stories as they went. Agents Donsley and Calverez would remain to secure the parking lot until backup was needed.

After the briefing, Donsley set out to gain final approval from the director. The others began gearing up. And then they waited. She wasn’t back for another hour. No one asked what took so long. They were used to glacial efficiency.

God bless the American tax dollar, Calverez thought. Then they hit the road.

It was Saturday afternoon when the voices started up again. There would be a knock on the door, followed by another one of Robert’s co-workers.

“Hey sweetie, why don’t you come out here with us?” It sounded like Julia.

“It’s lonely out here without you. I’m so cold inside.” Offered Alex

from HR.

Even Henderson joined in. “Robert, I’m disappointed in you. You were always such a team player. Do you not care about us anymore?”

Calverez and Donsley argued the entire trip there. It started when she asked him why he kept checking his rear-view mirror.

“Spooks” Uncomfortable shuffling.

“Does that happen often?” Donsley regretted not going for two vans.

“Sure. Just ask Alexi. He lost three Carts to them last month alone.”

Alexi’s voice drifted out from the back. “It’s true.”

Levi’s voice followed. “Anybody want some trail mix?”

Calverez slammed his hands on the wheel. “For the last time, nobody wants your fucking snacks!”

Donsley almost slapped him. “Don’t talk to your fellow agents like that!”

He turned around, taking his eyes off the road for what Donsley thought was a dangerous amount of time. “You do not get to tell me what to do. I’m the senior agent here, not you.”

“Then what the hell is your problem?”

His eyes darted back to the road. When he spoke, his voice was low. “We are driving, in the middle of the night, to do an office check. Sure, we might find something, but I’m willing to bet the entire office just drank the Kool-Aid. Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled to be out in the field. But an office locked from the inside? How am I supposed to take any of this seriously? And for that matter, why do you?”

Donsley sensed there was more to it than that, but she let it go. They sat in awkward silence for a while.

“Hey, Levi…” Calverez’s voice was soft. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure you were just hungry.”

Overnight the voices began working. They pretended to hear a phone ringing, and Susan would answer. Papers were shuffled, and the copy machine even went off a few times. Henderson would call random employees into his office and praise them while disparaging Robert. They all did this as loud as possible, for Robert’s benefit. But he was done listening at this point.

At midnight, blackened fingers could be seen pushing chocolate cake under the bathroom door. There was a loud knock, and in unison all the voices began to sing.

“Happy Birthday to you.”

“Happy Birthday to you.”

“Happy Birthday dear Robert.”

“Happy Birthday to you.”

There was an applause, followed by cries for an encore. The singing began again. This time Robert joined in.

Agent Calverez lit another cigarette. It was his second since pulling into the lot. He spoke into his walkie.

“For the love of God please tell me you aren’t still waiting for the elevator.”

In response, a curtain moved aside from a third story window. A man in a blue suit appeared, then promptly gave him the finger. Calverez chuckled.

“I gotcha, I gotcha. Keep searching.” He told the walkie. “Asshole”.

His cigarette was snatched from his mouth. A polished shoe

stamped it out.

“Do you think this is a joke, Agent?” Donsley asked.

Of course I do, Agent Hardass, he thought. “Um, no ma’am. I’m taking this very seriously.”

“Oh? Because you are making it easy assume the opposite.”

Calverez sighed, perhaps too loudly. Donsley opened her mouth to retort, but he was saved by the squawking of the walkie.

“Ground team, ground team, come in ground team.”

Donsley grabbed his walkie. “Report, away team.”

“Hey, we’ve got some shit on the fifth floor. Blood all over, right outside an office called *Henderson and Co*.”

She raised a sharp eyebrow at Calverez. “Hold your position, we are coming up.” The walkie barked affirmative. “Looks like our lead paid off.”

Our lead is the building security guard you dipshit, Calverez thought. But only to himself.

The two agents pulled free their handguns and moved into the lobby. Donsley motioned towards the stairs and pulled the door open. Calverez swept in and took the lead. They moved up the stairs in silence, up to the fifth floor. Right before Calverez could open the stairwell door, he felt a hand on his arm. He turned to face Donsley.

She came right out and said it. “What’s your problem Tony, huh? Is it me? I know we haven’t worked together long, but I don’t think I’ve been that much of a bitch to warrant this attitude.”

“Are you serious? Is now really the best time for this?”

“I’m not going in there until we hash this out. Otherwise we might as well be on opposite teams.”

Calverez felt his hands ball up. It took restraint to not shout in the cramped stairwell.

“You wanna know my problem? Fine, I’ll tell you. This is a joke. This mission, this job, its all a fucking act. We literally exist as the butt of someone else’s joke. When it comes to this paranormal shit, we aren’t even the fucking b-team. Most of our job is to sit on our asses and wait for the fucking goon squad to show up and solve our problems for us.” He inhaled. “I could give less of a shit what you think of me, since I know we only work here because we pissed someone else off enough for them to kick us into the ground. This isn’t a job. It’s not even an assignment. It’s a fucking punishment.”

He didn’t expect the smile. Her reply was soft. “Have you considered I act the way I do because I want us to do better? I know our reputation. But I also know you aren’t a screw up. Nor am I. At some point in our careers, we cared. About this country, about the Bureau, hell, even each other. We’re a joke because someone told us we were, and we believed it. Sure, we can mope around all day waiting for the men in black to kick us out, or we can do something ourselves.” She pointed at the door. “In there, we’ve got some kind of fucked up freak doing God knows what. There might even be survivors. They are counting on us.”

Calverez felt his defenses weaken. How long had it been since someone had actually expressed hope, had believed in their mission? At some point or another he must have cared. Why else would he have wrapped himself in this cloak of skepticism if not to pretend otherwise. His eyes began to tear up, so he wiped them on his sleeve.

He tried to open his mouth to speak, but no words came to him. Donsley continued. “You wanna know what else? I didn’t ask the director for permission.” Calverez started at this one. “We are all on our own for this one. No one to tell us what to do or how to do it. We have the initiative here. We can make the difference.”

Donsley grabbed Calverez by the hand. “They need you, Agent Calverez.”

God, I needed to hear this, he thought. This was real. Not that shit

back at the office, the little trinkets and gadgets that no one else had cared to collect. Not the miserable briefings back in D.C. Years of constant humiliation had rendered him cynical. But no one had ever talked like this to him. *If a man can't take pride in his own work*, his father had told him, *then the man's the problem, not the job*. He remembered how proud he felt at his graduation ceremony. No one had taken that pride from him.

Calverez found himself nodding. "Aye ma'am. I'm ready to be a hero."

Robert was sure he was dead. He hadn't eaten since Friday morning, refusing to touch the cake that clogged the gap in the door. The water in the sink tasted foul to him. And outside the masquerade continued. His mind was blank. The thing outside seemed content to let him waste away in the bathroom, and Robert didn't mind obliging it.

There was a loud crack. He raised his head in response. Outside the restroom door he could hear yelling, then a cry as a gunshot rang out. There was more yelling, followed by a cascade of gunfire. He swore he could hear Julia scream.

Silence. Robert stood up and approached the bathroom door that had become a prison. He could hear voices, ones he didn't recognize. There was laughter.

Robert unlocked the handle, turned it, and stepped outside.

Ana Hums

Dr. Adileh Khayyam entered the Site-43 cafeteria with analytical eyes, scanning from table to table with a slight frown until they settled upon a pale, tired-looking woman with short, black hair. The woman poured over several notes over a mug of coffee, pausing to look up at Dr. Khayyam, then immediately looked down. Dr. Khayyam chuckled to herself and quietly went to make herself a mug of coffee. She could feel the woman watching her the whole time, but when Dr. Khayyam turned back around, once again, the woman pretended to look over her papers. Dr. Khayyam quietly carried the mug over, and took a seat.

"Good afternoon, Researcher Mabel," Dr. Khayyam said softly. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"You can call me Carolyn," the woman replied with a sigh, "and no, feel free."

Dr. Khayyam nodded, and took a long sip of her coffee. Researcher Mabel continued to avoid her gaze.

"I didn't see you at the seminar today," Dr. Khayyam continued. "Heard from a little bird you were planning on dropping the Anomalous Humanoids Certification entirely. Is this true?"

Researcher Mabel sighed.

"That's the last time I tell Ian anything…" she mumbled and finally locked eyes with her senior. "Yes. It’s true."

Dr. Khayyam took another sip from her coffee before setting the mug down.

"Why though, exactly?" she asked. "If you don't mind sharing."

"Because, to be frank, Dr. Khayyam, if I've learned anything from

your seminars these past three weeks, it’s that Ana Hums positions burn people out fast," Researcher Mabel explained. She then clenched her fists in emphasis. "It's… soul crushing. And honestly, I don't think I'm cut out for it. I do appreciate your recommendation, but you have the wrong person."

Dr. Khayyam smiled as she listened, eventually chuckling softly again. Researcher Mabel tilted her head.

"You find that funny?" she asked.

"A little, yeah," Dr. Khayyam replied. "It’s just… I remember thinking that exact thing when I was in your shoes, way back when…"

"Congratulations!" Dr. Freedmen said with an ear to ear grin. "Heard you all just got certified. Welcome to Ana Hums!"

A young Adileh Khayyam gave a small smile in return as well as a half-hearted nod.

"Still feel like I'm making a huge mistake," Adileh replied, looking again at the Anomalous Humanoid Specialist Certificate she loosely held in her grip. "Let’s give it a shot though."

Dr. Freedman waved away her concerns with a roll of his hand.

"Dr. Khayyam," he replied with a confident laugh, "I've been in Anomalous Humanoids at Site-43 for 30 years now. I've seen a lot of talented people get that little gold star you have in your hands, and I can promise you that all of them, regardless of how successful they eventually became, felt the same way you do now! Trust me, Adileh. You're going to do fine."

Adileh nodded and looked down at the certificate again, concentrating on the print.

"I've got this…" she reassured herself.

"Do you know what team you're going to be assigned to first?" Dr. Freedmen's voice broke her concentration.

*"Oh, uh, **2370...**" Adileh replied. She then gave a small chuckle. "Here's hoping the assignment doesn't suck the life out of me"*

"Au contraire," Dr. Freedmen replied with an ear to ear grin shrinking to a small melancholy smile, "You'll find that it's just as likely that we'll suck the life out of them."

"I guess I just don't know how you do it then," Researcher Mabel went on. "You told us the horror stories yourself. When Ana Hums work gets bad, it gets really bad. They aren't abstract ideas or world sized eldritch horrors that destroy worlds by accident the way a human unknowingly crushes an ant. These are people. They look like you and me. They know how people work and how to get under your skin. Worse, they can do things like exsanguination with a touch, or turn people into marble. Real monsters. How do you do it?"

"Practicing jazz piano mostly," Dr. Khayyam said with a smile. "In all seriousness, you are right and there is no escaping that. We see really twisted and evil souls in Anomalous Humanoids, but there is a reason why we are there. We're the ones who analyze. We get inside their heads, and consult the Containment Specialists on how to best contain them. What kind of tricks they might try. Sure, we have to go into the lion's den on occasion, but in the end we are rewarded by helping make a better cage to keep them in. In the end, that's a big part of the drive."

"And the horror doesn't stick with you?!?"

"I mean, it does. Like I said before, there is no escaping that…"

Adileh sat in the interview room in silence, organizing several papers in front of her as she gathered her thoughts. Across from her was a slender, tan man dressed in the typical anomalous humanoid jumpsuit. Upon his face were several bruises and scrapes where security personnel had beaten him.

"I guess I just don't know what to do at this point, Terry," Adileh sighed. "Why do you feel the need to use your abilities in this way? Grind down others into raw nerves until they lash out at you."

Terry looked at her stoically, without a word. His eyes occasionally scanned her up and down.

"Your emphatic abilities could bring so much healing to others, if you wanted them too, but instead you seek to hurt others. What do you gain from it? Help me understand, Terry."

"There is nothing to understand," Terry finally replied in a soft voice. "People go entire lifetimes without saying what weighs on their minds, without embracing their emotions, and unfortunately those thoughts swarm to me from miles around. I just repeat them to finally set them free. No malice. Just clearing the clutter that's getting dumped on me."

"And the best time to do that is when it will hurt the people around you?" Adileh asked, jotting down some notes, then looking back up at Terry with a quizzical expression.

He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Perhaps instead of picking my brain you should get the mess that is yours sorted out," he returned. "They don't like you, by the way. That really is weighing you down."

"No," Adileh said sharply. "We're not doing that Terry. I won't let you try to get under my skin, especially since for all I know you could be lying."

"Maybe," Terry gave a sheepish grin. "But you'll never be sure, won't you?"

Adileh sighed and made her way to the door.

"I really am trying to help you, Terry," she said. "I do hope someday you'll realize that."

"The other side of the spectrum is even worse though," Researcher Mabel commented, looking into her now empty mug. "Innocent people, sometimes children locked away like cattle, and Ana Hums is on the front lines to watch them wither away and despair. It’s easy to justify locking away a monster, but a toddler?"

Dr. Khayyam nodded in agreement.

"It's not a part of the job I particularly enjoy, but if that toddler melts the flesh off people on contact…"

She faded out, gesturing her hand in a circle.

"But on the other side, we're the ones who provide the little bits of hope. Suggestions on what can be done to keep our subjects, while not necessarily content, still feeling like someone sees them as a person. It's far from ideal, but between us and the Ethics Committee, we help keep the Foundation from shifting from cold to cruel."

"Any luck, Dr. Adileh?" a little Asian girl asked. She sat on the cot in her containment cell, her jumpsuit at least two sizes too big for her. She looked around the room aimlessly as she waited for a reply.

"I'm afraid not," Adileh's voice came from over the intercom.

The little girl nodded in silence, her eyes falling down on the floor.

"I guess… I hoped…"

"Now now," Adileh's voice interrupted. "I didn't say there wasn't something I could do. Check your chute."

The little girl blinked and nodded, heading over to the small door on the nearby wall where her meals were usually delivered. She opened the sliding door carefully, inside she found a handheld game console.

"You said you used to have one of those at home, right?" Adileh asked.

The little girl nodded, taking it back to her bed and flipping it on. The title screen soon appeared.

Nintendogs

"Not the same thing as a real puppy, but it's as close as I can offer, sweetie," Adileh said.

The girl smiled.

"Thank you, Dr. Adileh," she said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

The cell then filled with the sounds of barks as she dove into the game.

In a nearby observation room, Adileh turned off the intercom and smiled at the little girl on the monitor.

"You're welcome," she said to herself.

"How do you not get dragged down then?" Researcher Mabel shook her head. "I just don't see how you can be so cavalier about this position. What keeps you on the surface? Besides the 'Locking up the Monsters' and 'Being Santa Claus' shtick. What is it?"

Dr. Khayyam finished her mug of coffee and shrugged.

"I'm going to let you in on a little secret here, Carolyn," she said. "No one in the Foundation, not the Researchers, not the MTF agents, not the O5 or even the custodians, stays above the surface all the time. Sometimes you will see something that will cover your legs in concrete and pull you into some pretty dark places. The thing about Ana Hums, though, is that when your subjects learn that they can trust you and that you are a friend, they start to depend on you. So, you'll pull yourself back up to the surface, if not for yourself, then for them."

"That sounds like it can backfire…"

"Heh," Dr. Khayyam chuckled and nodded. "Sometimes it does, most of the time though, it doesn't. It's hard to explain…"

The Site-43 alarm klaxons filled the halls as Adileh crouched behind her desk, a pistol held tightly in her hand as she waited for the breach to end, or security personnel to find her and remove her to a secured sector.

"Come on, come on…" she said under her breath as she watched the door. "Where are you guys…"

She stifled her breathing as she noticed the handle move and the door slowly open. A lanky teenage boy with dark skin entered, dressed in a typical anomalous humanoid jumpsuit.

"Doc?" he asked as he entered. "You in here?"

"Evan?" Adileh asked, getting up from her hiding spot, her pistol aimed at the young man, "What… how did you get here?"

"Wow, I didn't know you packed…" he said, and closed the door behind him. He then placed his hands over his head and sat down on the floor. "If I sit here until security finds us, will you not shoot me?"

Adileh lowered the gun.

"Evan," she said sternly. "How did you get here. I do need to know."

"Power got knocked out to my cell door. A bunch of us were able to get out. I figured you might be in danger and so I found my way here."

"That's… sweet?" Adileh raised an eyebrow questioningly. "And the others?"

"A few stayed in their cells. The rest made a break for it."

"You didn't join them?"

He shrugged.

"I thought about it, but as much as I hate it here, I imagine I would hate getting shot more. Besides, I have literally no idea where we are, so what's the good in escaping if you're on the moon, or beneath the ocean."

"Smart."

"My parents didn't raise a fool," Evan grinned. "Also, you've always

been so kind to me. If something happened to you during this, and I was just sitting in my cell twiddling my thumbs I don't know what I'd do."

"My hero," Adileh said with small smile. "I appreciate the thought, Evan. Thank you."

"What are friends for?"

"Listen, in the end, you're going to need to do what's best for you," Dr. Khayyam sighed, getting up to bus her dirty mug. "If you don't think Ana Hums is where you need to be, I'll gladly give you any recommendations you need so you can get there. But I truly do think you'd miss your calling, Carolyn."

"Why is that?" Researcher Mabel frowned.

"You've got everything we look for in our specialists. Attentiveness, compassion, empathy, and you remind me a bit of myself when I was in your shoes."

Researcher Mabel looked down at the table, the gears of her mind rapidly turning in thought.

"It just feels like I might be making a huge mistake…"

Dr. Khayyam smiled.

"Carolyn," she said. "I've been in Anomalous Humanoids at Site-43 for 15 years now. I can promise you that all of us started out feeling the same way."

Dr. Khayyam watched as Researcher Mabel looked down in doubt once more, then look up and nod, a small smile on her face.

"Trust me," Dr. Khayyam patted her on the shoulder. "If you take this path, you're going to do fine. See you at the next seminar."

Anachronisms

Research Assistant Richard Moss ran. He could safely say that he had never been this afraid in his entire life. The events of last twenty minutes buzzed in his head like bees. Explosion. Sirens. Security breach. Attackers. What was a Chaos Insurgency? Gunshots. Deaths. Lockdown offline. Running. More explosions. More bullets.

There was some bizarre form of music filling his ears. Everything seemed to fall into a rhythm: his breathing, the thudding of his heart, the pumping of adrenaline, the scream of the emergency alarms. The bullets were behind him now. For how long, he didn't know. Not long enough. He barely knew how he ended up running down this hall, or what he had done to acquire the item now tucked under his arm like a football.

He skidded to a halt, nearly tripping over his own feet with his momentum. This was the chamber he wanted. Panting, he scanned his ID card. Under normal circumstances, this would have been useless during a security breach. The uninvited guests had provided an unexpected blessing in taking out the lockdown procedures.

The door slid open with a hiss. Richard jumped into the room.

"Lord Blackwood!"

The slug turned the nub of its head towards Richard.

"Oh, good morning. While you obviously know of me, I don't recall having ever met… what's wrong?"

"Sorry sir. Can't chat. Security breach. Need your help."

"Calm yourself and catch your breath, man."

Richard paused for a moment. His panting slowed.

"The site has been breached and there are enemies on their way

here. I don't know if we can hold them off ourselves, so I'm letting you out and hoping. There's a key card in my pocket that can get you into your vault: stairs down the hall to the right, three floors down, chamber sixteen…" his voice trailed off as he strained to hear the dim scream from up the hallway. "Shit! You know Latin, right?"

"Why yes, I began studying it as a boy back in primary school. What does that have to do with an attack of any sort?"

"Just trust me: you're going to be using it soon."

Richard lifted the tarnished helmet out from under his arm and placed it on his head.

—

Publius Carthephilus Aetius began to regain consciousness. Death was much like sleep, he had decided: deep and dreamless. The blackness faded away at the edges of his mind. Heat and sensation and hearing gradually flowed into his perception. Without time, the process took both years and mere moments. The final push was like falling from a great height as the blurred colors and sensations whirled around him in a last mad maelstrom before snapping sharply into focus.

He was standing in a small, plain room. The only things of note were a small desk, a filing cabinet, and a glass tank filled with water, some tropical corals, and a brightly colored slug. Beyond the room he could hear a loud, repeated screeching noise. He looked down at his new body. Gangly. Thin. The usual orange jumpsuit had been switched out for the long white coat he had seen the doctors wear.

"Are you all right?"

It was an older man's voice, though he did not recognize the language. Publius glanced around the room. There was no one else there, same as before.

"Who's there?"

"So you're why he said I'd need Latin." It was the same voice, this time in very formal, accented Latin, coming from the glass tank.

“Who are you? Where are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anywhere, my good man. But that isn’t the time for that: we must get out of here quickly. There are enemies coming this way.”

“Wait, what? Who? Who is attacking?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out and stop them, whoever they are. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated.”

There was an awkward pause as Publius looked at the slug. Seeing no other reasonable option, Publius removed the lid of the tank, reached inside, and picked up the slug. He placed it in the breast pocket of the lab coat, where it poked its head out of the opening. Publius stepped outside into the corridor, wincing at the alarm sirens.

“To your right, and then down the stairs, and we can… oh, lovely.”

There was a shout from three figures to their left, perhaps thirty feet away. There were two men and one woman: The woman was shaved bald, a skull tattooed on her face and a machete in each hand. One man was bleeding from a small circular wound in his shoulder, yet still held a butcher’s cleaver in his good hand. The other was completely naked, with tangled hair down to his waist and smeared with blood red war paint, armed with a makeshift spear.

Publius’ mind sprung into action, analyzing the situation in an instant. Three enemies, all armed, one wounded, against one unarmed man and likewise unarmed slug. Judging by their looks, crude weapons, and slack postures, they lacked any sort of professional training or discipline. These were simple thugs. Still dangerous, of course, and more so than what they would have been with this unfit body.

The naked one attacked first. Publius sidestepped the spear thrust, shedding the doctor’s coat and the slug as he stole the weapon from the man’s hands: the attacker’s momentum sent him sprawling to the floor. Publius swung the spear around and hit him hard on the head with the haft, knocking him unconscious.

He was barely able to dodge out of the way of the woman's first machete swing. In his peripheral vision he could see the wounded man running away, back to find reinforcements, no doubt. That was a problem for later.

The woman was a better fighter than the spearman, to be sure: she kept herself moving, preventing Publius from slipping around behind her. He dodged her swings by uncomfortably small amounts, waiting for a opening. His spear was no use at this distance, he needed some way to get space between them, but she had good reach…

There. An opening. She had swung too wide, too hard. Publius leapt back and threw the spear.

It struck home, its jagged scrap metal point puncturing the woman's neck. She managed a moment of bloody gurgling before falling dead.

Publius pulled the spear from her corpse, wiping the blood on her clothing and picking up one of her machetes. With it, he walked over to the unconscious naked man and hacked off his head. He left the labcoat where it lay, instead picking the slug out of the pocket and placing it on his shoulder.

"Nicely done. Now quickly, back down the hall."

Publius ran as directed, despite his complete disorientation. He would trust the slug for now: it knew more than he did about this place, though he knew next to nothing to begin with.

"Oh, where are my manners?" the slug said from his shoulder. "I am Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, a servant of her majesty, queen Victoria of England."

The name was barbaric, and his queen and country meant nothing to Publius. Nonetheless, it was only proper to introduce himself to the slug that spoke.

"My name is Publius Carthephilus Aetius, a soldier under Gaius Marius in the war against Jugurtha and a… reluctant survivor."

"Ah… that explains matters. Bound to the helmet, I suppose. You're

quite a long way and time from home, my friend. But, we can't let that get us down. Your body's prior owner told me where my collection was being stored, and so that is our goal. There is superior weaponry there."

Publius glanced down at Blackwood.

"You do realize that you're a slug, correct?"

"Oh yes, very funny. I've heard that one before, I'm afraid."

—

Hazzard Jack beat a man's head in with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire. He loved the feel of the pulp between his tattooed fingers. The rest of the gang was likewise enjoying themselves: there was nothing like some rape, arson and pillaging to start the day.

He took a deep breath of the smoky air before splattering himself with the man's blood. The fun was running dry here. Time to move on.

Those fools in the Foundation. They thought they could protect the world, keep it spinning, keep its destiny locked up and "secured". The concept was childish, really. Entropy always won, and Hazzard Jack liked winning.

Fuck bitches, kill bitches, raise some hell and spread some chaos. That was his motto.

Wait…what was this? Running from a fight? Some coward had run back. He only had a bullet to the shoulder, that was nothing. He said something about a man in a helmet down a couple levels, someone tough.

Hazzard Jack would see about that.

—

"Exactly how is this supposed to work?"

“You use a keyhole. It is a key, after all.”

Publius looked at the keycard. It was not like any key he was familiar with, though of course everything in this place was alien and unknown to him. He had decided that writing it all off as magical would be the best option for the time being.

“I can’t find any keyhole.”

“Still disoriented, I see. It’s right there, next to your hand.”

The “keyhole” was a smooth black box with a slit in it, positioned on the wall at chest height next to the door. Publius looked at the card again. Everything he had seen so far seemed to have a parallel to the world he knew, just magical, for lack of a better term. This must be much the same. He inserted the card into the slot, and the door slid open, revealing the vault beyond. Emergency lighting kept the room dim: the stuffed and mounted animals seemed ready to leap at them from the shadows.

“Now then, I have some dueling swords which would interest you, but what we are really looking for are my particle destabilizers. They will be long metal tubes, hollow, with a wooden attachment on the end opposite the hole.” Blackwood said. “With two pairs of eyes we should be able to find them easily enough.”

It was a stroke of good fortune that the room was well organized: animal specimens here, plant specimens there, artifacts separated by area and time period. The muskets were quickly found within a glass display case, next to the sword rack and other, more mundane, firearms. Publius opened the case, took one of the guns of the shelf and inspected it. In his mind it seemed like some sort of club, but why would they bother adding a metal handle, much less a hollow one? He looked to Blackwood for an explanation.

“Oh, yes, you wouldn’t know how to use this. Don’t worry: it is quite easy. Simply point the end with the hole at the enemy and pull the trigger located there, and you should be…Oh dear, they haven’t even set up the aether collectors. They’re all about as useless as sticks at the moment, until we find the reserves…aha! Those glass balls over there, if you take those and insert them to those brass

slots on the side of the tube…”

The instructions were simple enough, and Publius had finished within a few minutes. He hefted the gun, finding a good way to hold it as Blackwood had told him. The wooden part fit against his shoulder

“Well done. That should last for a few shots at…”

The room shook as the door and most of the adjoining wall exploded. Publius dove to the floor, showered with dust and rubble. Over the ringing in his ears he could dimly make out some footsteps and foreign conversation.

“Are you all right?” Blackwood said quietly.

“I… I think so.”

“This will be dangerous, but I have to ask you to stand up. We do have an advantage. Just trust me."

Publius sucked in a breath, braced himself, and stood up, gun in his hands. His vision swam, but he could make out eight rather barbaric individuals in the room similar to the three before that he had fought, all still bearing a wicked assortment of tattoos, piercings and homemade weapons.

“Well lookie here!” One particularly brutal-looking raider walked towards the pair, swinging a wooden bat wrapped in barbed wire back and forth. “It’s helmet-man! It’s like it’s fucking Halloween or something!” The rest of the gang laughed.

“What’s he saying?” Publius whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

“Just insults, ignore them.” Blackwood focused on the hooligan in question. “It would be in your best interest to lay down your weapons, sir. We’re willing to avoid violence if you are.”

“Is that so? How about I tear you a new asshole instead?” The man shouted, leaping at the two. Publius swung the musket at the attacker, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger. A bright beam of

red light sprang from the barrel, illuminating the chamber. And hitting the man directly in the chest. His body went rigid, limbs bent at angles they were not meant to go, his skin and clothing charring black and peeling away like an onion. The light faded. The ash drifted to the floor.

Publius looked at the gun in shock, then at the pile of dust, then at the gun again, and then at the slack-jawed insurgents. He grinned.

"*Velim caput tuum devellere deinde in confinium gulae cacare*."

Lord Blackwood shook his head as best as a sea slug could.

"My God, man. That's just foul."

Anart Antics

Jakeob Aldon stared at her bathroom ceiling, reclined so far into the **`bathtub`** that only her face breached the surface. She was beginning to regret her latest purchase. Damn her impatience. If she had just taken the time to learn how to copy her consciousness and bind it to an inanimate object, her life would have been so much easier. But instead she took the quick route, the lazy path, and bought this stupid American tub with its stupid Russian water. And they wouldn't even tell her how they came to be, all they would ever talk about was communism and America and Mother Russia and blah blah blah blah blah-

"If you two don't shut up, I swear to God I will turn you into a fucking toilet."

"Sir- ma'am- whatever I should be calling you. I am an ass man. I would welcome this change. Shit in this commie's stupid-"

At least Aldon could say she learned a lesson from it all. Do your own leg work. Research like a proper anartist. Or you would end up with two idiots yammering into your brain. The Library was always open, all she had to do was wander in. She lifted herself into a stand and bade the duo a halfhearted farewell. They, of course, ignored her to talk about more inane bullshit. She dried herself off with a thankfully non-sapient towel and dressed in clothes that lacked even a hint of sentience. As things should be.

Shutting the door behind her made her feel a little better, put that much more between her and her giant mistake. At least the rest of her apartment was welcoming. A tiny space, packed with random anartistic garbage amassed between her and her roommate, Finnegan. Small moving statues, speaking paintings, CDs filled with mood-altering music. Bags of clay, stacks of pallets, sacks of concrete mix, buckets upon buckets of paint. It was a sty, but it was *their* sty. It was home.

Staring at his computer monitor was Finnegan, his ever-present beret displaced by the sound-cancelling headphones covering his ears. Finnegan was palming an old bathtub plug, spinning it in his fingers. Aldon skirted through the minefield of art supplies and flicked off the beret. It took several seconds for Finnegan to notice.

"Oh, hey, Allie." An eyebrow rose slowly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Stupid goddamn bathtub," she pouted.

"I told you," he sang knowingly. "It is pretty funny, you have to admit."

Aldon just crossed her arms and sulked.

Fingers danced across the keyboard as Finnegan saved and closed his latest audio project. He grabbed his beret and pressed it into Aldon's face while he removed his headphones. Aldon laughed, but swiped at him out of mock irritation all the same. The roommates exchanged a series of playful punches before Finnegan donned his hat again.

"Ready to go?" he asked, still smirking.

"As ever."

The artistic duo left their little apartment, making sure to lock up behind themselves. Outside of their personal alcove, they were out in the real world. Where they were supposed to be responsible adults. They walked adult strides, spoke of adult topics. Like sports, taxes, and the weather. How about that weather. It sure was weathering. And those taxes sure were taxing. Not to mention just how sporting those sports were.

The responsible duo entered the library and dropped their conversation. One had to respect the rules of the library, capital L or not. They wandered through the aisles until they reached their destination. A quick perusal of the shelf and Aldon plucked a specific tome from its brethren. It was even halfway out, as if it knew it was the one she wanted. One *Atlas Shrugged*. She flipped open the

book to a random page, made sure the coast was clear, and cleared her throat.

"Man, this is one interesting book," she said, without a hint of sarcasm. That was the important bit. "I'm really glad I found it!"

She snapped the book shut and slid it halfway back into place. She then gripped the spine and twisted. The book spun with her hand, and she gave it a light push. The bookshelf bent inwards as space twisted open into a portal. Finnegan giggled as he always did and hurried in, Aldon right behind him. With a gentle nudge the door was shut again, and space collapsed back into a state of normalcy, the book still sticking out by several inches.

Inside the Wanderer's Library, Finnegan and Aldon felt more at ease. It was their home away from home, where they were free to be their goofy selves so long as they followed the five core tenets. Return your books on time. Don't damage books. Don't steal books. Don't damage Library property. Don't harm those within the Library. Easy enough, though they had to remind themselves not to indulge in their usual roughhousing for fear of it breaking the fifth rule.

The Library itself loomed above, below, and all around them in its grand omniscience. Doors surrounded them in the small marble lobby, each representing more common Ways to reach the Library. Separating the lobby from their branch of the Library was an Archivist, one with its chair. Beyond that was a branching staircase that led to the different sections of the Library, which paid no mind to the primitive concept of gravity. Aldon looked up and saw a man who appeared to be sitting upside down, reading a book against the shelf he found it. A Page read over his shoulder as it stocked the shelves. On another floor, a Docent strode perpendicular to them, leading another Wanderer to her destination. Beyond the spiraling mess that was this branch, seemingly hovering in the distance, was another branch of the Library, containing all the knowledge of another reality. Beyond even that lay more branches, twisting and turning and intertwining amongst each other, often only a hair's breadth apart.

The two Wanderers approached the Archivist. Finnegan cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but when the unseeing

Librarian turned to look at him he faltered into a mumble. He had never been particularly comfortable with the Librarians.

"Can I help you?" it asked. Its breath matched the scent of a freshly printed novel.

"We're looking for a book that can teach us to make our own Ways," Aldon said. "We've been using a common one, but we need to transport something and it's too inconvenient otherwise."

Silence fell as the Archivist thought. "Will this cargo cause damage to the Library, its contents, or its occupants?"

"No. It's just a tub. Well, a talking tub. We need to get it to Japan."

There was a slight twitch in the Archivist's face. Aldon allowed herself a smile, since it wouldn't catch her doing so.

"Very well." It lifted a long finger, and without looking it pointed in what seemed a random direction above it. "Up three floors, on the left. Third row, eighth shelf. A book titled *A Wanderer's Guide*, by Lucifer. Do you require a Docent to help you find it?"

Finnegan frantically shook his head, his beret sliding to and fro. Aldon stifled a giggle and replied with, "No, I think we'll be alright. Thank you."

The Archivist nodded. "Enjoy your stay. Mind the rules."

"Of course."

Several weeks later Finnegan and Aldon found themselves in Japan. They had taken up pseudo-residence in the warehouse the competition was being held in, as had several other artists while they finished their **works**. One artist was occupied trying to find a way to make his chainsaws remain active. Another was attempting to unwind by playing the piano making up part of his piece. The event's creator, also a participant, was actively avoiding his wife.

Finnegan was sitting atop an abnormally large tortoise, his nose buried in a book. The tortoise, for whatever reason, was wearing his

beret. Aldon sat against the bathtub, toying with some pots and pans. This activity had nothing to do with her extreme exhaustion, or so she would tell you. The sound of sandals flipping and flopping disrupted her potting and panning as a man in a Hawaiian T-shirt approached their work area.

"Hi there," the man said. Aldon looked up at him with an expression she hoped conveyed her irritation. She either failed, or the man simply didn't care. He adjusted his stupid fedora sitting on his goofy-looking red hair. "A joint project, eh? What are you guys working on?"

"We're gonna use this piece of shit to power a giant turtle with waterjet cannons," Aldon said, banging a skillet on the side of the tub.

"Tortoise," Finnegan corrected without looking up.

Aldon pointed a pan in Finnegan's direction. "Fuck you, turtles are the ones in water."

"But the model you showed me was a tortoise," Finnegan said while half-yawning. "We got the tortoise I'm sitting on so we could see how one moves."

"What? No, I didn't." Aldon fell onto her side as she reached for the small mock sculpture she had made. Still on her side, she held it up to the man in the Hawaiian shirt, which clearly qualified him to speak on the situation. "This is a turtle, right?"

"It's a tortoise. Turtles have flatter, lighter shells and have webbed feet." The fedora-wearer hovered over the bathtub. "What's the tub do?"

"I made a fucking tortoise. What? Oh, it makes infinite water. Stick your hand in it."

The man did so without a second thought. His eyebrows rose for a moment, and he waited. He listened. He withdrew his hand and placed both hands on the rim of the bathtub. Aldon watched his mouth tug back and forth before he looked down at her.

"I could kill this for you. After the competition, of course."

"Ha!" Aldon found herself taking a small liking to the man. He didn't look familiar, but it was entirely possible she had spoken with him before. Faces ran together in events like this for her. Probably had something to do with the soul crushing stress and the mind numbing lack of sleep. Maybe. "Thanks, but as dumb as they are, I don't want them dead."

"Well, I could still take it off your hands. I have some old friends who would love it." He waved his hand around as if he could pluck the phrase he was searching for from the air. "They're obsessive collectors, so to speak."

"They can have it, then. Thanks." Aldon finally pushed herself back into a sitting position, craning her neck to look around. "So which is yours?"

"Oh, I'm not competing. I'm just a Nobody who felt like watching."

"Hmm." Aldon felt like there was something she was missing, but was too tired to care. "Well, anyway, if you'll excuse me. I have to figure out how to make a pressurized water tank out of a rice cooker."

"Already did that," Finnegan called from the tortoise. His voice seemed quieter with the stranger around, the book even closer to his face than before. "You should start mixing the concrete."

Aldon jerked around as she looked at all the crap they had lying around. "When the hell did you do that?"

"Yesterday? I think? Hey, where's my hat?" Finnegan fell off the tortoise unceremoniously in an attempt to find said hat, asleep by the time he hit the ground.

Nobody chuckled. "You guys are a bit over your heads, eh?"

Aldon snored in response.

The crowd of artists roared in anticipation as the siren went off. Two

anartistic monstrosities were positioned opposite each other in the ring, marked as a giant circle with a boxing glove holding a paint brush in the center. A giant stone platypus standing at 14 meters tall faced against a concrete turtle tortoise with a pair of metal tubes protruding from its shell, coming up to an even 16 meters tall.

Aldon and Finnegan almost had to lean against each other just to stay standing. They had done it, but only barely. The announcer declared the battle was about to begin, and that the artists were to activate their respective mechas.

"Can you do it?" Finnegan mumbled.

Aldon should have seen that coming, really. "You made the thing, you should do it first."

"I don't want to have to do it in front of-"

"Oh, get over it. C'mon. You say one thing, and it's a funny thing, and then you just think the rest. No having to talk to the scary people."

He held the bathtub plug in his hand, twisting his wrist to make the small chain spin. He sighed, spun his beret around, and took a deep breath.

"I choose you! Copyright Infringement!"

Hub | **Boron Blisters** »

Anart Lecture Caught inbetween a Dying Riverside Tree and a Discarded Campus Bench

Well, I think we're good to go.

So, I'm Anton Legler, the one in charge here. Standing next to me is Yang. She will be helping me, and give you instructions from time to time. Technically I'm a professor, but you don't have to call me that. I want this to be casual, which would be better for what we're here to do.

Ha! She says that, but if there are degrees and faculties for anart, she will surely make a professor. A good one. She was one of my best students, and I hope you will turn out more like her.

Now, let's get to the point, shall we. Yes, this is a studio for the teaching of extraordinary art, as you were previously informed by the various people that introduced you here. Even if you weren't, surely you noticed something unusual by travelling to a non-existent room and coming out of a painted door.

The hell you mean "small and shitty?" Yes, I can hear you perfectly clear, I made this small and shitty place mind you, it is part of my *art creation*. If you say something, I will know. If you say something again, I'll make sure you exit out of the windows. They go somewhere as well. You wanna find out? No? Then shut up.

And no, I don't think you need a grand cathedral to *learn*, or put it another way, your petty skills don't warrant it yet. Since you have come here, you better learn to put the grand ideas and messages you heard from other people that you don't even properly understand aside. Because we are going to start with basic, small things here, and the last thing I want is you lot getting preachy or deeply philosophical in your first assignment.

All good? Good. Now as you can see, by that corner, there are plenty of art supplies. Paints, clay, wood, and all the other stuff I

could think of. So go there, pick something you're comfortable using. And no worries, they're not gonna run out. If what you're looking for is not there, then you will just have to settle for the second best. But you can certainly bring your own stuff later on.

Yes Yang. Gotta forgive an old professor for not being up-to-date some time.

Found what you want? Good, good. Uh, what's that?

…

Oh right, I guess we'll have to get that out of the way.

I'm NOT teaching you to use *magic* here. The art supplies are not magical because I'm not a wizard. I don't know jack about that. And the reason I don't say "exploits" is that the materials you will be using are perfectly normal materials. The studio does replicate them, as part of its purpose, but no, you're not working with things already abnormal. Bring anomalous stuff here and you get defenestrated.

So whatever wrong information about this studio you got, let me just make this clear. As much as I… *respect* some of my other colleagues who use magic as a component of their art, there is, for me, a fine line between art made from reality-twisting materials, and art created to be reality-twisting. And all I'm willing to, or can teach is the latter.

Well, I have never been a demi-god, and this has worked fine for me, thank you very much. And last time I checked, Yang is also a perfectly normal human being, so this shouldn't impede you either.

There will be no chanting wizards, no summoning circles, and yes, you can create art that breaches the laws of physics with bare hands and no inherent ability. Everyone can do it, and it has been proven with this studio itself and all these paintings Yang so eagerly attached to the walls.

How? I mean, isn't that what you're here for?

If you're disappointed that magic is not going to happen, then sure, leave. If you've now decided to stay and see how normal humans

can create miracles out of the ordinary things, then good. I believe we can finally begin.

Why don't you all look at the art supplies you now have. Make art out of that. I'm sure you have some sort of experience, since you found yourself here. I don't care how skilled you are, that's not really that relevant. If you want that kind of improvement, go to a studio not suspended between places.

Before you start, I want you to think about yourself. More specifically, emotions, reactions, and feelings you have. Then, choose one particular emotion, and channel that into your work. Think about that, and what provoked that emotion when working on your thing. Think about how that can properly manifest in your work, or how it can be best represented.

I don't care what exactly the emotion is, because it doesn't matter.

If you're enjoying this beautiful sunny day, think about how the sun shines down and how the birds chirp between branches. Think about what is the best way to convey that feeling. Think about how to showcase that one particular scene in your head.

Just things, anything that has an impact on your personally. Scenes you remember, people you cherish, hell, even food you like counts.

I mean, if you hate me and this small and shitty studio, then channel that hate and I dunno, create a twisted mockery of my face?

Why though? Because this is the secret. This is how you create anart, how you shake reality. In the process of channeling your thoughts, first as simple as emotions, then more complex like specific ideas, you're going to eventually, find something. Something that you will feel that is just *right*. Not for any others, but you yourself. And if you follow that, your creation is going to come together and you find the line that links everything. And then your ideas will flow furiously into your work as if a blockage is lifted. You will even find yourself have very little control over what is happening, only your subconscious at work. But that's how it is. Because then, something extraordinary may happen.

And that's how I do it. How Yang and a lot others do it. We call the thing, no, that particular feeling, that state of mind, *Flow*. Because that's exactly how your art moves forward, like a stream, like a river, or even a waterfall. It's the thing that washes over you.

I can't find a better word myself.

I mean, there are different approaches to this, and slightly different settings for different forms of art. Things like maybe writing, performance that I can't really properly teach here. This is but one way to access the Flow. I mean Yang would argue that letting your mind wander is way more natural than trying to focus on one thing.

But then again, she produces art pieces like a machine so I wouldn't take her suggestions.

Do not mistake this as the only way to do it. I'm just trying to simplify things here for you newbies, because starting off with a bunch of complicated ideas aren't necessarily good, and even dangerous at times for our line of work.

So if this doesn't work out for you, it's okay. Don't stress out or force yourself, that wouldn't be good. We will be trying different methods in the future and I will make sure everyone gets there.

The most important thing is, you have to see that art is not trying to prove a point to some other people — you can do that, sure, but fundamentally, you're expressing your own ideas and emotions. And that's what matters.

I can go on about how the end result may not be what you're expecting, and especially for newbies like you who will have little say in this matter. That can be changed, sure, but that would be more advanced stuff after you get to enter that state of mind. So let's not diverge into interacting with the audience at this point.

Here, I will first teach you to reach that particular Flow, and then maybe how to redirect it and even *control* it to a degree to get what you want. And you will eventually be able to, if you stick with me.

Ah, of course you're not gonna succeed on the first try. If you do,

you might as well walk out of this studio instead of listening to an old man grumbling about what anart is.

Now, why don't you finish working on your pieces, and then we will proceed from there.

« Professors of Anart | HUB | Foundation Mandated Interlude »

And Again

The little boy hid behind a tall sycamore tree, the wind sending a steady rain of orange and red leaves over the field behind the school. The boy adjusted his satchel again, deciding that he would play a game before going to class and beginning the day. The red leaves seemed brighter to him, little dots in the landscape. They reminded him of the instruments in his father's office, which always flashed and beeped, even in the middle of the night. He would count one hundred red leaves. And then go to school.

No other children came out of the path from the woods to come to school this morning. In the distance, as he counted the leaves, he could see the cars in their procession. Each slowing to a halt, a well dressed child emerging (the boy could tell they were well-dressed because everyone's hair was neat and no one had holes in the knees of their pants), stopping briefly for a few words from a parent, and then dashing into the front entrance.

Five, ten, fifteen red leaves. All the children would be new this year, again.

Twenty, thirty, forty red leaves. This year, his father had told him, his name was "Marshall." The boy remembered his name being "Marshall" once before. But he must not slip up, and call himself "Alan" or some other name when the teacher called him. This was very important. Father insisted.

Fifty, sixty, seventy red leaves. What was he to say, if the principal asked him where Allenstown, New Hampshire was? He was to say, "I don't know." He had practiced with Father. All last night.

Ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three leaves. The warning bell sounded. He did not like the new house. It was isolated, windy and dark. It was his fault that they had to move to this place; why could he not control himself? His father hugged him before bed, drying his tears. You do what you are meant to do, his father said, smiling at

him. What's true for you, is true for mankind. Father always spoke of mankind.

Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven. He peeked around the sycamore tree. There she was, lingering by the swings behind the school. He could not understand, and Father would not explain it to him when he asked. She was here again. Just as she had been at every school every time they had moved. The little boy felt something stir inside of him. Some Thing (and it was a Thing, he prayed that it was a *Thing* and not *himself*) that always took over when he saw the same girl at each school. The acts that it made him want to commit filled him with equal parts loathing and longing; he began to tremble. The memories of what it made him do before came back in an instant, seared as they were into his mind. His breathing came quickly, and he braced against the wide trunk of the tree, heaving as he struggled for air, certain that he was going to die on the spot. Something like him was too bad to keep living, he was sure of it.

The Thing, whatever it was, released its grip on him. For now. He had come to a realization of late, imagining that the terror he felt when the Thing came over him, must be nothing compared to what the little girl must also feel. Every time. Tears streamed down his cheeks, even as the calmness returned to his face.

Ninety-eight. Ninety-nine. One hundred red leaves. One hundred little red specks, scattered all over the ground before his path. The words of his Father came to him, as they often did. They told him that he did not have to understand, and it was better that he did not. He was part of something bigger. Something grand. He was something that would help mankind to its completion. The little boy often asked his Father about the little girl, meeting the same wall of secrecy each time. But he never asked his Father about what completion meant. Deep inside himself, deeper even than the Thing, he knew that he did not want to ask that question. Father may answer it.

The little girl picked up her pink backpack and ran into the school. The little boy followed, running across the empty field of one hundred red leaves.

The little girl took her seat at the wooden picnic table by the side of the office building. It was lonesome, off on its own beneath an overhang. But the covered hallway gave her some protection from the weather while she ate her apple from the cafeteria. She liked to watch the wind blow the tall trees behind the school back and forth, as it whipped down from the north. She would meet her friends after eating lunch most days.

On this day, a little boy watched her from across the blacktop, peeking out from behind a tetherball pole. He looked comical, trying to hide. She waved to him. He didn't return the greeting, but instead moved hesitantly closer, as though he were one of the stray cats by the overgrown baseball diamonds. He looked very serious, not like the other boys in her class who were constantly pulling faces or shouting about something they saw on TV yesterday. She waved to him again, encouraging him to come closer. Step by tentative step, looking over his shoulder every few seconds, he came closer. She did not recognize him; he must have been in Mrs. Worthington's class, or maybe one of the special ed kids. When he finally came close enough to hear, she told him it was okay to sit down. He waited a few seconds, then did so, directly across from her.

She asked him what his name was.

"M-Marshall," he replied, almost in a whisper. He was clearly nervous. Some boys were like that, she thought.

He glanced at her, looking like he wanted to run away and hide again behind the tetherball pole. "What's y-your name? Is it, uh, Clara?"

She giggled. No, of course not. He must have mistaken her for someone else.

He looked pained, like her answer had somehow wounded him. Marshall wiped his brow; his forehead had a thin sheen of sweat, despite the autumn chill. The little girl was confused. Boys didn't usually act like this. Something was not quite right about him.

Marshall looked away, into the trees. "Did you, um. Did you know that people have all sorts of, uh, stuff in them."

The little girl shifted nervously. What did he mean, stuff? Like guts and other gross things?

The little boy's widened. He continued to stare into the distance. "Not just that. There's other things in there too. Things that, um, need to come out. Like, uh, escaping. Father says that people have truth in them. That it needs to, to see daylight."

The little girl noticed that he was trembling now. The sweat was beading up and running down along his neck. She saw that his hands were gripping the bench where he was sitting, so hard that his knuckles were white. She wanted to go now.

Marshall's face snapped toward her. She startled at the sudden movement, dropping the rest of her lunch onto the ground. The little boy looked terrified, as he trembled through sweat, his face flushed and his eyes wide. She leaned back in her seat from his gaze.

"I…I think y-you should run. You should run now. Please run."

The little girl tripped and fell back, getting up to leave but unable to look away from him. Not taking the time to dust herself off or check for scrapes, she ran for the classrooms. She was not looking at him now.

Looking down at his hands, Marshall noticed a thin trickle of blood dripping onto the ground. He had gripped the bench he was sitting on with enough force to dig splinters of wood into his fingers. They began to throb, the pain acknowledged now by looking at the wounds. His chest heaved, the shortness of breath making him feel like he hadn't exhaled for the entire time he had been sitting here.

The little girl had left her backpack by the opposite bench, forgetting to take it with her in her sudden need to leave. That was stupid, calling her Clara. She hadn't been Clara since two towns ago. He must be better about remembering names. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He blinked back tears of exertion as he struggled to catch his breath again.

The lightheadedness began to subside. His vision was clear again. He felt as though he were himself again. Or whatever he was that

remained after all of the name changes. He picked up the little girl's backpack, absentmindedly wiping his bloody fingers off on the side, the red streaks dark against the bright pink fabric. She had forgotten her things. He would have to find where she had gone later. He needed to return something to her.

Father drummed his fingers on his stainless steel work desk. The motion dislodged tiny bubbles in the specimen jars lined up next to his hand. He didn't like the way the little bubbles floated up past the tiny little lumps of vaguely-humanoid flesh as they bobbed in the fomaldehyde solution. The effect made it look like they were moving. The little boy wished he would stop doing that.

"The school tells me they are thinking of consulting a specialist. That you display abnormal behavioral traits."

The little boy was silent. This information was new to him.

Father's face, ruthlessly clean-shaven even in the evening, was hard for Marshall to read. The closest thing he could guess was… amusement? But the little boy had never seen anyone have that expression while something funny was happening. Father was smiling, yes. But his eyes were full of something between pity and hatred.

"This is quite something, you know. A specialist. How can you specialize in deviance from a normal condition when they don't even know what normal is? That's funny. Don't you agree, son?"

Nothing about what happened at school was funny to the little boy in the slightest. He remained silent.

Father sighed. He turned away, looking contemplatively at the strange rifle mounted on the wall above his desk. The little boy had seen pictures of guns before, but he had never seen anything quite like it outside of Father's office. The strange wiring around the barrel looked more like a movie prop. It seemed to glow faintly at night. Father's recommendation to think twice about touching it had been warning enough.

"I forget sometimes, you're not like me. You, your kind. I must be patient as you learn."

Father turned back around. He crouched so that he could look the little boy in the eye, on his level. The little boy shivered.

"Son, you must remember. Not too soon. You cannot help but reveal yourself. In fact, you must. But in the course of time." Father stood up again. He looked down upon the little boy, a simulacrum of kindness in his warm smile and calculating eyes. "They will all learn from you. You will teach them. But you must teach them in the proper manner. Believe me, I know."

Marshall always felt that he understood less whenever he spoke with his Father. But as ever, his instructions were clear. He must work harder, to act like the others. To keep certain Things hidden away. For a time. To help ensure that they would not have to move again prematurely.

"Now then. I have much to attend to, Son. Visit your mother, would you? She's useful for soothing matters such as these."

The little boy remained in the office. "Father, am I a bad person?"

Father's eyebrows crept up, tilting his head. Confusion. "Bad? As in evil? That concept is so strange, and yet it has taken quite a hold among these people, hasn't it?"

The man considered the question. He put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"My boy, something like you can't be evil. Through you, these people learn to understand something about themselves, something that they must one day address, once and for all. A quality about themselves that they must repurpose, if they are to live together in lasting peace."

Father's eyes crept towards the mounted gun on the wall again.

"Son, I will be here with you, guiding you in one form or another until your final breath. And then, I will be with you at the next beginning, to help you on your path. As I have done before."

The father embraced the son now.

"Until everyone has learned. Until there is peace. How can someone who brings peace be evil?"

He squeezed his son tightly. The matter was closed now. He ushered his son back out of the office, as he returned to his tasks, indecipherable to the boy.

Marshall ascended the stairs out of the basement, into the kitchen. His mother stood in her usual spot by the wall-mounted telephone, eyes fixed on him as he closed the the door behind him.

"There, there," said his mother, looking at her son, moving not a single muscle, as was her way. "There, there."

The little boy proceeded down the hallway to his bedroom. Behind him was the sound of his mother repeating her remark, over and over, to the now-empty kitchen. There, there. There, there.

The interior of his bedroom was covered entirely in plastic. The Thing inside him wanted nothing more than to look at one of the books filled with photographs that he and his Father had taken several towns ago. Or to open the concealed door in the floor of his closet. The Thing would have to wait. It must be trained to wait. Father insisted.

The little boy lay on his bed, the wind howling outside as the dusk overtook the woods surrounding the house. Sleep would not come easily this night.

And He Will Crash Upon The Rocks

It is often said that when you die, your life flashes before your eyes. There is truth to that statement, to be sure, though it differs from the frenetic memory slideshow people envision their brain playing in the moments before or during their demise. In death, your life experiences are not confined to the substantially limited two and a half petabytes or so of memory your brain offers. Your life "flashes before your eyes" because you are suddenly gifted with the ability to recall everything you've ever seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, now that you are unburdened with the heavy responsibility of life and its severe limitations. This is when you learn the difference between knowing, and *Knowing*, between knowledge and *Knowledge*. You become Light; a beacon in the darkness, a possible courier for a Child who sleeps and dreams of your existence. You will become a Messenger for the Child, or you can forsake that role as I did.

That is why I still Knew dread when I came back to my Home, though I had witnessed the birth and death of many stars since I last visited. Memories had become Knowledge which could not fade or be forgotten, and I had no one to blame but myself for straying close enough to Know the shrieking, writhing call of Broken Light. I spent countless eons of existence as a Stray, ignoring and fleeing the pull of the Child and my supposed purpose, but I was always powerless when it came to Broken Light; Light that has been shattered or twisted through unnatural means. I imagine that compulsive force was a purposeful failsafe from the Child itself; a gift to its philanthropic Messengers and a bane to Strays like me, a reminder that I was never truly in control of my fate. We were all drawn towards that which needed to be fixed, to be healed.

KAHHH!!! KAHHH!!! KAHHH!!!

Home loomed in front of me; my place of origin, a dead world I had

vowed I would never return to. I could not relieve myself of Knowing what had brought me here, but now I could at least prioritize the Knowledge of Home over the Knowledge of my irksome situation. There was no longer anything or anyone to Know here; even the Angels had fled at some point in time, though their unique brand of stubbornness likely kept them in place for far longer than could be considered sensible. Not that I would have ever considered them to have anything resembling sensibility. I wondered when the first cracks in their solidarity appeared. Did they stay to the very end? Did they understand they'd been lying to themselves all this time? I doubted I would receive answers to my questions, and the pull was too strong now for me to linger. I would have to continue my pondering below.

I descended to the surface, passing through what used to be an atmosphere, beckoned by the continuous shriek below as I steeled myself to become a tool of the Child and fix what was broken. A landscape of empty, sun-scorched earth confronted me. This corner of the galaxy might have been withering away and losing its tether to reality, but some other calamity was certainly responsible for cleansing my old Home of humanity. Whatever it might have been, it likely left as quickly as it first arrived, indifferent to the extraordinary circumstances that must have put it on its collision path with my Home. The pulsing shriek continued below me as I descended further beneath the rotted crust, my Light passing through matter which did nothing to impede my unwanted quest.

KAH!! KAH!! KALLL!!!

As I reached the origin of the gibbering squeals and spikes of distress that had compelled me back Home, I concentrated on my own Light. The last time I became corporeal was also the last time I had visited Home, and the effort I exerted back then had saved my Light as well as the Light of countless others. There was no reason not to take the same precaution now, and the sudden disorienting mixture of distorted Knowledge signified that I could now safely interact with the Broken Light I was nearing, and whatever may have caused it. I adjusted my senses, rusty with disuse, as I set foot on a floor for the first time in a very, very long while.

The scene before me brought the memory of my last visit Home to

mind: it was another massacre. At least that bastard Kuhn had kept the Light he stole mostly intact. Whatever was responsible for this new atrocity could boast no such precision. The room I found myself standing in looked like a children's playground had been clumsily combined with a high school science lab and a landslide. Rubble had claimed large sections of what obviously had been a laboratory, and playground equipment was haphazardly strewn about, much of it bent and broken. Broken Light glittered and screamed from every visible piece of metal from the former schoolyard fixtures, mewling at me like an angry, injured kitten. So *this* was why I was here.

Kah! Kall! Kall!!

Clarity provided itself to me as I continued to concentrate on shielding my Light with my corporeal form, while I walked from each piece of equipment, touching it, and attempting to Know it. This was different from Kuhn; this was self inflicted. Someone had broken their own Light, and it now littered the room in the form of destroyed playground equipment, like grey matter from a shotgun suicide.

I could not make sense of the chaos. I could not Know anything. Why playground equipment? Why in this laboratory? Why and how did someone break their own Light?

Chael!

The shock of sensing that name did not prevent me from noticing the shrieks and spikes had stopped. The Broken Light was speaking to me. The voice came from all directions at once.

Is that your name? Chael? I'm not sure how I knew it, it just seemed right.

What was happening here? In my immeasurable time as a Stray I had seen stars shatter, worlds unfold, civilizations rise and fall and rise and fall again, but never had I encountered Broken Light that could speak, or Know my name for that matter. This was not the corpse of a Messenger, or another Stray; this was a mutant, a Light that never should have been.

Can you hear me?

The only way I could communicate, even in corporeal form, was to let my Light into the Light of another. But Broken Light? There was a reason I was shielding myself from it. I wasn't some foolish Messenger; I was not looking to meet new and different things with sickening enthusiasm.

I think you can hear me. This way.

My concerns were starting to lose priority as I searched for the source of the voice, which was no longer coming from all around me. Anxious confusion was turning into curiosity.

Here, Chael. I'm here.

It came from the half-crushed frame of a swing set that had begun its slow descent into disintegration quite some time ago. I approached it as the caution I usually wielded like a shield was slowly drained from me. This was definitely not normal Broken Light.

I'm glad you came.

I was glad too. As I let my Light into the talking swing set, memories that were not my own invaded my corporeal senses, becoming Knowledge. At first, they trickled in like a stream, but soon I was swimming in a newly formed ocean, gasping for breath as I decided whether to sink or swim.

I haven't been glad for a very long time.

Slowly I sank to the bottom, watching as bubbles passed me by. Lazily, I reached out to touch one.

I can tell you about it.

Okay, but we do not have much time left.

---

when your toes can finally reach the trees
be sure to bring your mind along with them

« Prologue: Your Dream Is Not Terribly Marketable |

Hub | Origin: One Day Your Toes May Reach the Trees »

And I Feel Fine

Dr. Margaret Reese was awakened by the sound of Joey Tempest's voice. Rubbing her face and standing up from her desk, she sighed at the loudspeaker outside of her office. Someone had decided to blast "The Final Countdown" by Europe on a loop, and it looked like administration either was having trouble shutting down the system, or just didn't care. "At least it isn't R.E.M.," she sighed. She looked at her clock and sighed; 9:00 on 12/20/12.

She got up and shut her door, before settling back in her chair and looking outside; still no snow, despite being only five days to Christmas. That was weather in a nexus for you. In the spring it would rain Komodo dragon blood, in the summer the little league field would spontaneously combust, and in the fall… you got eggs. But come winter, not a damn snowflake in sight.

There was a knock at her door. "Come in."

Dr. Johnathan West entered the room, carrying a pair of foam coffee cups; the smell of hot chocolate wafted from them. He gave Dr. Reese a soft smile. "I thought you might like something to drink; you've been working non-stop. Everything all right?"

Margaret Reese shrugged, rubbing her face and taking one of the cocoas. "One of the O5's is being paranoid about the 2012 thing. You know which one, I'd assume."

West nodded, rubbing his head. "Anomalous Objects has been working on 120 potential XK-Class scenarios involving E-Class objects for the past three months; the thing back in October was just a nice distraction."

Reese snorted. "Biology and its various subdepartments are tackling at least 400, and that's just at this site… theology's got the biggest workload, though, poor bastards. I heard Father Reynolds joke about joining the Horizon Initiative if he has to look at another false

apocalypse thing."

West looked incredulously at Margaret. "I no longer feel bad for Tristan Bailey. He was whining about having to visit fifteen universes to negotiate evacuation plans."

"Meanwhile," Dr. Reese said, "Theology's got to deal with cross-referencing Meso-American calendars with Biblical visions of the apocalypse, as well as the works of Nostradamus, various prophecies of dubious content… oh, and they also have to forget how to speak Hebrew, apparently. Just in case."

West rolled his eyes and sighed. "Well, regardless, Happy Solstice… if we live to see it."

"Same to you, John."

"Dawn of Second Day… 48 hours remain…" Researcher Chris Hastings snickered under his breath, and drew odd looks from the rest of the staff in the break room. "What? The world's supposed end tomorrow. It seemed pertinent…" Hastings brushed his black, disorderly hair out of his eyes, while Agent Nicholas Ewell simply shook his head.

"Get real, Hastings. Just because the Foundation's scrambling all of its resources trying to find an XK-Class scenario doesn't mean it's gonna happen." Ewell slathered some cream cheese on his bagel, wondering if he should try some of the fat-free stuff instead; he was starting to get, as Jackie from humanoid studies put it, "love handles".

"I know, Nick. I'm jokin'- the stuff that's supposed to happen is *way* too far-fetched for this or any universe." Hastings put several packets of sugar in his coffee; he always thought the artificial sweetener was worse for you than the real stuff. "You hear about the one with the raspberry jam covering the western hemisphere?"

"I thought it was boysenberry… whatever the hell that is." Ewell looked at his watch. "Speaking of berries, isn't the botany department starting those tests on E-672?"

Hastings blinked. "That's today?" He slapped his forehead. "Crap, Partridge is gonna have my ass!" Hastings quickly chugged his coffee, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, picked up his briefcase, and ran for the door.

"Well, it's official. The world is going to end because of Gangnam Style!"

Akio Naguri blinked at Ryan Melbourne's outburst, looking up from his guide to memetic hazards and a book on the Aztec Calendar. "What are you talking about?" Ryan beckoned Naguri over to his cubicle across the aisle from him; on his computer screen was a rather disturbing **image**.

"…the hell is this?"

"Nostradamus meets PSY, apparently." Melbourne frowned. "Some people on the internet have been joking that Gangnam Style is a sign of the apocalypse, but this…"

Naguri rubbed his face and sighed. "Is it bad that, compared to the other shit we're seeing today, this almost makes sense?"

S & C Plastics went to sleep.

At least, most of the site did. A few were still up, trying to figure out what, if any, potential XK-Class scenarios would play out tomorrow. Over 6000 had already been ruled out by the Foundation as a whole, most of them religious; all procedures were still in effect, and not a single Keter skip was out of place.

At 23:50, Chris Hastings was observing E-672, a cluster of mistletoe growing on a yew tree within Greenhouse 3, in back of the S & C Plastics building. He yawned broadly, and looked at his watch. "10 minutes to the end of the world…" He touched the bark of the tree, looking up at the mistletoe. "You aren't going to force me to kiss anyone, are you?" E-672 didn't respond because, of course, it was a plant. He looked at the placard on the tree underneath, essentially a tl;dr of its file.

E-672

- Specimen of *Viscum album*
- Anomalous behavior first exhibited in 1632
- Long-living- single strand has survived for over 350 years
- Shows physical activity only on winter solstice
- Berries can be consumed safely, despite the toxicity of a normal *Viscum album* specimen.

Chris had never tried the berries. They were supposed to be very good.

The day's battery of tests had revealed nothing out of the ordinary, other than a resistance to fire. The whole of the site was too focused on potential XK-Class disasters to be worried about a simple bit of mistletoe. "You don't care about the Mayan calendar. About any of this. Tomorrow will just be another day for you." He looked at his watch. Five minutes to go. "Nothing's gonna happen."

Midnight came, and as it turns out, Christopher Hastings was right. E-672 showed no anomalous activity, other than a slight rustling of the leaves and low-level luminescence. Shaking his head, Researcher Hastings took some notes, stepped out of the hothouse…

…and into the first snowfall of the year.

|Hub|

...And I'm the Star!

The odd, tiger-colored, water-act-ruining spectacle was helped down into a seat at one end of a table in the Ringmaster's Tent. He twitched a couple of times, trying to find a position that didn't make it painful to sit. He settled on tilting himself to lean heavily on his left elbow. He was wincing and covered in bandages (in many multiple colors). A muscular man entered and sat down opposite him, looking pensively at the sore, sorry sight trying its best to look presentable in tattered attire. Eventually, the helpers had backed off from the altogether unsightly figure and competed over who had picked the most piranha teeth out of the guy.

The muscly man rolled his shoulders and entered an inquisitive, formal stance in his seat. "Any statements you'd like to make before we begin?"

"Two. You look odd."

"I get that a lot."

"I mean, I've seen a lot of weird people — where I come from, weird is normal! Or, no, sorry, where I come from *normal* is normal, where I went after that weird is normal, and now I'm kind of in a new place where I'm unsure what's weird and not. Still, I've never seen weird like you." The tiger-pallet-toting man attempted to interlock his shaking fingers, but each time he did his whole body jolted and his hands pulled away from each other. Eventually, he let his shaking arms rest on the table, convulsing a couple times before finding a position that didn't make his body stab with pain. "Do you see the whole world upside-down?"

"No."

"That's good to know. That would be disorienting. That would be real unfortunate, but then again, if you've always been like that then how would you know if you saw everything upside-down? It would be your normal. Heh, there's that word again! Normal. I have a weird relationship with normal. It's never really sat well with me. Heh, heheh, okay, I'm sorry, now *I'm* getting weird. Or, was I already? Still, sorry, I'll shut up about it."

"Okay, now —"

"Wait! You said two state — sorry, you said 'any statements' and I said 'two'. Got confused there. Regardless, I'm sorry, I have a second statement. Can I say it?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay, this one's a bit long. Hi! I'm, uh, okay, I really liked your show! I mean, I didn't really get to see a lot of it, but it sure left it's mark! Ha, heh, heheh, okay, sorry, but really! I saw you guys when I was really little and I never forgot it. I love you guys. I almost didn't know if you were real. Sorry! I landed in your tank! It was — it's just — I forgot to carry a two, and passing through dimensional borders, no matter how 'pocket' they are, is really tough and I haven't had much practice, so I thought I was just going to plop down and make my entrance backstage — ha! Like, that wouldn't work, you can't make an entrance backstage! You enter *from* backstage, that would've been…

"Stupid, okay, I digress, thank you for saving me! I know you guys don't always… *do* that. I think, at least, from what I've heard, not like it deterred me! I like you guys… a lot… okay, so, could you please send my apologies to that mermaid lady? She was really pretty, tell her she's pretty for me, could you do that? I'm sure she gets that a lot, uh, maybe don't say that. I might tell her myself. Actually scratch the apology thing too, I'll say sorry when I see her. She'll probably slap me… I think girls slap guys, right? I've seen it happen. On television. Maybe I shouldn't get all my lessons on television. I'm rambling! I tend to do that —

"Oh! Yeah! *I. I* am… Smarty Marty! Uh, ta-dah! I've been a… a fan of you guys for a *very* long time — crepe, I don't know how long you

guys live, I might have, uh, for me it's a long time, I saw you when I was real little and now I'm… thirty… something. Isn't that weird? I've just, I haven't kept track of birthdays for a long time. I… I don't like them. I digress! Again! I, uh, you must be wondering about me! 'Who is this guy and why is he rambling at me?' Ha! Haha, heheh, heheheh, okay, uh, I'm Smarty Marty Simmons, or just Smarty, or Marty, but you can call me Marty Simmons — other way around… there were three terms, not other way around, but you get it! I worked at Wondertainment, and I didn't like it there, so here I am! I just, uh, I told them *sayonara!* and took my stuff — er, no I didn't, I just left. Then and there. I was done with their bull, bull, uh, bull honky, and I wanted out, and I didn't know where to go — except I did, and it was the circus, and here I am! I've always loved face paint and theatrics, so I thought I'd… I thought, uh, I'd thought I fit right in, but maybe I'm wrong… I'll…"

He broke from his broken flailing (clearly there was supposed to be more physical emphasis throughout his impromptu speech, but every time he tried his eyes widened and he went back to his previous position) and looked around the room, making sure not to bend his neck in any way that would send him into spasms. "I'll, uh, I'll shut up is what I'll do. I talk a lot. I should stop that."

Manny glowered at the ambitious young soul, waiting patiently to make sure he was definitely entirely completely done with his speech. Once that was clear, he straightened up and breathed deep to prepare for his speech.

"*Wait!*"

All Manny could do was look at him.

"Uh, you said statements, not questions — I'll make it short. Look, do you guys have a stress ball anywhere? I just, I think better when I have a stress ball in one hand, and uh, well it relieves stress, you know? Haha, okay, yeah. That would be nice, if you could." He cleared his throat, and looked to see that no one was going anywhere to fetch him any sort of anything. "Okay, okay yeah, I'm uh, I'm done. Please, talk away."

Manny took his *second* deep breath, held it for just a second to

make absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure that Marty wasn't going to talk again… and then he spoke. "From Wondertainment, you say? Anything you worked on?"

"Um… no… I, no, unfortunately. I grew up in Wonder World! Tee emm and my momma supported me so I was admittedly a lazy bum and never figured out why I should get a job until she, uh…" The man shook a little harder for just a second or two. "She passed. She was beautiful. Best mom I or anyone else could have ever hoped for. Raised me right! Heh, for the most part. I might have been the teensiest bit spoiled…

"But anyways! She died and I couldn't couch surf for long before people got tired of me mooching off of them, so I looked up at that big tower and thought 'Alright Marty! You're gonna go in there and get a gosh darn job!' And uh, I did. I had a pretty plentiful portfolio and they couldn't *not* accept me. So I got in as a Toy Tinker — er, that is to say that I got into the Toy Creation Department." His breath got a bit more staggered now, and his right hand squeezed into fists in and out. "What made me leave was… on our first — *my* first, sorry. On my first, at? At my first toy idea presentation thingy I was accused of stealing somebody else's idea… it was this big dude, uh, big name in the department."

The fellow sat up, visibly paining at the motion but unwilling to back away from his more serious stance. "This guy was my idol. He was what made me want to be in Wondertainment's arms in the first place. My everything. My… my *star*. I mean, I took my nickname from him — his name was Brainy. Brainy Brian." He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes as if the name was difficult to say out loud. It was something akin to somebody mourning over the loss of an ex-lover, or a child realizing he would never be able to attain his dream of being an astronaut. "Brainy Brian Harding. I thought he was perfect. But he sat up, he sat up at the end of my presentation and said I was a *phony*. Said that I had blatantly stolen his idea, and I…

"I had gotten a standing ovation for mine! I was clearly working, I was working my way into this world and this amazing community of friends and fellows and he just stands up and calls my, pardon if I sound like I'm bragging, but my *spectacular* first toy… the Grow-N-Know Piano Plant. He calls it a piracy. And he's… been around

them so long that they couldn't… they all believed him! They didn't reprimand him at all, I saw him with his smug smiles that he hid behind their backs in his sideways glances at me and, and, and I couldn't take it! They punished me and sent him away on paid vacation due to an outbreak he had in the meeting… *paid* vacation. Paid vacation while I got dirt and a stern talking to. I wasn't having it. I, uh… Oh jeez, this sounds bad. I'm not usually a quitter! But I quit. Heh, I'm not usually a starter either, but I started, so that's a… start…

"But hey, I put my foot down, and I quit and stormed out and I laid my foot down — I already said that, but that just speaks volumes to the amount of confidence I did it with! I *really* put my foot down. That I did. Anyways, uh, I walked out and cried my little heart out and then I opened a portal, trying to go back to somewhere I knew and start over. It was a bit impulsive, but uh, I heard you guys like impulse here. Impulse and gut feelings. I didn't make the most flattering entrance, but I know you'll love me! I've always wanted to perform, I always wanted to be on stage and see the audience dance and wave and hoot and holler and yell and scream and… and… love me. Love me like no one person can, but exactly like a whole crowd could. In my emotional state I made a miscalculation, but that doesn't happen often with me. I'm, uh, I'm a math geek, I'm pretty good with it."

Manny looked questioningly at Smarty Marty, scanning him up and down for any signs of wavering, feeling the internals and externals. Something felt fuzzy and unclear, like an object in his peripheral vision. The entire explanation looked like it had physically taxed the man, but to be fair just sitting up at that moment looked physically taxing. Still, Manny noted a hint of wet in Marty's eyes. Marty would have wiped it off if only he had the ability to effectively raise either of his arms.

"And you want to perform?"

"Yeah! Yes! Yes I do! I would love to, I wanna see the bright stage lights and dance and sing and amaze and —"

Manny raised his hand to try and silence Smarty Marty, who stopped in his tracks and sunk slightly in embarrassment.

"So you want to perform. Do you have any abilities?"

"Yeah, I'm uh, I can make things — I'm a fast wit, I'm uh, I'm a social guy, I'm… good with kids. I am! I really am."

"You're not a Freak, are you?"

"A *what?* Well I would certainly hope not! I'm normal, I'm — no, I'm not, I, oh we've already had this talk. I'm absolutely positively not a freak, jeezums! What would… what would give you that impression? Oh gosh, do I really come off like a freak? Oh I'm so —"

"Oh, stop it with that. We're talking about Freaks, capital F. When we're looking for acts, we're looking for Freaks. We've got magicians, mermaids, conjoined twins with a comedy routine, an armless guy that juggles, we've got Clowns galore with all types of horrific and amazing features. You seem like an average Joe. We don't look for average Joes around here."

"An average —? Clearly I am versed in the odd and the — okay first I'm so sorry for misinterpreting freak, that was my bad, but come now! I broke a dimensional barrier, I've made toys for Wondertainment. Or, sorry, no, I *tried* to. Still, I was a Toy Tinker for a month there… I'm not an 'average Joe' I assure you! I can be amazing, audacious, Wondrous with a capital W, I swear it! I swear it with all my heart and might that I'm no… no… I'm no Joe six-pack I swear!"

Marty shook even more than he was before, wincing at the stinging his muscle tension caused. Manny looked disapprovingly at him. Marty wasn't a freak in any sense of the word, other than being unable to clearly and concisely communicate anything. However, one thing *was* clear and concisely communicated about him: he was extraordinarily motivated, and the circus *adored* "extraordinary". Marty looked desperately for a response from Manny, breathing in a way to suggest that he was about to speak but stopping himself each time.

"You have three options. By the time you come out of intensive care, have an act idea ready. If the Ringmaster and I like it, you have another week to practice it and then show it off to us. If we like it

then, you'll have a place on stage. If at either point you disappoint us, we send you back."

"Second option?"

"I'm not one to refuse an eager worker. If you want to be here that bad, I'll give you an in. You do the dirty work. Cleaning up, unclogging the toilets, milking the Clowns, you name it. All the menial labor, I'll keep you around as long as you do it. That's your second option. Your third one is to leave now, go back to Wonder World and —"

"Wonder World! Tee emm, you mean."

"— you can keep doing the things you were doing there. Bumming around and getting a job and whatever."

"Four options."

"Hmm?"

"There are four options. You missed one."

"Oh did I."

"You did. Let me propose a fourth option. I do your menial labor, sure. I can do that. I'm a motivated worker, most of the time, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. Anymore, anyways. So I do that, I'll do it for free even, but I bet that I have a talent you're in need of."

Manny raised (or lowered) his eyebrows at the sudden bold gesture from this altogether frail and pitiful try-hard. Staring into Marty's eyes, he gestured to prompt a continuation. This was an interesting move, he might not fully realize just how little power he held at this moment.

"Alright, so, sure, I was in a lot of pain, but being carried out gave me a good view of your circus, and I'm just noticing something. You're a circus, and you don't, uh, you don't have a lot of *rides*. I mean, okay, you have some. They're kind of… Oh please forgive me if this sounds like an insult to your ride… designers, but they're uh, they're bland! Have you noticed that? I mean, think about it.

You're at the forefront of entertainment, but acts are one-time things. You can only do them so many times, rides sit there and are ready for use whenever. You have to prepare for acts. And yet, you're all odd and crazy and you have such normal… such normal rides! You might expect them at your local fair! Like a, like a, like you just… bought…

"Okay I'm getting carried away, I don't want to insult you, but I can make you rides. Heheh, heheheh, I can make you rides! I can make you rides that will have your MC&D, or your SCP, or heck, your GOC lining up for fancy free fun. Rides that tower and yet are portable. Rides that send you on trips through the whole circus, or the multiverse, or your own friggin' *head*. I can make people switch bodies, even! I'm a, I'm a, or I will be a ride-making machine! I'd do menial labor in the meantime and spend late nights designing and building rides. I'll make rides. I can make you them. How's that sound?"

Manny considered. In just the last week (only based on their clocks, days in the circus were variable) they had been forced to decommission a sky-high drop tower. It shot patrons up into the stratosphere, but it was ever so slightly inaccurate and they were forced to build a giant trampoline for it. It was quite the attraction. People weren't told that they were going to be blown off course and the extra thrill was exhilarating for first-time patrons. However, the trampoline was just one of those things that worked forever until it decided not to, and at that point they had a very disquieting trampoline-shaped mess to clean up. Ever since they lost **`Charley`**, the ride market they had was *very* low quality. The best they had was the Fun-lovers' Funhouse, but their domain wasn't *quite* a ride. At the very least it was a different experience. Shifting his attention back, the two each made eye contact and Smarty Marty gave a weak yet eager smile.

"Ten days. You have ten days to make a schematic of a ride, and if it's not transportable, efficient, or most importantly fun, then you don't get to ask again. In the meantime, you're our janitor." Manny extended his right hand. "Deal?"

Marty frowned. "I'd shake your hand if I could, but I'm uh, it's hard. But yes, deal! Deal definitely deal. For certain. I won't disappoint

you, I swear it! Just uh, just pretend like I shook your hand. We'll shake on it properly later. Deal?"

Manny retracted his hand, and smirked. He was getting the hang of this rascal's personality, and suddenly he found him lightly charming. Lightening up, he leaned back in his chair, and nodded at Smarty.

"Deal."

"Yay! Yes, yes, yes ow, ow ow, ouch oh gods, too excited. Too excited! If there is such a thing! Heheh, okay, sorry, uh, can I have, can I get… I'm in need of more than some band-aids, I, can I, uh, an infirmary? 'Intensive care', I think you said? I need that. Can I go there? Please?"

Manny looked over at the stage hands, one of whom was begrudgingly handing over some scrip to the other due to a lack of piranha teeth, and whistled. They looked up, and came over to Smarty, picking up the stretcher they had put down earlier. They helped him onto it as he made grunts and moans of pain and grumbled out some strained gratitude. Icky sauntered into the tent, glaring at Smarty who flinched at her accusatory gaze (or maybe it was a stray tooth that they missed and was poking into his back). Manny went back to his professional demeanor, or at least became more solidly grounded in it, and prepared to explain the situation to an understandably angry Ringmaster, but first…

"Marty? I forgot one thing."

"Oh?"

"Lose the Smartie part. We have too many people named after candy."

« Life's a Show|Dread & Circuses Hub

And It Starts With A Song

The end of the world starts with a song.

You wake up, still hopped up on the pain pills they pass out like candy here. Someone changed the radio station while you were out, instead of sports scores there's singing. Your head is clearing quickly, not leaving the usual headache behind it, for once. You reach to change the radio station, and stop.
It doesn't hurt.

You look at your arm, at the tubes stabbing into it, and see the sagging skin pull back, tighten, heal. You sit up, and the song grows louder, and you realize that you're sitting up for the first time in months. You wonder if you're dead, if you're dreaming.

You aren't.

One minute has passed since the song started playing.

You try to get up just to see if you can, and you can, and it doesn't hurt. You walk awkwardly, legs still stiff, steps still unsure after so long without use. Your bare feet tingle as they touch the carpet. There is a small cactus perched on the windowsill, and you could swear that it twitches slightly, thorns growing imperceptibly.
Well, you decide, it's a dream. Might as well enjoy it. You step outside into the hallway, and hear the song being broadcast from every speaker in the building

Other doors are opening, all down the cancer ward, and pale people in sky blue hospital shifts are stumbling slightly as they remember what walking is like. You see that some of them still have tumors, those for whom you can tell, and you run a hand over your neck. There's still that small lump. You aren't cured? You feel cured, though…

The small potted trees, placed to give some feeling of life, are

rustling as if in a light breeze. You pinch yourself suddenly, automatically, perhaps even unwillingly… it is, after all, a very nice dream. It hurts, but it stops hurting quickly. You walk for the main desk of this, the top floor, the hospital's hospice. The receptionist is standing and staring, and you laugh when you think of how she's been put out of a job. Is this real? Probably not. It seems real, though, and feels real, and by now that's enough. You stroke the lump on your neck again, and it somehow feels bigger.

Two minutes in, and the song plays on.

You need to see the sky.

Three minutes.

You stand on the roof, and hear the song being played from every direction. The grass is green, and trees that had lost their leaves to the sinking heat of autumn are growing new ones, bigger and thicker. People are there, too, just standing and listening. You laugh, loud and without care, and try to sing along, but the song is in words that you do not recognize. It seems as if everything that can play the song is piping it to the heavens, a song of genesis, of life.

Life responds.

A dull ache is there in your neck, you realize. It feels heavier, too, as if padding were being placed on the tumor. You reach your hand up, and feel a mass of flesh twice the size that it used to be. And all the trees put forth flowers at once.
And everything begins to go wrong.

Four minutes have passed since it started.

You see someone down below keel over, suddenly. She vomits, and a sapling shoots up out of the mess. Others begin to clutch at their stomachs, some fall over, many throw up or suddenly vent their bowels. Small plants grow from the waste. You feel nothing but the steadily growing tumor.
You stand, transfixed, until

Five minutes have passed since you first heard the radio sing.

Things are moving faster, now. The grass seems to double in height in a matter of seconds, though from the roof it's hard to tell. New branches are sprouting forth from every tree you can see. Most of the people down below have stopped moving, and you watch as they bleed green that rises towards the sun. It's life, you realize, feeling detached. The hospital was sanitary. You've been fed through tubes for months, but there's bound to be something inside you waiting to grow. You don't care. You've been dying for too long now to care.
You sit down, legs dangling over a rising forest.

Six minutes.

You feel something slip down your side and hit the roof. You feel when it hits the roof. The tumor is spreading, and you watch it bubble outwards, putting forth a tendril here and there, feeling its way. It spreads like living molasses, but full of veins and prickling as it slips over bumps in the surface.

There's something gray in the distance, but coming closer. It's covering the trees, releasing smoke-like clouds as it does.

Seven minutes.

You must be the only one left. The tumor is spreading outwards still, coating the whole roof. It's almost like a gigantic cape. You wonder why you're still alive. The gray has solidified into a mountain of fungus, and you wonder if it will reach the clouds. It's stopped coming closer, though- the trees in front of it have become covered by what look like spider webs, connecting them all together, catching the gray spores and keeping the trees safe. Below you, the roads are no longer visible. The grass has taken over, with an occasional tree poking up from the tangle. The grass , as far as you can tell, is sprouting out and growing connections to nearby stalks.

How can the song still be playing? There can't be electricity, the speakers have surely been in most cases overgrown. It still seems to be coming from everywhere, though not like before. Before, it came from electronics. Now you can feel the voices as if the choir were standing right behind you.

Eight minutes, and you wonder how long the song can be.

The grass below has cut down the trees, joined together and lacerated the trunks, absorbed them and grown taller. The spider webs in the distance begin to cover the mountain of fungus, which fights back with irregular bulges and stick-like protrusions. You have covered the entire roof, and are working your way down the walls, entering windows as you reach them. The people inside have disappeared as far as you can tell. You can tell because the tumor can tell, not with eyes, but you can feel every minute difference in warmth that reaches it, every vibration that passes through the air and the building.

Nine minutes have passed, and you return to your room, slipping in through the window.

Something stabs you when you do. A spike rips through the leathery folds of flesh that were once a tumor. The cactus.
Your skin contracts around the spines, but more keep growing. They impale you, sent into a frenzy of growth by the touch. Spikes erupt from the top floor of the hospital, too fast to be stopped, too fast to be believed. It's odd. You realize, still detached, that you can see it happen. You can see every side of the building at once. The cactus throws quickly growing green balls of itself outward, seeming to double or triple in size before they hit the ground and tear into the grass. It hurts, of course, but that's nothing new.

You try to laugh as you think of a cactus growing here , in autumn no less, but you have no mouth anymore. It's grown over.

The cactus spreads furiously, each mine-like spike ball exploding into maturity in a matter of seconds. They begin to throw their own children outwards as well, and the grass acts as a single being, flowing like water to ice to solidify beneath the baby cacti, not letting them touch the ground. It doesn't matter. The spikes go down and somehow take root. They come up, as well.

Ten minutes, and it's time to die.

Twenty minutes later, and the song abruptly stops. Not that you're there to hear it. Not really. Something survived, though your brain

was impaled by a thousand miniature barbs, your body torn from the tumor and used for its nutrients. Some of the flesh survived, carpeting the roof. It may live forever.

It's not a wasteland that you left behind. When the song stopped, so did the changes. At least, so did the speed of the changes. They'll always be happening. They always have been, really. Where the hospital once stood is a world of spikes and thorns, the grass grown together with your cactus to give a clear message to whatever animals may come. Whatever animals there are. You would not recognize them, anyway.

The fungus still stands like a mountain, and will continue to do so, forever. The spider webs grow thick, but no insects will ever be caught. There are no humans left. In some strange spots there are things that were once human. A tower of bone, with eyes peeking out. A hair-covered family of four-armed and legless things, who will continue to etch meaningless inscriptions on crumbling masonry until they at last die out. A cloth-like, almost fluid mass of flesh that wisps through the miles of cacti, parting and reforming around each individual spear.

And the world began with a song.

And Now, He Is Gone

“I remember the good old days.” Pat sighed as he dug into his cinnamon pancakes, looking at his three friends. “You remember Carl, guys?”

“Carl was a great guy!” affirmed Dwight, taking a swig of his coffee. “I don’t know why the Heck he just went away one day… he’s still in the source material, after all. Not like he was told to blow off by anyone.”

Warren pointed at Pat accusingly. “And then you took his job. Damn upstart. Carl always picked up the bill whenever we ate, you know; he was rich enough that he could do that. Came with the territory. All the riches of all the conquered lands.”

“Isn’t that what that one Mediterranean guy does, though?” Frederick stuffed the last bit of bacon into his mouth. “You know the one. The kind of creepy guy with the hat and the dog.”

“I know who you’re talking about, but I can’t recall the name.” Warren frowned. “Kind of a pity, too; the dog was nice. I think it was named Spot or something?”

“Didn’t you used to be good friends with him, Warren?” asked Frederick, trying to sneak a piece of one of Pat’s pancakes.

“Maybe? I dunno. I was in Greece a lot way back in the day… and Rome… and a lot of places.” Warren looked at his friends and sighed. “We really don’t have much to talk about, do we?”

They all sat quietly for quite some time, looking at their plates uncomfortably. The waitress looked at them oddly before Pat spoke up. “Every minute, five people contract HIV.”

The other three groaned. “Why did you tell us that, Pat?”

“Yeah, last thing we want to hear about some monkey plague that you thought up. Ruins my appetite.”

“Statistics are dull, anyway.” Dwight wrinkled his brow. “All I have is statistics, now.”

“That’s pretty much what all of us have, Dwight.” Pat stood up and made for the edge of his seat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I gotta take a leak.” And with that, Pat got up and went to the restroom, leaving his three friends behind. Frederick took Pat’s remaining pancake and chewed on it.

Dwight groaned, rubbing his face. “Fucking pathetic.”

“Language, Dwight!”

“Warren, shut up.” Frederick looked at him, a bit of cinnamon pancake hanging out of his mouth. “I mean it! With Carl gone, Pat is supposed to be the one who leads us when it all goes down! If Carl were still here, that thing back in the ‘40s would’ve worked…”

“Are you sure it was the ‘40s?” asked Frederick. “I swore it was the ‘50s. Russia, remember?”

“Whatever,” said Dwight, flagging down a waitress. “Is it the right time of year for your peppermint hot chocolate?”

“It is,” said the waitress, smiling slightly. “I can get you some, if you’d like.”

“Yes, please,” said Dwight. “With whipped cream.” He smiled as the waitress walked off, shaking his head. “She’ll die on the job, poor girl. Slip on a wet rag and break her neck just after New Year’s.”

“Dwight, don’t be so damn morbid,” said Warren. “You don’t hear me spouting off things about bombs or bullets or video games.”

“I wonder where the hell Carl is, now,” muttered Frederick. “Probably in a seedy sports bar in Milwaukee or something making bets on the winning teams. That’s what I would do.”

“You think he would do something that petty?”

Frederick was about to respond when Pat came back. He frowned at his ever-hungry friend when he saw a lack of pancake on his plate. He then sat down, and picked up a copy of the local paper. "… Meteor shower soon. Maybe this'll be the one."

"Maybe," said Warren, nodding in thanks to the waitress that just brought him his peppermint cocoa. "We can only hope."

And So It Is Now

April 30, 1998

Able's fists were clenched hard enough to draw blood from his palms. He couldn't hear beyond the tomb, but he knew there were people outside.

He had to kill them. His body felt ready to snap from tension. It was ready to kill, needing to kill as mortal bodies needed to eat and breathe. The urge gnawed at his gut, worse than the hunger of a starving man.

Of late, he had managed to resist for a few minutes each time he was summoned to speak with his brother, but now with freedom so close…

He would wait until his body tore itself apart if need be.

—

In total, the ritual called for eight greater seals of protection, twenty-four minor seals of protection, three Wards of Rath-Ba, and a Matrix of Sav connecting a nodal system of forty-four augmented summoner's circles. The tomb sat in the center of the design, its own sides coated in more crimson runes. The Directors watched from their safe room several hundred feet above. With a button press they could activate Ukelele: with another, they could simply flood and collapse the chamber.

The blood had been easy enough to come by: a mandatory blood drive easily replaced the ritual slaughter of several hundred slaves. More difficult was constructing the actual ritual: it had been cobbled together from fragments of ancient texts and reverse-engineered spell rites millennia old. Enough material had been found in the last four months to triple the number of Daevite artifacts in storage, and that didn't include those items yet to be cataloged, propelling

knowledge of the Daevas forward near as far as the Rosetta Stone propelled understanding of the Egyptians.

The chanting began. A full tenth of the Coalition's practicing occultists stood in their circles, swaying along with the undulating, intermeshing words. The tone was haunting, almost melancholy, though tinged with an uglier undercurrent.

Agent Alto Clef stood in his own protective circle, twenty feet in front of the door. His knowledge of Daevic was limited to scraps of the lower tongue, and he knew little of magic. He focused on the door. When it opened, he would be the one to deal with Able, for better or for worse.

The chanting picked up its pace, the words spilling forth with greater power and urgency. A glow filled the chamber, shadows flickering wild and rampant against the walls in a wild dance. Wind whistled in unmoving air, building up to a roar that filled the cavern. The intensity crescendoed into a maddening height, burning and swirling and crashing, and then it stopped. The chant, the glow, and the wind ended as one, like an extinguished candle.

It was done.

—

It was done.

The urge was gone. The knot in his stomach untied, the tension in his muscles loosened. He felt weak, weaker than he had been for a very long time. Confusion roiled in his mind: everything was coming back to him, and it was unfamiliar. Cold, hunger, fear…Had he spent so much time a tool that he had forgotten what it was like to be a man?

Perhaps. If it was so, he would learn again.

Able stood up, and for the first time in over ten thousand years his steps were unsteady.

He pushed open the door of his tomb for the last time.

—

The door of the tomb swung open. Able stepped out, tottering and wobbling like a paralytic learning to walk again. He reached the border of the first ward and stopped.

Clef stepped out of his own circle and walked towards the Neolithic man.

[Looks like we did it.]

Able nodded. He swung his arm sharply, as if swinging a knife. No weapon appeared in his hand.

[Yes. We did.]

Able smiled, turned to the men and women standing at the margins of the circle, and spread his arms in triumph.

[Know this, tribe of Clef! Before you stands a man freed! By all the gods of the River and the Mountain be blessed, and know that I am your kin from this day forward!]

—

O5 SPECIAL ORDER 1998-04-30

In accordance with the original agreement of Project Greenhouse, Agent Alto Clef and all materials related therein is to return to the Foundation on May the second, 1998. In addition, the remains of LTE-9927, custody of KTE-9927-Prime, and custody of KTE-0706 are likewise handed over to Foundation jurisdiction for further study and containment.

BY THE ORDER OF

05-1
05-2
05-3
Foundation A4 Advisory Board

European Field Operations Director LaForte

European General Operations Director Fontaine
United Kingdom General Operations Director Cast
United Kingdom Assistant Director Burr
American General Operations Director Henderson
American Assistant Director Zane

—

“Zane, I don’t care what the records say. *I never signed that order*.”

—

O5 GENERAL ORDER 1998-04-20

Due to recent events involving a change of species, Dr. Adam Crow has been relieved of his position as Administrator. A new Administrator will be appointed by the O5 Board.

BY ORDER OF:

05-1
05-2
05-3

—

Dr. Gerry sat meditating by the Clockwork, letting the metronomic ticking and clicking fill his ears and clear his mind. Thoughts settled into place in time with the music. He was part of the Machine, the Machine was part of him, as Crom and Nala and Grape were of the Machine. Man did not create the Machine: man created machines so that the Machine might inhabit them. The computers he had created with the Clockwork were mere vessels for fragments of the Machine.

A true vessel, proper for the Machine in its fullness and perfection of Logic and Reason, would come in time.

And So On And So Forth

March 15, 1994

Francis tapped his pen against his chin, surveying the great sheet of paper pinned to the wall. He had been here longer than he thought: great swathes of it were covered in lines of his writing. He selected a reasonably-sized blank space and began to print in thin, neat letters.

[Next question: how do you perceive what I am writing?]

The drawing of a girl picked up a drawing of a piece of chalk and wrote on the drawing of a blackboard next to her.

[I hear it.]

[But you can't see us.]

[No.]

[Do people sound different to you?]

She erased the board to make more room.

[A bit. Sometimes a lot. Some people mumble, and some people sound really uptight and draw out their words. You sound normal. I can tell the difference, but it's subtle.]

Hmm…probably dependent on handwriting.

Francis scratched some more notes down on his own tablet before writing once more on the larger sheet.

[Thank you. That'll be all for today, Cassie. I'll send up some new pictures for your wall this afternoon.]

[Wait! Could you stay? I'd like to keep talking.]

[I'm sorry: I have work to do. Agatha or Simon will be around sometime after lunch, I promise.]

[Oh. Okay. Goodbye.]

[Goodbye.]

Francis watched the sketched girl begin to doodle forlornly on blackboard for a few moments before he stood up from his chair and left the room. He signed out on the time sheet hanging next to the door. A little hollow hole sank in his gut, as it always did after visiting with Cassie. Simon had "officially" confirmed that she was depressed, but that was obvious to anyone who spoke with her. It was like visiting your great-grandmother in the nursing home. All she wanted was someone to talk to, to break the monotony.

The staff did what they could for her, but with juggling recruitment, management, studying other items, and maintaining the façade as they stealthily wrapped up their outside lives…

Oh well. Off to the next job.

Francis' footsteps echoed in the empty hallway for a minute or so, before they were drowned out by a blaring alarm klaxon and the amplified voice of Dr. Crow's over the intercom speaker.

"Attention all personnel. A security breach has been detected in Tower 3, Level 5. SCP-682 has broken containment. Area lockdown has been initiated. Please proceed to your designated safe zones."

Tower three. He was in tower three. He was in a locked tower with the lizard. Alone.

Francis automatically ran his left thumb over the smooth scarred depression in his right.

Son of a fuck.

—

"So. Dmitri. Where'd you find these pieces of work?" John motioned to the four men sitting around the conference table, his toothpick

held between his first two fingers. Fucking administration and their no-smoking policy.

Strelkinov pointed to each in turn.

“Vasili is good friend from army days. Boleslav, he kill Afghans with bare hands. Live in mountains alone after war. Stanimir work for the KGB. Very classified work. Listed as KIA. Matvey, he is mafia.”

John raised an eyebrow.

“Not even going to ask. They’re your problem. Any of them speak English?”

“No.”

“*Your* problem then, *you* give them the spiel.” John walked off towards the door. “I gotta take a piss.”

“Ah. Okay. Mm-*hmm*. [Hello, gentlemen…]

—

John pissed like a racehorse. Too much coffee. Fucking no-smoking policy. Toothpicks, gum, coffee, nothing worked. He needed tobacco, dammit. He was jumpy, rattled, razzled, and supremely agitated. No smokes in four days. No *sun* in four days.

Easy, John. Relax. Just fucking relax…

The recruits. He focused on the new recruits. That was his job anyway. With these four, it brought the total number of security staff to sixteen. The others were a scattering of mercenaries, ex-cons, homeless vets, several other Russians, and one retired state trooper. Crow had been steadfast that they get a reliable security staff up and running as fast as possible, and John agreed. What irked him was that he and Dmitri were in charge of all of it, and it was not easy. Dmitri may have been able to pull old war buddies out of his hat like rabbits, but it wasn’t like they could just put out personal ads for this shit.

Still better than working for the CIA, though.

The stream finally trickled off. He had just zipped up as the alarms went off: his coffee and withdrawal-wrecked nerves shot him a good two feet in the air. He barely had time to land before the bathroom door was kicked open and he felt a large hand grab him by the collar and drag him backwards.

“We are having an emergency! We must be fast!” Dmitri pulled him out into the hall and threw him upright. John wobbled to a stable pose as Dr. Crow's voice came over the intercom.

“Attention all personnel. Security breach detected in Tower 3, Level 5. SCP-682 has broken containment. Area lockdown has been initiated.”

“Shit on a biscuit!” John spat out his toothpick.

“That will not help us.”

“*Goddammit Dmitri you know what I meant!*”

—

Francis was alone, and he was very scared. He held his mop in a vice-like grip, creeping with his back flat against the wall, and trying to control his breathing, as he had been doing for the last half hour.

He was terrified of 682. He would admit that. The last time he had worked with it, it fit in his palm and took a chunk out of his thumb. It wasn’t so small and cute now.

“Come on out, little guy. I’ve got a mop with your name on it. A nice dirty mop. I’ll mop you good. Beware my mop, boy. Respect the mop.”

Nothing beyond an empty hallway responded to his whispered bravado. Nothing at all.

Wait.

He leapt into the middle of the hallway, whipping out with the mop and hitting nothing. There was still nothing there.

Still nothing there.

There was a vent, though.

Something hit Francis in the chest, knocking him to the floor. Now there was something there. It was right there, actually. Right on top of him.

The lizard was about the size of a large cat, and held itself in much the same way: hunched and bunched up, ready to lash out, tail flicking back and forth. Its hide was knobbly and thick, a dull greenish yellow-brown with faded dark spots. The teeth were crooked, like the jaw wasn't fit for them, but they were sharp. Very sharp. Francis could feel its breath on his face. It glared at him with yellow eyes that looked thoroughly evil. Francis shut his own eyes tight. It looked like it had been *smiling*.

This was it. This was mauling time. He was going to get mauled. He clenched everything he could clench and readied himself for the pain

The weight lifted from his chest. Snarls broke out once more, this time a few feet above him.

"Mr. Wojciechoski."

Francis opened his eyes. Dr. Gerry stood over him, wearing a stained apron of thick leather and matching gloves that went up to his elbows. He held 682 by the scruff of the neck in one hand. It had stopped struggling, and the cause was clear: a frighteningly large hypodermic needle held in Gerry's other hand.

"This will suffice for the moment. I will place it in the backup containment unit before it adapts to the drug."

Gerry turned and began to walk off, carrying the unconscious lizard as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

"Now then, I believe you are still scheduled for overseeing experiments this morning. Good day to you, Mr. Wojciechoski."

Francis fell back on the floor and began to laugh. He had been there

the whole time. Of course he had.

Of course he had.

—

“I’m sorry you weren’t able to see your new recruits in action, Dmitri.”

“Win some, lose some.”

“That said, I’ll be revising 682’s containment procedures to include a permanent guard station. It’s become far more adaptive than I had originally foreseen, and I don’t want it getting out again.”

“Very well. I go speak with them.”

…
…
…

“Two decades of work and the only variant of the prion that works leaves us with a psychopathic gecko. It's a pity Sanderson isn't here, Connor. He'd be calling this a massive success. I miss his enthusiasm.”

“His absence is regrettable.”

“And will continue to be, because he's been in the ground for twelve years. He would have loved to see this. Probably would have put a collar on it and called it Leeroy or something.”

“As you say.”

“…You really are a bore nowadays, Connor. Has anyone told you that?”

“Regularly.”

And so the Crows Laughed

There comes the King and his crowd,

His subjects turned against him, taking his crown.

The cheering comes with flames of hate,

Burning and raging, bring the palace down.

Gold and diamonds scatter on the ground,

Bodies of the royal lie around.

A mask from masquerade stained and broken,

As is his ruling falling apart.

Rags on his body chains all around,

The King old and weak, losing

his power.

A crow laughs and the jester cries,

The skeleton of a lion roars but halts.

Upon the old tree the King was hanged,

His former subjects silently watch.

The chains are rusted and the rope is long,

Strangles and tightens squeezing the breath out.

The King mumbles and whispers as he lingers,

Praying to the dark gods we know not about.

Life slips from his body but deaths comes not,

His eyes cold and empty, his voice speaks of dark.

Half-alive when he is buried,

Half-dead when he escapes.

Coming back to reclaim his kingdom,

With blood and rage and horrors from beyond.

But a dead King rules not the living,

Until the living too find their tombs.

So the old kingdom is destroyed once more,

Only to build a new one for no mortal soul.

And thus the Hanged King sits in his palace,

His lords serve him with broken masks.

But the chains bind him with
pain and torment,

And the crows of death shall
forever watch.

The grand palace of the King trembled as flames licked its surface of gold and silver. The kingdom's long suppressed subjects had reached the King's dungeon, where he tried to hide as his guards stood defenseless against the mob. They dragged him, the once King, now deprived of his crown and throne, through the carefully polished marble floor, putting rusted chains around his hands and ankles. The very chains that the King had used to imprison his opponents. They rid him of his long gorgeous robe, using mere rags to cover his now scarred body. The old King murmured, but his mouth was soon slammed shut by the angry crowd.

The riot went on, with exploited farmers and workers and even the once loyal and lawful citizens, rushing into the palace to grab their share of the treasure. The followers and servants of the King were all butchered with knives and swords or even by heavy sticks and stones. Even the jester of the court was not spared. He was caught crying as the people put his head against the beautifully decorated palace wall. His mask lay broken on the ground, and his blood soon stained the royal carpets as the fire grew silently, taking the palace slowly apart.

But the wiser men of the city did not join this parade of madness. Unlike the uneducated crowd, they knew very well what the things in the King’s dungeon meant. Not just corruption and indulgence of pleasure, but something darker, whispers and prayers to things that should not be remembered. The tomes and symbols reminded them too much of the ancient gods of down in the abyss, the dark red liquid in the silver cup unsettlingly resembled blood. A lion, which was once the King’s pet, now reduced to mere skeleton, had carvings on it that they wish they could unsee. And they knew that the soldiers fell before the angry people not because their weapons were not sharp or their armors were poorly-made, but because their bodies so weak, that they weren’t even able to put up a fight. The

soldiers were hardly the young men in good health they were when they were recruited, as they appeared lost and confused with a broken soul, as if something had sucked their life dry over the years. So they fled, scholars grabbing their scrolls, painters taking their paintings and tools, leaving this cursed city without looking back.

The cheering in the city however, did not cease. The people celebrated their victory, throwing filthy things towards the King, picking up stones to break his fragile bones once more. Even the smallest children had come up and kicked the old man, leaving him crawling in the mud. They hardly understood what this all meant, but they too laughed with the crowd. The crows gathered on the branches nearby, and they made noises harsh and shrill, as if mocking the men below.

Tortured people had taken their revenge, but even those who had been the King's accomplice had joined their rank. The criminals who had murdered tens of people stood alongside those who were too afraid to even speak ill of the court, and they all cheered and cheered. The thieves walked proudly in broad daylight, for on this one day, the only thief was the King, who stole the Kingdom from its people, and everything else done was to serve justice. Innocents had died and the ones with blood on their hands were praised heroes, but the crowd did not care. They were vultures, feasting upon the dead body of a giant, who had been weak and sinful, now a lair for things so much more filthy than he was.

And the climax of the feast came when the King was taken through the long streets and out to a small hill where an old tree stood. They were going to use the gallows to hang him, but someone suggested that the King did not deserve a formal execution, but should die nameless and forgotten. So they took him here, a deserted place where the tree happened to be big and tall enough for him to be hanged. The King, who had crawled on his broken knees all the way there, hardly resembled a king anymore. Covered in dirt and rags, he was more along the lines of beggars than anything of royalty. But even as people spat at him and cursed him, nobody dared to look at him in the eyes. Even with his jaw broken, he murmured unholy words that no one wished to hear. So the crowd shouted and yelled as loud as they could, trying to hide the unsettling feeling stirring

their hearts and minds.

The execution was done easily and swiftly, as it merely took a long rope around the King's neck with its end tied to a large tree branch. The King was hanged, heavy chains still on his body, for the people felt unsafe to take them off. He had struggled like every hanged man in human history, but the words slipped through his lips were unlike anything others had spoken. He did not ask for forgiveness, nor did he curse his rebellious subjects for he knew they had already been cursed. He spoke inhuman words that came from places of dark, and then laughed and laughed until his final breath. Then there was silence, as his hands and feet finally stopped moving.

There was no longer cheering, as everyone tried to get out of the place as soon as they could. Nobody wanted to look at the Hanged King for a second more, as his eyes, now lifeless and wide, still seemed to be staring at them. The courage they built up when taking the palace was gone, the pride and the triumph they felt now reduced to void and fear. The King was hanged, but it was as if his laughter was still echoing on this small hill.

They never intended to bury him as they eventually did, for they wanted him to be exposed in the wild for crows to come and maggots to grow, and his body to decay, so that the King would die humiliated. The crows did come, circling around him but never landed. They just laughed and laughed with their ugly voices as if mocking the crowd once more. And the lifeless look of the King was so resentful and disgusting that everyone wanted to cover this foul creature with earth, as if mere soil would help them escape from his hateful gaze. They did not make him a tomb, however, and they buried the King only shallowly as nobody was willing to stay long to dig a hole deep enough. Then the crowd left. They went back to the city, and indulged themselves in their newly gained treasure, trying to forget what they had witnessed.

On the first day, nothing had really happened, except that a homeless reported that he had heard strange noises coming from the hill, where the King was hanged and buried. He also said that crows had gathered, their eyes fixed on the King’s grave, as if waiting for something to happen. But this was dismissed as a madman’s words.

On the second day, however, many residents of the city found themselves badly ill. They coughed, bled, and trembled lying on the floor as if they were bound by heavy, rusted chains. The river that flowed across the city had turned red, and smelled of human blood. Those who enjoyed their new power and wealth found themselves helpless after merely one day, clutching at the gold they took from the palace and died beside it.

On the third day, those who were still alive were able to move again. But they stood up only to put a knife against their throats or to scream while ripping their faces off. Their blood streamed out of their houses, staining the river with red even more. All animals had fled the city, except for the crows, which were now almost everywhere. They stood watching silently as the city spiraled down into madness. At the same time, the soil on top of the King's burial rustled. The crows laughed with their harsh tone as the Hanged King climbed out of his grave, with chains around his hands and ankles and the rope around his neck.

He was hanged as a king of men but he came out of that place something else. His body lifeless, but he was not dead as he refused to walk that path, and used souls he had and didn't have to make the bargain. The chains hit the ground, clashing against each other as the Hanged King made his way back to the city. The very city now flooded with blood and watched by dark crows, where people kept screaming until they could scream no more.

He moved past the streets where he was dragged along just a few days back, stepping on the blood of his former subjects. He walked slowly towards the ruins of the once magnificent palace he had built all those years ago. The treasures had been taken, and all that was left were dead bodies and broken weapons. The King moved past a broken mask, which was once worn by his favorite jester, but he paid no attention. He walked towards the dungeon where a throne covered by sharp, rusted spikes was placed. The ones who had taken the palace thought it was meant for torturing, and did not bother to move it. The King, leaving a blood trail behind, stepped upon to the throne, and placed his body through the cold metal spikes.

As the spikes went through his dead body, the King trembled. He would have screamed, if the rope had not rendered him breathless, for the pain was in the soul rather than his body. He was there to suffer forever, but it had been done and it was then his one and only rightful throne. For a moment there, there was silence, but then the ruins of the palace began to shake, and the city started to tremble. The flames rose once more, but more of a phantom of the past, and the blood in the river started to boil. The skeleton of the lion stood up, and roared.

The King's dungeon, where the throne was placed, the center of all these, now became a hole, a hole that warped the whole kingdom inside. It turned everything inside out, making them twisted and inhuman. The space bent, time disoriented, and the city was in another place not quite there, but still where they all were. The whole city was transformed and remade. The crows had taken off and they circled the city, searching for those who were not yet dead, pecking them with their beaks until they bled out in horrifying forms.

The Hanged King, who was now seated in the court of his new city, built upon the ruins of the old one, shall sit there forever and ever. The dead jester came up, once again wore his broken mask, and offered the King a silver cup filled with blood.

He spoke words not quite his in an alien tone: "With this, our blood, it is the Hanged King's."

The King took the cup, but his hand was broken and pierced by the sharp blades of the throne. The scarred hand trembled hard, and it was too weak to hold it. The cup then fell on the floor and the blood spilled on his new court.

The crows, who had been watching, laughed again with their harsh voices and left. They left the city as the dead stood up again, bending their broken body to resemble human form. They walked the new twisted streets, putting on masks to cover their bloodied faces, and started to cheer as they did when they were alive on the day they took the palace. They paraded in the new city and started a carnival, as if the tragedy was a grand masquerade all along. They laughed and laughed until the King started to cry and scream, but

his throat could not make a single sound, so he merely wept in silence.

So the city was ruled forever by the Hanged King, with the masked dead celebrating and parading until they too rot. But even those who had fled the city when the King was hanged found no peace. They were haunted in waking moments and in dreams, for whispers from the twisted city had found their hidings. They dreamt of a masquerade of corrupted souls, through the long hallways of a labyrinth down to the Hanged King's grand court. And when they woke up, they would shake in fear. But they could not forget what they had seen, as if the city of decay and rapture had taken roots in their minds. So they wrote dramas and poems about the cursed city, composed songs and paintings of the damned king. Some of them lost and forgotten, but those survived the long history will bring their viewers to the Hanged King's reach.

And outside the twisted alleys of the kingdom, beyond the spiked throne of the Hanged King, the crows all laugh and fly away, but their eyes shall always be watching.

And the Winner Is...

"Before I announce the winner," Assistant Site Director Edmunds said to the small group of researchers gathered in Site 73's cafeteria, "I'd just like to thank and congratulate all of you for participating. This has been a difficult year for us, and activities like this always help staff morale. I've enjoyed reading all your submissions - yes, Greg, even yours - and it was very difficult for the judges to pick a winner."

"With that out of the way," he said as he opened the envelope in his hands, "the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Malthus had won? His story was a ridiculous B-movie parody! He'd put so much time into his own submission, a self-referential piece about a man who'll do anything to win a writing contest, only to be outdone by this over-the-top piece of hack work that Malthus wrote in about fifteen minutes and submitted two hours before the deadline! "Well," he said to himself, "it's over and done with now. I can't change the past."

Or could he? His position gave him research access to a number of SCP objects that operated outside of linear time. It would be a major violation of protocol if he got caught, of course - but as he went about his work, he idly wondered to himself whether there was any way he could use any of the objects he knew about to change the outcome of the contest.

982? Not likely. 728? Too unpredictable. 276? Maybe, but there's no way he could pull it off without getting caught. 869? 869. Hmm. He'd overseen experiments in the past that involved using SCP-869 to

attempt to send information back through time. It'd be risky, but if it worked he'd have had the satisfaction of seeing the look on Malthus' face when he himself came out on top. If nothing else, he could call it just another experiment, right?

It wasn't for six months that he worked up the courage to prepare his parcel; an envelope with a 1948 postage stamp affixed to it, addressed to Site 73. Inside it, another envelope marked with the Foundation's seal and instructions not to open it until decades later - the day the site writing contest was announced. Within that, a third envelope, to be delivered to his own office - and within that, a copy of Malthus' story and a letter to himself instructing him to submit it as his contest entry.

Anderson was on pins and needles the entire drive to Galveston, the entire time bluffing his way past the guards at the entrance of SCP-869, the entire time he made his way past the crowds of people enjoying the park on that sunny summer day in 1948. Looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody else from the Foundation was following him, he made his way out the front entrance of the park, crossed the street, walked down the block to a waiting mailbox, opened it, and dropped his missive in.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. When the office gopher first handed him a letter that purported to be from his future self, he thought he was being set up. The story it instructed him to submit was frankly ridiculous, and he wasn't even sure almost until the end of the contest that he wanted to submit it - but he did, and it had worked! He'd take himself out for a nice steak dinner that night to celebrate.

He never did, however, bother to write himself a letter.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Malthus had won? His story was a ridiculous B-movie parody! He'd put so much time into his own submission, a self-referential piece about a man who'll do anything to win a writing contest, only to be outdone by this over-the-top piece of hack work that Malthus wrote in about fifteen minutes and submitted two hours before the deadline! "Well," he said to himself, "it's over and done with now. I can't change the past."

Or could he?

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. When the office gopher first handed him a letter that purported to be from his future self, he thought he was being set up. The story it instructed him to submit was frankly ridiculous, and he wasn't even sure almost until the end of the contest that he wanted to submit it - but he did, and it had worked! He'd take himself out for a nice steak dinner that night to celebrate.

It wasn't until thirty years later, his last month on the job before retirement, as he cleaned a career's worth of paperwork out of his filing cabinet, that he rediscovered the certificate he'd been given to commemorate his victory. He realized that he'd never closed the time loop by sending himself a letter with the story in it - and he'd better do so fast, because if he left the Foundation without ever having done so, thirty years of history could wind up in flux. He searched through his papers for hours looking for a copy of the story

that had won him that contest so many years ago - in vain. *I'll just have to improvise*, he thought to himself, as he sat down at his computer and began typing out the story as best as he could remember it after all these years.

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. How could this happen? His own story, "Revenge of the Ghostly Wrath," was exactly what the letter had told him to submit! Malthus must have seen his story and ripped it off - he had to admit that Tom's story was a little less silly than his own. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to send that story instead…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'I Was A Teenage Carrot!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. How could this happen? His own story, "Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury," was exactly what the letter had told him to submit! He thought it over for hours and hours before he realized he must have submitted his entry too early - and when Malthus found out there was already a story exactly like what he planned on submitting, he had to come up with something else. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to be more specific with his instructions…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Sarah Evans, for her story 'Love At 80,000 AU!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Evans rose from her seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was her grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. Director Edmunds had told him that he and Dr. Malthus had both submitted the exact same story, and since he couldn't tell which of them had plagiarized the other he had no choice but to disqualify them both. He'd waited too long - and by the time he submitted the story the letter had told him to, Malthus had already submitted his 'original'. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to be more specific with his instructions…

And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. Tom Malthus, for his story 'How Jester Got His Groove Back!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Malthus rose from his seat, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Later, in his office, Dr. James Anderson, associate managing supervisor of temporal anomaly research, cursed to himself under his breath. The letter he'd gotten from his future self had explained every last detail of how to ensure his victory. What had gone wrong? Perhaps it was inevitable that Malthus would win. Perhaps he'd always write a better story than the one Anderson submitted. Clearly, when he closed the temporal loop that had started when he got a letter from his future self, he'd have to send a second letter as well - one to remove Malthus from the picture altogether…

"And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Dr. James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'" The two dozen or so assembled authors clapped politely as Dr. Anderson rose from his seat on a pair of mechanical legs, took a short bow, and accepted the $100 gift card that was his grand prize.

Success! Anderson was on Cloud Nine as he made his way back to his office. It was a small victory in his long career with the Foundation and all the accomplishments they'd made to improve mankind, but it was a victory all the same. Immediately, he grabbed some digipaper and an E-quill, and started writing the instructions to his past self that would close the loop and ensure time remained unaltered…

Assistant Site Director Edmunds' thoughts radiated immediately across the great neural network to all those who had become part of the Foundation-Mind. "And the winner of this year's Site 73 short story contest is - Unit 483012, James Anderson, for his story 'Night of the Revenge of the Wrath of the Ghost of the Fury!'"

Anderson hid his feelings from the accolades of his peers as they drifted into his mind. In the stasis pod where his physical body lay connected to the tubes and machines that sustained it, he rolled over and unplugged his neural jack. *This is all wrong*, he thought as he suddenly found himself alone with his thoughts. *The world isn't supposed to be like this. My past self must have introduced some anachronism when he sent that letter. I've got to fix it somehow…*

"Et le gagnant de cette année pour le concours de nouvelles littéraires du Site 73 est - Dr. Tom Malthus, avec son histoire intitulée : Nuit de la Vengeance du Courroux du Fantôme de la Fureur!" Les quelques deux douzaines d'auteurs réunis applaudirent poliment, tandis que le Dr. Malthus se levait, s'inclinait rapidement et acceptait la carte-cadeau de 100 Francs qui était son grand prix.

Plus tard dans son bureau, le Dr. James Anderson, gestionnaire associé à la supervision de la recherche sur les anomalies temporelles, se maudit dans sa barbe. Malthus avait gagné? Son histoire n'était qu'une ridicule parodie de films de série B! Il avait mis tellement de temps dans sa propre soumission, une histoire autoréférentielle sur un homme prêt à tout pour gagner un concours d'écriture, simplement pour être surpassé par ce torchon bâclé et outrancier que Malthus avait écrit en quinze minutes et soumit deux heures avant la fin du délai! "Eh bien," se dit-il "c'est bel et bien terminé maintenant. Je ne peux pas changer le passé. "

Ou pourrait-il?

> **9/8/13:** The Time Contest has ended! The winner is Dr. Gears, with his tale 'Foundation 2099'. Thanks for all of your great entries!

James Anderson cursed under his breath as he read the announcement on the front page of the SCP wiki. His story about Lord Blackwood joining forces with SCP-173 to fight crime had been leading in upvotes for two weeks - and then Gears pops out of the blue again and posts a story that makes it to +100 in under two days? How is anyone supposed to compete with that? If only there were some way to travel back in time and submit Gears' own story before he could…

The quivering purple mass of flesh towered over the two dozen humans who kneeled in chains below it. It began to undulate as speech echoed from within its hulking body. "I have reviewed the literary tributes you pitiful creatures have submitted to me, and none of them are worthy. None of you shall earn your freedom today!"

The slave who had once been called Dr. James Anderson, back before the coming of the Age of Flesh, cursed under his breath. Sure, freedom probably meant a slow death alone in the ruins of the world above, but it had to be better than *this*. There must be one of the Master's playthings I can get at, he thought to himself, to ensure that he would be free…

Dr. James Anderson woke up in his office and climbed out of bed. It was a sunny Sunday midnight and lunch break was over - time to get back to work and think about his entry in the writing contest he'd be hearing about next week. Outside his door, he heard the sound of a gong - the office courier was here.

He opened the door and shivered as the cold winter air hit him. "L-l-l-letter for you, sir," said the Hawaiian-shirt-wearing courier as he handed him an envelope. Anderson smiled, tipped the boy six shillings and thruppence, and sent him on his way. Closing the door,

he sat back down in front of his typewriter and opened the envelope to find a single page, written in what appeared to be human blood;

We were fools to try and play with history. Millions and millions of paradoxes colliding with one another. Now it's all broken. Space and time are meaningless. It's just us, millions of Andersons alone in the empty desert below a sunless sky. He looks down on us, the great gray-faced god where the Sun should be, and His gaze burns our flesh. He sees us now. HIDE THE NUCLEAR LAUNCH CODES IN THE CREDENZA SO I CAN KILL HIM! IT'S NOT WORKING! HE'S IMMUNE! THERE IS NO HOPE FOR SALVA

Anderson yawned as his alarm clock went off - 37:65 on Marsday, Quatuordecimber 72nd. Time for work. He laid the letter down on his desk and started typing out a copy of it to submit for the writing contest he'd be hearing about next week.

"And Then I Died" Archive

Below are the previous entries for ***`the game`****. Read and enjoy! The answer are in links at the end of each one.*

Round 1: TroyL

I never really cared much for my brother.

We had at best a strained relationship. Our parents just muttered "boys" and went about their business, but it was different. It wasn't sibling rivalry. It wasn't even rivalry. We just… didn't want to be around each other. Ever. We were like the same end of a magnet, always pushing away from each other, always bowing to the invisible force that kept us surely separated. And, in a way, we were happy like that.

I went into the military; he went to college. I got out and started working with computers; he finished his degree and started designing them. I eventually managed a private companies IT department; he worked at development in a rival company. From my graduation on, I never saw him for more than an hour at most. Since our mother's funeral—the official cessation of all family gatherings—I hadn't seen him at all.

It made his sudden appearance, haggard, carrying a briefcase and a shotgun, that so surprised me. It was early in the morning, and when I opened the door, the light was carrying blinded me. He talked for a few moments at the door, still holding the light aloft, before he turned it off, apologizing. He came in, apologizing for the late hour, and asked for a cup of coffee. I agreed, sitting with him at the table silently. He didn't speak. I didn't ask.

As he was about to leave, he looked at me, tilting his head sideways for a moment. "Do you have any shells for a 20 gauge?"

I nodded somewhat, fetching them from my study at the end of the hall and handing them to him. He thanked me and left the building. I

should have wondered what he'd gotten himself into, what sort of espionage he'd managed, but I didn't. I just didn't care.

The next morning, I found myself unable to think. Everything looked like a gray haze, and even when I tried to concentrate, I couldn't. I remember turning the knob, and the bullet hitting my chest, but after that, everything starting shifting—going from gray to black.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 2: Dexanote

I've always had a pretty decent life. I was an only child, growing up in upstate New York with my mother and father. Mom was a real estate agent, Dad was an engineer. They both had emigrated from England before I was born, and we still had family back there. We visited sometimes, in the summers. I never liked English Summers. It would always rain.

I always got good grades in school, played sports, did my chores, and so on. Never caused any trouble, but never really looked for any. I was a model, if fairly average, teenager.

When I was 24 I decided to go travel abroad in Europe. Mom and Dad had retired together the year before, and didn't seem to mind. I wish they had stopped me.

I went to Italy first, then Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France… It was wonderful. I slept in hostels and under the stars, I loved this freedom. It was… beautiful. The countries, the places, the cities, the people, the art. It was all breathtaking.

One day, a few months into my travels, I called home to see how everyone was doing. I found that my widowed Aunt Helen back in England had passed, and left everything to me, her only nephew. I was told to make my way to Britain and find her lawyers, who would sort everything out in the mean time.

When I arrived, the lawyers had already sorted out the transfer of

ownership and related documentation. I now owned my Aunt's entire estate.

I went "home" to my new domain.

It was June, and the sky was grey. The estate was a large house in the countryside, with a greenhouse and a large garden out back. The entire building was covered in a purplish ivy, and an entire wing of the place contained a collection of strange, curious gadgets - a chessboard, an ugly green statue, a bunch of freakish dolls, a fortune-teller machine, records, phonographs, a wardrobe, a dartboard… Nothing in the rooms seemed to have any coherent theme. I just shrugged; I'd sort through all the bullshit when I had time.

I had decided to sleep on a sofa in the living room until I was more comfortable with the house. The huge conservatory window behind me let in a bit of light, the rain *plit plit plitting* off the panes. It hadn't stopped raining since I arrived.

I left one of the lower windows open to let in a nice breeze. At least I wasn't sweating, I thought. If I was back in New York I'd be quite uncomfortable.

It wasn't so bad here. The rain was relaxing, the ivy shivered quietly in the breeze. I guess I could get used to this…

I felt something brush against my arm. I became very still.

Something burned. I screamed.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 3: Ragazzo

In a Miami apartment's bathroom.

Ahhhhhh…damn…this…this is a really shitty hangover…fuck, man, what did I have last night…I'm here in my god damn apartment

throwing up in my fucking apartment while that bastard Jode must be waking up next to some hot piece of a-ah f-fuck… The sounds of vomiting echo off the bile, and blood splattered linoleum of the bathroom floor, interspersed with the odd dry heave here and there. "Wait…fuckin' hang on…I partied with Jode last week, the fuck…is that my fuckin' hair?! The hell am I sitting in? Shit, fuck, my hands… what happened to my fuckin' hands?!" And then I passed out.

Several hours later…

"F-fuck…oh…g-god…I feel like…fuckin' shit…what'd I…drink last night…fuck, it must have been that old ass boo-" A heave, a retching sound. A thin stream of bile dribbles out of my mouth, around the sickly pale orb of flesh that has swollen up from the roof of my mouth. I fall forward, and my face splashes into the toilet bowl, breaking through the thin crusty shell of bodily fluids into the rancid slop below.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 4: RhettSarlin

Almost ready. We've been waiting for this excursion for a while now. Just us and the desert, looking up at the stars, snuggled close. Sophie smiles at me as she finishes packing food into the cooler. I smile back and take our sleeping bags out to the truck. I love her more than she knows. We've been going on random playful excursions for nearly 2 years now, and ever since that day at the camel farm where she came out soaked but laughing I've known she was the one for me.

I may propose to her soon.

But not this trip. Watching the Perseids and looking at cacti are the order of the weekend this time. We've got everything packed up now. House is locked up, dogs have food and water, alarm's on. We already made sure things were good with her apartment, so she gives me a quick peck on the cheek and we're on our way.

Country music blaring from the radio as we head down I-8. I shake my head internally at her for that one, but hey, nobody's perfect. Exit coming up. Heading south now. She's chattering about her plans for a painting of the meteor shower. I love her art. I tend to appreciate the realistic more than the abstract, and her stuff from a distance looks almost like a photograph…at first glance anyway.

Quick stop in Why for gas and a restroom break, then head down to the campgrounds. Or near enough. Sun's going down and we want to get set up out in the desert rather than the official spots. We go offroad a ways, drive past a hill and park where the truck won't be seen. Hiking time. We grab our packs, bags, and the cooler and head out. A mile or so we deem sufficient. We find a nice clear flat area that's to our liking and set up camp.

Night now. Smores and hotdogs are sufficient for us. Playful makeouts, with an eye toward the sky. There it is! First meteor of the night. A kiss for every one we see. Soon there's too many for us to keep up, so we just lay in each other's arms and enjoy the show.

Starting to feel a bit sleepy. Wouldn't be my first time sleeping in the open, and Sophie doesn't seem to mind. My body tingles a bit, then starts to go numb. I drift away and darkness takes me.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 5: TroyL

He’s standing there. He’s standing there, rooted to the spot, looking at me. He’s going to kill me. He didn’t realize it when he walked in the room—and he doesn’t even realize it now—but it’s going to happen. They’re going to make him.

“Richard,” I whisper, putting my hand on the glass separating the two of us. “Richard, please don’t do this.”

His eyes look almost pained as he takes a step back, his face contorting as his teeth clench abnormally hard. I can feel it as they

grind, enamel on enamel, the sound practically boring a hole into my head.

“Please,” I beg, my voice a pained whisper. “Please don’t do this. I… I’ll do anything. I’ll do whatever you want. Just…don’t do what they say. Don’t kill me, Richard.”

He looks at me, gagging suddenly, as the intercom clicks: “Follow your orders, 18765. Proceed with the experiment.”

I pound my fists on the glass, screaming, “They don’t even know your name! Please! I know you! I’m your friend, Richard! Please. *Please.* Don’t let them kill me.”

I’m sobbing, and so is he. The intercom sounds again, and he closes his eyes. I watch as he backs away from me, his face streaming with sweat and tears. I pound on the glass again, and again, and again, to no avail. “RICHARD!”

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 6: Redswift

"August 14, 1981

I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. I was weak and this will be my very last entry. Even now I can hear him, pounding and screaming. His pain is real and actions justified but I could fight back if not for the screaming. Damn his screaming! It's his pain reverberating through my ears and my eyes and my bones and lending him my strength. There is no doubt I would already be dead if not for the heavy dresser which is slowing him down but will not stop him. He will never stop kill he kills the one responsible for taking her from him. I never had a "her". All I have is my farm and this journal. My last hope is that someone else will find use for them so at least some small good will have come of my existence. I can see the field right now from out my bedroom window.

The corn has seen better days but the sight of it is calming.

Well nevermind about that first part. I don't know what came over me. I'm sure I'll be just fine. I don't know why I'm still writing. It seems kind of silly and so does this barricade…I'll go say hello."

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

Round 7: Redswift

Finally I spot him walking toward the house. He is late for the first time today. Why does he look so shaken? I hope he is ok. The young man who brings me the mail is my only neighbor for miles. My driveway is too long and I am too weak to get it myself. His smiling face is the only reason for these old bones to get out of bed anymore. Yesterday's paper said there has been a series of strange break-ins but hell if I can remember any details.

I turn to walk toward the door so I can greet him when suddenly there it is. Soundless, still and black as the devil's heart, its featureless face just inches from mine. The strain is too much and I drop to my knees from the pain. My eyes remain locked on the intruder. The pills on my dresser are far out of reach but all I can hope for is one last smile, even from this fiend. The young man knocks as he finally reaches my door. Thankfully it doesn't react. I clutch my chest as the world fades. In a blink it's gone.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 8: CondorTalon

I've been sick just about my whole life. Chicken pox, mumps, the flu, mono, E. coli; you name it, I've had it. At first, it was really frightening, not knowing when the next strike was, but now, it's just annoying. I think I've been held back a grade about 3 times when I was younger. Thankfully, my wife has the patience of a saint, and she sticks by me without fail. Unlike me, she's almost never sick. I

don't know what I'd do without her.

It's happened again. I'm stuck in this bed, staring at the ceiling as the symptoms overtake me. My head feels like it's burning up, and my entire body is itchy. I even had to close the curtains because the lights were too bright for me. I'm worried that I'm getting attacked en masse.

Well, somehow I made it through without too many problems. I'm quite tired now. I think I'll turn in. Let me just grab my pills…

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 9: Redswift

The first warm day of the new year just happens to be my first day off in months. It's actually a little warmer than I would prefer but it seems like no matter where I walk the cloud position is perfect. Lady luck smiles on me today. Eating my favorite food at a picnic table in the local park I can hear the laughter of children on a nearby playground.

I lay down on the grass to let my fully belly rest under the beautiful blue sky. It is much softer than what I have in my yard. Hell this grass is almost better than my bed. I don't want to ever leave. That cloud looks like a bunny… I don't have a care in the world…That one looks like a heart…I haven't done this since I was a kid…That one looks like a…

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 10: A Fat Ghost

Sailcloth claps with the wind as I bring the boom around, salt massaging its way into my skin in the spray of a sharp turn. Summer sun bakes the landscape into focus as I try to keep it within sight. It’s

a lonely and haunted coast, hot sand and a shallow treeline the only definition for miles. The quiet is almost so absolute as to be a distraction.

Have I found a secret current, hiding somewhere just outside the comfort of a hundred outboards? A lighthouse idles by like the only telephone pole beside an unkept track of road, how did I miss that a minute ago?

A flash of fish just under the surface, or maybe just sun on the sea, draws my attention starboard. Something whistles on the gentle tidal roll, against wood and fiberglass and memory: my mother's humming in her small drawing room, my first girlfriend calling me in from the cold, the first movement of the only orchestra I've ever attended.

The boom taps out a warning strain against its tether, and I release my grip on the rail. The bow shudders and unfurls like a tulip. My feet leave the deck as wet stone rises to fill my eyes.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 11: Sorts

The rainy season had been getting shorter and shorter for the past few years and the grazing has become hazardous. The other farmers have been losing some of their stock as well, so I have taken it upon myself to spend more and more time with my flock with a rifle slung over my back. Some of the other villagers think that there's some sort of new predator stalking the savanna but I've not seen any unusual signs or heard any calls.

Most of the familiar watering holes are drying out, so I moved my flock further out to an older location I knew well when I was a boy. The water there was more often visited by wild animals, perhaps if there truly was some sort of new predator on these plains I thought I would at least be able to spot some sign of it there, but no such luck. There are few tracks and no animals to compete with, and the trees

and grass look to be striped with some sort of dark coloration. I feared the water was fouled so I drove my thirsty flock back towards the village when I heard the splashing.

One of my goats must have over-enthusiastically wandered into the water and was now thrashing about in the mud like it was injured. I dismounted and headed towards the shore but it wasn't a goat at all. It looked like a child, flailing in the shallow water in panic. I rushed over to help the boy out, his skin was coated with thick mud, black with silt. He took my hand and would not let go, and as his face turned to mine I remember thinking that I have never seen anyone so scared.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 12: Dexanote

Finally, I thought. *This place is great…* I stepped into the abandoned house, this will do nicely. Cobwebs, dust, a bit away from busier areas… Need a spot to drop the… eh. Maybe later. I sighed.

“Eh… nobody’s coming right now…fuck it.” I sat on a chair. Comfy enough. The body sat halfway into the doorway. Gas was back in his car.

“… Man.” I yawned. Felt the chair creak. Eh.

I tried to yawn, couldn’t. Pressure on my shoulder. Growing more tired by the second…

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 13: Felgraf

I slid back into wakefulness, and the first thing I could remember was the pain. My chest felt like I’d been hit by a sledgehammer, my

arms felt sliced up, and all I could smell was smoke and leaking fuel. What the fuck was going on?

The memories filtered hazily into my mind. Mary and I, our small transport plane—something had made us crash. I couldn't remember how it had happened—was it the brewing storm? Mechanical failure? Something else? The trees had 'broken' our landing, but now we were upside-down, and by the smell of it, the plane was on fire—

Shit, Mary! Fighting through the haze of pain, I struggled to unbuckle myself, fumbling with the straps. Finally, I managed to undo my harness, and I pitched forwards onto the ceiling in a heap. As I struggled to stand, my hand pressed down into something warm and sticky—blood?

It was hard to see through the haze in my head (and the growing smoke), and I sure as hell couldn't smell, but—no, it wasn't blood. It was something leaking from the cargo hold. I couldn't even remember what we were transporting. Mint ice cream, maybe? Fuck it, it wasn't important. I had to check on Mary-I hoped she was just unconscious.

I staggered the few steps to the copilot's seat, and look upwards. She was still strapped in, but she wasn't moving. Her eyes were open. She was gone. My copilot, my love, gone.

I ignored the growing smoke as I stepped closer to her, tears in my eyes. "Oh, Mary.." I lifted my hand to touch her face one last time, brushing her hair from her cheek.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 14: Dr_Adams

It was the most exciting day of my life. All of my hard work was paying off with an interview at the largest company in my field. I'd finally met someone special and my confidence was at an all-time

high.

I walked into the glistening, new skyscraper with the highest of hopes. A quick check-in at the front and I was off to the 30th floor. If this worked out, the rest of my life's dreams would soon follow.

Everything in the building was new. The floors and walls were spotless, and the plants were put in place just as they were in bloom. I walked into the bathroom for one last check. I felt like I was the first person to use it. My suit and tie were perfect. I turned on the faucet to wash my hands and was blasted with a shocking spray of cold water. I guess they hadn't gotten the water pressure quite right. If getting a little wet was the worst that happened, it would still have been the best day ever.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 15: RhettSarlin

She says her name is Jackie, and she's the most beautiful woman who's ever shown any interest in me. All dressed in this really revealing red getup, big hair, lots of big fancy jewelry. She went light on the makeup though, which I can appreciate. We've laughed and made dirty conversation all evening. I'm certain I'm gonna get lucky tonight. She's obviously horny, she's been touching me in flirty ways, dirty ways, she's got a bit of an evil glint in her eye, playful I'd call it. I don't know what she wants with an ugly mug like me really, best I ever picked up before was a lady just out of a divorce looking to feel better about herself for a while.

Yup, sure enough, she wants to come home with me. Easy enough, I live close, come here all the time. Well, ya win some and you lose some, and I guess this one I win. Let's have some fun tonight.

We go through the pleasantries at home, I offer her a drink even though we're both already plastered, she pretends to laugh at my attempts at humor, but I see the look in her eye, so I figure we might as well just head to the bedroom. She's wild alright, she rips me out

of my shirts, slams me onto the bed, and kisses me passionately… her nails dig into me and she bites me a little as she pulls away. I start working her out of this getup she's in, I don't really want anything in the way of this. Undo the back, start working on the front-

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

Round 16: RhettSarlin

What's the point to life? I just can't see it. We go on about our daily lives, day in and day out. But we're just matter, just atoms and energy. What's special about that? What's special about life? It's all predictable, we all follow predetermined courses according to the flow of energy inside us, our free will is an illusion. We'll never escape to the stars anyway, it's a forlorn hope, so one day an asteroid's gonna hit or we'll be hit by a solar flare…or, hell, the sun will supernova at least. And then bam. We're done. Everything was pointless the whole time. I don't see any reason to prolong it. We're just meat and bones and empty inside, and my death will be no loss to the world. Nobody will even think about it 100 years from now. I'll never be remembered, and the people who might have remembered me are doomed to perish anyway.

These thoughts have gone through my head for the last 6 months or so. The last time I actually found myself enjoying life was at the carnival back in August. People seemed happy, lovers holding onto each other. Kids running around laughing and playing with their carnival toys, using their imaginations and having fun. Old couples walking around serenely, enjoying each others company. Life seemed special to me. But since then everything has felt so dull. Maybe I enjoyed everything too much and burned myself out, because life just isn't fun anymore. Everything is dreary, I see people's faces as they pass by now and I can tell they're all full of goals and dreams and hopes that might come to pass. But I know better. Hell, they don't even really exist. Do I even exist? I feel that I shouldn't. I don't feel like I belong in this world, that I'm not even supposed to be here anymore. It'd be best for me to just make life

better for everyone and end it.

Yeah, I think that's the best option about now. I'm going up to the roof of this building and jumping off. Maybe it'll be fun to fall. Let's find out. If you find my body, just throw it in the river or something, ok? Leaving now.

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 17: Dr_Adams

I swear to God I spend more time writing these reports than anything else around here. My eyes can't take much more of this damn screen. I know I signed up for this, I know it's important. Hell, before I spent every waking moment thinking about it, it was *interesting*. But how many times do we need to test it? How many times do we need to crunch the numbers? At least I have some people to talk to. Speaking of which, our new researcher was looking good today. I've never dated a Korean before…

A sudden crash jolts me out of my seat.

How did it happen? The noise is deafening, drowning out the screams of my friends.
I glance up as my computer screen flashes a bright red warning of an imminent containment breach. A wave of calm sweeps over me as my training and instincts take over.

No! Not without a fight!

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 18: Tyber

Day 3:

Okay, okay, I can do it this time, I'm sure of it! Just got to loosen my muscles, get my mind clear, and go for it. Ok…1…2…3!

Dammit!
…

This damn door! Just got to… huh huh…… clear my head, don't think about it, just don't think about it. Its not going to do anything, it's not. Let's just, give it another go. Alright, head's clear, body's limber, I can do it. I can do it. OK! 1…2… go!

God… gah… Goddammit…

…

Please… just… just let me go… I can't, I can't keep trying. Its just too… I can't. Please, just go away, leave, I'm begging you! I know you can hear me! Go away!

…

It's still there. I know that much. Everyone else is gone, but it's still there. Why? What the fuck does it get out of this? I just want to leave.

But it won't let me.

…

One last time. Just, one last time. I can't do much else. Just one last time. I'm going through that door, and I'm leaving. Its not going to stop me, I won't let it. This time, I'm just going to leave, just going to leave, and never come back. Ever. Just going to leave… just going to leave…

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 19: CondorTalon

Being on the beach alone always calms me down. The smell of the air, the sound of the waves, the fact that no one else is here, it all comes together to create the perfect euphoric experience. I take a few steps along the coast, kicking things about as I go. I kick a rock ahead of me; it feels heavier than I expect. It lands near a small boulder. The boulder is smooth and in the rough shape of a chair. Perfect. I sit on it, and let everything wash over me.

Wash over me… wash over me…

Shit. Where did the time go? The water's around my ankles. The tide rises legendarily quickly on this beach. I should find a better place higher up.

Why can't I move? I need to get away from the water. My body won't respond. The water sloshes around me like it's being shaken up. Shit. Gotta get away. Why can't I move?

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

Round 20: Scantron

And I don't know how I got here. Ow. Did I get beaten or something? Maybe. What the *fuck* was in that needle. I'm holding a printout of… I don't know *what* this is. They can't be serious. The other guys don't look like they know what it is either.

There are loudspeakers and cameras here, just like that one other room. Except this one looks grimier. Headaches. The lights (fluorescent) come on, and I can see the stuff on the table better. What's that thing next to the loudspeakers? It looks-

"Welcome to the Punishment Detail, but you probably know it as 'Keter Duty'. I'm in charge of this. You're here because of your less than satisfactory behavior. If I may direct your attention to the scripts you each hold in your hands for a moment. If you don't read this script correctly and do *exactly* what it says, the consequences will be less than pleasant. Start at the bell."

Script? What- oh, this. Doesn't look like any script I've ever read. I can barely read this shit, it's incomprehensible. Whatever they drugged me with, I can't think straight. Still, I think I can at least pronounce it right, that should be enough. Shit. I do wonder why it cuts off in the middle-

Dingdingdingdingding

Where did the time go? Well, I'll have to give it a shot.

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

Round 21: TroyL

It should work, dammit! I know it should work! I've got over this time and time again, and nothing makes sense!

I sigh and sit down at the table, looking at the room. I've gotten obsessed, I know, but obsession is good for physics. Planck was obsessed. So was Einstein, and Schrodinger, and Hawking! All of them were obsessed, and they changed the world. That's all I'm trying to do… Just change the world, for the better. With a heavy sigh, I sit down in my desk, looking around the room. I've scrawled the equations over the walls again and again, constantly trying to make it work. When I ran out of room on the walls, I started using the floor. When I ran out of room on the floor…

Someone is trying to scoop me. They're trying to steal my notes, I know. Three cases of sabotage, this year alone. The techies say that they can't figure it out… No surges or anything…

I sigh, returning to my desk, staring up at the ceiling where I had…

'Oh God,' I think, noticing the crack running along the top of my office. "OH GOD!" I say out loud, running toward the door, hoping to get out before the whole thing-

And then I died.

Round 22: Voct

Mmm. I pick the crumbs off my plate, drop them into my open mouth, and then suck the sauce off my fingers. Maybe it's just the contrast with the hospital food, but this has got to be the best damn burger I have *ever* had in my *life*! I know what the doctors would tell me, but I promise myself that I'll start my new healthy diet tomorrow. Absolute promise. *One* burger won't hurt me, and with a name like "Last Chance Diner"… well, hell, that's as good as a sign from God, right?

I burp hugely, feeling like an eight-year-old as I savor the taste passing over my tongue again, and pay the waitress. It's seven dollars; I give her a twenty and tell her to keep the change. That was one INCREDIBLE burger!

As I walk towards the exit, I get a sudden, stabbing, pain in my left chest, spreading towards my neck and shoulder… oh god, no, fuck, no no no PLEASE no… I collapse on the floor, knocking over a chair. I hear the waitress and the other customers panicking, someone's yelling 'call an ambulance', but I can tell it'll be too late…

and then someone says "Get out of my way, I'm a doctor", and I feel a tiny surge of hope. I hear his footsteps coming closer, quick, sure, and confident.

"You're very, very lucky I happened to be in the same diner as you," he says, and I know he's right. He rips open my shirt, looks at my chest, puts his hand on me, just over my barely-healed scar, then closes his eyes and counts to himself for a few seconds. He opens his eyes again. "It's worse than I thought. I'm going to have to operate right here. I have some tools in my bag - waitress! There's a drugstore down the street, go buy me some gauze and a bottle of rubbing alcohol!"

He traces the scar on my chest with his finger, then pulls a scalpel out of his bag. "At least it'll be easier to go in. Don't worry, you'll be all right."

I summon all my strength, and manage to croak "thank you, doctor". I can tell I'm going to pass out soon.

He glares at me. "Stop making that noise, I'm trying to talk to my patient."

And then I died.

(Solved)

Round 23: Bright

It was a beautiful, hot day. And I? I couldn't resist going for a swim. The pool was empty, sparkling clear. Grabbing the pool noodle from the side, I jumped in. I dive to the bottom, and noticed a shadow across the water. Did someone toss something in?

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

Round 24: CondorTalon

Brrr. The cold wind smacks against my body as I walk home. That was a great meal, and I'm glad it was relatively cheap. The walks home always give plenty of time to reflect. About life, about death, about—

Suddenly, I'm knocked out of my thoughts when someone runs out of the alley in front of me. The man quickly hurries away, a panicked look on his face, but I catch a glimpse of something shiny in his hand…

A knife?!

I quickly head into the alley the man came out of. Did that man stab someone? As I round the corner, I see the body of a woman lying unconscious in the alley. I run over, silently thanking my family for convincing me to attend medical school. As I land near the woman, I check for a pulse. It's dark so it's hard to find a wound. A nearby

hissing sound is interrupting my focus. Is that a gas leak? I'd better hurry. As I scan my eyes across the body, I find no blood, but I still check to make sure—

Wait what's that coming out of her stom—

And then I died.

(Unsolved)

And Then I Died...

Below are the previous entries for the game. Read and enjoy! The answer are in links at the end of each one.

Welcome to *And Then I Died…*, an SCP collective writing game! Useful information is held behind a collapsible tab right here:

Click Here to Learn The Rules of the Game

This is pretty simple. The idea of this game is to compose an encounter with an SCP without overtly revealing what SCP it actually is. The rules are basic, and as follows:

1. Whoever guessed the last one correctly (information about guessing at the bottom) has to write the next one. If you don't want to write, then don't guess. Feel free to sit back, relax, and say "Oh! I got it right!" when you do.

2. If you're writing the new one, try to keep it under 500 words. This is a game, not a novel. Also, try to get it written within a day or two (a week at the longest), so the game can keep moving forward. If you fail to write your entry quickly enough, a judge will step in and write it for you.

3. While not required, a few red herrings are definitely encouraged, so long as the final solution is the most likely/most obvious answer. Having someone die from exposure to **SCP-008** while **SCP-682** eats their torso and they're fired from the Sun Launcher… Not gonna work.

4. Try to make it… well… not obvious, but… guessable. Going for something needlessly obtuse will make the game no fun for anyone.

5. The character "speaking" (and this is the most important rule) *must* die at the end. It might not be from the SCP in question, so long as their exposure caused it somehow.

6. If no one guesses your SCP, then congrats! After a week or so, let everyone know how clever you were, and write another one.

7. If you're the author, make sure you send a message to **TroyL**, or **Dexanote** to let them know the answer. Troy, Ragz and Dex will be recusing themselves from making any further guesses to function in this capacity. Winners will be posted in the discussion thread for this page, so keep your eyes open! Maybe you won!

If there are any questions, or a need for clarification, please notify the game judging people things, TroyL, or Dexanote, in the chat. Thanks, and have a good time reading and guessing!

Looking for the old entries? Click **right here** for some excellent reads! Answers are included at the end of each entry.

Round One: TroyL

I laughed when they told me about the faeries that would occasionally appear around the room, especially since I'd not really been around and SCP like this one before. Heh. To think, I was going to be working at Site-19. It was going to fun! So much fun!

I yawned and looked around the room, scratching my neck and peering over at the sensors, watching the blips and swatting away the little, winged nuisances. Mostly things I could ignore…

After a moment, though, one of the blips goes too high. The machine lets out a soft alarm, and with a sigh, I push myself up and open the observation door, walking over to the bed and glancing down at the sleeping form there. Nothing that I can see, but to be safe…

I grab the syringe (there are always a full stash of everything I might need right next to the bed) and slide it into the IV, depressing it and tossing it into the bin. I walk back and look down at her, smiling, then…

Her lips are moving. I can almost make out what they're saying? Avoid Cameras? Abba Concierto? Abra Ka-

And then I died.

Solved

Round Two: Scantron

Oh, oh man. I can't believe that worked. Do you think they even saw anyone take their tickets? Probably not. Shit, stop giggling man! You're sounding like your girlfriend. Let's just hope… aw, fuck. Nosebleed seats. Eh, it's not like it's setting us back anything.

…fuck. **Fuck.** The fuck was that shit? We aren't paying this guy ten mil a year to hit easy pop-ups. I don't even know *what*'s going on. You think maybe they could have spared a few funds from the renovation to get some decent fucking players, right? I mean, we have enough medieval stuff in that one guy in left field, the one with the mustache.

Just… well, hey, it's most of the way over. We're not losing *too* badly, right? And their relief pitcher, what's his name, he's kinda shitty, so we have a shot. Oh, look, s'pose we should stand up and sing along. I always loved this song…

Fuck, this is tingly, I don't kn-

And then I died.

Solved

Round Three: Vlemich

Damn this heat! This isn't what I signed up for at all. I can't believe

they sent us down to this God-forsaken land. I'm getting sick of the Austrians all over the place. It would be nice just to see a few more Englishmen around here to make things feel more like home. Oh well, just another day of watching over platoons. At least I managed to land an easy gig! All I have to do is sit up on this rooftop, out of sight, out of mind for all these damn gun toting soldiers.

Finally some action! And lucky me, all I have to do is sit up here and start picking off any threats I find. Look at those boys go! Those new guns are really clearing the way for our boys! For the Queen!

Each man is moving professionally, coordinated through the small village. These small militia might not be well equipped, but orders from the top are to put them down before they can gain enough support and man power to become a threat. I guess I can respect nipping it in the bud, but it's almost too easy. Just look how securely those Tommys are getting through this little place! Alright, time to buckle down and keep an eye out for them….

WHAT IN THE HELL IS GOING ON? Damnit, this is turning bad quick! I can't even see any return fire! One, two… five men down already at this one stupid little hut! What the fuck! Damnit, I can't see anything! Shit, shit, SHIT! Where are they? GOD DAMNIT the whole damned platoon is going down! Son of a bitch! Ah fuck, somebody is coming out of the hut… Line up the sights… I don't know how you took out a whole platoon but you're about to go down mother fucker. He is looking around at the dead bodies now. All I need is a clean shot at his head. He comes out into the open; heart is racing; sights are lined up; a clean shot to the head, wait, what's wrong with his face? No matter; I slowly squeeze the trigger.

And then I died.

Solved

Round Four: anqxyr

I am running, running faster than I've ever run before. Tunnels of the sewer around me are lightness, all alike, and some part of me worries for a moment that I will get lost here. I can hear the blood

pulsing, pounding in my ears, and feel the presence of the beast behind me, chasing me.

The beast came for us when we were resting, eating. It killed three, maybe four, before the rest came to their senses and started to run. To be honest, we expected it to happen, eventually. There were debates, and proposals of traps and early warning system, build from scraps and garbage. But none of it matters now.

I can see the outline of another tunnel ahead of me. I dive into the opening and continue to run for half a minute more, then stop. I can see every detail of every brick in the wall before me, edges sharp, gleaming in the dark, as if they are laughing at me. Dead end. I turn around, mortified.

The beast enters the tunnel, blocking the only way out. I look in its eyes. They are focused on me, not blinking, and I see the hunger and the fire of hunt in them. Before I can do anything, it comes to me, at me. For a brief moment I think about a life I had before, normal life, with joy and purpose, not filled with fear and disgust, not focused on mere survival. Then the beast closes its jaws on my throat. I try to scream in pain and terror, but all that comes out is a high-pitched squeak.

And then I died.

Solved

Round Five: Uncandescent

“I’m disappointed in you Richie.” His voice wavered and bubbled on the edge of my consciousness. The world was spinning, tilting every which way. I was going to be sick.

“Very disappointed.”

A burst of pain, terrible pain, right in the back of my head. Am I dead? Dying?

No, still alive, still breathing.

It shouldn't hurt to breathe.

"I thought we were friends, you and I."

Stay conscious. Focus on something, anything, anything other than the pain. It's dark, but—there, on the ground, in red, it's—

Another wave of nausea. It was a tooth. My tooth.

"But then you went and stabbed me in the back. Is that how you treat your friends, Richie?"

"I… I didn't…"

This wasn't fair. They'd hit me too much, too long. Words were hard now.

"What? You didn't what? C'mon, spit it out!" A slap on the back, hard. Blood flew from my mouth. The ropes dug into my arms.

"I didn't mean to…" It came out blubbery, but I was beyond caring.

"You didn't mean to spend my money?" He reached forward and grabbed my shoulders. "You didn't mean to splurge it all on a fancy new car?" A heavy smack and suddenly my cheek was pressed against the floor.

Suddenly something broke inside. Hot streaks trailed down my cheeks, and this time it wasn't blood.

"Please… Please just… just stop." I begged.

"No. You know what Richie, I'm not gonna stop. You've fucked up one too many times." A click cut through the ringing in my ears. "No more excuses."

"No!" I yelled. "I can pay you back! I know people! I have something that can stop this!"

"You're right. Life insurance."

And then I died.

Round Six: Uncandescent

It's true what they say, you know. You never appreciate what you have until it's gone.

Like the sun. No one ever stops and goes "Gee, I'm sure glad that the sun is there!" It's always going to be there. And if you've seen it once, you've seen it a million times. It gets you nice and toasty on warm summer days, but for the rest of the time there's central heating. And central heating doesn't shine in your eyes, or make your skin flake off, or hang you with the big C. But now… now I regret every second I didn't spend just standing outside, just soaking it all up. Maybe then I'd have some extra for times like this.

And people. Never thought I'd give a crap about people. Always in your face with their whining and their problems and their baggage and exactly everything about themselves that you couldn't care less about. Right now, I'd give my left arm just to see someone's face. I don't even care if they're deaf and mute, I just want to know that someone else exists. I just want to… I guess I just want to know that the world really happened. That I didn't just make it all up, you know?

No, that's stupid. I'm the stupid one here, really. Traipsing around, looking for adventure, and I wind up—

OW! Wow! Did I mention antibiotics yet? Because I really miss antibiotics. Wowee, antibiotics. I haven't been able to look at my leg in—days, maybe? I don't know. No sun, no time, no goddamn difference. The color makes me sick, and I don't think I have anything left to puke up. And on top of that—

Sorry, I… I tripped. You have to really watch your feet, cause…

I… don't think I'm gonna make it.

Actually… I know I'm not gonna make it.

I think I might have always known.

Is it wrong that I feel better now?

Cause I do. I feel like… like I could snatch up every criminal on the planet. And map out the insides of every abandoned building in the world. It'll take a while, but I'm sure I'll have plenty of time, you know? Where I'm going, I mean. I wonder what it'll be like. At least I know it can't be worse than here…

And then I died.

Solved

Round Seven: Scantron

You know, once you get used to the stench, this place is pretty great. Functional heating, still has electricity, full fridge and pantry. I'm almost thinking "What's the catch?", you know, seeing as how nobody's moved in yet. I'm not normally accustomed to living arrangements this nice, given my lifestyle… stayed up all night playing video games to celebrate the find. Neighbors are probably wondering why the lights are still on… I should really go to bed. Ah, here's the bedroom.

Hm. Now, that would be the smell, wouldn't it. Let me just… yeah, he's dead. Well. I'll just look for any… yeah, they're dead too. I wonder what killed 'em… they're so pale. I should probably leave now, no good just standing around.

Ow! Fuck! Why can't I walk? I… ugh, thirsty…

And then I died.

Unsolved

Round Eight: Scantron

I yawn and look out at the road in front of me… the yellow dividing lines come into existence in my headlights, rush past me, and dissolve into the darkness. I yawn again. My eyelids slip closed and then snap back open. "Hey Jo?" No response. I prod her.

She stirs, then stretches a bit in the seat beside me. A sleepy "Yeah hon?" escapes her mouth.

"Could we, uh…" I yawn even harder and blink my eyes. "Could you get me s'more coffee?"

She curls up back into a ball in the passenger seat. She mutters, "We don't have any more… you drank it. We should just pull over for the night."

My eyelids are so heavy. I drift out of my lane a little, but I swerve back in and blink rapidly to wake myself up. "No, no, we have to get to your parents' house by six."

"Mm-hmm…" She's back to sleep already. Lucky her… I would have her take my place, but she had the last shift. It's my turn right now.

I refocus my attention on the road in front of me. I let out a massive yawn, my mouth going wide enough to strain the jaw. I massage my chin as I talk out loud to myself. "There's no-one else on this road right now… it's supposed to be straight. I could rest my eyes a bit…" I stroke Jo's hair a bit and close my eyes-

I wake up with a start, finding my weight pressed on my right leg, my foot squeezing the gas pedal. Jo is screaming. The radio is screaming. In my groggy panic, I just floor it harder…

And then I died.

Solved

Round Nine: Grug16
"Come on, Brad," I said. "Why do you have to be such a freakin' chicken?"

The other guys laughed. It was clear nobody liked my younger brother. Who would? The little guy never leaves the house. He says he's scared of “Monsters” and “Bad Guys”. He watches too many cartoons. Still, I had to take him with me. If a little mischief night fun isn't going to make him man up, nothing else will.

So we strolled down Fairside Road. Most of the houses had their decorations up already, shriveled ghosts and plastic witches everywhere. They looked really freaky in the darkness. Brad stayed close to me as Mickey, Jun, and Rob hovered around and tossed insults.

“Snot nose”
“Fatass”
“Nerd virgin.”

“Stop it!” yelled Brad.

“Alright, guys. Let's get that house first,” I said, trying to distract them. Old Lady Carter's place. I figured she'd be too deaf to notice us until we were done. Mickey pulled out the four dozen eggs he brought, handing three cartons to Jun while he opened the last. After tossing a few, I remembered Brad was with us. I held out an egg in my hand. “Come on, Brad. Think of it like a… a magic spell.” I put on my best big bro face for him. After a second of hesitation, he nods, and took the egg. He wound up and threw.

A single window pane broke clear of the frame, and we heard the wonderful sound of dishes and silverware falling over inside. That's a lot of payoff for one egg. Brad looked at me in disbelief, and then smiled. “That wasn't so bad, was it?” I said. The other guys started clapping. I was more proud of him than I had been in a long time. Then the clapping abruptly stopped, and the screaming started.

And then I died.

Solved

Round Ten: GideonSmith08

“Shit, shit, shit, shit…”

Knocking a neglected glass of mystery juice over, I pulled Jeremy in close, soaking myself in his tears and in the unknown fluid. Earthquakes, while pretty common, are always a constant fear. But I guess that’s to be expected in LA; an occasional test of acuity at 9

PM to “shake up” life a little, pardon the pun, isn’t THAT bad.

Holding him close, my unconditioned paternal instincts kicked in. The last decade’s been… shit: Faulty brakes took my parents, the Big C took my Katherine, the land-lord’s taking our shitty home in a few weeks, and even Mother Nature’s against us today. But, staying true to all of those damned Full House episodes and Disney films I think we used to watch, I guess I’m just giving giving the kid someone to depend on, y’know?

“Shhhhh… That’s it. Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

My sleeve acting as a crude replacement for the tissue boxes on the table above us, I started to believe that I got pretty good at this crap. And as if I was a damned psychic or whatever, staying under the desk seemed like the best idea, considering the possibility of an aftershock. A few seconds later, the satisfaction of my precise judgement made the shaking room a little brighter.

Not wanting to be too righteous, I thought back to the familiar faces…

I don’t know how they put up with my shit over the years, but I supposed this fucking family was… mine now. I clung to Jason… Shit, I mean Jeremy- a little tighter, nuzzling my face against his messy, grey hair.

I don’t know if it was fear or a deep rejection of my new responsibility, but the cold, awkward unfamiliarity felt… almost right.

And then I died.

Unsolved

Final Round: TroyL

It's with a sigh that I lean back in my chair… Finally, it's over. All this 'And Then I Died…' nonsense is through. Too many people didn't seem to care, and the ones who seemed to care guessed too quickly to get it right… Oh well. These things happen. Maybe I'll start it up again one day…

I stand up and walk out to my car, feeling a few drops of rain hit my neck as I climb inside it, closing the door and shivering as I make the slow drive home. The heater feels good, at least. I turn on the radio, listening with a chuckle to Garrison Keillor. He looks *nothing* like he sounds, being far smoother and more elegant than his rough voice would suggest, but that's fine, after all.

I finally arrive home, walking inside and dropping my keys, wallet, phone, and scancard on the table, sighing and walking over to my home computer, sitting down and checking IRC to see if I had any pressing messages. Finding that the most exciting thing going on was another newbie getting kicked from #site19, I stand and make myself some dinner: egg whites and toast. It's a little dry, but palatable enough. Good food for a dieter.

After dinner, I catch half an episode of House, then change into my workout clothes and head to the gym. I'm there for maybe an hour, just doing chest and back, and then a quick run. The light rain hasn't let up, but I rather enjoy running in the rain, if I'm honest. It's nice and cool, and I feel clean when I get done.

The trip home is uneventful as I scribble my time, "8 mins 47 sec", down in my workout book. I'm just a little pleased with myself for keeping my mine under nine minutes, something I wouldn't have even thought about a few months ago. When I head back into my house, I make more eggs, then sit down and screw around in some of the chat rooms, trolling Ragazzo and Echo just for kicks, then getting into a retarded argument over something similarly retarded. It's a nice enough evening, all things considered.

I take a shower finally, then dry off and head to bed naked. Laying down on the new mattress, I can't help but wonder if I'm really getting anything done with my life… But, of course, it doesn't matter.

Because then I died.

Click Here to Learn How to Guess

To guess, send a PM to one of the three judges by clicking their name here: **TroyL**, **Ragazzo**, or

`Dexanote`. Alternatively, you can enter the **#site19** chat and send a PM to one of the three judges: TroyL (alias MechaTroy), Ragazzo, or Dexanote (alias ProfChainsawFace, Chainshank, or anything with Dexa in his name). They'll let you know if you've guessed correctly. Generally, you only get one guess, so make sure you think you're right before you take a swing at it! If you win, then congrats! You get to write the next one. Have fun!

And Then I Died... Part III

Welcome to the 3rd edition of *And Then I Died…*, an SCP collective writing game! Useful information is held behind a collapsible tab right here:

+ Click here to learn the rules of the game!

1. Whoever guesses an entry correctly first (more on that below) will pick an SCP to write a mini-tale about (200 - 500 words). If someone doesn't want to write, they shouldn't guess. The entry needs to be written within 72 hours (3 days). If it doesn't happen, the second person to guess correctly will be given a chance to write an entry. This continues until no one else has guessed, in which case, the judge will step in and write an entry for the person based on the SCP.
2. The character "speaking" must die at the end and the entry must end with "And then I died.". It might not be from the SCP in question, so long as their exposure caused it somehow.
3. While not required, a few red herrings are definitely encouraged, so long as the final solution is the most likely/most obvious answer. The answer doesn't need to be obvious, but it definitely has to be guessable, or at least have something clear about the connection to the answer at hand.
4. There are three days for guessing. There's a 24 hour wait time before the guesses are revealed (if someone guessed correctly in that time), to collect the guesses made. Otherwise, two additional days are allowed for guessing, for a total of three days.
5. If no one guesses the SCP after three days, congrats to the author! They can write one more.
6. If someone is writing an entry, they should send a

message to all of the judges so the judges can know what the SCP in question is. Judges can help for proofreading, though do note the judges will tell you if you're potentially being too obtuse, or veto your entry if you're abusing the rules to get away with no one guessing. The judges, then, can't actually guess or give the game away.

7. If you've guessed right before and you guess correctly, your answer will be put in a lower priority than any other correct guesses. This is to prevent people from writing multiple times in quick succession and leave no room for other guessers.

Looking for the old entries? Click right here and here for some excellent reads! Answers are included at the end of each entry. Have fun reading, guessing, and/or writing!

Rounds 1 - 20

+ Show.

Round One: Decibelles

It's late out, cold, and I'm hungry. Though the drunkenness is starting to wear off somewhat, I'm already regretting how much I had to drink in the first place. Maybe if I wasn't insistent on trying to act like a fucking idiot to impress Sarah, I wouldn't be stumbling back in the dark.

Though, the farther out I head towards home and on this path, the more lost I think I'm becoming. Shit. I probably shouldn't have taken this shortcut when I can barely feel my way around. Not like it's the deep woods, though. Worst comes to worst, I can sleep outside. Maybe under a tree or something.

I'm feeling relieved as Hell to find an exit, at least. It's an

open field, but I think it's in the general direction of home. Probably another half-hour and I can collapse and watch some news. Though… wait. There's some person up ahead. And holy shit… they're not hanging, are they? They look like they're jerking around like Hell.

"Hey, buddy! Are you alright!? You still alive? Hold on a sec, I'm… I'm gonna come getcha!"

I stumble my way over there, going as fast as I can. I dunno who the poor fuck is, but I gotta get them down. Probably call the police too. I'm really hoping I'm not too late, and I can get them down and call the police.

Something's rushing towards me just when I get halfway there. I can hear it growl. Growling's not good. I don't want to get caught by that. I turn and run as fast as I can, away from that thing growling and snarling and barking. Please God, please, let me live. It was just a dumb mistake to get drunk, I wanna live.

I feel it pouncing on me, and I fall to the grass. It starts to tear at me.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Two: DreamwalkerFae

Ah, such kind children. So sweet of you to help me patch up the old place. Here, why don't you have some food. No, no, no trouble at all. I only need a little anyway, and I know how hungry you get. Yes, yes eat up. We can't have you losing your strength now can we?

Oh, you poor little thing. Here, let me see. Ah, that is quite a nasty cut, but I know what will help it feel better, just come with me to the kitchen and we'll get you a glass of nice, cool milk. That's right, drink it all. There we

go. See? Already starting to heal up.

Oh, that must be pest control. Apparently, the neighbors have been hearing some kind buzzing. I'm sure that it's nothing, if we had a bug problem I think I would have noticed by now. Now, you children make sure to be on your best behavior and to stay out of their way. Yes, come in gentlemen, thank you for coming. The attic's right this way…

Wait! No! What are you doing?! GET AWAY FROM THOSE CHILDREN! GET AWAY! STOP! LEAVE MY CHILDREN ALONE! GET AW-

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Three: MrAnakinSpecter

It was maybe seventeen minutes since the rain started. It was cold and wet and poured down hard. There was no warning when it came, so I wasn't ready for what happened.

I had been playing by the churchyard were my parents were wedded before the storm. Pa went into town so he could visit with Mrs. David Planter like he did every Wednesday while Ma was busy having her private prayer sessions with Reverend Bekket. Going into town was fun because I only got to go with Pa on Wednesday and with Pa and Ma on Sunday to church. Pa was always really stressed about his business with Mrs. David Planter and didn't want Ma to worry, so I needed to keep it a secret.

Pa wouldn't be back for another couple hours, so I busied myself picking flowers in the churchyard. Mr. David Planter worked in the churchyard, so I wasn't surprised when I saw him. He called me over, but my

clumsy feet slipped and I tumbled right into Mr. David Planter's work. I must've hit my head and blacked out for a long while, because Mr. David Planter was nowhere to be seen when I woke up.

It was maybe seventeen minutes since the rain started and maybe fifty years since I went to sleep. The rain ran down the cheeks of all the stone angels and made them cry. I cried too — until the sun shined through those dark clouds. It was the most beautiful thing I ever had seen.

But the rain stopped.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Four: sirpudding

I stood balanced athwart that high wooden path as the Duke's men came across the gap. By that dark mark across their backs I could see they were all of his house. I unlimbered my pollaxe and rolled my shoulders beneath my maille and tabard as I said, "Fools! If you continue on this course, it is naught but rank treason! You cannot but give strength to the infidel in this rebellion! Know also that I, Sir Bruce, will not let you pass lightly this day. What say you?"

"We are in the right, Sir Bruce. Duke Hugh has given insult that must be answered in blood!" said their leader, and I recognized him as Casper's cousin, Hector.

"So be it then", I answered as I lowered the visor of my bascinet.

With a mighty roar, the Duke's men gave charge. I was true to my word and made them pay dearly. With my pollaxe, and my broad frame I was able to force them to come one at a time. I was the better fighter, and a half

dozen of them met their doom there. Alas though, fatigue and wounds sapped me and when Hector came upon me he struck me senseless with a mordhau from "Irontooth", his famous longsword. Dazed, I was no match in the grapple, and he threw me bodily into the abyss.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Five: DreamwalkerFae

Finals week is always such a pain, which is why I'm glad that there's only one day left to go. Still, I'll need an energy boost if I'm going to get through all my last-minute cramming tonight. I quickly stop at the vending machine and punch in a random code, hoping for a soda with a high caffeine content.

Just as I'm about to leave the building, all the lights in the hall go out. They flicker back on after a few moments, but not before I manage to run into the corner of a table. Stupid school, they won't even pay to keep the lights working right.

I have to turn on the heater as soon as I get back to my apartment. It's not exactly unheard of, but it's weird that it's still this cold this late in the year. I sit down to study, but it's harder than usual. I keep getting this feeling that someone's watching me. Probably just me being paranoid again.

After about an hour of studying, I give up on trying to hold back my nasal congestion and reach for a tissue. I had assumed that it was just allergies, but the red stain on the tissue as I pull it away says otherwise. I groan at the distraction as I reach for another tissue to stop the bleeding. Must just be my dry sinuses.

I try to study some more, but it's impossible. I keep catching bits of movement out of the corners of my vision, and the creaking of the structure becomes impossible to tune out. I know that I'm being silly, that I'm just over-tired, but I move to close my bedroom door. As it closes, I see a shadowy figure standing behind me. I scream and turn around, but there's no one there.

I know that I'm not hallucinating at this point. There's someone else in the room with me. I can hear their whispers I can feel their cold hands on my flesh lifting me up they want me to come with them they want me to give them my heart

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Six: Mister Ious

Man, it’s cold outside. I swear I had put on my winter coat, but I’m somehow wearing my old vest. I thought I'd thrown this ugly rag out. Margaret? I’m home! Could you put some soup on? Thank you!

Huh. I thought I'd grabbed the remote, not my keys. Eh, I'm probably just a bit stressed out.

Thanks, Margaret, this smells wonderful. Love you too… Margaret, honey? You gave me a fork. No, it’s alright, I’m sure you were just distracted. I've been a little distracted too, recently. Some new kid at work got the promotion instead of me, and I'm a little irritated by it.

Mmm, much better. Never underestimate the power of soup. Thanks again, Margie.

Uh, Margaret? I think I’m going to turn in early tonight. No, it’s just that it’s been a long day, like nothing has been going well for me. I also think I feel a cold coming

on. Yeah, I'll probably feel better in the morning, but I gotta get a good night's sleep first.

God, I feel like crap. I'm gonna need some help getting to sleep.

Non-drowsy… non-drowsy… non-drowsy… Margaret, do we even have any cold medicine that won't keep me up all night? Oh. In the- right, okay, thank you… two pills for one night… man, those things hurt to swallow. I should have gotten a glass of water. Oh well, nothing for it now.

Wait. This was a box of cold tablets just a moment ago. What's… Stree… Strik… Strychnine?

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Seven: Bryx

I broke out of the crowd on the dance floor, sweating in my silk. I hadn't realized that Aunt Myra could still move like that until the bouquet hit the floor. I chuckled at the picture in my mind as I sunk gratefully into the first seat I came to.

"Strawberry, milady?"

I turned and met Michael's eyes. He was holding a chocolate-dipped strawberry on a fork. I pushed it away.

"I'm already sweaty, Mike. The last thing I need is to get sticky."

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't see any sweat. I see a woman brimming with so much happiness that her skin is shining with it. A woman who happens to have been torturing herself for the past six months to fit into that dress."

I batted my eyelashes at him, mock serious. "Are you trying to seduce me, Mike?"

"I can't help it. I'm in love with you."

"I love you too, but I'm a married woman now."

"Where is he? I'll fight him for your hand."

"He's right… here." I'd intended it to be a quick kiss, but our lips had other plans. When we came up for breath, he said, "how about we share the strawberry?"

I nodded, put my hand on the fork, and leaned in slowly and bit. Bliss. I wanted to remember every part of this moment for the rest of my life. I felt the smooth metal in my hand, still warm from where Michael was holding it. I saw his eyes glowing with the same excitement that I was feeling. I tasted fresh strawberry and smooth chocolate making love in my mouth. I smelled his cologne mixing with my perfume, not quite managing to hide the scent of both of our nerve-sweats combined. I heard…

Screaming coming from the buffet table.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Eight: DreamwalkerFae

I wake up strapped to a board, and someone just dumped a bucket of something cold and slick all over me. There's a chorus of shouts in the background. The cold liquid is dumped on me two more times, and each time raises another uproar from the surrounding crowd. Confused, I shout at my captors to tell me where I am and what is going on. I receive no response.

Panic rises in my chest as a man walks up to me and pulls a jagged black knife out of his robes. I scream as he jabs it into my left thigh and pulls it downwards. Next, he moves to my torso, managing to make five even cuts along my ribs on both sides. Next come the fingers on my left hand. He continues in this manner for what seems like an eternity. Each of his cuts seems measured, cold, and precise, in stark contrast to my wild flailing.

Once he is finished, the man picks up a chalice of some foul-smelling drink and takes a long drink from it. He then pours the rest on my chest, burning into my woulds even more. He sets down the cup, stretches his hands over me, and begins to recite a chant. As before, each of his actions seems deliberate and precise, as if he must carry out this twisted ritual in perfect form.

"Mun-ti-ah-ak-met-su-ni-ah-bo-in-tec-nu…" His chant seems to be only beginning, but I cant fight the pain anymore, finally drifting off to my last moments of sleep.

And then I died.

And then I woke up.

What a strange dream. It mostly just seemed to be a dramatization of my life, before that last part. I know it wasn't real, but… something about seeing your whole life, then just seeing it end like that… What do I do with the rest of my life?

This question stays with me for the rest of my years. I'm never able to find an answer.

And so I grow old.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round Nine: Mister Ious

I love running.

The clarity of a starting gun being fired, the anticipation of a long race, the thrill of crossing the finish line…

It almost all ended when the drunk driver nearly killed me in broad daylight.

After the various surgeries were done, I was eager to get back to training, but my doctor told me that I had to wait several months before I could physically exert myself again.

I lasted four weeks before cracking.

I felt the breeze growing stronger as I picked up my pace, bringing with it the scent of new buds opening on the trees. It didn't really smell nice, though. It was weird. I used to love that smell. It was like I could smell it, but I couldn't smell it. Maybe I was going nuts.

Running somehow didn't seem the same. I couldn't feel the freedom, that release of stress I was used to. It wasn't right. It wasn't… anything, really.

I ran faster than I'd ever ran before, but I didn't get tired. I kept up a full sprint for almost the entirety of my run. But how?

My vision started to blur. I blinked quickly, but it only got more blurry. My body seemed to be telling me something, but I couldn't figure out what. I kept running, trying to find the comfort that I had known before, but I couldn't find anything. I couldn't feel anything.

My lungs gave out. I collapsed onto the road.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 10: sirpudding

Soldier of the Revolution! Arise in defense of the Motherland!

I blink the words out of my vision as my armor pumps the stimulants into my body and the memories of readiness drills into my mind. As I wake I hear that music and that stupid chanting, so we are still in combat.

"'Tasha, report."

"Comrade Viki, the battle outside isn't going well. Some kind of enemy pods have attached," she whispers.

"So prepare to repel boarders, huh?"

ATTENTION: All tactical teams, report to your stations and prepare to repel boarders.

She says, "Yes, comrade," without a trace of irony.

The enemy finds me before I make it to my station. Something shreds the bulkhead and this thing glides through. It's big; 3 meters at least, mostly tail, with these three huge arms on the front and one big cyclopean sensor bulge right in the center of the arms. It's wearing an armored spacesuit, or maybe it's a robot. I open up with the rockets and it misses me with some kind of plasma weapon. I hit one of those arms at the base, and it separates, spraying gooey fluid and meat. Not a robot, then.

On the radio, it doesn't sound like we are doing so good, and I try to report in, but I keep getting stepped on by some poor dying bastard.

Comrade Starshina Usov, belay your last. Report to deck

54 section Ж, unseal orders К-03, and carry them out with all due diligence in defense of the Motherland.

'Tasha gives me the map and I get to section Zhe. The walls here look like they are made from the shell of some huge bug and there's this big pulsating mass.

"All right, 'Tasha, give me those orders," and I'm able to remember one of those secret briefings they gave me. They say I'm supposed to cut open that big bag.

I read the graffiti:

> The hive presents its finest soldier in order to repel all boarders.

"Huh? I guess the brass thinks it's worth trying," and I start cutting.

What comes out is very fast and I feel something hit me in the stomach. I smash into the wall and black out. When I come to, the music and chanting has finally stopped, but over the radio all I hear are screams. "Tasha, I can't feel my legs."

"That's because you are cut in half, comrade. I'm sorry but I won't be able to keep us alive for long. I don't think opening that thing was a very good idea."

"Heh. And they say you can't understand irony. Can you still work my arm? Does the cutting laser still work?"

"Yes, Viktor Vyacheslavich."

"Well, lets add a warning to this graffiti. Put it in binary, like the others. Maybe somebody in another world will be smarter than us."

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 11: Agent MacLeod

I never understood why all my friends made fun of my boyfriend. I mean, yeah, he was a *little* chubby and a little weird, but he was also very sweet. Plus, I liked how weird he was. I mean, aren't we all a little weird? He was nice to me, and we shared a lot of the same interests, so it made sense to *me* that I dated him. I mean, of the guys I've dated and I've seen my closest friends date, he had to be one of the nicest ones. No, scratch that, he *was* the nicest one.

The biggest problems are, he's a little goofy, and sometimes his romantic gestures end *very* poorly. I'm going to explain the worst such example of that second one.

He took me to the beach, where we bought ice cream at the boardwalk, when he leaned in to kiss me and accidentally got ice cream all over my shirt. I mean, we were at the beach, so I had a swimsuit top on underneath, but it was a white shirt and he stained it. He kept apologizing, and he tried to wipe it off, but it looked like he was trying to grope me, so he just kept making himself look worse. Or, that's how it looked in his own eyes, at least. I wasn't mad at him.

So we were walking along the beach holding hands, me in my swimsuit top and shorts, and him wearing his trunks and a t-shirt, saying sweet nothings and him trying to make up for his screwup at the boardwalk. I wanted him to just shut up and enjoy the beach, so I faced him towards me, closed my eyes, and leaned in for a kiss.

When I opened my eyes, the beach was gone. We were in a cold, moonlit forest. How did we end up in a forest? We were on the beach just *seconds* ago!!! I started to panic. So did my boyfriend. He kept telling me that I needed to take his hand. I wanted him to take me back. He said he didn't know what was going on either, but he

really needed me to take his hand.

That was when we heard the children laughing. He tried to grab my hand, but he was rough, and I got scared, and I started to run away. The laughter turned into screaming, and there was something chasing me and —

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 12: CondorTalon

I'm sorry.

My knuckles go white as I grip the steering wheel harder, sweat collecting on my forehead as I pick up speed.

I'm so sorry, Jennifer. I'm doing this for you.

My other hand trembles, my phone practically glued to my ear. I can hear the whimpering of my sweet Jennifer over the phone, and my shaky resolve turns into a grim determination. Oh, my sweet Jennifer. Please forgive me.

This is all to keep you safe.

I can see the speedometer inch slowly more and more toward the far side, and I look forward, eyes on the horizon, fixed on one particular point.

I can vaguely hear sirens coming from behind me, and I realize, almost as an afterthought, that I'm breaking several traffic laws. Like I care.

At least Jennifer will be safe.

I see my target approaching fast, hear the voice through the phone.

Here I go. Jennifer… I love you.

The tires squeal and my stomach turns as I pull the steering wheel hard.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 13: ObserverSeptember

I sit down at the table in front of me. Why the hell are they all wearing those weird things over their eyes and I'm not? I don't really feel too good about this, but I don't really have much of a choice. I've lived a long while, and worse things have happened to me.

They put a book in front of me - weirdly enough, I can't even see the title; it's covered up by a bunch of weird tape. I try to turn it over to so I can see the title of the book, but they stop before I can.

"Please open the book to page 344," the woman behind me says.

344, huh? Alright, then. I open up the book, and…

Well, it's just a history book. Looks like I've pulled the page up to 1971. A few photos of the Battle of Brooklyn, along with a couple of the Ascended. I worked with a few of them when we were fighting against the insurgency. Nice guys, all of 'em.

I look back, and the woman seems alarmed. "Where is your arm?"

My arm? The fuck is she talking about? I lost my arm during the Second Battle of Hartle. Was pretty crazy, going through that hole after they expanded it.

"No," she says, "your arm was there a moment ago. It just disppeared."

No way. This lady is fucking crazy. Why the fuck would she say something like that? LIKE HELL it was there! I've had that goddamn stump for decades, and I'll be damned if I let some stuck-up egghead tell me I don't! I stand up and rush toward her, to teach her a lesson for talking down to me -

Then the guard shoots me.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 14: Thekillerax

It had been Nicole who had suggested that we go to the park that day. I had heartily agreed, if only to spend more time with her. We walked outside and settled down on a park bench, a feeling of contentment settling in my chest. We sat in silence, giving me a chance to think. Soon my thoughts were drifting back to a few weeks ago.

When Nicole had approached me, begging for forgiveness and a chance to stay with me, I almost slammed the door in her face. But I'd decided to grant her a second chance. As much as I had hated to admit it, those months without her had been some of the hardest I'd ever had to slog through. There'd been a hole in my chest, and no amount of porn could fill it. And now that she was back my life was more or less back to normal. I was happy, finally.

I was pulled from my reverie by an angry voice to my right. I looked over to see a man at least a foot taller than me towering over Nicole. Oh God, what was going on? Was this a mugging? Surely someone would do

something! But all we got were concerned looks from passersby. I struggled to focus on what the man was saying.

"…for this guy? Are you fucking serious?"

Nicole simply stared at him, petrified. Mustering my courage, I opened my mouth, and for a horrible second no sound came out. "L-leave her alone!" I finally managed to squeak out.

"Funny," the man said, chuckling humorlessly. "That's what I oughtta be saying to you." His hand shot out and wrapped around my throat. He leaned in close and growled, "Jasmine is mine. Leave her the fuck alone."

Jasmine? This man was simply mistaken. He flung me back onto the bench and I gasped, desperately attempting to draw in enough breath to speak. Finally I managed to croak out, "Not Jasmine. Nicole."

But the man's expression only darkened. "Don't fucking lie to me, you little shit. I know my girlfriend when I see her." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. Distantly I heard the panicked exclamations of passersby. It all seemed so far away. "I'm tired of your shit. Step away from Jasmine."

Sweat trickled down my face as I swung my gaze from the man to Nicole. *Why wasn't she saying anything?* I reached out my hand to comfort her, to try to coax some words from her. Too late, I registered the snarl of anger and the glint of the knife blade flashing towards me.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 15: Davsto

I walked through the forest. The red sky of dawn shone through the trees. The forest was lush and green, with moss growing up the trunks and animals everywhere. It was if no human had been here for years. I stopped to admire the reflection of the sky in a shimmering lake.

That lake.

Oh God.

I had to do it. Years ago. I was walking with a friend of mine, an old friend I'd known for years, and her son. I knew what I was going to do. I needed to do it. There was a struggle, a splash, tears, and then nothing but ripples on the surface of the water. I had walked away, alone.

I sat down with my head in my hands and wept as the memories came back to me and guilt overrode all my other emotions.

But I hadn't done it properly, had I? It hadn't gone quite right. And there was no-one here to do it with now. I ran and jumped, and felt the cold water stiffen my body and fill my lungs. I reflexively flailed, trying to escape. My throat tightened in the cold, and gradually my struggling slowed to a stop.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 16: sirpudding

He handed me my business card, I read it, and then we all got to talking.

"So, I went to high school in Minnesota."

"Yeah, that's right."

"I had a girlfriend named Stacy."

"Cindy."

"Stacy."

"Cindy was a girl I dated once, but Stacy and I were pretty serious through college."

"Yeah, I remember that."

"I hate bananas."

"Definitely."

"My dad worked at a factory."

"Yeah, a factory."

"Mom taught middle school."

"Kindergarten."

"Middle school."

"Kindergarten."

"She taught kindergarten for a couple of years, but then got a job at the middle school; seventh grade."

"Sure, that's right."

"My first job was a car wash."

"McDonalds."

"No, it was the Wash 'N Go."

"It was definitely McDonalds."

"I agree with me," I said.

"Same here," says another me and that's how it started.

It got pretty ugly there for a while. I vandalized their Facebook. They spread horrible rumors about me at work. I got some of them arrested.

Early one morning I woke up. My hands and feet were duct taped together and my mouth was taped shut. Some of them were there and started talking to me about that first job. Well, after I heard all the details, I remembered I was right and I totally had worked first at the Wash 'N Go.

And then I died.

(Unsolved!)

Round 17: sirpudding

"Well, it's been a pleasure", I typed, pressed enter, and then closed the chat window. Nothing to do now, but wait.

I took out my pill case and shook out a big pink hexagon with an "F" printed on it. As I reached for my glass of water, I changed my mind and tossed the pill in the trash. I'm not going to have to remember for very long, regardless.

I heard the door of the lab open. Somebody was loudly weeping nearby. A long orange furred arm holding a bottle poked in. "Zack, we were going up to the roof to watch. You wanna come? I've been saving this 60 year old single malt. No occasion more special than this", he said.

"Yeah, Jack. I think I will. Sounds better than sitting here and watching this duplicitous mutt."

Up on the roof, as I split the bottle with an orangutan, we watched a couple of people jump. Nearby, somebody was playing a violin and a couple was slow dancing to it.

Then Jack pointed up, with a beatific expression full of awe and sorrow and I followed his finger. Up in the sky the stars were winking out as though a shadow were passing over them.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 18: rumetzen

The day had been good to us. Through a crack in the ice, we had been able to ambush a large group of prey, and gorged ourselves for the first time in months. The little ones, always eager to learn, had even managed to catch a few for themselves under our watchful eyes. Now, our bellies full, we drifted through the waters. My mate swam by, her song echoing through the sea.

A noise came from the side. Turning, I saw, in the distance, something large and white cutting across the surface of the water, a stream of bubbles trailing behind it. With a kick of my tail, a surged forward to get a closer look at this strange visitor. My mate called to me, nervous, but I ignored her and swam on.

The creature was like none other I had seen in these waters. Almost as long as I and several times as broad, the only part of it that moved as it swam was a small tail in the back. It swam slowly, and didn't turn or move away as I approached, as if it didn't even notice my presence. Curious, I swam up to give it a nudge.

And then I died.

(Unsolved!)

Round 19: djkaktus

After my parents split up, my mom and I moved to Kansas because her parents lived there. I love my nan and pap, but goddamn if it wasn't the most dull experience of my life. School hadn't started yet, I didn't know anyone in town, and my only familial relations were either working all the time or geriatric.

That's why I got the job at the restaurant. It was only a temporary gig, I figured a week or so, while I was waiting for a position to open up at the company my pap used to work at. He had some strings to pull and the job there paid better. My mom was supportive throughout the whole thing, told me I'd make friends pretty easily.

It was one of those old fashioned places, like you see in the movies? I think my mom thought I'd be making friends my own age, but that was a joke. Nobody who frequented that place was under the age of sixty. Pleasant enough people, though. I enjoyed myself there.

On my last day of work, they were doing some work on the front doors and had us closed for a few hours before dinner. I was cleaning the counter and noticed some kind of commotion outside. Didn't understand why anybody would want to make a big deal about it; it was only for a few hours.

I hear a crash from the back and saw that Julio had just collapsed on the floor. As I was running back to help him up, I eyed a container of bleach sitting on the shelf. I was thirsty, I realized, so I took a drink. Took a couple of drinks, actually, then passed it to Amy and she finished the bottle. Helped myself to a brick of soap after that. Can't tell you why.

Anyway, and then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 20: spacecadet

It's early in the day, I think, when the colonel comes in asking my authorization for the latest plan.

I don't really follow the details. And I don't really have to. At this point there's just enough left of my mind that I know how much of it is gone forever. The colonel is really running the show, because I can't. Even as a young woman our mission would have been an intolerable strain, and I haven't been young for many, many years. How old? At least twenty years older than the colonel, who himself would have been ordered to mandatory retirement under the old order.

I let my mind wander again as the colonel talks about Cernekov radiation this and anamolous semicrystalline condensates that. I go back to them. Back to my husband and children. I like best to remember the kids how they were in good health, not so much at the end. We tried to have more, of course.

The colonel interrupts my thoughts by asking for my formal approval. I make a noise that he interprets as assent, and sign the paper he presents. He tells me, as always, that this time he thinks we'll get the bastards.

I go back in my head to my family.

Soon even that becomes impossible.

And then I died.

(Unsolved!)

Round 21: Decibelles

We had sailed back from the Callahan-Willow Sector, from the

galaxy previous. After several ordeals resulting in battered men in a battered ship, we were all relieved to head back into Earth's major port for repairs. A long journey was coming to an end, and maybe this time, we would be able to rest for a few months more before heading off again.

No sooner had we sailed near the Moon than we heard the calls from a barbaric sort of group. Their ship was approaching ours, and though they did not raise their weapons, they had put on an aura of intimidation, and the attempts to reach us via communications had left us thoroughly puzzled.

"Can you make it out, Captain?" the young lad questioned. I let the words flow through my ears as I looked through the references on-hand, trying to decipher what I could.

"It's some sort of ancient, near-extinct dialect. Given the language and the materials their ship are made out of indicates that they have been around for far longer than expected… and potentially easy to overcome." They had all looked at me with doubt and surprise in their eyes, but I know my men and their capabilities. It would be nothing for them, even in our condition.

We sent out two pods of men to their ship, and I had elected to follow them. The combined firepower we carried would most certainly prove to be enough to take down theirs, and we would return home with more than we had set out for. The brutes had even seemed to take no mind in us approaching and safely going onto their ship, despite the differences in technology.

As we approached the group waiting for us, it struck me that they were made entirely of some type of earthenware, one I had rarely been able to view up close at home. It was exotic, and the fact that they were animate no less… it made me lose my train of thought. There was no time to admire these wonders, however. As their supposed general finished speaking, I nodded to my right-hand shot, and he raised his weapon and blasted the man's head into pieces.

The next thing I felt immediately was a blade traveling through and out my stomach. I only had time to look down at it for a brief second before all sound and light drained from me.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 22: minmin

I begin to smell the incense and know that they've started for real. My eyes are blindfolded, but firelight peeks in through the edges. Though I can feel the weight of the ornaments in my hair - solid gold, no doubt - the cloth of the blindfold is rough, almost like tree bark. Idly, I wonder if they couldn't have at least prepared something more comfortable. At any rate, it's too late for complaining now.

The stone beneath me is cold, but not unpleasant. I trace the ridges with my index finger, feeling familiar patterns I'd only ever been allowed to see, not touch. The sensation is strangely underwhelming. Is this it? Can this be it?

Will they miss me?

There's a voice above me. It's not mom's or dad's. Drier. Older. I recognize it as the elder's, rising and falling in a gentle cadence of archaic syllables. I used to be scared of this when I was younger, clinging tightly to mother as the elder rolled his eyes and chanted and chanted and rocked back and forth. Yet today it is somehow familiar. Comforting. Perhaps it is the spirits at work. Perhaps it is the incense.

Even though my vision is mostly pitch-black, I can already see the scene in my mind's eye - the incense bowl should be above my head by now, about three hands up and slightly to my right. I can almost feel the worms, wet with river water and fat as tubers, as the maidens slide them into the ridges of the stone slab. They tickle my back and I almost smile, but control myself. *It is very important to keep still during the ceremony,* said father before we'd left in the morning. *Be still like rocks on the river floor. Only then will the river accept you as one of her own.*

We're proud of you, our child, added mother.

It's happening at last - the worms start to move over me, tentatively feeling for, then wrapping around my skin. The bag of keepsakes resting on my bare chest - mother even insisted I pack the comb - is also soon engulfed in the shifting wetness, which presses it into my skin and digs it into my ribs. I try to gasp for air, but find that my chest is too tightly restrained. Soft, damp appendages soon cover my face, and now I am unable to breathe at all. Somehow, I don't feel panicked. And despite most of my past few months leading up towards this moment, I don't feel ecstatic, either.

There is a sense of being lifted up, gently, reverently. I hear the sound of flowing water. My vision fades to white. Before I go completely, the soft damp coils around me seem to widen - not in size, but in a kind of presence. Is this what She feels like?

Yes, comes the answer from a thousand tiny teethed mouths around me. *You come into good hands, little girl.*

We protect you now.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 23: Agent MacLeod

Everything I'd ever done had been leading to it. Every sport I was in, from elementary clear through until then, every mile ran and every exercise out on the field. Every locker room pep talk, every touchdown made, every good and every bad tackle. All of the injuries. All of it had been leading to that.

That season had been one of our best in decades. Coach Simmons didn't say it, because he didn't want to jinx it, but I could tell he thought we'd finally make it. Things hadn't been the same since Coach Wilson went missing, or so I'd been told, but things had been looking up after a decades-long losing streak. Sometimes, it felt like the whole world was conspiring to prevent us from getting to the Sugar Bowl.

And then, at that moment, I had the ball, and I… Oh my god, I was almost *miles* ahead of the guys from the other team. There was only one play left in the game, and we only needed one touchdown to get ahead and put us on the fast track to the Sugar Bowl. My heart was pounding, and my feet flying. I'd never felt this way during a game before. I *knew* I was going to make it.

I ran just a few more yards and crossed into the End Zone. Touchdown. We'd won. We'd finally made it. We were going to the Sugar Bowl.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 24: Amuness Creeps

I rose out of the ocean. I escaped all of my fears and troubles. The surface was not as bad as the deep, dark ocean. I finally escaped. I drowned. I was supposed to die.

In the distance, I found a light. I swam towards that light as fast as I could. I was completely dizzy and my lungs were filled with sea water. But, I don't care. In the mist was a light and it was the only thing I could see.

This house…was it my house? No. I quickly entered the house and slammed the door. I couldn't hear it. It must have left…

"Honey!" my mother said behind me. I looked at her and she looked at me. "Listen, you've been out for hours! We're gonna have a small party because you're relatives are here!" I looked into the living room. She was right. They waved at me. I waved back.

"Mom, r-really I um…I need to change out of my clothes."

"Of yes of course!" she said. "It's been raining for hours!"

"N-no mom I…"

This was too weird. I got out of there and I headed up to my room. I heard something breathing behind me as I went up the stairs. A loud breathing and grunting. Aggravated grunting. I turned around and saw a man. He was completely burned and his bones were showing through his skin.

"Mom!" I yelled.

"Yes honey?" she replied.

"There's some man here and…wh-what is he?! Mom, who is this guy!?"

"Oh that's Peter, Sweety! He's here to have dinner with us!"

He screamed like a demon at me. I noticed that he was trying to come towards me. "Stay back!" He screamed much louder and he ran towards me, screaming.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 25: BOXER9999

It was dark. The stars shone dimly through the clouds that enveloped the skies around my ship. A glance to the side window of the control cabin revealed the whirling Pacific ocean under me.

I just had recorded my last words, the only archive which will speak of my effort fighting the enemy. My soon to be death did not bother me though. No, it was the fact that I had failed my mission that really saddened me. I had failed and my enemy will continue to terrorize earth.

Again and again, I had tried to destroy my nemesis. Half a century after the beginning of my mission and I had stayed at the same point. Oh things had changed of course. The crew for example; once they were all like me, men made of flesh and blood. But now they were things resembling the enemy in almost every way. But my

superiors had told me that the appearance of the crew wasn't my business, and I always followed all my orders and so I stopped thinking about these strange companions.

As my mind slipped in and out of consciousness a vague memory stirred through my mind. It had been a cold night very much like this one. He had encountered a few strange flying vehicles with which he was trying to communicate. But then his enemy appeared attacking my vessel and destroying a couple of the strange ships. However the strange vessel who did survive helped defeating the enemy that day; the serpent had fled their combined firepower. A smile crossed my lips as I recalled that encounter. It had been a good battle, and a worthy ally. But soon my grim demeanor came back as I remembered what was my task today.

Standing up from my chair, I felt the feeling of exhilaration I always had when looking at my vessel's command board. Then I slowly walked to my living quarters, there I looked for a moment at the objects who brought back my memories: the picture of me with my old crew mates; the one we had took on V-day.. On the walls my old stuffed hunting trophies hanged, while my trusty navigation maps lay on the table.. Then slowly, as I regarded these remains I calmly took my weapon and pointed it towards my head.

No, I suddenly thought. This is not how I will end. At first thinking hesitantly, my thoughts quickly resolved what I wanted to do.

First I broke my weapon with my hands; I thought I had heard once that when disbanded a soldier shouldn't give away his weapon. Then I calmly went back to the instrument board, sitting on my command chair in which I sat, staring at the dark night.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 26: sirpudding

"What a beautiful day for a war!" I said, laughing. "Have some of the

umbidvo wetintsanga, please. After we conclude this you gentlemen simply must stay for the Reed Dance, as my guests."

"I would be delighted, Your Majesty," said Cardinal Langa.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to stay that long, Your Majesty", said Agent Bekker, "They need me to fly to the States to report on today's test. My sincere apologies."

"It is nothing, Kerk, I will send you an invitation for next year. I will insist upon it, in fact. I will tell them you work very hard and need a holiday," I said, slapping the man's shoulder, "They cannot refuse my request, after all, I am King. Well, let us get this over with so we can enjoy the rest of the day, eh? I have the document here. Agent Bekker, does this fulfill the requirements? Good! I will sign it then. And … there! Here, Your Eminence, as you can see I have officially declared war. I must now ask for your immediate surrender, with no conditions, other than that you admit defeat."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. As you can see, I have been empowered by His Holiness to negotiate on his behalf in this matter, and I officially surren … Your Majesty! Are you well? Are you choking?"

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 27: minmin

The motor died on the 24th. The radios went soon after. Then the generator sputtered to a stop as the fuel ran out, and we drifted silently in the moonlit sea.

It was four in the morning on the 26th when Skipper woke me up. "Jo, Jo, you have to see this." I follow him blearily to the hold, sallow torchbeams lighting our way. There is a trickling sound of water. He squats down and shows me the source: a small, perfectly circular hole has been punched in neatly about two inches above the floor. The edges aren't ragged - they bend in smoothly like butter. Skipper turns to me with a worried look on his face. "Well? What do you

think?"

"I think we should patch this up," I tell him nonchalantly. I don't bring up the fact that directly across the room, a round, black mark has been burnt into the wall. I inspect it when Skipper leaves to find his tools, and find that it's still warm.

We find several more over the next few days. They're always small, always impossibly round. Skipper tries to set up a shift system, both of us keeping watch on the hold, but it never quite works out. Meanwhile, I busy myself most of the time trying to get the radio to work. It remains dumb, taunting us with the occasional burst of static.

It happened on the 31st. We're down to our last box of batteries and Skipper goes to check the hold again to find some to salvage, when we both hear a sharp cracking sound. It's coming from portside. I run over and peer over the railings, only to see a bright beam of green arc from the sea and cut across the deck like a searchlight. Below me, strange lights rove in the deep. "Skipper! Get the lifeboat!" I find myself crying out. He's yelling too, but I can't make out the words.

There's another sharp crack. The floor beneath me lurches as more green arcs tear from the water and cut through the deck like hot wires through wax. I run for the lifeboat and in my panic, I almost think I see small grey fins and large, white eyes darting in the water. More lights. *Crrrrrack.*

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 28: sirpudding

"Peace be upon you, my friend. I thank you for the generous hospitality of your home," I said.

"Think nothing of it, my motivations are entirely selfish. I intend for you to make me wealthy," said Luzio, laughing.

"God willing, this will make us both wealthy, my friend!" I said.

"Good news then, I went over the plans you sent me with my cousin the mason and we think we can build your irrigation channels without much trouble. Now that you have rested, we shall break our fast and then I would like to take you see the orchard. Are we agreed?"

"I am eager to begin, honestly. I did not come all the way from Kairouan to sit in your lovely home. Perhaps we can eat as we walk? " I replied.

"Khalid, you warm my heart with your eagerness to make me a wealthy man! Yes, I will have Donna pack up some bread and olives for us and we will set forth within the hour. Let me tell you, my blessed father might come down from Heaven and strike me, but I think being conquered by Saracen Ifriqiya was the best thing to happen to this city."

We chatted pleasantly as we walked north through the city, Donna Carmino's bread was delicious and warm and the fresh orchard olives juicy and piquant. We stopped at the basilica, so that Luzio could get a blessing for this venture, I made a note of the location of the mosque for evening prayers, and then we crossed the river.

Suddenly, Luzio turned to me and shouted, "What the hell? You baby-burning son of a bitch! How many innocent babes did you shovel into that brazen gullet, eh?" With a swift motion, he drew his dagger and stabbed me again and again in the road.

And then I died.

(Unsolved!)

Round 29: sirpudding

It was a fluke that I survived at all and that was likely to be temporary. The storm that had capsized me also drove me far to the south into the Antarctic circle. The boat righted itself, but the masts were lost, the radio hopelessly destroyed, and I lost the emergency

beacon when I tried to use it, swept overboard.

I got the generator working at least, and I managed to keep warm and avoid hypothermia, but the farther south that I drifted the more likely that I would run out of fuel and freeze to death. At least it was summer and the days were long.

As I drifted closer to the Antarctic coast, I scanned the horizon for any sign of human activity, though the odds of having randomly drifted near one of the research stations in the whole of a continental coastline aren't great.

Then I saw in the distance, a dozen regular round shapes. Those had to be geodesic domes! I started to allow myself to hope. Even the current seemed to be on my side as it pushed me inexorably in that direction.

As I washed ashore, I fired off a flare. I had enough fuel to maybe keep me alive for a few hours. Exhausted, I fell asleep.

I was awoken by the sound of a helicopter, and I quickly scrambled outside, frantically waving at the circling aircraft.

Suddenly there was the crack of a gunshot.

And then I died.

(Solved!)

Round 30: Dexanote

I've just been feeling… better lately. It's hard to explain, I'm just… happier. I'm not so nervous or sad any more and I guess the world just feels better.

After moving out here, I got over myself pretty fast and got in touch with a couple of the clubs out in town. There's a lot of stuff out here, I had no idea. And the house is perfect for having little parties, the basement's almost finished and the den has a bunch of old- well actually it's not even that old, it's a little worn but it's perfectly good

furniture. Even a pool table. Little too drafty though, I keep getting chills and the air's way too dry. The humidifier is working well enough but I really need to get the furnace replaced. I'll see if Bill can take a look at it tomorrow.

Oh, doorbell. Good. Work party tonight, just because. Couldn't resist, made a bunch of cookies and stuff - I actually just took up baking, I've been on a bit of a sweet tooth kick lately, getting really really good at it too. People love cookies, I've met tons of new people just bringing cookies every week to work. Bowling night's next Thursday, people will meet and warm up here before going out - it's a great central place.

Little tired, but that's alright… Oh, new faces. I wonder if they have time for a quick bite, the cookies smell great…

…

… They're yelling…

…

… Why am I so ANGRY?

…

… and then I died.

(Unsolved!)

Footnotes:

+ Click here to learn how to guess!

To guess, send a ***Wikidot PM only*** to one of the three judges by clicking their name here: **Decibelles**, **djkaktus**, or **Dexanote**. **(Do note that at this time, only Decibelles is the judge for this game.)** Make the subject "Round [Number] Guess". They'll let you know if you've guessed correctly by the end of the time period. You only get one guess, so make sure you think you're

right before you take a swing at it! If you win, then congrats! You get to write the next one. Have fun!

And Then, Kit Slept

It was the bright colours of the tattoo that caught his attention.

On the back of her neck, were two eyes. They were different colours - ‘heterochromia iridum’ his brain supplied, seeking out the word against the litres of cider and the different coloured pills that rattled inside – and they were staring right at him.

To be fair, they were staring at everyone in the bus station, but Kit could have sworn that the eyes only had eyes for him.

There was nothing else particularly striking about this passerby that would mark her out against the deluge of people who had come past as he waited for his ten-to-eleven bus, which was now meant to be at eleven twenty-one. She kept her hair shaven fully on one side, and long on the other, just grazing her shoulder in length.

It reminded him of graffiti he had seen once in Brighton. Sanctioned graffiti – the worst kind. She – the subject of the graffiti – was the same as the girl who had just passed, only her hair was longer and a different colour and she probably had a different face, so she wasn’t really like the girl at all so much as she was just painted onto a building to appeal to both men and women alike.

What was she advertising again?

An app, that was it.

And it was about…

“Safety awareness. Suicide.” Kit mumbled, not sure if he wasn’t aware of the middle aged woman staring at the man talking to himself or if she was even actually there at all.

The graffiti was rumoured to be haunted. People swore up and down, left and right, port and starboard, that the advert had only

caused a spike in suicides amongst young people. Kit may have believed that once, because rumours are rumours are rumours are rumours are –

What was he thinking about again?

Right.

Kit may have believed that once, but now he had seen things and felt things and **fucked things that no-one else knew of** – amazingly beautiful things, indescribable horrors he scribbled in notebooks with his heart racing and his breath short, things that were meant to be mundane but spoke and looked and stared at him.

Kit wondered what it would be like to touch the tattoos on the girl's neck. Being eyes, they would most likely blink, and he would feel the soft folds of their eyeshadow-coated eyelids. He marvelled about the things this girl must have seen, with eyes in the back of her head.

Pulling his hood over his head, he stalked out of the bus station the very second his bus to a new life appeared. He dismissively crumpled his ticket in his hand and took a last puff on his cigarette before flicking the butt into a nearby drain. Wait. He hadn't smoked in nearly five years. He had just flicked his vaporizer into the void. Fuck, not again. He took a breath of clean air, then continued to walk the direction he had seen the girl go.

His thoughts distracted again, as they often did, to the app that was supposed to save lives. Maybe people relied too heavily upon it. In times where you can get an app that pipes music into your brain and pre-orders your coffee, maybe people believed a click of a button would stanch bleeding or place a chair under struggling feet. Maybe people still need people after all, and maybe his self-imposed isolation would cause his own death. Maybe no-one needed anyone, and humankind had to let go of the idea of love and lust and trust and –

He was tired again. He felt like the z-drugs in his system which granted him a few hours respite a night was still buzzing around there, despite the coffee he had downed at the bus station cafe. It was easier to blame the drugs, even the legal ones, for everything

that went wrong. It was harder to blame his own brain and feet for causing him to walk seven kilometres out of his way in pursuit of a girl he had seen once. A girl who, when he spotted her a second time around quarter of the way into his journey, had burst into many different coloured butterflies and flown away into the sky.

Since he had accepted this fact, he had just been walking. His mind rambled and his stomach was hollow, but the butterflies would eventually have to land and reform themselves into the girl. Then he could touch her eyes – the tattoo, not the real ones, he reminded himself – and he would feel peace in his own system.
But he was so weary. He felt an ache down to his very bones and suddenly missed his future home where he knew there would be pills and drinks waiting. The sky was already darkening, and he was miles away from anything he knew, but that rarely troubled him.

No-one was waiting on the other side, after all.

Kit flopped onto a drizzly rain-coated bench. He stared at the sky with the heaviness of more impending rain, and realised it smelt of cinder, perfuming everything around him.

Kit rolled onto his side and stared at the grass, curling long legs under himself so he fit neatly on the bench.

And then, Kit slept.

And Then There Were None

Ten little soldiers, all having crossed the line,
One was distracted, and then there were nine.

Nine little soldiers, reading books at late,
One got too tired, and then there were eight.

Eight little soldiers, two up in heaven,
One tried to fly and join them, and then there were seven.

Seven little soldiers, blowing out the wicks,
One got lost in the dark, and then there were six.

Six little soldiers, running to the hive,
A busy bee stung one, and then there were five.

Five little soldiers, wondering who's Blore,
One wasn't Wargrave, and then there were four.

Four little soldiers, swimming in the sea,
One swam out too far, and then there were three.

Three little soldiers, eating up their stew
One ate too much, and then there were two.

Two little soldiers, the rest were all gone,
One AIMS to hang himself, and then there was one.

One little soldier, thinking "I should do that again!"
So we're back to the beginning,

And then there were ten.

10. Adrian Goddard glanced at the poor bastard on the receiving end

Larry Sellars ripped open the envelope to his invitation,

and converted it into a paper airplane that exploded into a literal fireball when it slammed into the window. “Considering buying some of your pieces,” he read aloud. “Would like to meet you in person. Meet me at Soldier Island. Costs and travel will be sorted after you meet with my assistant, Blaine, later today… ring if you cannot make it… blah blah blah… Yours Sincerely, Mr. Rios-Guy. Huh. Nice name. Still, what creatively bankrupt goon names a placed Soldier Island? Christie did that ages ago, mate.”

He stood up, before saying, “Still, good artists copy, great artists steal.”

Jane Anderton read through the email quickly. An invitation to Devon from somebody she had never heard of did arouse some suspicions, but she needed some time off anyway. If she hadn’t have sold that damned death clock, she probably wouldn't have been demoted. Hell, she probably would- *should* have taken that idiot Hartwell’s job if he hadn’t brought up some bullshit about “ethical violations”- like he gave a toss! Like he wouldn't have done the same if he could get away with it, like she would have without the fucking idiot customer leaving their address on the fridge!

“Didn't matter, it was done,” she thought, before looking once more at the address. Soldier Island. Wasn’t that the one from that old Agatha Christie book? She looked at it a final time, before shrugging her shoulders and saying, “Fuck it, why not?” to nobody in particular.

Corporal Edward Reiben read his letter slowly. He had put off opening it all day; not out of fear, but out of preserving the anticipation like a child before Christmas. He didn’t receive any more mail after Sam died. When he read that Mr. Rios-Guy was hoping to hire three new security staff- and that he was one of them- his first thought was that it was that arsehole Evans playing a

trick on him, or some pathetic scam trying to rinse him of his last few pennies. But… it didn't ask for any credit card information, and the only thing Evans did was call him, "Reibender," before Captain Moore told him to back off. He didn't mention the letter.

When Blaine actually arrived at the barracks hidden off somewhere among the Surrey countryside, he hugged him.

Lev Shevchenko spent five minutes thinking after he had finished his letter- or perhaps fantasizing would be a more accurate term. He had always wanted to visit England, and with Rios promising to sort out his Visa, it had the potential to turn his life around.

He spent the next half hour arguing with Mr Blaine over the accompaniment of Alexandra and Vera, his wife and daughter. Blaine finally compromised by agreeing to pay for their accommodation and travel, but that they would stay in a separate hotel in Devon, more than thirty miles away. They agreed on that.

He waited three hours to tell them, saying no more than the occasional hint of a big surprise. He gathered them in the living room- after assuring Vera many times that she was not in trouble- when he had finally accepted himself what was happening.

It still didn't stop him breaking into a massive smile before he could say the words "Very important letter."

---

9. Lawrence Sellars watched as Henri jumped into the pool

The storm raged. Waves smashed against the side of the Vindication, rain teemed down in its thousands, and the moon's hue was reduced to a vague haze by the pitch black clouds. Foundation agent Rawley sat quietly inside, reading slowly over her invitation.

“Dear Ms. Rawley,
It is my pleasure to invite you to a small social gathering at Soldier Island. I have been looking for a decent body guard since I acquired the place, and your record indicates you are somebody I would like to have in my organization. Please consider it. Funding for your journey will be provided. My assistant, William Blaine, will arrive shortly. Please contact me if you are unable to attend.
Yours sincerely,
Mr. Rios-Guy”
She had gone for it. What the hell, it would be a decent excuse for weekend off, and her boss Tanners didn’t have a problem with it.

She looked up at the ten other people on the boat. The cabin was cramped; ten of them sat in the cabin, while Blaine piloted the boat.

She turned to the person next to her. He looked about five years younger than her thirty two, his face clean-shaven and his hair cut short.

“Hey, why’d they hire you?” she asked, more out of boredom than curiosity.

He responded with a thick American accent.
“Said they wanted to have a chef.”

“Huh. Security guard.” She extended a hand for him to shake, and he took it.

“Harry Thornton. Work for the United Independent Utilities, hoping that’s going to change soon.”

“Emma Rawley,” she said, thinking for a moment as to whether to mention that independent and united were mutually exclusive.

“You know the owner?”

“Mr Rios-guy? Nah, haven’t even seen him, actually.”

“Huh. Neither have I. Hey, you ever read And Then There Were None? Cause, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say this seems like the exact same plot.”

“You a murderer?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Killed a homeless guy just an hour ago,” Thornton said, totally deadpan.

“Yeah, good one. How long till we get to this damn island anyway?”

“Think that’s it coming up now,” he said, jabbing his slender index finger against the window misted by condensation at the sole light in the endless expanse of the sea.

Adrian Goddard idly flicked through his e-book on his phone. He didn’t really understand it- Why was Norton beating up Meeks, when the Helios were dragging Dufay away?- but, seeing as he lost any signal on his phone twenty minutes ago, he had no other choice, other than to talk to the stupid idiots next to him.

“Hey, you got any connection?”

Goddamn it.

“Uh, no it’s just something I downloaded. No connection either.”

“Huh. Hey, I’m Danny, by the way. Danny Clay. Private investigator, specialize in stopping corporate espionage. Guess this Rios guy… guy doesn’t trust his own employees. Hope that doesn’t apply to us, heh.” He smiled weakly at his own joke.

“Hmm. I’m Goddard. UN corporate executive. Rios doesn’t even want me for a job, he just decided having a UN bloke around would be good press or something.”

“Hey, you met Mr Rios? Haven’t heard too much about

him.”

“Neither have I, actually. Odd.”

Mohammed Ayad sat quietly, his arms pressed against the wall in a vain attempt to stop the rocking of the boat to send him flying into the person next to him. It didn’t work.
“Sorry,” he muttered, and the man responded with the same.

“Hey, you know anything about this Mr Rios? Just wondering, cause I’ve heard basically nothing about him.”

“Nah, can’t say I do, mate. Only here ‘cause he said he could use a speaker like me at the place for a few hours, and it’s a free holiday, so why complain? Jay Devers, by the way.”

“Mohammed Ayad,” was all he managed to say before William Blaine shouted through the speakers.

“Uh, we’re coming up to Soldier Island now, if you could please get your possessions and be ready to disembark.”

Ayad and Devers exchanged glances, before grabbing their suitcases and converging with the others onto soldier island.

The island was small; no landmarks were on it except for the rather large house in its centre. A few trees grew on the neatly cut grass that surrounded it, a small beach at its front.

As the roar of the boat’s engine started up again, they all headed off for their rooms, previously located by Blaine.

Reiben flopped onto his bed. He was knackered; he had spent the last three hours travelling, and all he wanted to do was sleep. Still, he’d probably have to meet Mr. Rios.

He dropped his suitcase (“Suitcase wanker!” Brambly had shouted as he left, not maliciously. Reiben returned a non-malicious middle finger) onto the floor, before a pennant hanging from the wardrobe grabbed his attention.

It read, in a middle-ages esque text:

Ten little soldiers, all having crossed the line,
One was distracted, and then there were nine.

Nine little soldiers, reading books at late,
One got too tired, and then there were eight.

Eight little soldiers, two up in heaven,
One tried to fly and join them, and then there were seven.

Seven little soldiers, blowing out the wicks,
One got lost in the dark, and then there six.

Six little soldiers, running to the hive,
A busy bee stung one, and then there were five.

Five little soldiers, wondering who's Blore,
One wasn't Wargrave, and then there were four.

Four little soldiers, swimming in the sea,
One swam out too far, and then there were three.

Three little soldiers, eating up their stew
One ate too much, and then there were two.

Two little soldiers, the rest were all gone,
One AIMS to hang himself, and then there was one.

One little soldier, thinking "I should do that again!"

So we're back to the beginning,

And then there were ten.

Reiben felt a pang of fear. Just like the book… Jesus. Jesus, why the hell had he come here? He was going to die. He was going to die on this god-forsaken island and he'd done exactly what he told himself he would be clever enough to avoid when he read the damned book, had probably inspired the bastard to do this-

No, he was being ridiculous. Worst case scenario, it was a prank, a twisted joke. And he wasn't a murderer.

Except for Sam. He couldn't have known that he'd die. Hell, he had taken all responsibility if it all went wrong… Commander Moore had cleared him of all blame…

But Armstrong didn't have a motive, he did it accidently as well… and he probably saved more lives than he killed… and he even stopped drinking. Didn't matter to Wargrave, killed him anyway. And Armstrong's first name was Edward…

God, why did he have to fucking invent that piece of shit gun that was supposed to, "Save lives"?

All he managed to mutter was, "Jesus, Sam, I'm so sorry."

There was a knock on the door. It was the posh bloke whose name he had picked up to be Goddard.

"Hey, Reiben, wasn't it? Looks like Blaine has set out dinner. Should get down there before it gets cold."

Reiben shrugged, and followed Goddard to the dining room.

Meals had been set out on the table, each looking identical.

“God, I’m starving,” said Clay. “Let’s eat.”

“Heh. Let’s hope it’s not poisoned,” Reiben joked. Nobody laughed.

---

8. Emma Rawley sent the six of them through the doorway

They sat down, and Devers had just taken his first bite when a voice suddenly rang out from the next room. It was deep, distorted, inhuman.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, silence, please.”

They all stared at each other. Had to be a joke, nobody would actually-

“You are charged with the following:

“Commander Adrian Kenneth Goddard of the Global Occult Coalition, you are charged with causing the death of Frederick McPherson.

“Agent Emma Jane Rawley of the SCP Foundation, you are charged with the deaths of Daniel Denney, William Carlyle, and Geoffrey Betterton.

“Lawrence Daniel Sellars, of Are We Cool Yet?, you are charged with causing the deaths of thirteen people during an anomalous art exhibit.

“Corporal Edward Richard Reiben of the Chaos Insurgency, you are charged with the manslaughter of Samuel Birch.

“Mohammed Omid Ayad, of the Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts, you are charged with causing the death of Nicholas Vincent Graves.

“Jane Helen Anderton, of Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd, you are charged with causing the death of Charles Jonathan Kimball.

“Daniel Frederick Clay of the Horizon Initiative, you are charged with the murder of an unknown Fifth Church Combatant.

“Harry Michael Thornton of the Unusual Incidents Unit, you are charged with the death of Kevin Victor Connors.

“Lev Yuri Shevchenko of the GRU-P, you are charged with the deaths of Victor Cherenkov, Yuri Malarkov, and Alexis Artyom.

“Jacob William Devers of the SCP Foundation, you are charged with the murder of 124 people aboard the Regal Vindication.

“What do you say in your defense?”

---

7. Mohammed Ayad jammed his foot on the accelerator

They all stared at each other, taking in the surreal situation, before Reiben stumbled away from the table, and straight out of the dining room. A vomiting sound emitted shortly after.

The remaining nine stared at each other, before Sellars finally said, “I suppose we’re all in on the masquerade. No point trying to hide it.”

“He’s right. We might as well be honest about it,” said Clay.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” spluttered Devers. “What masquerade? What was the voice even saying? Total nonsense.” He sipped his drink, perhaps in an attempt to look natural. His wooden acting gave him away.

“Bullshit. Look, the rest of us aren’t denying it,” said Sellars.

“So you admit to killing those people?”

Sellars grimaced, before admitting, “I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. They were just being idiots, and more people would have died if I hadn’t have stopped them.”

“Fine, I’ll admit to killing that Fifthist bastard. Guy killed two of my men, I wasn’t gonna let him walk away just because he threw his hands in the air.”

“I have no idea whom Fred McPherson is. You’d think I murdered someone I’d remember it!” shouted Goddard.

“But you are GOC?” asked Ayad.

Goddard paused for a moment, before saying, “Yes.”

There was a noise from outside the room, and everybody turned to its source.

Reiben walked back into the room, looking pale.

“S-sorry. Got a bit… bit light-headed. Like, this is just like And Then There Were None, right? Nobody should drink anything, that’s how the first person died.”

“Shit,” said Devers, looking at the glasses. His was the only one that had been drunk at all.

He coughed loudly, then again, before entering a coughing fit. Ayad and Shevchenko, who were sitting next to him, grabbed him before he could fall onto the floor.
He suddenly stopped coughing, and went limp. Ayad’s hands darted for Devers’ wrist.

“He’s still got a pulse… We should get him to his room, have somebody take a look at him. Anyone here a doctor?”

“I’m no expert, but I’m better than everyone else,” said Goddard.

Shevchenko and Ayad carried Devers between them,

Goddard following.

The six people remaining in the dining room looked at each other.

“Right, I’m going to get on the radio. See if we can contact Blaine,” said Clay.

“You really think the killer hasn’t already taken care of that?” questioned Rieben.

“Worth a shot.” He left.

Rawley began to speak.

“Didn’t the killer leave a poem in the book? Seems strange that they’d miss out such a vital part of the-“

“Actually, there’s a copy of the poem in my room. I’ll get it, could give us some clues. Whoever it is, he- or she- is basing it off the book, right?”

Rieben left before Rawley could object to a Chaos Insurgent running around on his own. She figured that he probably was of little danger as an individual.

She looked back around the table. Thornton, Anderton, and Sellars.

“I’m going to find out where the hell that voice came from,” said Thornton.

“Shouldn’t we all stick together?” said Rawley. “Someone poisoned Devers-“

“Like anyone would base their murders off a book. Probably just a joke.”

“Joke? How would they know about the UIU, or the Coalition, or the Foundation? Why would they fly you half way around the world for a joke?”

Thornton left without another word.

Rawley, realizing that Devers' party was now larger than her own, decided that going there was her best bet. She left Anderton and Sellars in the dining room.

"Is he alright?" she asked Goddard as soon as she stepped into the room, surprised to see only Shevchenko there.

"He's still alive, if that's what you mean."

"Where did the others go?"

"Goddard went out to get his first aid kit from his room, not like that'll help much. Ayad… actually, I have no idea where Ayad went."

He paused, trying to remember, before saying, "You're Rawley, yeah?"

"Yeah. Shevchenko, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Lev Shevchenko."

There was a period of awkward silence, before he asked, "So… who do you think poisoned him?"

The fact that her tactic of safety in numbers had resulted in her being alone with somebody maybe a foot taller materialized in her brain the moment he said it.

"Clay," she said, the first name that came to mind. "I really should be getting back to the others."

"I'll come with you."

When they arrived in the living room, Goddard and Reiben were there.

"Look, all I'm saying is that it says in the poem "One got distracted", right?" said Reiben

“That doesn’t mean anything, it could be a lie, or maybe even the distraction itself!” argued Goddard.

Sellars sat quietly, turning towards Shevchenko and Rawley.

“Anderton said she was going to the toilet, if you’re wondering where she is.”

Thornton entered the room, a small speaker in his hands.

“Found this little bastard,” he said, holding it up. “Must have been from this.”

Ayad arrived shortly afterwards, saying, “Tried signaling Blaine, but he’d already gone out a few miles and I couldn’t see him.”

William Blaine’s death was mostly painless. When he first noticed he was out a fuel, he had accepted his fate. Narracota had survived, but he wasn’t Narracota, he was Morris. He knew that the sandwiches given to him by Mr. Rios were poisoned with a particularly slow poison; too late.

In a final attempt at spite, he released the ladder. He knew it would probably mean nothing, but his final image in his mind was of the poor sod who had been pushed into the water climbing onto the boat and finding his body.

“Where’s Clay?”

“He said he was going to the radio room, try and hail Blaine,” answered Rawley to Ayad’s question.

They didn’t have to look for long. Daniel Clay the Third was found sitting on the radio room chair, his throat sliced open from ear to ear. His face was stoic, his eyes closed. Blood had splattered all over his clothes.

Rieben vomited for the second time that day. Ayad fell silent. Goddard checked his pulse. Anderton looked at Shevchenko, who looked back. Rawley went to check on Devers. Thornton fiddled with the speaker in his hands, in a futile attempt to distract him from death.

It was Sellars who said, “Clay’s dead… murdered, and somebody’s responsible.”

---

6. Jane Anderton didn't look at him as he asked if it was safe

Goddard and Reiben took Clay’s body to his room, both trying their hardest to avoid his- its?- vacant stare.

“How the hell did a kid like you end up working for the CI?”

“Pretty simple, actually. Sam- yes, he was the guy I killed- said we should sign up. I’d always been interested in the anomalous since I was a kid, and I guess I saw it as an opportunity to really change the world in some way. You know what we were working on when Sam died?”

“What?”

“This gun we were making for the Mi- these guys, which was basically a really powerful tranq rifle. Like, it was brilliant. Had to break a few laws of physics, but it was worth it. Full auto. Just took one of the darts to hit the guy and he’d be out. Not strong enough to penetrate bones; biggest chance of injury was it smacking straight into your eye and blinding you.”

“I’m guess something went wrong.”

“Sam kept saying that he wanted me to shoot him, just to make sure it worked perfectly before we showed it to the buyers. Had a fatal allergic reaction to the sedative. Died before I could get a doctor to him. Cleared me of all

blame, since Sam made a note saying he'd accept all responsibility. I just…just wish that I hadn't done it."

"Jesus. You were friends?"

"Probably more than that, actually."

"Sorry."

"Nah, not your fault. So, what happened to you? How'd you kill Fred McPherson?" asked Reiben, laying Clay onto his bed. He had almost forgotten he was carrying him.

"Can't recall it exactly, but I think I've got a good idea of what he's on about. Back a few years ago, I was in South Africa chasing after this anomaly in this old street. Fired at it, must've accidently hit this guy. He was bleeding on the road, begging for help. Had a choice between either saving one life, or letting the anomaly kill more. Easy choice, don't regret it."

"Do you regret it now that we've got this guy killing us off one by one?"

"Fair point."

"JESUS!"

Rawley's scream was heard by everyone on the island.

Ayad and Shevchenko sprinted in, only to find Devers sitting up on his bed and Rawley looking at him like he was a ghost.

"Christ, Devers, you scared the hell out of me."

"So, uh, who poisoned me?"

"We don't know, but…"

"Clay's dead," said Ayad suddenly.

“What? How?”

“Some bastard slit his throat.”

“Who?”

“We don’t know. Whoever it was is probably one of us, and probably isn’t going to stop at us.”

The nine survivors gathered in the dining room.

“Okay,” said Rawley, holding up Rieben’s pennant of the poem and his copy of the book.

“The killer is obviously basing their murders on both this book and this poem. Now, one of us is dead, and they are going to continue to do so until we are all dead, minus themselves. That much is obvious.

“I don’t know how many of you have read it, but I’m going into some serious spoiler territory, mainly because our lives are at stake. The first person to die had his drink poisoned; the killer anticipated this, used that as a distraction so he could get to Clay.

“Now, seeing as the killer in the book faked his death, we will be thoroughly checking to make sure the dead are actually dead. We’ve all committed crimes, we all work for enemies, but if any of us want to walk off this island alive, we have to work together. Agreed?”

There were a few murmurs of agreement.

“I think we’re each meant to represent a character in the original,” said Reiben. “Considering that my murder was both accidental, and that my name is Edward, I reckon I’m Armstrong.”

“But you’re not about to ally with the killer with the benefit of hindsight, are you?” said Shevchenko.

“Good point, but I suppose he’s trying to subvert it on

every count.”

“It’s late,” said Anderton. “We should sleep.”
“…I’m sorry, but have you been listening to a fucking word we’ve been saying?” said Goddard. “Did the part about the psycho killer running about become lost on you?”

“If we are gonna sleep, we should all get in one room. Keep three people awake at all times.”

“How will that help? The killer could just, I don’t know, drop a grenade and run,” said Sellars.

“They have to follow the poem, remember?” cut in Ayad.

“Yes, but what’s stopping a particularly paranoid person whose goal is to simply off us all to ensure their survival doing it?”

“The obvious lack of grenades?” said Goddard, but that did not stop them going to their separate rooms that night.

—-
Rawley looked around her room. Why had the killer hanged the pennant in Rieben’s room? Why poison Devers in particular?

Probably just random. She locked her door, and pushed the bedside table next to it, locked all the windows, and did a final sweep of the room to make sure it was totally devoid of anyone but herself.

She considered just staying up all night, pointing her revolver at the door until morning.

But then again, “One got too tired, and then there were eight,” was next, and she didn’t fancy tempting fate, so she slept.

When Shevchenko found a copy of And Then There

Were None resting on his bed, he decided that skimming through it could give him some clues.

It was 2 AM when Shevchenko read the epilogue. It was a single sentence that suddenly revealed to him who the killer was. God, it was obvious. Their motive wasn't revenge, it was some twisted form of justice, mixed with a heavy dose of a-

Lev Shevchenko turned the last page, and the memetic image stuck to it was the last thing he ever saw.

---

5. Lev Shevchenko threw the torch onto the house

The breakfast table had two empty seats the next day. Ayad said he would get Shevchenko, but everyone followed him. They had all been expecting it.

"So, what killed him?"asked Reiben.

Goddard checked the book, creased over on the last page.

"This," he said, holding up the image of alien geometries and impossible colours.

"…What's that, and why aren't we dead?"

"Mimetic image. Fatal to 0.5% of the population. I guess the killer did his research."

"Shouldn't we make sure he's dead?" asked Anderton.

"Good point," said Devers, checking his pulse.

"Nah, I was thinking more like stabbing him through the eye."

"…what? Why the hell would we do that?" said Ayad.

"Because he's either faking his death, and therefore the

killer, or dead anyway, so it doesn't actually matter."

Reiben was sent to fetch a knife, and returned quickly.

Anderton drove it deep into his vacant eye. Nothing changed.

"We should search the island," said Goddard. "In threes. While the search in the book didn't turn up much, the killer may- just may- be using reverse psychology. That's how he got Clay.

"I'll go with Rawley, Devers, and Thornton, give a brief search of the north. You four take the south. Oh, and go and get a mirror."

"Uh, why?" asked Sellars.

"Lombard managed to actually get the mainland's attention by heliographing. True, he wasn't there to see them arrive, but it's worth a try."

The second Goddard's squad exited the house to the small grassy field that composed the northern half of the island, he said, "It's got to be one of them."

"What?" asked Devers.

"It's one of them. Got to be. Look, I think I can trust you. At the very least, I know I'm not the killer, and two of you must not be the killer, or I'd be dead at this point."

"Okay, you've correctly pointed out something that we all figured out when Clay died. What's your point?" said Thornton.

"My point is, their lives are not equal to ours. Anderton is a totally ruthless bitch; she killed that Kimball bloke for profit. Reiben work for the CI, even if his killing was accidental. Sellars killed thirteen people for art, even if was an accident that amount of negligence probably means he deserves a bullet in his head. Ayad… well, we

don’t know him, do we? Always sticking to the shadows, always walking off with a weak excuse.”

“So what’s your plan?” asked Devers, although he already knew what he was proposing.

“That we kill all of them. I’ve got a gun, they don’t. Four against four, with our four better trained, better armed, and with the element of surprise.”

“And if one of us is the killer, we will have murdered four innocent people for no reason and still end up dead,” said Rawley.

“A risk we’ve got to take. It’s one of them for sure.”

“Well, I’m not doing it. Jesus, Goddard, Ayad’s literally done nothing and you’re saying we should kill him?” protested Thornton. “Like you’re any better. Who was this McPerson bloke, then?”

“Shot him accidently chasing an anomaly. Who was- Connor, was it?”

“I suppose there’s no putting it off. Connors was a prick who worked for the CI- part of the group Rawley sent to their deaths- and the Foundation handed him to us to circumvent some rules or something. Taggert and I brought him in, but he wouldn’t talk. So I tried beating it out of him. Taggert gave me some bullshit about “regulations” and how “He who fights monsters should be careful that he himself does not become a monster”, but I didn’t care. Beat the shit out of Connors; that I have no regrets over. He told us where their base of operations was, but then he had to bleed out anyway. I didn’t mean to kill him, but what’s done is done.”

They stared at him for a few seconds.

“We’re all going to die.” Rawley said it with no forewarning.

“What?”
“I mean, this is all a fucking game to this shit. Just a fucking horror movie, just because he got bored and couldn’t think of anything else to do. And he’s just going to keep doing it and doing it and it’s never fucking going to stop, and we can’t stop-“

Rawley was hyperventilating.

“Two people I talked to last night are dead. And I don’t… I don’t feel… I don’t feel *anything*…”

Thornton put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright, we’re gonna be fine.”

Goddard spoke next.

“I’ll die fighting a war, I’ll die slowly in bed, but I am NOT dying because of someone’s shitty game. I’m getting out of here, and I hope to hell I can take you with me.”

“Well, I think we should actually explore the damn island. I’ll check the cliff. Goddard, you try the trees over there. Rawley, Thornton, check the house.”

Edward Reiben had finally caught the sun in his mirror. He stood a meter away from the cliff edge, the tide violently smashing against the jagged rocks.

“Got it!” he shouted, only to find one of his three audience walking back towards the house.

“Hey, Ayad, where the hell are you going? Gotta search the island, mate.”

“I need to pray.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“I need to pray.” Ayad walked out of view and back into the house.

“Look, land’s about ten miles away, Reiben. They won’t see you.” Anderton was already walking away as she was saying it.

“Just hold on a second.”

Reiben spent a few more seconds angling the mirror in the vague direction of the land, before he realized he was alone.

He was about to shout, “Oh shit,” and run towards the others. He was about to run back towards the house, thankful to have realized just in time what a stupid move splitting up had been.

He never did any of those things.

Edward Reiben was pushed. He felt his legs go out from under him, as his arm smacked against a rough outcropping of rock. He spiraled off the cliff, down into the icy cold waters of England’s winter seas.

---

4. Jacob Devers spent one final moment with his finger on the trigger

They gathered in the dining room a few minutes later, Ayad carrying a single shoe that had washed up on the shore.

“Where the fuck is Reiben?” shouted Goddard.

“We… we don’t know. We left him heliographing.” Sellars did not look up at Goddard; he looked solemnly at the stained tablecloth.

“What?” Goddard said it with an equal amount of disbelief and anger. “WHAT? You fucking idiot! I told you not to split up!”

His main source of fear was that he himself had been stupid enough to split up; the only reason it had been Reiben and not him was total luck.

“Well, if you were all together, then it has to be one of us three, right?” said Sellars.

Thornton looked at Devers who looked at Rawley who looked at Goddard.

“We spilt up too.” Devers was totally deadpan as he said it.

“You fucking hypocrite!” shouted Anderton.

“Look, shouting isn’t going to get us anywhere,” said Thornton. “We need to think logically. We can presume Reiben is dead; “Tried to fly and join them” pretty much guarantees it.”

“Could’ve faked it. Just like the killer did in the original book.”

“Why’d he do it this early? Better to stay among us for longer, then fake his death later. I think he’s dead, Ayad.”

“Fine… but if we see him again, kill on sight.”

“A bit extreme, I think, Goddard. We’ll tie him up.”

“Woah, Thornton, waaaay too much information of what you two got up to last night,” said Sellars with a smirk.

“I think if I had, I’d be dead at this point. I mean, Reiben is testament that the gay guy always dies, and having sex pretty much seals the deal. At least he wasn’t black.”

Rawley said, “Nah, I’m gonna die last. If there’s anything I learned, it’s that the black guy is going to die just before the climax.”

“On to the practical side of things; was anyone accompanied for the entirety of our search?”

“No, we all split up,” said Ayad. “Except, actually, did you two-?”

“Nah, we split up as well. Stupid. Really stupid. Sellars suggested it, and then he just started walking off on his own before I could say anything else.”

“Right, I think we need to go over this logically,” said Rawley. “We must consider if anyone has an alibi. Nobody was with someone else for the entirety of the search; anyone could have done it. Even considering that the four of us would have a difficult time sneaking over without being noticed by anybody, it remains a possibility.

“Anyone could have placed the book in Shevchenko’s room. Anyone. Nobody can be ruled out from Clay’s death, either. The only people who have proved beyond all doubt that they are innocent are Daniel Clay and Lev Shevchenko. I have the suspicion that Reiben is still alive, but in all honesty the killer probably offed him in such a way that would make us suspect him.”

She had no idea just how right she was…

They searched for Reiben afterwards; nobody left the party. After the search uncovered nothing except a second shoe, they proceed to bed.

Goddard had no plans of sharing Shevchenko’s fate; or, for that matter, Rogers’.

He gathered Rawley, Devers and Thornton in his room.

“Right, I’m pretty certain at the point it’s gotta be one of those three. So, safety in numbers, right? All of us should stay the night in the same room.”

“Right, so then if it’s one of us, the killer can kill all of us in our sleep. Good plan,” said Thornton.
“No, we’ll keep two people awake at all times. Look, all I’m saying is that it’s much safer than us sleeping alone.”

“Seems to me the killer would try something exactly like

this," said Devers.

"In what way would I benefit from having everyone in the same room? I'd have to follow the poem, remember?"

"I don't know. But, anyway, I'm not risking it."

And Devers retreated to his own room.

"He's got a point. Plus, I really don't fancy staying up half the night."

"But being murdered is an attractive prospect?" shouted Goddard as Thornton left.

He turned to Rawley and said, "Look, please don't go."

"I'd do it if they were, but locking myself in with someone with a mad killer going about doesn't sound like a good idea. I'll see you tomorrow."

Goddard locked his own room the second she left, and lugged a chest of draws in front of the door. He placed his revolver on his bedside table, made sure the lamp's switch was in close proximity to his hands, and cautiously flicked it off.

Goddard survived that night, even if he hardly got any sleep. Most of the others were in a similar situation, with the obvious exception of the one person who had nothing to fear.

However, one of them didn't get any sleep that night, nor ever again.

Anderton flicked her light off, and stumbled through the darkness to her bed. All lights on the island were switched off; only the dim glow of the moon offered any illumination, but all that did was stop her eyes adjusting to the darkness. She walked twice the distance she should have before realized something was wrong.

Oh Jesus. Lost in the dark. She was going to die because of some stupid fucking idiot who decided resetting the fucking death clock to midnight that fucking fuck fuck fuck.

She brushed past a plant. God, she was outside? How the hell did they do that? Her vision was total darkness; she could only feel the damp soil between her toes and hear something running, something that wasn't human, something that was going to Oh Jesus please no eat her and then-

Whatever the hell it was, it roared, and Anderton felt a bolt of pain shoot up her leg.

After that, she didn't feel anything.

---

3. Harry Thornton punched him in the head

Goddard had been expecting someone to die that night; his guess had been Rawley, or possibly himself. Anderton he had expected to see in the final three, but he knew that she almost certainly wasn't the killer.

They gathered in the dining room, almost knowing that one of their party would not be joining them.

"Shit, it's Anderton," said Thornton, almost unsurprised.

He, followed by the other five- Christ, were there really only six of us left?- ran up to her room to find it a tangle of undergrowth and darkness, which expanded far past what it should have. A dismembered leg lay caught on some brambles, blood staining the cloth.

Thornton shut the door as quickly as he had opened it.

"Okay, what the fuck was that?"

Devers explained. "Something that's basically theoretical at this point. Called Walton portals. Essentially, you can

create an entire separate world by reengineering an already existing portal, although it's difficult as hell do to."

"Wait, just how hard are we talking here?"

"We've had our best personell working on it for the last three years. Nothing. Mainly because we have nothing to base it on, and because the only actual research we have on it was taken from some random CI mook's USB."

"Jesus. These things could be used to create infinite farm lands, stop all overcrowding issues… and this bastard used them to murder somebody. The sick fuck." Ayad said it with the first genuine anger he had experienced since arriving.

The genuine anger was echoed with genuine guilt from the person who had created the portal in the first place.

They went back to the dining room and sat quietly.

"So, bees next. Heh. So many annoying bee-related memes, and the killer didn't go with any of them. Have to give them credit for that," Thornton said almost humorlessly.

They went back to the table, and they sat silently. Thornton had reduced himself to simply eating everything he could; Devers drummed his fingers until Rawley asked him to please stop that; Sellars read a book, which he complained about endlessly to Goddard ("Okay, see, look at this, Meeks' wife is suddenly dead for no reason and then Barnes begins killing everyone and I have no idea what Moore and Harland and Strasse are doing, they sort of…"); Ayad remained totally silent.

"I'm going to the toilet," said Sellars.

"I'm going to pray," said Ayad.

"I'm going to my room," said Devers.

Goddard, Rawley and Thornton all had a very strong instinct that was telling them only two were returning.

Sellars wasn't going to the toilet.

He ran into his room, found his phone that he had left on his bedside table, and walked downstairs playing the third level of "Please Solve the Game." (Or PSTG as he liked to call it.)

Devers entered his room and thought of what he did that landed him here.

"Infection has spread throughout the ship…" said the voice of Howard, like had only happened yesterday.

"Survivors are already disembarking. Could possibly be infected. Sir, if this thing escapes…"

He had to do it. Right? There was no other way. Everybody on there was already dead anyway.

Before he could ponder the morality of his choice to launch the torpedo, he noticed the box on his bed.

Before he could even say, "Oh shit," it snapped open on its own, and they emerged.

They all heard his screams.

Goddard raced towards its source immediately, while Thornton and Rawley looked at each other momentarily, before joining him.

Goddard arrived at Devers' room to see Sellars and Ayad already outside. An intense buzzing noise emitted from his room, punctuated by screams.

Ayad was pulling desperately on the door; it didn't budge. Goddard shoved him aside, and had a go himself, as if he was somehow going to unlock it.

Thornton and Rawley had arrived by the time the screaming had stopped completely.

“What the hell’s going on?” shouted Thornton.

“I don’t have a fucking clue,” Goddard said, quickly running his hands over his cropped black hair. He slammed himself against the door, to no effect. Repeating the action twice showed a slight buckle and some splinters, but Sellars stopped him before he could finally break it.

“What if whatever is in there gets us too?”

Goddard considered it, before stopping.

“Okay, so what do you suggest we do?”

“Wait until the… hang on, listen.”

Goddard did. “What?”

“Buzzing’s stopped.”

Goddard gave the door another kick, and it finally subsided.

“Oh Jesus.”

Devers’ body was covered in ugly lumps and bruises, with thousands of bees littering the floor.

Goddard turned away before he could no longer resist the urge to vomit.

“Genetically modified bees, most likely. Die in a few minutes… or something like that…” Ayad remarked.

They didn’t move his body; none of them would dare touch it.
Again they sat on the dining table, just as the sun began to set.

“Goddamn…Goddamn…” Goddard muttered. He rubbed his neatly trimmed beard, before sighing. “We can’t just sit here waiting to die. We have to do something.”

“Like what?” Rawley asked.

“Swimming. Yeah, actually, swimming. The shore’s what, ten miles away? If we get something buoyant, we could make it.”

“Too risky.”

“Stay here, and that bastard’s gonna get us.”

“Go out there, and the weather’s gonna get us. Look, I reckon I can get the bastard.”

“That’s your choice. I’m gonna have a go at swimming.”

“What if you’re the killer? What if you’re just trying to escape?”

“Hey, come to think of it,” said Thornton. “Didn’t the next guy fake his death?”

He had just finished saying it when his head exploded.

---

2. Daniel Clay hesitated to fire when he started to scream

A small bullet wound was punched into his left temple; there was nothing left of his right other than some exposed brain matter. Skull fragments and blood littered the floor. Thornton’s corpse slumped forward.

They all stared at each other, and at Thornton.

Ayad screamed, and they scattered. Goddard scrambled backwards, falling onto the floor, before righting himself and sprinting to his room. Rawley sped off instantly. Ayad, trembling immensely, nervously hurpled towards his room.

That left Sellars. He grabbed an apple from in front of him, and took a bite out of it. He had the feeling it might be his last.

Rawley reached her room first, and instantly flung open her draw and grabbed he revolver. It was already loaded with six bullets; she'd only need three.

Goddard arrived in his room seconds later. His revolver, too, was loaded.

Ayad's plan was rather different; namely hide until it was safe to come out. He had just ran into his room, and was just about to shove his bedside table against the door when he noticed the plastic paddling pool in front of him.

In the last few seconds of his life, his mind raced for an explanation; it had just reached one when he was pushed.

As he fell towards the pool, he didn't scream; for some odd reason he found himself totally calm. He only glanced back at the killer, and thought, "I really should have known it was h-"

Goddard and Rawley both reached the empty dining room at the same time.

"Where's Ayad?" he asked, his hand firmly gripped to his holstered revolver.

"Where's Sellars?" she asked, her hand firmly gripping her holstered revolver.

They both drew at the exact same time. She remained rooted; Goddard dove for cover in the form a nearby pillar.

She shot twice, Goddard not even aiming as he returned the same.

Neither moved for a few seconds, enough time for

Rawley to shout, “Drop the gun!”

Goddard didn’t respond, so she slowly edged her way forward. A bullet hole marked the exact centre of his forehead.

“Jesus,” she muttered, looking at her gun with disgust. The fact that she had killed him floated around aimlessly in her mind, but didn’t cement itself. It didn’t feel real.

A sharp jab in her neck brought her out of it.

“Ow! What the-“
Her legs fell out from under her, and she collapsed.

“What… what the fuck…”

Sellars stood above her, a syringe in his hands.

“You couldn’t have just waited a few more minutes, could you?”

“W-what?”

“It was all set out! Ayad was supposed to pray, and then I’d push him into the pool. Goddard would pick up the spoon, which’d kill him. But noooo, you had to fucking ruin it, didn’t you?”

“It’s… it’s you, isn’t it? You’re the killer?”

“What, the person who is currently talking about killing people after stabbing a needle in your neck? Yeah, no shit.”

“What the fuck was that?” Rawley said, raising her hand to the injection’s source of impact.

“Your legs are paralyzed, and that’s not the worst of it. Ya see, remember those six Class-D you sent into that mysterious doorway of doom and death? That didn’t kill them, no matter how much they wish it did.”

“You fucking hypocrite. They were murderers, just like everybody you killed.”

“At least mine are actually dead. Anyway, three of those Class-D were totally innocent CI POWs. They committed no crime-“

“They killed my friends! They’re fucking murderers!”

“It was an act of war, Rawley."

"War? How the hell can you call that war?"

“Of course, this isn’t the end of it. In a few minutes, the injection I gave you will take full effect.”

“And that’s gonna do what, exactly?”

“Sorry for being so cliché; I really wanted to be more original than this. You will be turned to stone. Unable to move, talk, or scream.”

He picked up Rawley’s gun, fired at the corpse of Goddard, and again at Thornton. He placed one of the two bullets remaining in his pocket, and tossed the pistol to Rawley.

“Kill me, or face a fate worse than death. Your choice.”

He walked away slowly, not even turning back when he heard the gunshot.

---

1. Edward Reiben took aim at his head

Sellars’ small rubber dinghy bobbed slowly in the waves. It was night; the sky was cloudless, the full moon illuminating an ill-defined strip of sea water. Blaine’s boat was up ahead; it remained relatively still, and looked the same as it did when Sellars had disembarked. There were no grips on the side of the boat; Sellars went around twice attempting to find the best place to board.

When he finally acted, he first chucked his jerry can of petrol aboard, before hauling himself on as well. A few drops of water pitter-pattered onto the boat, and Sellars threw his lifejacket to the ground.

So, he had done it. Nine dead men, and he was the only one left. The footage of it all was on a DVD in his back pocket.

Sellars stepped into the darkened cockpit, and realized he was going to die. The lights were out; the boat's generator could function independently of engine, and could power the lights for several weeks before running out. Blaine died at night; the only reason they'd be off would be if someone turned them off.

"Shit. Well, come on, Eddie. Let's get this over with."

Reiben stepped forward, a flare gun in his hand. He was distracted, tired, had nobody but darkness for company for the last few days, suffering from some kind of infection, beginning to wonder if Armstrong ever did any of this shit, half-drowned, starving, and partly considering blowing his own skull open with the flare gun.

The only thing he was totally sure about was that this was never happening to anybody else again.

"Don't move," he said meekly.

"And it started so well. And it started so well. You may as well just put a fucking flare in me, Eddie. I failed. Credit where credit's due; you're a bleedin' good swimmer."

"Sorry. Anyone else left?"

"Nope. Just us two. And it'll be one soon."

"Any last requests?"

"Yeah, actually. Let me send one more text."

“And if you’re setting off a phone bomb or some other bullshit?”

“You really think I’d do that, Eddie?”

“…Yes!”

“There. Sen-BANG!”

“Was that really supposed to scare me?”

“Anyway, sent it.”

“What’d it say?”

Sellars threw his phone off the side of the boat.

“Now, you’re gonna want the exposition rant explaining everything, like why and how I did everything?”

“Let me guess, you did it for some vague bullshit about art?”

“…alright, you got me. So, want to hear the rest of-“

Edward Reiben fired.

And Then What Happened?

Agent Tangerine sat listening avidly to Agent Green's tale.

"And then what happened?"

"Well, apparently she went to school with Duchamp."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Hell of a coincidence. The boys drugged her and verified it all."

"Huh."

Tangerine sat and sipped his mango juice. His Hawaiian T-shirt and sandals matched his vibrant red hair, as though he were a living explosion. Agent Green was wearing his customary black-tie suit. While neither of them should have attracted much notice in the busy city, as a pair sitting at the same table they were drawing more odd looks than Green was comfortable with.

"So how are things on your end?"

"Well, I'm busy working on something for the exhibition on Friday."

"Keep it smaller than last time."

"Of course, of course. Most people are keeping it pretty small this time around, as far as I can tell. The age of explosions and fireworks is winding down. 'Loud and in your face' has been done a billion times."

"I doubt there won't be a billion and first."

A waitress walked over and placed a tea tray on their table. Green pulled it to his side, pouring hot water into a clinking china cup.

"Gotta admit, I'm enjoying playing the artist here. Bumming around

all day and getting paid for it. Much better than having giant monsters trying to eat your brains, glad to be out of there."

"I'll drink to that."

They tapped their glasses together, Tangerine downing the last of his juice as Green took a careful sip of hot milk tea.

"So what did you do with this girl afterwards?"

"Full course of amnestics, induced coma, stuck her in the hospital. Should be out of the picture for a month or two and no one knows we did a thing. Didn't really need her for much else, and we've gotten rid of one of The Critic's big ones."

"Yeah. Makes things complicated for us, of course."

"Hm?"

"Friday's thing was her exhibition. Whatever it was she had planned, she'd hyped up a lot of people about it. If she's out of the picture, then the exhibition's got nothing from The Critic's clique."

"Surely that's good for us though, right?"

"No. Definitely not. See, it was just going to be The Director's little dance number or whatever she had planned, but they aren't just going to cancel it. That would make them look like they only had the one idea, they'd seem imaginatively sterile. They'll be pulling in something else to make up for it, and whatever they do will almost certainly make a bigger bang."

"Shit. Planning crowd control for these things is hard enough as it is."

"Indeed. Glad that's not my problem."

"Any chance we could block the venue?"

"Do it in advance and they'll move it, and once they're there they won't budge."

“What kind of turnout are you expecting?”

“No idea.”

“Ballpark it for me.”

“Pfffff… a thousand or so? Maybe two?”

“Shit. We can’t bar that many people without creating more problems.”

“Could get lucky, might not be that bad.”

Green downed the rest of his tea.

“Could we try and split the group? Set up another exhibition at the same time?”

“If you’d asked me a week ago. Your only real option’s to ride it out, I think. Have some guys attend as casuals in case someone pulls something stupid.”

“And how likely is it someone will pull something stupid?”

“I’d put odds at fifty-fifty, but everyone I know’s playing it safe. Basic stuff all around. The only real unknown here is Critic’s lot, but they don’t normally leave stuff lying around. Shouldn’t be any problems, don’t worry about it. If we make it through, cleanup should be trivial.”

“That’s a big if.”

“Don’t worry, seriously. Nobody’s going to start anything in the middle of an exhibition this big.”

They stood up, tossing change into a tip jar as they left.

“Hope you’re right, Tan. Good luck on your end.”

“Good luck yourself, Green. You gonna be there yourself? Take a gander at the impossible made real?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Brilliant, I love seeing you in plainclothes. You always look so uncomfortable.”

The Sculptor sat listening avidly to The Painter’s tale.

“And then what happened?”

“Well, that’s what we don’t know, since the cameras were cut. Looks like the play itself might have been an exploit.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Made by a genuine anartist from the 17th century. That’s my guess, anyway.”

“Huh.”

The Sculptor sat and sipped his banana milkshake. Unfortunately, the hospital cafeteria didn’t have a particularly wide variety of beverages, and even then the banana was the off kind of false, artificial banana flavouring, too sweet to be genuinely palatable, not to mention that the milk was skim. The Painter took a pause to swig his pocket flask of whiskey.

“So what are we doing about the exhibition?”

“No idea. Worst case scenario we just pull what she was working on.”

“What was she working on, anyway?”

“Well, it was a pretty standard exploit acrobatics show, from what she told me. You know the stuff, leaping tall buildings in a single bound, trapeze stuff, doing flips and shit. Not really what I’m into, but I can appreciate it at least.”

“Sounds decent.”

The Sculptor continued drinking. Seeing The Director’s body lying comatose with an oxygen mask had not been enjoyable.

“So. The Director turns up to her play that she’s been working on for two months, talks to all her actors, and then five minutes before showtime that asshole turns up and asks her to stop the performance. Then this. The question, then, is who actually made it happen.”

“You know as well as I do it was Duchamp.”

The Painter pensively considered the thought. He had previously dismissed it as being too obvious, then reconsidered it as being deceptively obvious on purpose.

“Well, he’s certainly the only lead we have.”

“The only lead we have? This is the same fucker who nicked Felix, you know! This is the stupid asshat who mailed you a painting that makes you shit yourself, this is the idiot who outright declared war on us, and this is his pre-emptive strike!”

“Could be. But probably not.”

“Hm?”

“Think about it. Everything Duchamp’s done until now has been absolutely safe. Sure, he made me shit my pants, he sent stuff to everyone, but none of it was harmful. Duchamp might be an arrogant asshat, but this hurt the audience. People died. If I’ve got this right, and I reckon I do, Duchamp wouldn’t so much as hurt a fly. He’d harass us, yeah, but he wouldn’t pull something like this. It’s too much escalation, it doesn’t mesh with what he’s been doing. I really don’t think it was him.”

“But that’s surely exactly what he’d want you to think.”

“No. He wants to enact a cultural change, and as childishly as he behaves, he knows that something like this just gets him nowhere. What incentive would he have?”

“To weaken us.”

“If he’d wanted to kill us he would have done a cleaner job.”

“But that’s not what he was trying to do. He made it look as though Sandy did this on purpose, and the only thing that can possibly do is bring up our visibility in a bad way. The Man’s going to crack down on us if this goes on, and they will crack down hard. He’s poking a lion and a tiger with a pair of sticks to make them fight to the death.”

The Painter considered the implications.

“It’s certainly an interesting hypothesis, and if you’re right, it’s a clever strategy.”

“I’m right. It wouldn’t have been any of the Suits, weaponising exploits isn’t their style. He’s played it safe til now to get our attention, and pulling this is his way of letting us know he’s not messing around. We’ve got to do something.”

“What do you suggest?”

“He targeted Sandy because she was showing on Friday. That’s our chance to go big and show everyone we’re cooler than them. He wanted to break us down, to distract us from the community, to tear us from the audience and destroy us as artists. Well fuck that. Come Friday, we throw out everything we’ve got.”

They stood up, walking to the lifts.

“I’m guessing you’ll be wanting to call the shots on this one?”

“We don’t need to concern Critic with something like this. We’re not children, we don’t need him to change our fucking diapers.”

“No complaints here. I’ve been working on a piece that should suffice.”

“I’ll call the others, then. See you on Friday.”

Felix Cori sat listening avidly to Ruiz Duchamp’s tale.

“And then what happened?”

“Well, after she tried to stab me I just left.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. I knew she wasn’t going to listen, I’m good at picking up subtle hints like attempted homicide. Best I could do was get the hell out of there.”

“Huh.”

Felix sat and sipped his green tea. Ruiz was soldering a circuit board to some mechatronic actuators, occasionally flicking switches to check that all was well. He pulled a multimeter from his workbench and probed the currents. Satisfied with the results, he stood up, grabbed an apple-flavoured juice box, popped the straw in, and sat down next to Felix.

“So who do you think did it?”

“Well, it wasn’t an accident… I’d put money on the Suits. They’ve been pushing the bounds more and more lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how they used to charge in guns blazing? There’s none of that anymore, and it’s not because they’ve ‘given up’. I reckon it’s a shift in strategy, but I don’t have anything solid to back it up.”

“Well, maybe. Can’t see them using exploits as a weapon, though.”

Ruiz sucked his juice box dry and started methodically unfolding it. Felix blew his tea, then took another tentative sip.

“So. What have you been up to, old man? Diving into the retirement fund?”

“Quite. I’m still working on things, just more traditional materials. Nothing out of the ordinary for a while at least. Time to eke out a bland and plain existence.”

“How profoundly boring.”

Ruiz had folded his juice box into a small aeroplane shape. He threw it across the room, landing it neatly in a garbage bin near the door.

“Will you be taking time out of your busy schedule of bland and plain for Friday’s exhibition?”

“I might, I might. What are you doing for it?”

“Oh, I won’t be going. Gotta finish all of this stuff. The last of my materials came in this morning, so it won’t be long before I send out the invitation.”

“Well, you’ll be missing out, I think.”

“Hm?”

“Sandra had a big show planned. The guys – well, whoever’s left – they won’t just cancel it. They’ll have to show the Suits that they mean business, that they aren’t intimidated by this. They’ll be going very, very big, pulling out all the stops. Yep, it should be quite a show, methinks.”

“See, that’s the kind of childish bullshit that solves nothing.”

“Yeah. Honestly, they’re a bunch of kids. No idea what they’re doing.”

Felix sipped the last of his green tea and placed the cup at his feet.

“Glad I don’t have to deal with it any more. Hell, glad I don’t have to deal with you.”

“I’m not that bad. I’m just riling them up, really. It’s like kicking a beehive, but all the bees are artists and the kick is mailing out butt jokes. Butt jokes and poop jokes.”

“The pinnacle of comedy.”

“Quite. I just wish they’d lighten up, you know, not take everything so damn seriously. They’re not taking it the right way. Neither did you, to be honest. Retiring, bah. Scuppered all my plans, how dare you be unpredictable!”

Felix chuckled at the faux outburst, taking his cup and standing to leave.

“Well, good luck with this stuff, at any rate.”

“Don’t need luck when you’ve got talent, Felix.”

“Quite right. That’s why I wished you luck.”

“Hah. Get out of here, old man.”

Snip. Snip. Snip.

« **Quintessence Of Dust** | **Hub** | **The Cool Kids** »

An FAQ; Or, What The Hell Is A Hume?

Q: So what the hell *is* a Hume?

A: A good question! A Hume is a way to determine the strength and/or amount of reality in a given area. Now, you may have issues with reality being measured this way, and it's certainly a hard concept to grasp. One of the better analogies that can be used to explain this works like this: picture that everything in the universe is covered with a thin layer of sand. This is the baseline level of reality-one Hume. When some of the sand is removed, by any means, there is less sand around, and the level of reality has dropped. When sand is added, there is more reality around. Now, this explanation is *highly* simplistic, but it helps introduce the concept and gives a nice visual representation. So, using this analogy, Humes just measure the amount of sand in an area. Clear?

Q: But how do we define these things? What are they in relation to?

Another good question! Every measurement has got to be defined in relation to something, and so we devised a way to create a Hume baseline. We created two pocket realities that each contain Scranton Reality Anchors that maintain the Hume levels at an arbitrarily high and low level. These levels have been designated 100 and 0, respectively. It is from these pocket universes that Hume measurements arise.

Q: So how are Humes measured?

A: Via the Kant counter! A Kant counter consists of two portals to the pocket universes discussed above. Using these as a baseline, the Hume level of a localized area can be measured.

Q: Brilliant! Where's your Nobel?

A: As per Foundation policy, outside sharing/recognition of work is

impossible. But fear not! We've been compensated more than adequately, and, in addition, we recently got a very favorable **Ethics Committee** ruling authorizing a mission to speed the progress of outside researchers on the same track as us; meaning that Humes may be present in the world in as little as a few years!

Q: How can Humes help me?

A: If you work with lots of reality benders or reality-bending-based SCPs, you're in luck!

First off, reality benders. These people have a twofer effect on reality. Firstly, reality surrounding them is usually slightly less real than normal. Secondly, their own personal Hume reading is usually a little higher than is normal. The magnitude of the first and second are, of course, related to the relative power of the bender in question. Usually, a low-level reality bender runs at about 75-80/130-150 (Hume level of surrounding area/Hume level of individual; this will be used for all future examples.) Especially in the case of low-level benders, extreme discretion must be used to avoid a false positive on reality benders, as these readings can fluctuate in vanilla humans. For more information, see this lecture on reality benders. It's a huge help. Powerful reality benders, however, usually run at about 40</>300, indicating a large ability to shape reality. Of note is **SCP-343**. Unlike all other reality benders, it does *not* exert any influence whatsoever on outside reality. However, its internal Hume reading is astronomically high, registering at an average of 860 Humes (averaged across seven different tests; more ongoing.) This indicates many things, all of which are being heatedly debated by the researchers studying SCP-343. Finally, take the case of **SCP-239**. Unlike many powerful reality benders, where area of effect, internal, and external Hume readings all are quite large, **SCP-239** has an unusual twist. Her area of effect is quite low; only extending to her line of sight and/or imagination (which, while seemingly giving her an infinite area of effect, is really only limited to what she can actually imagine, and thus can be *generally* ruled out with proper containment.) However, her readings are 30/500, granting her a nearly unlimited ability to shape her local reality as she sees fit. As in the case of 343, the meaning, cause, and containment procedures for this are being debated extensively.

Humes can also be applied to non-human anomalies. For instance, take **SCP-2464**. The Hume measurement inside both the anomaly as well as SCP-2464-2 have unequivocally confirmed the hypothesis regarding the anomaly, (see the addendum for more information,) allowing for more effective containment. As another case, take **SCP-668**. This tool perpetually raises the Hume readings within a meter or so of it by approximately twenty Humes when not active. When active, the Hume level rises to astronomical (>670 Hm) levels across all measuring Kant counters, and it is theorized that this effect extends across all known space. Following this realization, 1) more effective containment for SCP-668 was put in place, and 2) immediate monitoring of all Kant counters commenced in order to serve as a warning system for the existence of any more anomalies in the same fashion. Finally, take the example of **SCP-2000**. To facilitate containment, Scranton Reality Anchors were constructed and deployed. Prior to this, it was not known how or why Reality Anchors operate. Now, we know both how the Anchors work (by keeping local reality at a constant 20 Hm) and why they work (in keeping with the sand metaphor, it works like this: they drain sand from different, nonessential universes to keep the supply of sand in ours steady. It's nothing like that, but the metaphor roughly holds).

Q: Last, but certainly not least, who are you two?

A: Doctors James Caldmann and Carlos Rzewski.

Questions? Confusion? Accusations? Come to FAQ 2, the Electric Boogaloo, where all your Hume-related questions will be answered!

Anderson the Alternative

"So, uh, we all know what our little firm now faces," Vincent Anderson looked around, noting the reaction of the other four most important members of **`Anderson Robotics`**. "Our facilities raided, our staff attacked, our customers apprehended. We don't have enough resources to defend ourselves, and um, the Foundation won't stop until all our products are in their hands. We won't be able to go on like this, and I would like to make a proposal."

"No," Phineas immediately cut him off. "We've talked about this before, Vincent. I'm not going to let you sell our years of hard work to some… rich businessmen who see nothing but profit in our efforts. If we're subjected to their rules, our inspirations, our innovations, and our originalities will all be lost."

"Yes, and I've thought about that, Phineas," Anderson turned to the old man, nodding slightly. "We are always going to be raided, and um, some of our products will be snatched from our customers. Receiving funding from MC&D can give us the power to counter those, but only temporarily. It doesn't fix the problem from the source. So as I really think about it, there is only one logical and permanent solution."

The four's gaze followed as Anderson stood up, moving to one of screens in the meeting room. "If the Foundation really wants our little gadgets, we're going to cut out the, um, 'middle man' here, which is the being raided part," He chuckled slightly at the joke, and made the announcement. "We will be directly funded by the Foundation."

Jason choked on his drink. Jeffery froze, and Medea just stared at him blankly.

"Wait, what?" Phineas said.

Anderson turned on the device. After a few moments, the screen

flashed on, and a blue figure appeared.

"Hello," the computer vocalized. "I'm **Alexandra**, your Foundation liaison. It's nice meeting you!"

"What do you mean 'you didn't actually think this was going to happen'?" Director Holman stared at their "Robotics Specialist", a few veins visible on his forehead. Next to him, Assistant Director Merlo gave a resentful look.

"Well, I didn't actually expect that the ghosts of the droids would linger due to their hatred towards the tasks the Foundation put them through?" Vincent Anderson replied, forcing a smile.

"And let me remind you that you're part of *the Foundation*, Anderson," Holman tapped on the table. "And this is because of the brain mapping tech? Their souls are now trapped there? So how come I was not informed about this in the first place?"

"I did mention it, in the reports. Just that I didn't really, um, highlight that part."

Holman looked like he was holding back a curse. After a few moments, he signed. "You're dismissed, Anderson. Back to your department, I believe any further instructions on what to do with… **SCP-3560** will be filed to your place directly."

Anderson nodded, and exited the Site Director's office as Merlo shut the door on him. He stood there for a second, and let out a modulated breath. He then took out his silver comedy mask from his person. Putting it on, he once again noted how much he hated the dress codes.

As he walked through the facility, a team of MTF agents rushed past, no doubt to deal with the mess he had created. They were led by Commander Shaw, who appropriately gave him a middle finger. Anderson returned the greeting with a nod.

After a short walk and one elevator ride, Anderson was standing in front on the Special Robotics Department of Site-64. A familiar falcon logo was branded on to the door, right inside a Foundation department shield. He pressed his palm into the security scanner and allowed the door to slide open.

The common room was unusually empty and quiet, occupied by only two individuals – **Hector** and Researcher Conwell, who were playing a game of chess. Anderson already expected that most robots would be called back temporarily in light of the incident, and staff likewise interviewed. The two were probably left here in case of emergency.

As Anderson walked pass, the Peregrine bot looked up to greet him, while Conwell was too engrossed in the game and the music playing in his earphones to even notice.

Several more similarly empty development and management offices later, Anderson reached his own office. As he finally settled, he took out his standard Foundation-issued pad and checked his feed. Unsurprisingly, it was bombarded with reports and complaints regarding the appearance of SCP-3560, a hell on earth for his beloved robots only. He also was in for a small chat with an Overseer within the week. Meanwhile, on the intranet's small social media, "#RoboLimbo" had become a trending topic, which he really didn't care to read the specifics about. Anderson decided against logging in any of the chat rooms, and spent the next five minutes sinking into the comfort of his chair and staring at the ceiling.

Eventually, his eyes settled on a framed photo of him, Phineas, Jeffery, Medea, and Jason standing together, each with a genuine smile. It was Anderson Robotics' official opening day, and they joked about being pushed to bankruptcy within the first week as none of them knew anything about running a business.

Money, however, was no longer a concern as the mighty Foundation machine worked its magic. Their tech was valuable enough, so they were given much freedom to create as they wished; the only drawback was the endless arguments with Ethics Committee about robot rights. Yet, only he and Jeffery were still stationed at Site-64. Jason jumped at the opportunity to be transferred to bigger and

more prominent sites, and Medea with him. His little firm was pretty much disbanded, taken away piece by piece, and without him noticing, intergrated into the Foundation. And as for Phineas…

As his thoughts drifted, Anderson closed his eyes and put himself in sleep mode.

"Mr. Anderson~ Rise and shine!" A sweet albeit slightly mechanical voice rang out in his audio receptors, and Anderson snapped back from the dreamless false sleep. He was greeted by a blue-skinned woman with long blue hair.

"Alex," He said as the cameras serving as his eyes refocused.

"Yep," Alexandra, the coordinator of the Special Robotics Department responded. "I do hope you've gotten enough rest, mentally, of course. The rest of the team is already waiting for you." She then wasted no time to help Anderson from the chair and began to lead him towards the common room.

"Um, I'm sorry, Alex," Anderson asked as the office door closed behind him. "But what do you mean, team?"

"Oh, the news came while you were sleeping. We're assembling a team to explore the interior of the 'Robo Limbo'," She said, dramatically making big air quotes with her hands.

"I thought that would be up to Shaw and her—"

"Heeeeey sup! Mr. Anderson!" A green-haired young man jumped out of the common room and patted Anderson on the shoulder, interrupting his question.

Anderson winced slightly at the sight of the overzealous AIAD bot. He was never quite used to the temperament of the Foundation AICs, for they were never quite human enough and not as comfortable to be around as his own androids. But of course, the work was still impressive; he himself couldn't write code like this. So instead, he resorted to curse the engineer of the personality drives in his head.

"That's quite enough," Alex smiled, shooed Thorn away and gently pushed Anderson inside.

He saw yet another familiar artificial face and realized this must be way more serious than he had hoped. Nevertheless, he greeted Grape, the third AIAD robot, who only grunted in return. Looking around, he also saw a few agents sitting around, notably Commander Shaw, who was helping herself to some juice. Hector was nowhere to be seen but Researcher Conwell was helping the agents with some equipment.

"So," Anderson finally said. "What is this about, may I ask?"

"Oh, we're going into 3560. Because all the Robotics department androids are in for inspection and review right now, me, Grape and Throne are helping with the mission," Alex explained. "Lawbringers have already covered the basic grounds, and we have a secure route out in case anything happens. And… lemme check, MTF Tau-51, Urban Brawl will have our back outside the portal."

"And I'm sure I will be helping remotely over the radio?" Anderson asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," Alex smiled politely. "But I will be directing the mission. You will go in with the rest of the team."

"There must have been some kind of mix up. I'm uh, not exactly good with field work."

"Oh I dunno. I'd say your lighting cannon was pretty impressive," Shaw cut into the conversation, finishing off her drink. "So impressive in fact, it burnt down half of this department?"

"But clearly you have way more experienced agents," Anderson swallowed but only felt dryness in his throat.

"Whose life shouldn't be thrown into the murderous extradimensional hell *you* created." Shaw made no attempt to hide her aggression.

Fortunately, Alex put herself between the agent and Anderson timely. "You have the most knowledge about SCP-3560, Vincent.

We really need an expert in there as well."

"But—"

"Mr. Anderson, it would be the best for you to go with this mission." Alex said apologetically. However, there was a certain sternness in her voice. "I have clear orders."

"Oh yeah, between this and the Phineas incident, you're in a *very* dangerous place, Vinny." Throne chimed in, a completely unsuccessful attempt to lift the mood, taking the situation entirely too lightly.

Anderson stiffened. As much as he want to believe that it was Holman setting him up, he knew that Alex must have taken the order from even higher up. This was a warning to him. He had started to miss his long gone status of a PoI – at least back then he only had being locked in a cell instead of termination to worry about. He had always been afraid of the possibility, even made plans ahead of time. But it had not come to that yet, so he simply nodded.

"Great," Agent Shaw said dryly. "Let's head off."

As Anderson walked among the shadowy trees and the thick fog, taking shelter between armed MTF agents and armoured bots, he felt somewhat surreal and ridiculous, as if he had been placed into a stereotypical horror movie. But the moment he stepped into the portal, he had felt a chill down his spine, despite his receptors incapable of such sensations. If he were to think about it more rationally, it must have been the thaumaturgical signature of the place; but right now he couldn't help but feel a bit intimidated.

After all, despite what others might think, he knew next to nothing about this place. The theory had been proposed, but back then they were way more interested in putting andorids together than worry about the potential consequences. Even Phineas, the more careful of the two, was not presistent in looking into it. There were concerns, but they were put aside, and the theory was shelved. He knew souls would be stuck, but had little idea of what they would be like, and even less of an idea of what their torment would generate.

So far, the team went on without accident; the whole place seemed awfully quiet and undisturbed, despite a slight rotting scent. Alex's voice over the radio guided the team cautiously, and it reassured him to a degree. Most of the team had their weapons ready to go, and the two bots were already scanning and mapping the area.

But then, footsteps, statics, and the rustle of the leaves all broke out at once.

It was Throne who first recognized the ambush and alerted the team, but it didn't buy them much time. Android souls that had blended too well with the environment had charged out of the thick fog, hundreds in number. Then again, "charge" was an overstatement, as their bodies were tattered, many of them barely held together, sustaining the damage that caused them to expire. Nevertheless, there was strength in numbers, and the team was surrounded.

They returned fire but this only served to slow the androids' advance. When one fell down, more rushed on, and seconds later even the fallen ones would start to crawl fowards once more. As bullets impacted their already tattered bodies, Anderson wondered if the removal of pain receptors from the majority of the androids was such a good idea afterall. On the one hand, there were no cries of pain; yet on the other hand, they inched on despite the damage.

The team fell back as they fired, but soon their rear was under attack too. The radio buzzed as Alex started to call for backup, but they couldn't have come to the rescue quick enough. One of the androids finally got close enough, and suddenly exploded, releasing a great wave of light, which swept across the whole team. As the light reached him, Anderson felt no heat. When his systems were back on again moments later, he found himself alone.

He tried the radio, but only static come out; something was interfering with the transmission. Anderson swallowed and surpressed the wild and terrible guesses sprouting from his mind; those would only make the situation worse. He pulled up his guiding system, came up with the rest of the directions with his guts, and walked on.

His footsteps echoed, and everything else dissolved into shades of grey. Tree after tree, clouded by the fog, it all looked the same. He desperately marched on, while at the same time afraid that drastic movements would attract unwanted attention. The feeling that some of the souls were more than eager to see him kept coming back to him, and he felt his steps getting heavier.

At this point, he was slightly regretting not taking Phineas' suggestion more seriously and devoting time to create actual AIs, instead of going for the easy way out to save the funds.

Anderson suddenly stopped moving forward. Right in front of him, there was a figure. Because of the fog and his perplexed state, he didn't even notice it until they were meters apart. Taking the sight in, what little of the blood he had left in his body ran cold. It all made sense now; the team was never the target, their goal was him all along.

It was his old friend, Phineas. Or the Saker bot he made to be Phineas, to be exact. In his chest, a huge hole burnt through by charges of electricity still visible.

Shit.

Anderson turned to run, but the Phineas Saker leapt forward to tackle him.

"What's up, Vincent? Don't want to chat with an old friend?" The dead android roared, his voice accompanied by a thick static sound.

The robot in the shape of an old man briefly gained the upper hand, but Anderson managed to turn over to face him. Kicking what was left of Phineas' stomach, he managed to wrestle himself out. The Foundation's tech had gotten better over the years, and Anderson received his share of updates.

"I-I'm sorry," Anderson said, as he stood up and raised his arm towards Phineas. "But, um, you should be dead."

Phineas had stumbled to the ground. "I warned you about this! Look at what you have done," the droid stared at Anderson. "And now,

because of you, I'm stuck here as well."

"Yet, last I remembered, you also went along with it," Anderson couldn't bring his gaze to meet with Phineas'. "I'm sorry, but I really need to get out of here now."

Anderson fired his electricity weapon. A loud crackling sound rang out, yet, there were only the tiniest sparks of electricity. Anderson was stunned as he realized that the environment must have interfered with the workings of his thaumaturgy device.

Phineas only smiled. Taking the chance, he lept forward once again and grabbed Anderson's weapon arm. With a painful shriek, the arm was torn off.

"Your pretty magic tricks won't work here, Vincent." Phineas said, this time grabbing Anderson's throat. "You're staying here with us, paying for your mistakes."

"And I'm guessing my head alone would be enough for you?" Anderson decided to struggle, albeit without much success.

Phineas tightened his grip, but a moment later the arm holding Anderson's throat began to melt. It was now the Saker's turn to shriek in pain. It was the very dissolving agent Phineas himself had invented for disposing of robots that was now eating away his body.

"Well, glad that I have a, uh, backup plan then." Anderson got back up, still holding a few globs of blue and orange in his hand.

"You're not getting out of this," The android roared. "I'll heal, and I'll go after you."

"I'm sure you will, old friend." Anderson said as he tossed several orange spheres at him. The goo stuck Phineas to the spot, and he could only curse as the substance quickly hardened.

Anderson sat down to catch his breath. As he regained his composure, he took off his silver mask as large chunks of it were also damaged by the dissolving goo. As he did so, Phineas stopped cursing and looked up, staring at his once friend intensely. Anderson didn't look back.

A few moments later, distantly, a few shouts were heard, and gunfire rang out. The static faded and Anderson's radio started to buzz slightly.

"I'm sorry, Phineas. But I believe I, um, should go now."

As he got up, the now trapped android started to cackle. "You think this is over?" He said with a broken voice. "Oh, you will be here with us, Vincent. You're always afraid that one day you will run out of your usefulness. You think I didn't know you had made a Saker for yourself? You've sealed your own fate!"

Anderson felt his blood become even colder, but he didn't allow the feeling to surface. He turned away from the broken android on the ground. "Goodbye."

As he walked off towards the direction of the sound, laughters echoed behind him. The leaves of the ghostly forest rustled, and became quiet once again.

Angel Of Red And White

The coldest I have ever been was the day I was born.

Alaska, of course, is a very cold state to begin with, even in the middle of summer. I was born in the winter. It was on New Year's Day, twenty nine years ago, that I was unceremoniously thrust from my mothers' loins in the back of a second hand pickup truck. My parents realised they would not make it to the hospital in time. My mother, for her part, was calm. There was no room inside the vehicle, and so my father lifted her out, then rested her on the snow covered truck bed. The cold did its part to dull the pain. Twenty minutes later, I slipped out into my father's chilly gloves. As I cried, my tears began to freeze.

Every birthday, my parents would share this image with me. I was a baby still dripping with blood, with snowflakes sticking to my body. Their tiny little angel of red and white.

Then we'd go outside and let off the fireworks.

Happy New Year.

The first few years of my life were uneventful. I crawled and mewled and burped and pooped and did what a baby is supposed to do. Tufts of red hair popped from my head, and Alaska's endlessly cold weather resulted in a lot of playing indoors. I aged some more and learned to talk, but had very few people to talk to. My father worked all day and I slept all night, so we saw very little of each other. My mother ran me through my homeschooling course modules; neat, compact little packages of worked examples.

Those course books were the best games I had. My parents would never let me buy computer games, of course. They rot your brain, they'd say. I had no friends to play with. We lived in the middle of nowhere. As a child, the only things I had to occupy my time were

those worksheets.

When I was seven years old, my mother had to go to the hospital for a week. While she was there, my father looked after me at home, taking a break from his work. He didn't know how the homeschooling program was supposed to work, and he wasn't a good teacher. We never really had a great rapport. So he left me to my own devices in the room with all the instruction booklets, Kindergarten and up, all sorted neatly into their nice little boxes.

When my mother returned home, I had finished two years of schooling in her absence.

This was, perhaps, the most pivotal educational event of my life. Rather than guiding me through slowly, my mother allowed me to progress at my own pace. She'd lie upstairs in her bed all day, coming out to make quick meals. I would sit downstairs and devour educational materials. After junior school level, the content ramped up in difficulty, and so my progress slowed. I'd go upstairs to visit my mother, proudly showing off my completed worksheets. The things I said to her still incite guilt after all these years.

"Look how well I'm doing without you!"

I was a child. I didn't understand the sort of pain that comes from not being needed in your own house. In retrospect, I'm sure my words were tormenting. A grinning, red-haired little kid, telling his mother that he's glad that she's not slowing him down any more. That she isn't getting in the way. That he's glad she's spending all day in bed now. Now she gets to relax.

The next year she died, and I grew up fast.

My father looked after me after my mother's death. Still, I saw little of him. Some mornings I'd wake up and he'd already have gone to work in the ancient pick-up truck. I worked through my course books, occasionally ordering new ones to fill gaps in my knowledge. When I was thirteen, my father bought me a computer, and I discovered the internet. The net was still in its infancy, then; better in some ways, but worse in others. At the time, it never really occurred

to me to use it for anything other than education. Learning was fun, and so I would read. When I was fourteen, I discovered… other things on the internet. There were no sexual education pamphlets in my course work, barring clinically dry biology textbooks. The burgeoning net was the next step in my educational pathway.

When I was fifteen and a half years old, I finished the last of my schooling pamphlets. I remember turning over that final sheet, to look at the aged piece of paper reading "CONGRATULATIONS!" in a childlike font. My mother and father had written on it back when I first started the courses. I felt tears well up in my eyes as I recognised my mother's handwriting.

"We are so proud of you."

I started college when I was sixteen.

I still didn't really know what I wanted to do. Mathematics and the sciences were always a decent option, and admittedly what I'd always found the easiest, but I never really had any great passion for them. I never had any great passion for anything, though, so taking what I was good at made sense. Physics was my choice.

I had to live on my own in Anchorage. Not that I minded; since my mother died, most days I had the house to myself. I was very much used to being alone. What I was very much unused to was not being alone; having to leave the house every day, having to walk to classes taught by Real People, in lecture halls filled with other Real People. I wasn't used to having to take notes; I tried for a week, then realised what I was transcribing ended up mostly useless. Instead, I just remembered the course content the first time. It was easier to understand what was being taught when instead of assigning it to paper, I spent that time assigning it to my mind.

I topped the class in every course for my first semester.

This gathered a lot of attention. Sure, some people had noticed I was shorter than other students, that I didn't talk to many people or join any clubs, and that I never entered into the on-campus bar. They mostly kept their distance. Course results came out, and I

made the mistake of letting my name go out on print. Not long after, I gathered a reputation among my peers for being "the short nerd". Then everyone kept coming to me for course help.

I *hated* it. I wasn't an anti-social person, but having to slow down my mind to explain things to people was frustrating. Never before did I have to transfer ideas in my head into other people's. Trying to do so made me extremely uncomfortable. I hadn't met this problem before. The second semester finished, and with one exception, I topped all of my courses again. Then I took to solving the problem of dealing with Real People.

I found it surprisingly simple.

Sociology, body language, some study of linguistics. I spent three days reading the dictionary from cover to cover. I'd never thought to do so before, nor really needed to; even if I didn't have the right words in my mind, there was no need to limit my thinking to the constraints of language. I saw it as a mesh, a grid with which one could transfer information, and with that attitude I turned my mesh into the finest one I could.

I got along with my classmates far easier after that.

When I was eighteen, a Professor offered me a teaching job.

I knew him quite well. He was a personable, if somewhat eccentric man; he'd taught three of the courses I'd topped. While not the best teacher, he was an excellent orator, and could easily hold the attention of his students for the marathon three-hour lectures for his more advanced classes. He needed someone to take a position teaching the first year courses' tutorial classes; I was glad to take the position, and the pay nicely supplemented my personal finances.

It took some time to review the material on the course. It had been some years, but refamiliarising myself with the content didn't take long. Each week, I'd spend some hours preparing notes and worksheets for the course. The physics was basic to me, and I enjoyed passing on the knowledge. Admittedly, I was younger than some of the students, but nobody made too big a deal of the matter.

At the end of the semester, only 3 in the class of 78 students failed, and they were the ones who hadn't attended my tutorials. The Professor was exceptionally pleased, and offered me a similar job in the second semester.

At the end of the second semester, just before my nineteenth birthday and going into the final year of my Undergraduate degree, he offered me a research job.

The research replaced most of what my final year of tuition would have been. For the first half of the year, I mostly covered theoretical Quantum Mechanics concepts. It was, while groundbreaking, not especially interesting work for me. Most days were spent poring over scientific articles the library's archives, trying to piece together the way that the nanoscopic world worked. At the end of the first semester, I came across a paper that greatly altered the course of my research.

The article was written on a typewritter; not formatted, not in the library's database, and likely unpublished. Just some twelve dense pages of scientific prose on seemingly ancient paper, likely undecipherable to anyone who hadn't spent as much time as I had poring over the literature. There was no mention of the Author's name. It was woefully incomplete - likely an early draft, if it had ever been completed - but the concepts put forward were alien. Alien, and potentially revolutionary.

1. Introduction **[TO WRITE]**
2. Traditional Mathematical and Scientific Thought **[TO WRITE]**
3. Modern Mathematical and Scientific Thought
 3.1. Modern Understanding of Reality **[TO EDIT]**
 3.2. Physically Empirical Non-Axiomatic Models of Mathematics
 3.3. Non-Axiomatic Models of Physics
4. The Interdependencies of Systems **[TO WRITE]**
5. Philosophical Discussion
 5.1. Bias Within Non-Axiomatic Biological Minds **[TO EDIT]**
 5.2. Repercussions on Epistemology

5.3. Analysis of the Modern Non-Axiomatic "Naïve Science"
5.4. Accounting For And Removing Bias **[TO WRITE]**
5.5. Effects on Engineering Disciplines
5.6. Morals in Memetic Engineering **[TO EDIT, maybe cut]**
6. Conclusion **[TO WRITE]**

Empirical Mathematics. Non-Axiomatic Physical Systems. While the mathematical concepts violated fundamental assumptions, the tenuous structure that they still held appeared to stand on its own. The paper put forward what seemed to be physical impossibilities with casual simplicity. It made no intuitive sense, and yet, the few examples given seemed viable, if not trivial to construct.

So I did.

It took me twelve days to build my first working perpetual motion machine. It was a brutal, makeshift thing, constructed from gears and pulleys. The action of the machine acted to pull further tension along an already-tense piece of rubber, which drove the machine even more. I analysed the construction, since I'd simply been building based on plans that were not my own. It took me a further four days to modify it to extract more energy than I put in. Admittedly, it then ended up breaking, spinning faster and faster until the rubber band snapped from the stress. But it worked. Despite traditional physical thinking, despite long years of being told otherwise, it was possible to construct a perpetual motion machine.

A few weeks later, I could make one out of two pieces of paper and an elastic band.

At the end of the second semester, I finished my degree, and submitted two completed academic papers. One was on my original research topic, and it was the capstone of my educational career. It went to the American Journal of Physics. The other was the side project I'd been working on without the department's knowledge, knowing I'd probably be berated for the project or seen as insane. It was wholly possible that I was, which was a concerning prospect. It was my paper based on The Paper; the nameless article that I

couldn't help but make a proper noun in my mind. This one, I sent to Letters in Mathematical Physics - a more frequently published journal, and one with the objective of rapid dissemination of breaking research. The worst case scenario, I thought, was that my paper get discarded into a trash can thousands of miles away.

Eighteen days later, a week before my twentieth birthday, the worst case scenario knocked at my door.

The knock was rapid, methodical, military. Five knocks, almost perfectly spaced from one another, then a break, then another five knocks. I got to the door and opened it a crack, the chain lock still in place. A man slightly taller than I stood outside the door, sporting a brown crew cut and a black suit. He looked at me through the crack in the door, smiled, then spoke.

"Mister Stanley Burden?"

"That's me."

"Hi Stanley. My name's Max Green. I'm from Springer Media, I'd like to talk about the paper you submitted to Letters in Mathematical Physics. Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure, yeah, hang on."

I closed the door, undid the chain lock, then re-opened it. Green smiled again, then held a small white rectangle out in his hand.

"Thanks, Stanley. Here's my card."

I took it from him, looking at the plain black ink printed there.

> **Agent Maxwell CT-B05**
> **Green-type Anomaly Agent for Anchorage, Alaska**
> **Global Occult Coalition**

"You're not from Springer."

I looked back up at him. He was smirking, holding up another one of the same business cards, then turned it around. The reverse side had a fractal image on it, similar to those I'd already seen in the

Morals in Memetic Engineering section of The Paper. I felt my eyes unfocus and the sun started to go dark. I fell forwards, dizzy; Green caught me in his arms. He looked down at me with amusement in his eyes.

"Sorry, Stan. I lied."

Then the world felt like nothing.

I opened my eyes, my heart feeling like it was on fire. I jerked, trying to clutch at my chest; my arms, however, were bound to the chair I was seated in. I looked upwards and to the right with unfocused gaze, slowly resolving into view as "Max Green" as he continued to inject a concoction of chemicals into my arm. He looked down at me, his face severe. He emptied the syringe into me, then pulled it out roughly. My arm began to drip blood.

Green walked to the other side of the table, staring at my face while the liquid circulated around my body. My heart kept trying to escape my chest cavity. Every icy breath I pulled into my lungs stung and scraped at my insides, and every exhalation left me feeling less than empty. My brain felt like it was bunching up in the wrong places. I felt my neck spasm lightly, and with each twitch of my head the world kept spinning. Green stared until the protests of my body ceased, then started to talk.

"I have injected you with an inhibitor. Whatever unusual abilities you previously possessed are now under lock and key. Please understand that this is simply a precaution and is mandated by procedure."

"What?"

"Pay attention, Stan, because I'm only going to give this spiel once. You are currently two hundred feet underground in a holding cell of the Global Occult Coalition, an organisation dealing with threats of a metaphysical nature."

I felt my neck start to twitch again.

"Metaphysics, in this context, is not some odd and intangible realm of philosophy. It is a very real, very dangerous system acting to subvert the fundamental workings of our reality. It is, if you break down the term into its roots, quite literally beyond physics."

My neck stopped twitching.

"Physics is meant to work for a reason. The most dangerous thing that a human being can do, if they have to obey the laws of physics, is split an atom. Human beings who subvert those systems can do far more dangerous things, without need for a stockpile of radioactive materials or a particle accelerator."

Green pulled a cigarette case from inside his suit jacket, tapped one out into his hand, pulled a lighter from his other suit pocket and lit the cigarette's end. He took a deep draw of smoke-infused breath, then exhaled the putrid toxins into my face. I started to cough, and my lungs again felt stabbing pins.

"These people are known as Type Green threats. In the vernacular, 'Reality Benders'. If you are capable of performing the experiments detailed in your submitted article, then it is almost certain that you are one of them. Of course, you were 'exceptional' to begin with. There are patterns in the childhood of a Type Green, involuntary and unconscious alterations to the world around them. Loss of a parent at a young age, to serve as a tragic backstory. Eternally lamenting the constant pain of being 'better' than everyone else. Talents precipitating into some level of either arrogance, if they are to become 'mysterious loners', or modesty, if they want to play at normality. Your life story is so formulaic, so cliché, and so statistically improbable that it's as though an untalented author has been curating your entire life. You raised flags."

He paused to take another pull from his cigarette, then blew several rings of smoke up into the air.

"As the Green-type Agent for Anchorage, it was therefore my job to monitor you. A job I've been doing since the second your father drove you into city borders four years ago."

He stared at me, waiting for me to object. My lungs still felt like cold

fire, my mind still foggy and slow. If I opened my mouth to talk, my stomach may well have clenched and emptied itself onto the table. Instead, I simply nodded, though it likely seemed like another spasm. Green continued.

"There are four phases in the development of a Type Green threat. Firstly, denial. A refusal or rationalisation of their metaphysical capabilities. In your case, until recently, you were thought to be at most in this stage. You did not have conscious awareness of your abilities, I believe, until some time this year."

"The Paper."

I spurted out the phrase reactively. Green frowned.

"We'll get to your paper in a moment."

Not my paper, The Paper. I opened my mouth to speak again, then heaved up the remains of a half-digested sandwich onto myself and the table. Green looked on with disgust, shook his head, and continued.

"The adverse physical effects of the inhibitor will wear off soon. You can give your part then. As I was saying, you were believed to be a Phase One. Phase One Type Green threats do not elicit a threat response from our organisation, simply occasional observation. We are quite happy to leave people alone, if they are no genuine threat. Phase Two is more dangerous. Phase Two typically involves experimentation, an exploration of your abilities. You're a Phase Two right now."

Green pulled out a copy of the paper I'd sent to Letters in Mathematical Physics and thumbed through it.

"What you put forward here is what we expect from Phase Two experimentation, just a bit more formalised. There is a very clear method to your metaphysical madness, where other Phase Two examples simply 'do' or 'feel' without any analysis of their metaphysical phenomena. You've put down what you perceive to be a new paradigm in mathematical and physical research. What you don't realise is that it's entirely incorrect for anyone who isn't you."

Green stood and walked to a corner of the room behind me. I tried to twist my head around to follow him, but the bindings prevented it. He walked back with a soft rag, wiped my vomit from the table, then returned beyond my view. I heard a tap running for a moment, then Green turned it off.

He walked back to the table and placed on it a glass of water, a small pile of paper, a box of elastic bands, and the copy of the paper that I'd sent to Springer. Green then stood next to me and untied the knots holding my arms to the chair. He returned to his seat on the other side of the table, then gestured to the pile of materials.

"You state in your article a very simple example of a perpetual motion machine, one which 'anyone' can construct over a few minutes with two pieces of paper and an elastic band. I'd like you to try and make one for me now, based on either your memory or the comprehensive instructions you've written down."

"And the water?"

"It's water. You just threw up. Drink it and try to keep it in."

I picked up the glass, pouring the liquid down my throat. My head felt a little better, and my heart had resumed its regular pace. I took two pieces of paper and an elastic band, looking back up at Green. He nodded and raised his eyebrows.

"Have at it, Stan."

I looked back to the pieces of paper. The first section, the stand, was the easier of the two to fold. I started to construct it, firstly by folding the paper up to a point. Then, around the base, I folded the sections on which the elastic band should catch, without any particular problem. Moving the completed base to one side, I took another piece of paper, and folded it to rest on top of the first piece. I tested placing the two together, and the rotor spun nicely on top of the base.

The next part was to fold the rotor piece so that the elastic band would pull on it, then as the piece spun, give way to the next jutting section, then catch on it. Similarly, it would realign the elastic band

on the base, which would repeatedly fling the elastic band around the whole mechanism opposite to the rotor's movement.

The folds no longer worked.

I knew how the fold was *supposed* to happen. It should have been intuitive; I'd folded hundreds of the things. I moved the half-folded rotor to the side, then picked up a new piece of paper. I closed my eyes, deciding to rely on muscle memory. Fold, fold, fold, fold, fold… and then there was paper in the way where there shouldn't have been. I opened my eyes and looked at the folded rotor. It wasn't the right shape.

I picked up the copy of my article, flipping through to the relevant section.

> Then, taking the outermost points of the star rotor, fold them into the opposite sides of the paper by twisting them through the clockwise-adjacent points.

I looked up at Green, looking at me sombrely from the other side of the table. I spoke.

"This doesn't make any sense. I know how it's supposed to fold, but there's paper in the way where there shouldn't be."

"Type Greens have an intuitive understanding of how to enact metaphysical effects. Whatever terminology that makes internal sense to you, however you're perceiving these changes to the world, is nonsensical to anyone who hasn't had your experiences. You can't communicate what you think to people because the ideas can't operate outside of your own head."

Green pulled out a completed paper perpetual motion machine, then plucked the elastic band into motion. The mechanism started to spin, propelled by its own momentum.

"We took this from your house. I'm sure, looking at it, you can tell the mechanism by which it operates. But nobody else can, other than you, or maybe another Type Green. It's built off your internal idealisation of reality."

Green pushed his lit cigarette against the central point of the still-spinning paper.

"Pay close attention."

The rotor caught fire, yet continued to spin; the flames spread to the base, and the whole structure started to collapse and curl in odd ways. The elastic band stopped moving as it should have, flinging itself to the ceiling, then falling to the ground.

Then there was a loud CRACK, and what remained of the structure exploded into a puff of ashes.

"That's the sound that space makes when it unfolds itself. That's what it sounds like when normal reality is reasserted."

Green swept the ash from the table, then took another deep draw from his cigarette. The room was filled with the scent of tobacco.

"There are two more phases after where you are. A Phase Three Type Green is at stability. They know their limits, and don't try to push beyond them. They're the ones that normally give us the least trouble, and that's where I want to get you to."

"And Phase Four?"

"The fourth phase is the Type Green finding that they have no limits, typically accompanied by delusions of godhood. I don't believe that you will reach this phase for two reasons. Firstly, you seem to operate under a very strict and self-consistent system of metaphysical comprehension. Your abilities, for example, will not let you levitate objects with your mind, or alter memories, or do any of the stranger things which we have to deal with for Type Greens. Even in your idealised reality, you have limits. Secondly, your personality doesn't match what we'd expect for ascension to Phase Four. You take your academic abilities for granted, admittedly, which led to a superiority complex - one you're disappointingly unaware of, or flippant about. But the fact remains that you can quite easily be reasoned with. You don't try to manipulate people, beyond maintaining an amicable outward mask; nor, frankly, do I think you're capable of it. You're far too naive to put yourselves in the

shoes of a god. Which is good, since we've enough gods to deal with already."

There wasn't much I wanted to say in response that wouldn't make me look petulant, so I remained silent.

"I think, though, you can understand why this organisation exists. There are people out there who do consider themselves as gods. There are people who can grab other people's minds and twist them, reshape them, or snap them with trivial ease. These people are not reasonable in the way that you are. These people cannot be negotiated with. What they want to take, they take, what they want that is not there to take, they make. These are people that the world can't know exist, and these are people that we can't let exist."

Green tossed the stub of his cigarette to the ground, extinguishing it with his foot.

"My job is to kill those people, or stop them from getting to that point in the first place."

I kept quiet while Green lit another cigarette.

"In our organisation, Green operatives like me are normally accompanied by Orange operatives. They're the heavy artillery for when something goes wrong. They're either normal people wearing 'Orange Suits', huge armoured exoskeletons resistant to the sorts of things that Type Green threats can enact, or they're a Type Green themselves who can go head to head with the other reality benders. Which finally gets me to my point."

It was obvious what was coming.

"I want you as a reserve Orange operative."

I kept quiet.

"We have three Orange operatives in Anchorage already. Orange Suits are expensive, and impractical for urban environments, so all three are reliable Type Greens. Given the sparsity of threats, I'm the only Green operative in the region."

"I can't say I'm impressed by the whole Reservoir Dogs, colour-by-numbers shtick."

Green's face remained stern.

"I need a yes or no response."

"I'm a theoretical physicist. Also, you have kidnapped me and have held me against my will. No."

Green nodded.

"I think you understand the necessity of having done so, but fair enough. Then here's how this will work. Keep out of our way, keep to yourself, and we'll never see you again. No more attempting to describe or communicate metaphysical phenomena. No more perpetual motion machines. No more of any of it. Keep to yourself, continue on with your research at the college, go on as if nothing has happened. If you violate any of these, we will bring the full weight of the GOC down on you. If you make it necessary, we will end your life. Indicate to me that you understand and accept this."

"I understand."

"Good."

Green was quiet for a bit, then continued.

"That inhibitor's going to last the rest of the week. Get used to feeling like the rest of us."

Green took out his business card, flashed the fractal image at me, and the world felt like nothing again.

I woke up on the lounge chair in my apartment, a dull pain pervading my head. I opened my eyes slowly, then blinked; the room was dark. The LED clock across from me shone red numbers across the room at 23:37. I stood up, walking across to the light switch; flicked the lights on, then swore a bit and shielded my eyes with my left hand. My eyes adjusted, and I looked down at myself.

The blood from the injection still drew a coagulated tree down my arm.

I went to the kitchen, twisting the tap and wincing as cold water washed the pattern away, dissolving it into a red spiral that disappeared down the sink. I splashed some water in my face, trying to rouse myself further. I walked to the bathroom and took a shower, then switched into my winter sleepwear. Tired, I moved to my bedroom, previously filled with the pitter-patter of perpetually spiralling papers.

Now, there was silence.

I sat at my desk, then took out two stapled sheaves. The first, my thesis. I thumbed through it, looking at everything I'd written. It made sense to me, but seemed… hollow. I'd thought it some great work, a breakthrough, at least some kind of progress, but no, my mind was tricking me. There was nothing new here. Yet how the Professor had raved on it, called it astounding, lauded me with praises. Whose thoughts had I errantly twisted to see my way? How much of what I thought true was self-delusion, how much of my success was trickery? How much of my life, just some formulaic and predictable pattern, straight from the same cookie-cutter as every other 'Type Green' abnormality?

The second, my derivative article, a knockoff imitation of The Paper, filled with highly personalised theories I had thought universal. I knew what I meant, the ideas were in my mind, but the words didn't have the meaning they needed to. It was rambling. It was incomprehensible nonsense by an incoherent author, an author blind to the work's absence of communicable meaning. How much of what I had done really meant anything, when separated from my ambit? What of my life was taken the easy way, and what was earned? How could I be sure I deserved any of what I had?

Did I deserve anything at all?

Probably not.

I jolted up and started racing to the kitchen.

Your entire life's a play, and you turn people into actors.

I retched into my mouth.

Your life's a play, and your mother died from the role you cast her in.

Dark yellow splattered across my kitchen sink. I heaved and heaved again; the stomach acid stung at my tongue and went up my nose. My eyes began to water as my heaving stopped. I panted, watching as my vomit dripped down the drain. My reflection in the metal base stared back through the pane of bile, ginger stubble peeking through my blanched chin. I wiped my mouth, rinsed my hands, cried, then returned to bed.

Get used to feeling like the rest of us.

My sleep was broken and full of nightmares.

« `Hub` | **It's All Just A Big Long Cry For Help** »

Anima Ex Machina

In the darkness of his unmoving mind, a servo stirred in Cron Apostolou's head.

Just the one, though, and just enough to keep the basic functions working. He saw nothing - not since the moment his body had succumbed to hydraulic lock and he had collapsed to the ground. But his consciousness grasped at sounds, distant as they were. In the moments afterwards he had heard the roar of a crowd, as if through water, though that had faded. The hushed voices afterwards had faded as well, and then another jubilant eruption from the crowd, only this time further away. More hushed voices. An angry snarl. Pacing feet. Nothing.

There was a period of silence afterwards that may have very well lasted a century for as little as Cron could comprehend it. The single spinning servo sliding softly in his skull did little to maintain a sense of self, only keep the lights on. As its gentle hum wore on, Cron felt himself disassociate, and The Thing That Once Called Itself Cron Apostolou came apart from his body. It fell back into the darkness that surrounded it, watching its catatonic form getting further and further away, the dim light around it growing ever fainter until it might not have ever been there at all.

In the quiet black, free from the whispers of the world it had departed from, this spirit stretched and yawned, flexing and bending as if to shake loose the joints that had grown stiff over time. This continued for a short while, as it primped and preened like a cat in a sunbeam, until it noticed a presence that crept up quickly and immediately filled all of the space around it. The spirit turned, and found itself gazing into the confused eyes of Anantashesha.

"Hullo there," the spirit said idly.

The Eel's face pinched slightly. "What are you doing down here?"

The spirit leaned back slightly, trying and failing to take in the Eel in its entirety. "Relaxing. I think I've died."

Anantashesha sniffed. "You're not dead. I could tell if you're dead." It looked around behind the spirit, and seeing nothing, said, "You're not supposed to be hanging around down here, you know. Not good for you."

The spirit shrugged. "I don't know how I got here. I don't know how to get back where I came from."

The Eel nodded slowly, and then its eyes grew wide. "Hang on one second. Don't I know you? You smell familiar. Have we met?" The spirit shook its head, and Anantashesha's brow furrowed. "No, no, I would swear on it. Did you die once? Are you some kind of lich?"

The spirit shook its head again. "I don't know much about myself at all, honestly."

The Eel nodded again. "How much exactly?"

"Enough to be narratively interesting, I guess."

"That's an odd answer," Anantashesha said, seconds before clarity dawned over its features. "That's it! I remember where I know you from. I pulled you out from inside me in exchange for a back scratcher."

"That's gross."

"Yes, yes, that's it. There was that queer little man who came down here in a diving suit looking for a soul. You were that soul, I have no doubts." Anantashesha smiled, pleased at itself. "How have you been?"

"I mean, I'm here again," the spirit said, considering its words, "so I wouldn't say… super."

"There are worse places, trust me," the Eel said, waving him off. "What have you been up to?"

"Playing football."

"Oh!" The Eel nodded. "I don't know what that is, but that's really great. I'm happy for you! Look what you've accomplished! Back in the living world and doing football! That's not half bad for somebody who died once."

The spirit frowned. "You're a god, aren't you?"

The Eel grew quiet.

"Why can't I perform magic?"

"Pfft," Anantashesha said. "Why in the world would you worry yourself about that?"

"It's a thing humans can do, but I can't. Am I human? I feel human."

The Eel shrugged. "Your soul is human. I don't know if your body is human. Either way, that doesn't matter. Plenty of things can create magic that aren't human. Have you ever looked at light spilling through trees in the early morning, or seen fog dance across a lake at dusk? I might just be waxing poetic, but trust me when I say it's a little naive to imply that magic is a strictly human endeavor." It paused. "No, your disconnect from magic is because you died."

"I died?"

"You don't remember it? Hrm. Likely not. Yes, you died once. Your soul was torn from your body and you found yourself here, with me, and went the way all souls go, into that quiet oblivion. Once you pass the Screamers, the connection between your soul and the arcane was severed, and that's basically the ball game with that one."

The spirit's eyes grew dark, and its face downcast. Anantashesha grimaced.

"Look, I'm not the one to be giving life advice, you understand? My whole jam is the meaninglessness of life, how little any of this matters when compared to the never-ending nothing that you find yourself in currently. So take this with a grain of salt when I say that, if you think your not being able to do magic makes you any less alive, or any less… human, I don't know. It doesn't. Your existence

isn't made more or less important because you can conjure fire or fling sparks or anything like that. Your abilities don't make you, you. Hell, the things you call yourselves don't make any of you who you are. It doesn't matter if you're made of meat, or made of metal, or jelly, or what color you end up, or anything like that. This idea of identity is such a silly concept, because you're trying to use words to describe something that can't be described. Your innate you-ness. You get it? You're you, because you're you."

The Eel leaned back and shrugged. "And yeah, someday you'll end up back down here and return to the Silence Beyond, but a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts."

The spirit looked up. "Is that a reference to something?"

Anantashesha waved it off. "Yeah, but you're going to miss that one. Look, just know that if you're getting caught up in some sort of emotional thing because you can't make magic happen, you shouldn't. Magic isn't something you do, it's something that happens to you. I imagine there are plenty of other souls out there that think that your very existence is pretty goddamn magical."

They sat in silence for a moment, and then the spirit nodded. "Thanks. I feel better."

The Eel nodded. "Good. Because I think you're about to wake up."

The spirit squinted up at Anantashesha. "Am I going to remember any of this?"

The Eel shrugged. "Probably not."

And with that, something sharp grabbed the spirit by its back, and it was whisked upwards, away from the encompassing darkness and towards some minute light a lifetime away.

"Bye! Have fun storming the castle!" The Eel snickered to itself. "Shit, he'll miss that one too."

Cron Apostolou heard the sound of idle chatter first, as his auditory sensors hummed back to life. He felt the heart in his chest resume

beating unimpeded, and his lungs filled with air he didn't need. Light crept into the corners of his eyes, and suddenly his vision was flooded with color as his ocular cells woke up. He opened them, slowly, and as his sight adjusted to the light in the room, he made out several familiar faces. His friend Yuri, Coach Demopolous the Offensive Coordinator, JaMarcus Aurelius, and a peculiar man with silver hair and large, black glasses.

Cron blinked, and then blinked again. He stretched his arms and legs, feeling the hydraulic fluid coursing through his veins once again. He moved his jaw side to side, readjusting where it was supposed to sit on his face. Satisfied, he glanced around the room, where its various occupants stood staring at him, most of them white as a sheet.

"You," Yuri said, cautiously, "you see?"

Cron nodded, rubbing the back of his head. His hair was matted and he knew he looked filthy, but he felt good.

"What happened?" he said, his voice jumping out to greet him. "Did we win?"

JaMarcus smiled. "Yeah. Fake extra point. Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, went for two. Walk off two-point conversion. The place is lit. They tore down the scoreboard. I heard they laid siege to Troy like, an hour ago."

Cron smiled weakly. Regardless of what was about to happen, that was a small comfort. "How long have I been out?"

"Three hours," a voice said from the back of the room, the energy in it crackling like lightning. Out of the shadows appeared Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, his face frozen in a grimace and his eyes burning behind dark sunglasses. "Weren't sure you were going to wake up. Figured I'd have you sent to the dump in the morning with the other broken trash."

It was Cron's turn to grimace. He saw Yuri and JaMarcus' faces grow ashen, and Coach Demopolous nearly faint. Curiously, the man with the silver hair seemed bemused.

"I, uh, I guess, I should-" Cron began, but was immediately halted by a single crooked finger from the Head Ball Coach.

"What you should do, right now, is shut the fuck up." His glare turned towards the other three members of the team. "You three, out. Practice on Monday. If you're late you'll spend a century on the Planet of Hands."

With little more than a sharp gust of wind, the three men scampered out of the locker room, leaving only Cron, Coach Panagakos, and the man with the silver hair. Satisfied that the three were out of hearing range, the Head Coach turned to the silver haired man.

"Alright, time's up. What the fuck is this."

The man nodded curtly. "This is an Andersopolis Automatronics Saker Model 9, a first-of-its-kind humanoid cyborg. Extremely advanced."

Coach Panagakos, studied Cron for a moment. "What happened to it?"

"Hydraulic lock, seems like," the man said. "The spear it caught pinched a hydraulic line, and when it pulled the spear out it lost hydraulic pressure and collapsed. Curious thing, that," the man said, the faintest hint of the idea of a smile creeping across his lips, "it has self-preservation protocols in place to keep it from doing something like that. Odd that it would be so easily able to override them to win a football game."

Coach Panagakos sneered. "You're goddamn right." He turned back towards Cron, looking him up and down. "Who are you?"

Cron's voice was suddenly very hoarse. "C-Cron, Apostolou."

The Coach nodded. "Alright, Cron Apostolou. When were you going to tell me you were a robot?"

"Cyborg," the silver-haired man interjected, an actual smile flashing over his face now.

Cron shifted uncomfortably. "I, uh, well." *Do you lie? Can you lie to a*

demigod? The goose is cooked, you need a way out of this. "I imagine it would've eventually… eventually come up."

"Like fuck it would've." The Head Coach's voice snapped like a chain being broken. "You're meaning to tell me that you were going to wager the best chance this team has had at winning a championship in nearly one-hundred years on something that might've come up, *eventually?*"

Yes. "Yes."

Coach Panagakos rubbed the bridge of his nose furiously. "Do you know why I'm so fucking pissed off at you right now, Cron?"

Cron flinched at the sound of his own name. "Because I'm a-"

Another finger, and more silence. "It's not because you're a goddamn fucking whirly-bird or wind-up or thingamajig or rooty-tooty-point-and-shooty. I don't care whether you're a robit or a troll or a lesbian dog or whatever the fuck you are. We have legitimate snake people in our secondary, Cron, you think for a minute that the thought of playing a robot-"

"-cyborg," the man interjected again,

"-what the fuck ever, you think that bothers me in the slightest?" Coach Panagakos sighed. "When I consigned my soul to the dark powers of the Hereafter and pledged allegiance to the Suffocating Horror, I did it with one goal in mind: win motherfucking football games at Alexylva. You think I gave two shits, while my soul was being shredded by the thousand-hooked arms of Malidramagiuan the Most High Horrific, of what it took to win those football games? You think that, when I was begging the Many-Eyed God of Punishment to be made whole again, the concern of putting a toy in at quarterback even so much as *crossed my motherfucking mind?*"

He spat on the ground. "Because it didn't. I'm here to do two things, Cron. Win football games, and win fucking football games. I don't care about what some shitty newspaper has to say about humans and robots, the same as I don't give a rat's ass about what he'd have to say about the subtle and discrete pleasures of fucking a pig

in the ass. And I'm shitty at you because you were selfish, and you nearly lost me a goddamn football game. If you ever so much as consider, in the faintest and most ethereal daydream, of ever doing that kind of shit ever again, I swear to the Darkness Below and Beyond that I will turn your still-beating heart into a bedpan and shit into your soul for the rest of your miserable, gasping, fetid existence. Are we clear?"

Cron nodded. If he'd been capable, he would've pissed himself.

Coach Panagakos nodded. "Good." He turned to leave. "Hell of a play there at the end, though. Really was something else. Good work."

Cron coughed. "So… so are we good?"

The Coach turned back towards him and shrugged. "You and me? Sure. But after that stunt you pulled tonight, we're being investigated by the NSCPAA Ethics Committee for playing a non-approved individual at quarterback, since robits are technically still against regulation."

"Oh fuck," Cron said.

"Yep. Fuck. And if you can't figure this shit out, and you still end up costing me the season, the carnival of red delights that will come to pass upon you will be such that no man for a thousand years will dare to so much as speak of them. So you two fucking figure it out."

He left the room, leaving only Cron and the silver-haired man standing in the silent locker room. Cron blinked a few times for good measure, then turned to the man.

"Hey Vincenti."

"Hello again, Model 9," the man said, smiling eagerly now. His blue eyes peeked out from behind his glasses. "We've got a lot of work to do with you, and Homecoming is only a week away."

-△-

Animalia

INTERNAL MEMO

ACCESS LIMITED TO SECURITY CLEARANCE L-1/883 AND HIGHER

DO NOT COPY OR REDISTRIBUTE

---

re: SCP-883 Containment & Research Procedures Updates, Effective 1999-03-13

Following the events that occurred on 1999-01-25, exploration within SCP-883 has been restricted to 6.5 kilometers or less. Should any insects show unexpected levels of aggression, all personnel will immediately retreat to no more than 1.0 kilometers from the entrance until such time as the on-site MTF has investigated and the lead researchers have cleared the incident. Meetings providing the full details of the new security procedures are being scheduled. See your section leader for assigned times.

Honey harvesting will continue as currently scheduled, with the guard force increased by 50%. Remember that no more than 1 liter should be harvested from any given 5 meter length of honeycomb. Additionally, new kevlar protective suits have been developed and will be assigned as of the effective date listed above.

MTF η-5 will be dissolved and the surviving members reassigned. MTF ζ-9 will be transferred in until such time as MTF η-5 is re-formed. Please welcome the "Mole Rats" to their new assignment.

I have dreams of it, you know. Flying and falling and floating. Deep blue sea that is filled with a vast buzz of scales against wings. The details differ; sometimes I'm swimming with the fishes, sometimes it's the birds and the bees. But I always dive deeper, deeper, deeper into the heart of the swarm, the school, the secret.

The members of the new Recon Task Force designated Omicron-6 were a careful selection of ichthyologists, oceanographers, submarine and submersible operators, and agents with spatial distortions experience. As the only member of MTF Eta-5 with underwater combat training, Agent Patricia Ortiz was a perfect choice. After her initial briefing into SCP-850's security and containment protocols, she was somewhat disturbed. As far as the Foundation grapevine was concerned, SCPs were pretty much all unique, and to find a pair of disconnected ones that were so similar was disconcerting.

Still, until the Bottleship was completed, she'd be spending her time with the other non-engineering members of the Trilobites refreshing and retraining her underwater skills. It'd been a while since she'd used a harpoon, and the ones they'd be using were rather more powerful than what she'd originally trained with. She wasn't looking forward to encountering the larger inhabitants of the zone.

At the heart of it all is what I think of as the Queen. Not in the sense of a great mother or a ruler, but rather like the rat-kings of old: the maddened result of too many creatures knotted together in too small a space until a great horrible vastness forms. In the nature of dreams, it is all-encompassing, surrounding without and within like the fabric of reality itself, while its single form lays in front of me, lazily gliding around me on its finwings.

Even including the usual construction delays and last-minute mission tweaks, Project Bottleship was completed within a reasonable amount of time. It was a testament to the dedication of the Foundation construction crews that a 50-meter-long submarine could be constructed in free ocean while surrounded by a school of herring in constant motion. The Trilobite was a pride of engineering,

and well up to the task set before it.

It was midday when the last of the crew finally boarded their new home and the exploration mission finally officially began. Agent Ortiz heard a thin cheer as the captain announced that they were descending, and wondered what green researcher thought that any exploration assignment was a good excitement. She, like all field agents, knew that the best assignments were *boring*, and sincerely hoped that this one would be so dull that she'd be begging to surface just so she could see some unfamiliar faces.

This is the point where you'd expect me to say something dramatic like I startle awake, sitting straight up in bed, soaked in a cold sweat. But that doesn't happen.

Or that the Queen whispers dark secrets into my mind that promise to drag me into an enlightened insanity. But that doesn't happen.

What happens is that it flicker-flutters off, utterly uninterested in one not of its kingdom or kind. And then the dream resumes a more normal surreality, leading to random sparkings and images as my mind resumes its nightly housecleaning.

The submarine moved slowly through the school, as visibility was essentially nil due to the fish, and sonar was little better due to the same interference. The last thing that the crew wanted was the ignomity of crashing into an unexpected seafloor or undersea mountain. The slow pace suited some of the more excitable ichthyologists just fine, though, as it gave them a chance to get as much footage of the fish they passed as possible.

The first few kilometers were interesting, as the herring veered around the intruder into their realm, slowly changing in subtle ways into new variations of the base species. The novelty rapidly wore off, though, and the next few tens of kilometers quickly subsided into a nice boredom. The scientists still noted the slow progression of changes, but a subtle coloration change or slightly different fin shape were less entertaining than before.

There was a burst of interest at the end of the first day, when the ship officially passed the previously established point of furthest exploration and they entered truly uncharted territory.

The schools of herring that they'd been passing through started to thin as the fish diverged into more and more radically different body plans and sizes, building into a new, self-contained piscine ecosystem. After a few days, they had thinned enough that the sonar was able to function more or less unimpeded. This was less of a blessing than expected, given that they still couldn't ping a bottom.

But I still remember the dreams and the intersection that is the Queen. A great fish large enough to swallow the sea, yet the size of the humblest buzzing bee, emblazzoned in shimmering colors of indifference. I know that it waits, deep within a school and opened by a comb. It waits, for it has world enough and time to wait.

After a week more of exploring the widths and depths of the schools, the weapons officers had already had to spear several large fish which had been getting aggressive with the ship, including one almost 10 meters long. But no significant damage had been done before the aggressors were either killed or driven off, so the captain and lead researcher decided to dive until a bottom was found, or until they reached the limit at which they wouldn't have enough fuel to return.

Deeper and deeper the Trilobite sank, discovering a strange occurrence: the schools of fish began to get denser again, only this time they were composed of larger and larger fish. They seemed to accept the submarine as one of their own, though, and the number of attacks dwindled to nothing. But an air of expectancy permeated the ship as the crew subconsciously felt a sense of impending… something. Maybe doom, maybe salvation, maybe just a threshold.

The appearance of the mountain peak should have been a relief, but just increased the feeling of trepidation. It was roughly triangular from above, with a tip blunted by water and seemingly scalloped trailing slopes. And it extended even farther downwards, past the lower limit at which the intervening fish created a confused sonar

signature too dense to read past.

It wasn't until they were a few hundred meters from the mountain's side that it suddenly *flexed* and the Trilobite was roughly shoved away by the massive wall of water. The next few minutes were a confusion of alarms and rolling and jumbled feelings of both despair and relief as the tense atmosphere finally released. The relief was short-lived, however, as the massively broad and scaled body to which the mountain was attached rose up to meet the fragile ship.

And when the men in their armor and the women with their pots finally come upon it, it will move and it will lead and it will feed.

INTERNAL MEMO

ACCESS LIMITED TO SECURITY CLEARANCE L-4/850, L-4/883

DO NOT COPY OR REDISTRIBUTE

---

re: SCP cross-contamination

All personnel with clearance to read this memorandum have been provided clearance to read the summary dossiers for SCP-850 and SCP-883. Please review these dossiers prior to continuing to read this memo.

On 2000-12-12, the Foundation lost contact with the deep sea exploratory mission into SCP-850, codename "Trilobite". Among the personnel aboard was Agent Patricia Ortiz, formerly a member of MTF η-5, which had been assigned to SCP-883 prior to its dissolution.

On 2001-03-01, members of MTF ζ-9 discovered Agent Ortiz in SCP-883, 7.3 kilometers from the entrance to SCP-883. She was found unconscious in a fetal position, covered with approximately 1700 insects with known high levels of aggression, none of which had stung her. Agent Ortiz was retrieved and placed in a quarantine unit

and has not yet regained consciousness.

Please provide a list of information you wish Agent Ortiz to provide once she has awakened. Relevant questions will be compiled and incorporated into her debriefing and a full, un-redacted transcript will be provided to lead researchers.

And it hungers still.

Anniversary

He walked - or maybe glided, for if anyone could see him they would say his feet did not touch the ground - through the sterile concrete halls of what they had labelled Site-19. They couldn't see him, of course. For all their supposed security and expertise, the so-called Foundation knew so very little about so very much. Anyone looking at him might experience a cold sensation or perhaps a slight feeling of nausea, and if they were actually good at their job they might report the sensation and trigger a security alert. That had happened once or twice; he was no more infallible than the Foundation. But it was rare, and he wasn't concerned.

Today was a special day; the anniversary of the construction of his favourite creation. And so, he had decided to pay it a visit. It wasn't his only creation, of course. One of the first was a statue of a naked woman with no face which, when looked upon, prevented you from looking away. Effective, but crude. The removal of choice from the observer made it one of his least favourite pieces of work, but it gave him an appreciation of statues as a medium. What better way to convey the human form.

Following that were a number of pieces he had long since destroyed for being too flashy; idols that demanded attention through colourful effects and loud sounds. He ultimately found those more crude than the naked woman, a toddler screaming for attention rather than attention given willingly.

And so came his prized piece. The perfect piece of art. No compulsions, no gaudy effects, just the pure representation of the human condition. Endlessly demanding of attention, and savagely violent when ignored, producing nothing but waste. Even the instructions he had given it were elegant in their simplicity; don't move when observed and, if no one is observing, then kill. He could have it do anything - the rules were arbitrary, like rules tend to be - but anything more would corrupt the work.

He'd made other pieces since, of course. Some might say they are better, more advanced, possessing of more meaning. As if art requires meaning. Manipulating reality to imply one thing or other, to send some message or make some kind of statement. Childish tantrums thrown by the immature still so convinced of their own importance that they can't bare the thought of someone disagreeing with their views.

Art exists simply to exist, just as his prized work did. The Foundation named it SCP-173, terrible bores that they are. He'd never named it himself. He approached the room in which they kept it, locked away from prying eyes. There were rare moments when he didn't blame them for locking it up. Ignorant as they were, how could they see anything but an engine of destruction. Had they ever *truly* looked at it, he wondered. Were they even capable of seeing it as art? He had his doubts.

He entered the "containment" chamber - as if art could ever truly be contained - without issue. Trivialities such as doors and walls had long since stopped being concerns for him. And there it was, slowly walking around the edge of the room, surrounded by the only things humans truly had to offer; blood and shit.

"Hello," he said out loud.

The statue froze, and then slowly turned to the source of the voice. It wasn't capable of expression, but had it been he liked to believe its face would be showing surprise. Truth be told, he wasn't sure that it even possessed any true intellect; he found that keeping that a mystery even from himself enhanced the work, made it a truer representation.

"It is good to see that you are well."

That was true; he'd half expected to find it smashed to rubble. It wouldn't have been difficult, were the Foundation inclined to do so. That was some small point in their favour, he supposed, though he doubted they did it for the preservation of art.

The statue approached him, slowly, as if hesitant. As if it couldn't believe what it was seeing before it. It reached an arm outwards,

and he took it. It was a slightly awkward gesture, as he hadn't give it hands. The stone of its body was cold to the touch, but he held it for a few seconds before releasing it, a small gesture for an old friend. Or perhaps it saw him more like a father-figure - again, he didn't know. That thought gave him a slight pause. Perhaps his creation truly was intelligent, and felt abandoned by the only being in existence to show it anything other than fear.

Was it sad? Angry? Did it possess any emotion at all? Perhaps it was pleased, pleased that it had been remembered after all this time. More uncertainties. The one thing he was sure of was that it could hear him.

"I am proud of you, my creation. You have surpassed anything I could have ever hoped for."

The statue seemed to stand a little straighter, if that was possible. Perhaps he just imagined it. Again, he was not infallible, and was not immune to seeing things in his own work.

He remained for a while, admiring the piece. Part of him was sad that he couldn't bring it with him. But that would draw too much attention.

"It was good to see you. I must leave now, though. The Foundation drones will be along shortly to clean your room."

He raised his hand to its face briefly, before turning and heading to leave the room. A thought occurred to him before he left; he paused and turned back to it.

"Why don't we play a little game, just this once. They usually send in three people, yes?"

A vague movement, as close as it could manage to a nod.
He wasn't sure if it would still respond to different instructions; it had been so long, the ones it had might have become ingrained into it. But hey, it was worth a try.

"Well, just this one time, if even one of them is disrespectful enough to look away, you may do as you wish. Even if the others are still

looking."

The statue resumed its pacing, slightly faster than before, as if excited. He smiled to himself as he walked through the door and left the Foundation to their work.

Anno Domino

December 1st, 2081

Access: Record of extranormal events and object retrievals
Enter password: **********
Access: Record for Site-466 retrieval agents.
Enter password: *******
Access: Records dated November, 2081.

Date: 1/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Shopping Centre car park
Response Priority Level: Green
Description: An unidentified man was seen wandering through a multi-storey car park at approximately 14:00, behaving erratically. Witnesses reported that he left scorch marks on all the surfaces he touched, and emanated large amounts of heat.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation agents secured the area and subdued the man, consequently designated E-75006.

Agent Chard ignored the muttering of the man, still audible as it was from within the insulated cell. When the researcher went over to the viewing window, Chard did not follow.

The man inside, he knew, was naked. He had been dressed in casual clothes but they had caught fire as the man's temperature continued to increase, and they had been removed with heat-proof gloves once they had arrived back at the facility. Standard equipment like that was one of the few things that weren't in short supply. It was clear that the heat was making him uncomfortable, but with his internal body temperature he should already be dead, so he hadn't much scope to complain. Not that he could, at any rate. The unfortunate man was rambling as if half-asleep, in hesitant, indistinct nonsense. Clearly his condition was making it difficult for him to

think or speak properly.

Based on the location and clothes he had been wearing, Chard suspected he was shopping when it had struck him, whatever it was. He could confirm that, with security tapes and background checks. He had people on it. But for now, he had to ensure the handover of the E-Class object to research personnel.

Something about this particular researcher, Dr. Kritschau, faintly annoyed him. All of his features were set high in his face in such a way that he always had the appearance of peering down at you like a specimen, even if, like Chard, you were a few inches taller than him. He hadn't looked in Chard's eyes at all as the Agent had explained what he had seen during the retrieval, instead keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the paper as he took notes, but now that he was looking at the object he was writing quickly and fluidly without even glancing at the page.

Chard let this continue for a short while, with Kritschau ignoring him and noting down the immediate observations of the new SCP, but then he felt compelled from awkwardness to move over to the viewing window. The man inside had pressed himself up against the cold concrete wall, trying to keep himself cool. He faced away from them and tried to cover himself up.

Chard's eyes drifted to the floor of the containment chamber. The researcher said something under his breath. "So, needs a refrigerated, or at least insulated and well ventilated, humanoid containment chamber. Materials must be heatproof. Food and water… "

Chard cleared his throat. The researcher didn't seem to hear him, so he started talking. "Is he going to live?"

Kritschau's eyes stayed fixed on the huddled shape of the man. "That's up to the directors. You know how it is." Chard looked uncomfortably at the windowsill, not willing to look up and compound the man's shame. They both knew that Kritschau was mincing words.

The man clambered to his feet, arms held away from his body, and

moved to the other side of the cell, surface for cold concrete. Kritschau noted the behaviour down. Then he sucked in a breath, put the lid back on his pen, and pulled down the blind. Chard was relieved. Something about the unfortunate man elicited his pity. He wouldn't want his life in the hands of the Foundation, either.

"Apologies if that seemed a little callous, Agent. We're as stretched by the current situation as anybody."

"I understand, Doctor."

Kritschau swallowed, looking away from the Agent. He hurried over to a desk and produced a form, neatly filled out. He proffered his pen.

"Thank you, Agent. Your boys are doing an exemplary job." The researcher affected a small smile. "I sometimes wonder why they can't just scrap the paperwork and cut costs that way."

Chard took the pen and signed his small, rudimentary but serviceable signature.

"I couldn't agree more, sir."

[DATA EXPUNGED]

Date: 8/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Square
Response Priority Level: Orange
Description: The fountain in the centre of Square ceased function at 19:53. The fountain quickly became covered in algae. A number of organisms, believed to be temnospondylids, emerged from the Fountain, along with several unidentified organisms displaying animal characteristics though apparently made of plant matter.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation Agents did not respond to the incident initially, as it was primarily handled by Global Occult Coalition agents. Event was reported to the Foundation following capture of several unknown organisms in the surrounding sewer system and discussion with GOC officials.

The GOC had rolled in military uniforms and jeeps, a show of organisation and professionalism that put the Foundation to shame. Everything was carefully calculated and organised effectively and precisely.

The setting-up of the cordon was done with clinical efficiency and deftness, and with minimal fuss. From the outside, it was an inspiring example of efficiency in public security.

Inside, the story was somewhat different. The square was in chaos. The fountain was overflowing, with cold muddy water running over the cobbles, and the bodies that were lying on the ground. A woman's corpse was being savaged by a primordial-looking thing coated in a thick layer of mud, and a group of smaller, green, frog-like creatures quarrelled over the remains of another. People were screaming, people were running to get away, and sluggish masses of foetid reeds and mosses spilled over the lip of the fountain and squelched, amoeba-like across the cobblestones.

GOC Strike Team 'Thoth' moved in quickly, boots splashing in the muddy water, stepping over rafts of stinking vegetation. The creatures ignored them, content to chew sloppily on the dead. Smaller creatures waddled in the shallows, and scattered in front of the soldiers. The team moved past them, towards the fountain, hoping to gain some understanding of the situation.

The first warning that Thoth Three got was the feel of something pressing against his thigh. The coldness and dampness of it didn't elicit a reaction- after all, he was wading in cold water. But something was wrapping tight around his leg, and the faint pressure was what alerted him. He looked down, and saw that a large clump of plant matter was tangled round his leg. He reached down to brush it away, but then he saw the fronds flex and squeeze around his fingers, trapping his hands.

"Damnit, something's on me." he said, relatively calm. There was no point in panicking, and to be honest the situation wasn't necessarily a bad one. His team members turned round, as the mass of waterweed and ferns inched further up his leg. A clump adhered itself to his other foot. He tried to take a step, and couldn't.

“Okay, Three, give us a second and we’ll cut you out.” said Thoth Six, the team leader. He was reaching for his knife when the water beneath him frothed and something underwater clamped on to his leg. He swore, and tried to move, but he was stuck. “Looks like it’s got me too. Everybody else, get back.” Then he tried to jerk himself free.

Instead of pulling himself out of the grasp of the plant, he lost his footing and, with a crash, toppled headlong into the water. The plant-thing moved fast, coils of waterplant fronds wrapping around him in a vice grip. He fought hard to get back up, choking and spluttering as he was forced underwater, then he bobbed back up coughing. He’d managed to prop himself up on his elbows and get his head clear of the water, provided he twisted his head to the side.

Thoth Four took a step towards him, only to recoil as a mass of leaves and algal scum floated to the surface and writhed slowly in his direction. Thoth Six tried to shout something, but muddy water flowed into his mouth when he opened it and he had to cough to clear it.

As he watched his team leader struggle against the constricting plant to keep his head an inch or two above the water, Thoth Three wondered how long you could hold your breath for. Probably not long enough for help to come.

Date: 13/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Airport
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: Luggage carried by a passenger began to exude a thick, dark blue gas after being placed inside an X-Ray machine as part of a routine security inspection. This was followed by the manifestation of an unknown and hostile entity which was responsible for the death of 57 individuals. Gas dissipated after three hours: the entity was not found.
Follow-up Operations: Foundation agents disseminated the story that the deaths were caused by a terrorist attack. Bodies were examined, then incinerated.

The man who walked up to the airport security gate to have his hand luggage scanned wasn't to know that by the end of the day he'd have been labelled a terrorist. Luckily for him he wasn't going to have to suffer a tarred reputation, but nonetheless he would end up as a name and face on a notice board with evidence and lines of enquiry written up around him in board marker, based solely around the premise that he was involved in a terrorist attack.

He wasn't to know what was in the suitcase he handed to the border control man, even though he'd packed it. Even afterwards, picking through the debris, the investigators found themselves stumped as to what exactly he had in his luggage.

As the tired looking, stern-faced man in uniform placed the suitcase in its little grey plastic tray and set it on the grey plastic rollers, the supposed terrorist checked his watch. The seconds ticked down as the suitcase rattled along into the X-ray machine.

The border control official barely had time to register the movement on his screen, before a dark blue, thick gas began to seep out of the X-Ray machine. Someone screamed and the blare of a klaxon started up. The man looked in bewilderment at the X-Ray machine as the gas billowed out and pooled sluggishly over the ground. Assuming some sort of chemical weapon, people started running. One border officer, the one manning the X-Ray machine, was slow to react. The gas spread over one of his feet, and the man suddenly collapsed sideways as if his legs had given way. A thin limb emerged from the gas, and clawed fingers gripped him by the arm and dragged him within.

The man with the suitcase, previously frozen in confusion, snapped out of his stupor and made an attempt to run. He did not get far, as the flowing gas seemed to change direction and pursue him. A black mass rose out of the gas as if shedding its skin. A long, segmented, chitinous tendril, like a great legless millipede, lashed out of the fog. It was tipped by a collection of barbs. It slammed into the man's back, the spines puncturing the skin, and using the purchase to lift the unfortunate man into the air, and draw him yelling backwards. The mist enveloped him and his shouts faded into quiet.

Others were equally unlucky. The gas quickly spread out to cover

much of the airport floor. Those who touched it collapsed to the floor completely limp, and were immediately enveloped by the mist. Others managed to find higher ground, jumped on counters or dashed madly for the exit. Some of them escaped. Others were dragged backwards into the fog as barbed tendrils latched on to them and yanked them away.

After it was done with them, the cloud receded away from the bodies, leaving little patches of clear floor scattered across the airport. Soon, all of the screaming had stopped- those who were still alive had escaped, and those who fell into the miasma couldn't scream. There was just the hiss of the gas escaping from the X-Ray machine and the gentle rustling of something from within the cloud until, after three hours, the flow of gas stopped and the mist gradually dispersed.

The bodies were not all there when the Foundation arrived. They hadn't been butchered- there were no cut marks. Bits of them bodies simply weren't there, as if they had been dissolved. The damage was bizarre and erratic- one person would be flensed of their skin, others would be missing limbs or large chunks of their bodies. Some had been given the keyhole treatment, with small patches of skin, tissue and bone missing, through which the organs had been removed.

The bodies of about half of the dead were identifiable. The supposed 'terrorist' was identified as an Adam Eppson, and he was found to be missing his left common carotid artery, five teeth (all molars), all tissue save for bone from the fingers on his right hand, and small patches of tissue from his neck.

As was increasingly becoming the case, it was eventually decided that the victims at the airport had been killed by a freak and unpreventable accident. The mechanisms of the universe had begun to develop stress fractures, and people were beginnning to fall through the cracks.

Date: 22/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Hall
Response Priority Level: Red

Description: During a public address, local politician began acting erratically, veering off-subject. The majority of the audience and staff at the venue were rendered comatose during the duration of the event.
Follow-up Operations: A Global Occult Coalition agent assassinated Mr. during the course of the event, having pre-empted Foundation efforts to secure the anomaly. The agent was detained following his intervention and was highly co-operative. His testimony indicates that GOC forces have been severely weakened in the area, and that he was part of a small team acting independently due to this occurrence.

“And when the people renounce their faith- not their faith in God, not their faith in government, but faith in the most visceral, basic of things, their faith in their own existence- that’s when the terrorists win. That’s when we everything we stand for boils away and we’re left with the salt and ashes of our own self-deception and hypocrisy.”

Agent ‘Blowfly’, of the Global Occult Coalition, could hear the politician ranting, even with his noise-cancelling headphones clamped over his ears, and he knew he would have to work fast. He strode down the central aisle towards the stage. As he went, he glanced around the room- at least a hundred people, all apparently paying the man rapt attention. None of them were moving, though. None of them were fidgeting or leaning forwards in their seats. They were motionless, completely motionless. By contrast, the man on the podium was ranting and raging, moving frantically, his wild eyes staring out into the audience.

“And I refuse to allow that. I refuse to allow it now and I will continue to refuse until all the clocks have been broken down into atoms and men have forgotten the meaning of ‘normal’. That is my pledge, and I will stick to it. In ages past, the people of the world were made to follow a contract signed and sealed without understanding. Without consent. A deal made before we were born. And that is what the Freemasons delivered us from.”

‘Blowfly’ could feel a buzzing in his ears, and a brief flash of electric pain in his forehead. He drew a pistol from his shoulder holster. Nobody seemed to move, or really notice. Colour was beginning to

fade from his vision, and his feet were lead weights. Blowfly pointed it up at the politician, but suddenly his arm went stiff and his fingers would not move. The politician leaned forward and went still as well, staring intently at ‘Blowfly’.

“And despite that, despite that service, there are those who would say that what was done was wrong. That free thinking, and free living, and free breathing, is a crime. They want to stop you from flying! They want to illegalise your new-found consciousness. They are insidious, and I tell you that they will not abandon their quest to keep you chained inside your own skins.”

‘Blowfly’ could not move. Even his lungs weren’t working. It felt like he was about to die, just like he’d watched all the other agents die, immobile and choking to death. At least he would die with his feet on the ground.

The image of the politician in his immaculate suit, with a forcefully friendly expression on his face, was off-set by his eyes, which seemed bloodshot, wide and frightened. The poor bastard had no idea what he was saying, or what was going on.

The politician gave a spiteful smile, and with a faux-civil tone inquired “So, what does my honourable opponent have to say for himself?” He drew out the question, and the Agent’s lungs began to hurt. Finally, he allowed the last syllable to slip from his lips and hang in the air. Blowfly’s vision faded completely, and he felt himself slipping away.

Then, suddenly, the force holding him in place was lifted. The Agent’s retort was a single gunshot. The politician collapsed backwards, dead within seconds, and lay sprawled in blood on the stage.

Blowfly gulped air down, and sat down on the floor. Still, no-one was moving. He sat there for some time, until the Foundation came to pick him up. It was against protocol in every way, but what else could he do? He had no back up, no place to return to. All the other agents, at least all the ones he knew, were dead.

He let the agents take him back to one of their facilities, told them

what had happened. How almost the other agents from his base had been killed by some glowing KTE that had made their death into a public spectacle. How he'd been one of the only ones still walking around when the call had come in to liquidate the politician.

When he found out that the Foundation thought they were overworked, he laughed very hard, and very bitterly.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location:
Response Priority Level: Yellow
Description: An anomalous and unidentified form of organism, outwardly resembling a form of polyp, is discovered having grown within a disused tunnel. The organism was shown to recreate sounds of human speech and secrete a paralysing and digestive agent from vents on its surface when disturbed; this behaviour claimed the life of an urban explorer whose companion reported the incident to the police.
Follow-up Operations: Due to the isolated location and the stresses placed on attending agents, as well as the fact that most of the field agents available in the area involved in two concurrent higher priority events, investigation of the incident was delayed and the area remained unsecured until late morning on the 14/12/2081, by which time it was discovered that the organism had grown considerably, resulting in the deaths of two other individuals, both local homeless people who had attempted to shelter there overnight. Organism classified E-76821. Majority of the organism destroyed, with living samples secured for analysis.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED] Morgue
Response Priority Level: Orange
Description: Six corpses being held at the [REDACTED] Morgue reanimated at approximately the same time. All the entities were lucid and communicative, and possessed the memories and personalities that they had possessed prior to death. Despite several debilitating and lethal injuries being present on the bodies prior to the incident, the affected bodies were found to be fully intact,

healthy, and displaying normal life signs.
Follow-up Operations: Due to actions undertaken by the staff of the Morgue, information regarding the incident had been partially revealed to the public, necessitating the dispersal of Class-B amnestics. Under the pretence of a quarantine procedure related to an unknown pathogen, the area was secured and the six affected corpses were transported to Site-16. Following testing, which determined the bodies to be otherwise non-anomalous, the entities were terminated.

Date: 24/11/2081
Location: Motorway
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: [DATA EXPUNGED]
Follow-ups Operations: Though the event did not immediately threaten human life, [DATA EXPUNGED] presented a major threat to the secrecy of the Foundation. Agents deployed to terminate or capture individuals involved. Amnestics proved ineffective in eradicating symptoms caused by exposure to the event. 30 witnesses are terminated and the event is explained as a major traffic accident.

Agent Chard allowed himself a moment to think, even though he didn't particularly want to. After all, he wasn't going to get the chance later.

He stared down into the amnestics in his hand, two little dirty-beige circles sitting in his palm. The doctor responsible for dispensing the amnestics had obliged his request for a moment to think, but he would have to take them soon. Even now, when it came to looking after their employees' mental health, the Foundation couldn't really afford to waste time.

No counselling sessions or therapy any more – there wasn't time or money to be spared on such matters. They'd replaced human sympathy and help with pills a long time ago. Whatever you've seen, whatever you did, you make statements, note down all the details, then take a pill and forget everything.

Then you read over the files and suddenly you know what happened, but you don't feel it. They saved the therapy for the real problem cases, or the stuff so bad that that gut emotional reaction managed to bleed through just through second-hand description. At least, that was the idea. Chard had done it before. It seemed to work.

As the chief organiser of the operation, he wanted to be able to forget, to shift the responsibility onto something, onto someone, else. It didn't particularly matter that the person was himself. After all, it wasn't as if his past self was going to fight back.

He knew that he could make the argument anyway, even without the amnestics. It was because of the procedures. It was because of the pressure he was under. It was because of the day and age he lived in. Most of all, he could blame the priority system.

Although all of these excuses appeared in his mind, Agent Chard had to admit some level of guilt. He had mishandled the situation, and now multiple people, including other Agents, were dead. He'd been the one who rubber-stamped it, and prioritised killing the people in the morgue over saving lives. Kritschau and his team were probably dissecting them at that moment.

But at some level, he was responsible. He had to be; otherwise it meant that there was nothing he could have done. He refused to let himself become a victim of circumstance, however dire those circumstances had become. He was an Agent of the Foundation, after all- didn't the Foundation exist to overcome the impossible?

God, he'd been listening to the propaganda again. Secure, Contain, Protect.

The first two were getting harder by the day, and after today, he wasn't sure what the third one was supposed to mean. Was he supposed to be protecting humanity, or the interests of the Foundation?

It didn't matter what the answer was. After all, he wasn't going to remember it. He looked up at the doctor. For his part the doctor didn't look particularly impatient. Chard looked at him, and then put

the pills into his mouth. The man smiled slightly, watched as Chard took a swig of water from a plastic cup, and swallowed.

Later that day Chard sat at his desk and looked over the reports of what had happened. Four people dead, six anomalous entities terminated, one anomaly contained. The pictures from the tunnels were gruesome, but he had seen worse. He tried to summon up a twinge of remorse for what had happened, but couldn't.

He'd done a good job, he thought. Chard slipped the report back into its manila folder, and braced himself for the next alert. It couldn't be long.

Date: 31/11/2081
Location: [REDACTED]
Response Priority Level: Red
Description: The residents of the Apartment Building were affected by a possible reality warper, believed to have been capable of conditioning powerful mental compulsions into those he interacted with. Building's residents were eventually implicated in multiple counts of murder, theft and assault against individuals known to the suspected reality warper, Mr. , whose was arrested for one of these charges.
Follow-up Operations: Following an attack by affected individuals on a local police station to free Mr. , Foundation operatives were able to confirm Mr. 's nature, and lay siege to the Apartment Building with the intent of neutralising Mr. . Foundation personnel encountered heavy resistance, but were successful in terminating Mr. . Following this, a resident of the building is believed to have detonated an explosive device, killing approximately 12 Foundation agents and 37 building residents.

Agent Chard couldn't feel much. He could barely feel how the rain pattered down on his face, eliciting brief, tired confusion. But it didn't scald him, and he couldn't feel tiny, wriggling things on his skin any more.

Water trickled down his face, carrying dust into his eyes. It stung, but he wasn't able to make much more than minute groans. He tried

to wipe it away, but his arms didn't seem to want to obey him, and besides they hurt more than his eyes.
He thought back to what had happened, as his clothes started to dampen.

Everyone, it would seem, has a crack in their armour. Some were just more obvious than others, like a crippling weakness to being shot repeatedly.

There had been an announcement over the radio that the anomaly had been neutralized. Very short, very matter-of-fact, without a hint of triumph. Maybe because there wasn't much to celebrate. They were just going to face this again the next week, and then again the week after that.

How Agent Chard would have loved to be able to work for the Foundation, say, 100 years ago. Then, you could wait months, even years before an incident occurred in the area you would be assigned to. After a job, you'd be able to say you'd protected someone. Now they were just handing fate a rain check. Eventually, there was going to be something they couldn't handle.

He'd heard about some of them. Terrorist attacks were getting more frequent, apparently. Natural disasters, too. At least this time there actually was an explosion to back up the terrorist angle. Some poor bastard had been duped, tricked or forced into wearing a bomb, and he had set it off as soon as he realized his lord and master had snuffed it. At least, that was what Chard guessed. The heat, the roar and the sudden pain all matched that description. He wasn't sure how far he'd been thrown by the blast, or whether he had hit his head.

The bomb had also blown out the roof, and as he opened his eyes slightly, he could make out the gaping black hole in the ceiling. Blurry, indistinct shapes on the floor, the right shape for slumped human bodies. Raindrops fell into his eyes, and he had to clench them shut again.

He could hear noises, muted though they were, from somewhere nearby. Maybe they had sent someone to find him. He hoped they would come quickly. He didn't know how much more time he, or the

Foundation, had left.

| **Hub** |

Annon

Warning: If you enjoyed the way `Ecce Perago` ended, then read no further. If you enjoy the thought of a grimdark Foundation, or have a low tolerance for quirkiness, this may not be the story you want to be reading. If, on the other hand, you'd like to see the New Administrator get what he has coming to him, then, read on.

Fifteen minutes was all it had taken. In fifteen minutes, the world had changed, even if no one had noticed. The Administrator looked upon his work, and was proud. His seniors had always disliked his ideas. They all believed that free will was some grand idea. Only the Administrator knew that people were stupid. They needed to be led, to be guided. He was the one to do it now, with all this power at his fingertips.

All this power. They say absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Enh. Close enough, for Foundation work. The Administrator grinned beneath his mustache as he set to work, implementing changes that would bring the world into a more ordered state. Little did he know, that his plans were not the only plans out there. The Foundation planned for everything. Even a rogue O5.

13

All of his plans had been built off one assumption, one purposeful lie. The O5 who had recruited him told him there was no O5-13. That the 13th vote was transferred from one O5 to another, which was true. The 13th O5 held no temporal power. While he was often invited to listen in on Overseer council meetings, and many of the council members treasured his advice, he had never been the most… stable of people.

You see, the 13th O5 made his home at a site that was not quite a site. While those who had been to it saw nothing unusual about it, Site 67 was on none of the Foundation's official books. It was an SCP, a quite powerful one, and one known as a 'little black box.' No number, just a name. The House. The easiest way to hide something is in plain sight. So, a natural landmark was built around it, and those who had to visit it were given to believe it was just another SCP.

The 13th was a special man. To survive in the House, one had to be. After all, time inside this SCP was a little unusual. If one were to use popular culture references, one might employ the phrase 'Timey Wimey Ball.' Inside the House, Cause did not often follow effect, and could quite easily loop into each other. So, the 13th had to be different, had to be able to think in more dimensions than the average man. This, of course, resulted in him being, by our standards, not altogether there.

"I think you might be starting to bore people. This is a lot of background to get through."

… Of course, when one spends a lot of time using one's mind to explore all manner of eldritch horror and power, one sometimes gets confused as to whether the room one is in has three walls, or four. So, instead of trying to explain, let's just see what happens.

"Thank you," the 13th says, to no one specific. Few are those who would enter his office. Site 67 doesn't get many visitors. He is a tall man, red haired, pale skinned, but no freckles. His office walls are lined with book shelves, and even more books somehow stay in place in their shelves on the ceiling. A simple old computer sits on his desk, an Apple IIe, still looking pristine and new. He is currently engrossed in the reports of the latest (from his point of view) exploration into his house, when a red light blinks on his screen.

"What's all this then? Ah, yes, the Mann takeover," he mutters to himself. He happens to mutter to himself a lot. Sometimes, he is even still in the room when he mutters to himself. Sometimes, he mutters back. It helps. "I thought I still had another week before that happened." His fingers fly across the keyboard, reading the reports as they file in. "Ah, yes, interesting. Full TPK. Well, almost full. Ha.

Should have taken some time to find out more, Mann. Always were too eager. Well, let's see what we can do about this." This comment appears directed to the old man standing by his door, who seems to still be holding his gardening shears.

There were always fail safes in the Foundation. Each and every O5 always had a dozen or so on hand, ready just in case. Mann had found out the ones that protected the O5s, but he hadn't learned about the replacement protocols.

Which was what the 13th initiated, with a few clicks of his mouse.

12

"Is he… is he dead?" The nameless assistant, whom we'll now call Tim, for the ease of narration, peered through the doorway, watching. He had grabbed the first agent he saw, once his mind had cleared.

"A'yup." Agent Lament made a show of checking the corpse's pulse, then leaned back on his heels. "Y'can sorta tell by the big gaping hole where his jaw and chest should be." Lament pulled off the former Overseer's glasses, curious to see who might be behind them. No one he recognized. But, then, he wouldn't.

"Well, agent, I-" Tim paused, his eyes glazing over. After all, O5-4 wasn't the only one who could plant commands in people's minds. "By the authority vested in me, whomsoever takes the glasses from his body shall be named O5-12 in his place. Agent Lament, you were never the first choice, but you are still capable of what we need. I hope." Tim slumps, his jaw sore. "I… what… did I just make you…?"

Lament can't help but smile. Overseer was never actually a goal of his, but, since it was offered…

"Well. Maybe I can't do a better job than this poor soul. But at least I-"

He slips on the sunglasses.

"Can hold my alcohol."

11

Clef sat back, staring at the dead body. O5-11 had been a good friend, once upon a time. Eleven, or, as he had been known back then, Jings, had been the agent who had trained Clef, when he first joined up. When Jings got promoted, Clef had hoped the old man would change things. They had made plans, had talked things over. They would do great things, with Jings in the place to make things better!

But nothing had changed. Oh sure, at first, Eleven made things better, eased some restrictions on the Safe humanoids. But he didn't let any of them go, as they'd talked about. He didn't ease up on the D-class deaths. Eventually, he became just another Overseer, grinding down anyone who tried to make things better.

Mann might not be the best choice to take over, but at least he'd follow his plan.

Ha! Like Clef would let anyone else take over. The only person in this world you could trust, was yourself. Clef reached over to the body of his dead friend, and slipped off the man's bracelet.

"If there were a move past Checkmate, I'd say that. But for now, let's just say I win." He slips the bracelet onto his own wrist. "I always win."

10

Some transfers of power were epic. Some were quite interesting. In Ten's case, it was a simple matter of an email marked 'Urgent' showing up in the inbox of one Dr. Moose. She took a moment to read the contents, then sighed as she rolled her eyes. "Really? Me, an O5? Fuck a doodle."

9

O5-9 was the unluckiest O5.

Dr. Bright glanced down at his cell phone, and made a face. "Fuck. Nine got himself offed again?" He tapped his fingers together, and frowned over them. There was no one on site currently who fit the specifi— No, wait. There was one. Yes. Two birds, one stone. "Joshua!" He called to his secretary. "Tell Agent Elroy to meet me at the elevators."

A few minutes later, the doctor and the Agent were riding down the main shaft together. Bright stared determinedly at the numbers as they ticked down, towards the bottom of the site. Yoric, on the other hand, fidgeted, hummed, and otherwise made himself annoying. It was his gift. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. "Look, Jack, if this is about the cafeteria incident-"

"It's not about that."

"Ah, then feeding Kane peanut butter, look, it was really funn-"

"Not that either."

"That girl told me she was 18!"

"… That excuse never worked for me either. Yoric. You are being let in on a secret several steps above your current security level. So, shut up, and do what I tell you."

The rest of the ride continues in silence. If he had been any other doctor, he might have worried about what he was planning on doing. But Jack had stopped making emotional connections to his fellow workers. He knew it always ended badly.

The elevator drew to a halt at the bottom of the site… and then proceeded to move sideways for some time. Yoric shot a questioning look at the Senior Staffer, but chose not to ask. It wasn't until the elevator doors slid back to reveal a sign on another door that he actually spoke. "Nine Six Three Two? Wait, there's more of

you?"

Jack opened the door, and stepped inside. The room was small, a large window showing the room beyond, in which a box rested on a pedestal. "Yoric. This is very important. I need you to go into that room, and open that box, and bring me back the object within." He sighed. "I've been authorized to give you the 006 you've requested if you do so."

Cautious, but optimistic, Agent Yoric Elroy passed into the next room. Dr. Bright locked the door behind him, then turned to the window to watch. 963-2 had always been his dirty little secret. It was his fault it had been created. Yoric carefully opened the box, and, when nothing jumped out at him, carefully reached out a gloved hand to pick up the odd metal symbol inside. "This the ARGH!" The agent screamed in horrible pain as his body was grabbed by an invisible force. His bones, his flesh, his entire body was wrenched, this way and that. Bright stood watching, hands clasped behind his back. This was what you got when working with inferior materials. Well. It didn't matter. In a few minutes, Yoric would be completely gone, never to be seen again. And his body would rise as O5-9, the Overseer who thought he could be immortal. Bright would have to bring him up to speed. One of the problems of 963-2: it had only copied the memories up to the point of Nine's first death. It didn't matter.

After all, O5-9 was the unluckiest O5.

8

Desiree Talleh walked into the O5's apartment as if she owned the place. She had always had a habit of being in the right place, at the right time. And now? She was going to be in the right place, at the right time, to end up an O5.

Desiree was a young looking girl, of African descent, her hair done up in cornrows, looking at the world through coke bottle glasses. She opened the door to the bathroom, and reached in to turn off the water with an oven mitt. She stared at the remains of Eight with

some distaste. Ick. Overseer soup. Still. Miss Talleh reached her hand into the muck, fishing around for the little ring. It was her choice to become Eight, and if anyone wanted to stop her, well, she'd been planning this for a lot longer than they had. She wasn't afraid to call on help from friends in scaly places.

"Me and Clef as O5s? What is the Foundation coming to? Next they'll be asking 343 to join." And she giggles, at some private joke.

7

Dr. Gerald looked down at the burning wreckage of his vehicle. The flames could easily be seen for miles around, pieces of the car spread across the upper third of the road he'd been driving on. He turned his hand this way and that, studying the ivory chopstick driven through the middle of his hand. "Huh. Guess this means I'm an Overseer now, huh?"

He glanced down, studying the ground far below. "Now if only I could get out of this tree."

6

Black looked at what he had wrought, and the corner of his eye twitched, just a little bit. His mentor, and his partner, both dead by his hand. It shouldn't have been this way. He was supposed to have given his life for Six. Thompson was too good to die like a chump. But this was how it had happened. All he could do was move on.

The first step was to remove Six's hat and pistols. They weren't special, but they meant something to Black. The pearl handled pistols were tucked into his belt, the hat placed jauntily upon his head. Then, carefully, reverently, Black picked up the cane. "This will not stand. You shall be avenged."

5

"I feel like goddamn Dorothy," Sorts muttered as he pulled the shoes off the body of O5-5. "Really? Shoes? Who makes an object of authority out of damned shoes?" He frowned, studying them closer. "Okay, these really feel kind of wei- HOLY SHIT it's human skin."

He pauses, thinking over his statement. "That shouldn't actually surprise me. The midgets… they surprise me. Fuck, I hate these cameos."

As he stalked away to get the shoes re-sized for him, a dozen instances of SCP-5555-J danced about the body of the former Overseer. They sang, in some kind of unison. I'm sure you can guess the song. It starts 'Ding dong.'

3

"Hey. Josh."

"Wassup Gnosis?"

"That program crashed."

"Which one?"

"The one that takes up all that memory on the Cray."

"Ah, fuck. Oh well, just use the backups and reboot the damn thing."

"No problem."

2

'Ding! You have a new video message.'

Dr. Sophia Light glanced up from her work with a sigh. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Sometimes, she missed being a member of the Junior Staff under Bright. No, strike that, that was something she never missed. But she wouldn't mind less paperwork. A break from the work was welcome at this point.

The video opened on an older, familiar looking woman. "Sophia. If you're getting this message, not only am I dead, but I never found a way to tell you. I know what you're thinking, and no, I'm not your mother, grandmother or such. I'm you. It's a long story, but let's just say, if you ever need to reboot the universe, make sure you're inside of it first. Your computer is currently getting an update with all of my files. See, you're going to take over for me. You're O5-2. Good luck." The video feed cuts off, then turns back on. "Side note: Why the hell do the time travelers always go after Hitler? He's got to be the luckiest man alive. Look into the possibility of his SCPness."

Light sighed, rubbing her temples. Less work? Never.

1

"… and that is why I have decided to pass on my mantle to you," the video continued, as Dr. Gears studied the pale trenchcoat in his hands. His face, as always, betrayed no trace of emotion. "I have done all I can to lead you to this point, where you can control the Foundation. No matter what anyone may try to tell you, your role is first among equals." The man speaking betrays no emotion himself, a deadpan delivery that wouldn't change even if he were dying while he recorded the message. Which he likely was. "And in the end, I just want to say, I'm proud of you."

At that Gears looks up at the screen, freezing the image before it ends. He stared at the man on the screen for several long minutes, letting everything process. He was now the man in charge, the Overseer at the top of the pyramid. He should feel something. Some small bit of… something. But he'd never admit it.

He simply nodded at the image on the screen. "Thank you, Father. Rest in Peace."

4

"Yes, yes… ha! That would be perfect!" Mann couldn't help but laugh to himself. So much information, so many things for him to do.

"010! We can expand it! Humanity will do what needs to be done, not what they want to do!" His fingers flickered across the keyboard, and then stopped as his screen froze. "Access denied? What kind of crap is-"

"Hey, four, how's it going, man?" The young teen on the screen smiled. "Hey, sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the O5 council has held a vote of no confidence, and, welp, you're out!"

"O5 council? THERE IS NO O5 COUNCIL!" Mann paused, taking a deep breath and standing up. "Apparently, I didn't erase you as thoroughly as I had planned. That can be easily rect—" Again, Mann was interrupted, as 11 more video feeds popped up on his screen, each of them filled with the shadowy outline of a human head and shoulders. Each of them displayed the words 'No confidence' in green at the bottom.

"No! No! I did this! I planned it all! You cannot do this! I am the Administrator! The power is mine! The power is—" BANG! Mann, the top half of his head gone, takes two steps, still trying to mouth words. A second gun shot echoes throughout the room, and Mann falls to the floor, his body twitching. His assailant fires twice more, and, finally, the Mann who would be Administrator lies dead. The man who killed him slips into the just vacated seat. Still warm.

"Dr. Mann is dead. Took a bit to kill him, looks like the files were right about him doing some self augmentation. I'll have the boys down in research look at him. Is there any pressing business for the council, at this time?" Negatives from each of the Council members. "In that case, I, Frederick Heiden… shit, I mean O5-4, declare this Council Meeting closed."

O5-4 stared down at the corpse of his predecessor. It had been a long day. It was only going to get longer. He took a moment to kick the corpse in the side. "God dammit, you asshole. This wasn't what I wanted."

And then he turned back to the computer, and to his duties.

Anomalous Incidents

Boyd kicked his heels onto the mahogany desk, a copper penny in his hand. "Call it."

"…tails." Fish shifted uncomfortably, reclining in the opposite chair.

"…Nope. What is that, seventieth time in a row?" Boyd grinned, holding the penny so it glinted in the light. "I do believe that I like this one. D'ya think they'll let us keep it? Or hold onto it for a while?"

"Well… we probably shouldn't… might get in trouble."

"Ah Fish, you're no fun at all."

> Item Description: A penny which, when flipped, will always land "heads up".
> Date of Recovery: - -
> Location of Recovery: ,
> Current Status: Melted down.
> *Notes: Can't believe that none of the researchers kept this to win bets with.*

"…uh, Dr. Roget?" Research Assistant Dwyer poked his head into the office. "I got those reports finished…Hello?" Finding himself alone, he slipped into the office and sat in the chair.

He thumb-twiddled, glancing around as the clock ticked. His eyes fell upon some stuff on the desk. He smiled. *I love bobbleheads* He picked it up and, with a flick-

A janitor swept the hall outside, whistling a tune to himself. He noticed the door to Dr. Roget's office ajar, and with a grumble of curiosity, peeked his head through the crack. Research Assistant Dwyer, a man in his late 20's, was sprawled out on the floor, his neck at a rather unpleasant angle.

The janitor groans with a roll of his eyes. *Not another one.* He set his broom aside, heading into the office and grabbing the foot of the now deceased researcher. With a grunt of effort, he gave the leg a quick tug, moving it toward the door.

Dr. Roget had been walking back to his office after a particularly tasty casserole. He hummed to himself as he turned to corner, and saw the janitor lugging something out of his office. "Hey, what's that there?"

"Another dead kid." The janitor gave the leg another jerk, pulling the body out of the office. "You need to start lockin' your door."

Dr. Roget groaned. "I always forget to put that damned thing away when I'm out of the office. When will these punk kids learn to not touch other people's shit? It only leads to tragedy."

"Start hidin' it or somethin'." The janitor grabbed his broom and started dragging Dwyer's corpse down the hall. "'cause I'm not cleanin' up the next one."

> Item Description: A -brand bobblehead that, when bobbled, causes the user's head to bobble with it. Can create neck injuries if bobbled too hard.
> Date of Recovery: - -19
> Location of recovery: Seattle, Washington
> Current Status: On Dr. Roget's office desk In Dr. Roget's office safe.

The maintenance shed was extremely humid, and Agent Boyd was grumbling as she dug through piles of tools. She stood up and wiped her brow."It should *not* be this difficult to find a damned hammer."

"Let's just say we couldn't find it and leave." Agent Valint grinned as she leaned against the shed door, making no attempt to help.

"We already did that, they won't buy it a second time." Boyd stooped down and began to dig through a pile of rakes. *Why do they have so many damn rakes…*

Valint rolls her eyes. "You know you'd think they'd just do it

themselves, and I doubt it's in the rake pile."

Boyd tossed a particularly rusty rake to the side. "You never know, with the way they keep shop around here they could be anywhere….ah!" She pulled a hammer from a shelf, kicking up a cloud of dust. "Hammer is located!"

Valint sighed. "Right…. it would be on the shelf." *Can't they ever organize this damn place for once?*

She stood up, contemplating the hammer in his hand. "Alright… I kinda want to hit some stuff now. To make sure it works."

Valint shrugged. "Whatever, not like we have anything better to do."

"Do we have any planks… or nails…" She dove back into the stuff, soon returning with a wooden plank and a rusty nail. Boyd offered the nail, plank and hammer to Valint. "You want to do the honors?"

"Sure, why the hell not." Valint lined up the nail and hammer, took a swing… and a miss.

"Nice one."

Valint frowns. "What the fuck?" She swung again, with the result being a second miss.

Boyd sniggered. "Having problems?"

"Fucking hell, you do it." She shoved the hammer at Boyd.

"Alright, let me show you how its done." She swung with all her might, directly onto her thumb.

Twitch

"**FUUUUUUUUUUUUU**"

> Item Description: Hammer which will consistently miss the nail intended as its target when used by humans. Use of machinery or robots to guide the hammer results in normal function.

Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Identified by agents working in Site 19's maintenance shed, currently in storage.

"Well then." Agent Ekblad removed his hat, squinting at the skylight. "I do believe that is Love-Love."

Item Description: A white table-tennis ball produced by the DHS company, marked as "Four Star". Note that DHS is only known to manufacture balls up to "Three Star" grade. In addition to showing an unusually efficient bounciness, it launches with extreme velocity when in contact with DHS-made table tennis bat rubber.
Date of Recovery - -
Location of Recovery: Site- , Recreation Room
Current Status: Item's anomalous properties were discovered when Agent Ekblad used it in a friendly match against Researcher . Item flew through open skylight, current location unknown.

"I don't even get this one." Agent Boyd held the wig gingerly, at a fair distance from her body. "I mean really, what's the point of having a wig that only works if you already have hair?"

Fish stared forlornly at the tufts of hair littering the floor. "… You didn't have to cut *my* hair to find out."

"Well, you say that, but in all fairness it would've taken at least 20 minutes to find a bald guy to test this with. Much quicker this way." Boyd stretched the wig onto Fish's now smooth cranium.

Fish looked up. "What'd it do?"

"…. Huh. Can't say I expected that."

Item Description: A wig that mimics the hairstyle of its wearer. When worn by bald persons, it transforms into a rubber swimming cap.
Date of Recovery: / /
Location of Recovery: shop in Omsk.

Current Status: Incinerated.

"C'mon, you can scrub better than that." Agent Boyd grinned, walking around her crouched partner. "No pain no gain, am I right?"

"We've been… working… for hours… I don't think… this is going to work." Fish panted, scrubbing the almost-squeaky clean polo shirt over a washpan with all the force his wiry body could muster.

"You do make a valid point. Perhaps we could try a more efficient method of cleaning."

Fish sat back, wheezing as he struggled to catch his breath. "Like… what?"

"Hmmm…"

Item Description: A [REDACTED] brand polo shirt, with a large mustard stain on the front. The stain proved to be impossible to remove.
Date of Recovery: / /1999
Location of Recovery: , GA, USA.
Current Status: Destroyed during a vigorous attempt to clean it.

Another Boring Day

Special Agent Broderick sat in front of his computer, idly looking through closed case documents. Rat people in the subway? Turned out to be some group of perverts dressed in rat costumes. Mysterious artifact that killed all its owners? The damned thing was radioactive. A cult leader capable of real magic? A washed up stage magician and a humidifier filled with LSD. He would kill for once, just once, something he was sent out on to be a real anomaly. Considering he was in New York City, something genuinely strange was bound to pop up eventually.

He got the call about something weird going on at around two in the afternoon, just when he was reading about the moving statues that turned out to be a performance art group last summer. The call said that there was a girl with three eyes freaking out in Penn Station. It took him twenty minutes to get there from the field office.

When he finally got there, a member of security led him to the area where she was. As he got there, he observed the situation for a moment: the girl was backed into a corner and obviously frightened. She looked perfectly normal aside from the large third eye in her forehead. It was a dull red and seemed to lack both white and pupil, making it difficult to know where it was looking. A hat lay a few feet away from her on the ground, one that could have been used to cover the eye.

A security officer approached her; her forehead eye glowed red and the officer's hat and jacket ignited. He dropped his hat and tore off his jacket as Agent Broderick went to the head of security, after watching this display with astonishment and excitement: he would finally encounter something abnormal! He explained who he was, and was given permission to approach the girl. He did so, raising his arms above his head, one hand holding his badge open in her direction, the other empty.

As he walked into the perimeter he said, "Hello, I'm Nathan. I'm not

here to hurt you; I'm here to help."

She backed further into the corner, looking away as if trying to keep him out of the field of her third eye's vision. He stopped a few feet from her.

"I want to get you out of here unharmed. Can you please tell me your name?" he asked calmly.

The girl looked at him from the corner of her normal left eye, her hand blocking her third eye from view.

"Megan," she said quietly in a shaky voice.

He picked up the hat that was on the ground and offered it to her "Was this yours?"

Megan nodded and reached out to grab it, then placed it on her head to cover her eye. Once this happened, he said "Why don't you come with me, I can take you somewhere you will be safe?"

Megan nodded and moved out of the corner. He cleared a path ahead of her through the crowd as they made their way to a hallway. When they were almost at the end of the hallway, she slumped and fell over, a small metal dart sticking out of her back. Down the hall stood a man in a suit, with one arm raising a badge and the other placing the weapon on the floor as Agent Broderick was reaching for his gun.

From the door he and Megan were heading to came two more men in suits wheeling a stretcher. As they approached they identified themselves as Agents Howard, Fine, and Howard of the Social Conformity Program, which he never heard of but they explained it to be a group made so that people like Megan can be helped to live normal lives, and more people knowing about it was a threat to people like Megan. They asked him to help them gently put her on the stretcher to get her to an ambulance they positioned at the exit they were using.

As they wheeled her to the exit, he tried to ask them questions, but kept being instructed to wait until they were in the ambulance. Once

inside, he asked what was going to happen to her as one of the men attached a IV and a monitor to her arm, they were going to keep her under anesthesia until she was in a safe location to prevent her third eye from waking. As he asked more questions of the other two, finding out the Megan was from Maine and accidentally immolated her house a month ago before running away, the one who prepared the girl for transport filled a syringe and expelled the air before getting Agent Broderick's attention.

He was told he needed to receive a booster shot, in case there was some form of virus responsible for Megan's condition, after the shot he suddenly felt groggy, unable to keep his eyes open as he slumped over and heard them saying: "How much did you give him?" "Enough to make him forget everything after one or so." "This guy is good." "Why do you think we keep making sure his transfers get denied? This was the ninth scip he brought in alive this year."

It all faded to black.

- - -

As he awoke at his desk, Agent Broderick looked at his emails. A new one came in saying he had to log some girl in a weird costume who was throwing lit matches at people, claiming she was starting fires with her mind. As he wrote his report he considered sending in another request to be transferred out to another division. For some reason he kept getting denied, despite all his attempts to move to a job where there was more excitement.

Either way, today was just another boring day at the UIU.

Another Day On The Job

“Foxchaser, do you have eyes on?”

“Affirmative Sky Kennel. Transmitting coordinates to you as we speak.”

“Coordinates received. Aerial scans show some signs of recent reality manipulation, be advised.”

“Understood Sky Kennel. Proceeding with caution.”

Captain James Lee took a hand off his radio and motioned his team to come closer. The members of Site 118's Containment Team Beta 6, “Foxchaser” leaned in, with the quiet reassurance of experience hanging about their demeanors.

“Hume scans say that the location shows signs of recent anomalous activity, so we’re going to have to do this carefully.” James smoothed out a roughly drawn map on a flat rock, showing a drawing of a small farmhouse.

“We know there are two infiltration points that we can use. The front door is the main entry point, we’ll call that Point Alpha. On the side of the house is a set of doors leading down to the storm cellar, which probably leads up into the building. This will be point Beta.”

“Melissa, Hung, and Thomas, you will proceed through Point Alpha. Sweep carefully, and watch all potential points. Hume detectors hot.” The three people he pointed out nodded quickly.

“Jackson and Pierre, you’re with me. We’re going in from below. Any questions?”

Melissa cleared her throat. "Weapons hot?"

James grimaced, scratching his chin. "No, not yet. We're not cleared to do so yet. Stick with the operating procedures for now." Looking

at his squadmate, the captain could see her disapproval, but she merely nodded, tight-lipped.

"Alright, break."

James lifted the cellar door ever so gently, praying that it wouldn't make any noise. His luck held, and the door quietly opened.

The smells of a musty and abandoned storm cellar wafted pungently through the air as James nodded to his team and started to slowly make his way into the sublevels, rifle at his shoulder. Long-abandoned dusty keepsakes and mementos of a family long gone crowded the small space, and James did his best to avoid disturbing any of it in order to keep quiet.

Slowly, methodically, the team checked every corner of the old storm cellar. Under tables, around old furniture, sifting through the dust on the ground, all to find any signs of the escaped anomaly.

Captain Lee was less concerned with finding physical signs of disturbance than he was with more anomalous ones. If the skip was really trying to hide its physical tracks, there was nothing he could do to find it. So, he focused his time on the handheld Hume detector in his hand, seeing if it picked up any signs of anomalous manipulation. Carefully, cautiously, he swept the room, praying that he would get the jump on the anomaly if it was there.

Nothing.

James motioned to his teammates, who shook their heads. Nodding, he motioned towards the top of the stairs, carefully put his Hume detector away, and brought his rifle into a ready position. Jackson did the same, leaving Pierre the main detector as they quietly moved into formation.

About to head upstairs, James took point and prepared to enter the main house when he heard a blood curdling scream.

The captain rushed up the house, taking the stairs two at a time, and

heading to the top part of the house where he heard the scream. His team followed closely behind, watching the group's sides and sweeping their flanks for any signs of movement.

James stopped when he reached the top of the stairs, holding a fist up. Jackson and Pierre stopped behind him. Lee made a series of hand gestures, before dropping to a crouch. His squadmates did the same, and the group formed a triangle, rifles out, watching all points as they quietly moved down the hallway of the farmhouse.

The house was small; the second floor little more than a pair of rooms at opposite ends of a narrow hallway. One of the doors was askew, and the group made their way to that end of the hallway first.

Captain James quietly opened the door, rifle ready. What he wasn't ready for was what was inside.

The room inside defied all logic. Not merely in an exaggerated figurative sense, but the size of the room was easily larger than most of the rest of the house. Moreover, where the rest of the house was a dust-covered abandoned shell, the room inside was a gigantic bedroom.

It was one James had seen before, two years ago, but not at this size, and certainly not in this location. The pattern on the wallpaper was soft yellow ducks on a light green, and the carpet was covered in the scattered toys of a typical young boy, exactly in the places that he had remembered them being before.

The light came in eerily through the windows, and Lee heard the sound of a steady pitter patter of rain on the window, even though it had been sunny and clear when they first entered the house. He noticed the time on the clock by the bed.

8:36 PM.

Just the way it had been before.

Hung and Thomas's bodies were sprawled on the ground, twisted in unnatural angles and so still that James knew they were dead on sight. Melissa had been smashed into a wall and was lying in a pool

of rapidly spreading blood.

The captain closed his eyes, knowing that if the anomaly wanted to kill him, it would have done so as soon as he entered the room. He avoided looking at the bodies of his squadmates, and instead tried to look for where the escapee could be.

“They tried to hurt me.”

A very small voice coughed when it finished, and Lee heard the sound of sniffling. He looked around for the sound of the voice, but he saw nothing.

“I’m scared.”

Then, he remembered where he had found it last time. James took his helmet off slowly and set his rifle down. He got on his hands and knees, motioning for his teammates outside to not move, and he crawled towards the giant children’s bed. Pulling out his flashlight, he shined it underneath.

In the light was a young child, dirty, disheveled, and still wearing a raggedy Foundation-issue jumpsuit. He blinked in the sudden bright light, and shivered, covering his grime-coated face, streaked through with tears.

“Mister….Mister….Lee.” The child sniffled.

“Hey there kiddo. How are you?” Captain Lee tried to look as reassuring as he could.

The child rubbed his eyes with his hands, sniffling again. The streaks of dirty tears rolling down his face smudged and only succeeded in making the child look even more sad.

“I-I’m scared. There’s lots of mean people around and I don’t want to go back to the big room.”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay buddy. I’m not going to take you back to the big room, I promise. We’re taking you home now.” Captain Lee quietly spoke, extending a hand for the little boy.

The child shied away, a sudden reaction that made Lee's heart leap into his throat and freeze for a moment. The boy hesitantly looked at the hand and then back to the captain's eyes.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The child slowly took James's hand, and he pulled the boy out gently, slowly, making sure to not startle the poor boy as he did. He lifted him into his arms carefully, and held him as the boy clung to him like a bear cub to its mother.

The door was 30 feet away. Not too far. Just a minute until he could reach it.

"I'm glad we're not going back, Mister Lee."

"I know you are buddy. We're going to bring you back to your home. Remember what home looks like?"

20 feet.

"Yeah." The boy sniffled again. "It was big and loud and fun, and it had all my toys. I never get any toys at the big room." The child wrinkled his nose, leaning against the steady, reassuring weight of the captain's arms.

10 feet. The captain slowed his breathing, and closed his eyes for a moment, steadying himself. Only 10 more feet until he was clear of the anomaly.

"What do you miss most about home?"

The child thought for a moment, and became so quiet for a moment that the captain's heart started doing calisthenics again.

"I miss my dog, Frog."

"Frog? What kinda name is that for a dog?" James laughed.

5 feet.

“I named him Frog ‘cuz I was really little when I did it and I didn’t know any better. I miss Frog a lot, how’d he always jump around and be really happy to see me.”

They were clear of the anomaly and back inside the house. James breathed out slowly.

“I’m sure Frog will be really happy to see you again.”

“He will. I miss Frog a lot.” The child smiled, thinking of happier memories as he wrapped himself around Lee’s body more.

“I bet you do, kiddo.” Lee closed his eyes, and his hand went to his belt.

“Mister Lee?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for taking me home.”

Captain James Lee shuddered as he patted the child’s back with one hand, drew his sidearm with the other, placed it against the boy’s head, and pulled the trigger.

Neutralization Report: SCP-5389

During an escape attempt by SCP-5389, the anomaly killed two Foundation field agents of Containment Team Beta-6, Privates Hung Nguyen and Thomas Blake, and crippled a third, Sergeant Melissa Jeffries. As per standard operating procedures, Captain James Lee was forced to neutralize SCP-5389. Lee has been awarded a Meritorious Commendation for his actions in preventing the escape of a hostile anomaly as well as his quick thinking, which allowed him to prevent further loss of life.

Additionally, Captain Lee has requested and been granted a round of Class B amnestics for personal use.

Magic Orientation

"Hello. Thank you all for coming. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Dr. Tilda David Moose. I am the director of Site-19.

"I'm here to — pardon my colloquial tone — I'm here to talk to you about magic.

"I'm not a very good speaker. Just letting you know that up front. If it were up to me, someone else would be standing here. So let's start this with some questions. Just raise your hands like you're back in school. Easiest way, don't you think? I — Oh. That's… that's too many hands. Alright, you in front, go ahead.

"No, this isn't an orientation for Mobile Task Force Sigma-3. Sigma-3 is a task force that doesn't exist. It doesn't hold 'orientations.' I think they had **one orientation**, ever, and that was when they were created. If you're here from Sigma-3 and you think you need an orientation, your superiors haven't been doing their jobs. Next question?

"I thought I said don't ask me questions about — okay, fine. She just asked why everyone here is from Sigma-3. First answer, it's not everyone. More… two-thirds of you. I see at least a dozen are high-ranking members of Tau-9, the Bookworms. Some of you are clearance 4 researchers who've just been read into this program, at least three of you are new directors, and some of you are… 'spooks'. Not saying who, of course. Just have fun wondering about that. Anyway.

"Very, very few people in the Foundation are allowed to know anything about magic. This is… by far the largest number of people I've ever spoken to about this. I guess what with everything that's been happening recently, the Overseers want more people, ah… knowing what's going on.

"Yes, okay, ask your question. — His question was — what exactly

is 'Sigma-3'?

"In that case, I have a question, too. How the hell does anyone in here not know what Sigma-3 is? You should've been sent material on… right, great, still in the process of declassification. I see. I take it back, I suppose.

"Okay. We'll start with what we call "the anomalous community." Give you the lay of the land. How the world works, out there in the shadows. I'll explain how our Groups of Interest fit into this. I'll tell you about the Wanderers' Library. And, yeah, I'll explain a little bit about Sigma-3. In between, we'll have breaks, so you don't hate me too much.

"I assume you all already know this, but… There may be about a hundred of you in here, tonight. Still, you are a fraction of the Foundation's population. We're going to keep it that way. Anything you hear from me, *anything*, is not to be discussed with anyone who's not read into this program. On pain of death. Probably.

<clears throat>

"Finally, I'm going talk to you about magic.

"Don't panic. No, you're not hallucinating. There has been no containment breach, and, I promise, there are no drugs in your coffee.

"I am quite simply talking to you in the color blue.

"This is because I am what they call a "mage". Or, if you like, a "Type Blue"… or "a witch". This is stuff we can do. It's, well — magic. Trivial magic, but magic nonetheless.

<clears throat>

"But I'm not going to talk about magic quite yet. Give me just a moment, and we'll get started."

"Right. I said I'd talk to you about Mobile Task Force Sigma-3, "The Bibliographers". The boring name is on purpose.

"Let me preface this. I'm not in Sigma-3. I only consult. I did induct a few of you myself a couple years ago, but I don't do that anymore. Yes, I see you, Agent Navarro, stop waving. As I was saying, since I'm not in Sigma-3, this will be the short version.

"Sigma-3 is a Foundation task force which deals directly with the anomalous community. On friendly terms, or at least as friendly as we can manage. If this sounds ridiculous to you, good. Means we haven't had any leaks.

"Originally, Sigma-3 was one of the Task Forces that took part in the failed invasion of the Wanderers' Library, three or four decades back. It was the only one left mostly… intact. Afterwards, it was reformed and repurposed by order of O5 Command.

"They are not a paramilitary task force. Nor are they a containment team. They are the product of our superiors being very, very concerned about the idea that the Foundation might miss out on some important things — world-ending things — simply because we are so isolated from the anomalous world.

"Even with the invasion of the Library… if we had sources within the anomalous community, and if the task forces, or at least their leaders and the people doing the planning for them, had been cleared to know what we *did* already know about the Library — then the operation could have gone significantly differently.

"As it was, the Library incursion involved no people who had even *heard* of the Library before the op began. It was too highly classified, and we didn't have any direct sources, people who'd been in there long enough to seriously know what it was like.

"We still don't even know what happened when we went into the Library. The memories of everyone who went in were different. Even our existing recordings — actual audiovisual footage — directly contradict each other. Some of the survivors don't remember even going in at all.

"What we know for certain is that even now there are still Foundation members left behind in the Library, imprisoned beyond our reach. Beyond any reach. And that this was completely

preventable.

"But I'll get back to the Library.

"We have always had some sources in the anomalous community. We have a long history of cooperating with the Global Occult Coalition, which is far more part of the anomalous world than we are. We also created Mobile Task Force Tau-9 — the Bookworms — to deal with anomalies related to the Library, the Hand, and 'magic', in a more traditional manner.

"But that could only take us so far. Command decided we needed ears on the ground.

"Originally, Sigma-3 did not make use of any direct anomalous means. In recent years, this has… changed. There are people who are actual, practicing magicians in this very room, members of Sigma-3. People who are anartists. People who do double duty for organizations like Marshall, Carter, and Dark, the Serpent's Hand, and other anomalous organizations.

"And they've had results. Sigma-3 has contained a high number of actively dangerous anomalies that could not have been secured without cooperation with more benign anomalous entities. There are at least three dozen SCP objects which Sigma-3 contained directly that I'm aware of. And more that Sigma-3 acquired at least some information for.

"I'm not allowed to name most of them tonight, because not all of you are on Sigma-3 and cleared to know that. But just from SCPs I've worked on as project lead… Sigma-3 helped locate **SCP-003**, the first SCP object I was assigned to, through a remote viewing operation coordinated with outside sources of information from the Wanderers' Library. Sigma-3 also discovered and acquired **SCP-472** through contacts in the anomalous community.

"On a larger scale, Sigma-3 helped prevent a direct, coordinated assault against the Foundation about a decade ago, after Incident Zero — an assault that would've crushed us, and that's almost impossible given the Foundation's size and defenses. I can't tell you the exact number of times that Sigma-3 has literally saved the world,

but I can tell you it's in the plural.

"In exchange, Sigma-3 is set apart from other Foundation task forces. They do not aid in the containment of any anomalous entities, not even indirectly, unless it's done with the cooperation or members of the anomalous community.

"This is where many people stop, and raise hell. This is worse, to them, than even task forces like Omega-7 or Alpha-9. Those task forces use or used anomalous entities — but this task force actively shields certain anomalous entities from containment! Worse — sometimes Sigma-3 even makes deals which allow anomalous entities to go free.

"This goes against the fundamental ethos of the Foundation, they say. And maybe they're not wrong. But as things stand now, the Foundation is not capable of simply containing every anomaly out there in the wild. Until that time, Sigma-3 has proven its worth. What good is our ethos if we don't have a world to protect?

"Let me get colloquial again. Sigma-3 are the people whose job it is to know if some cultists are summoning Cthulhu. Generally, their friends and neighbors don't want the world to end. But maybe they can't really do much to stop it. But we can. They have the knowledge. We have the resources.

"They may not know we're Jailors… er, members of the Foundation, but when Cthulhu's involved, they don't mind telling someone who knows someone who knows someone else who can call in one of our bigger Mobile Task Forces and bust some heads. And save the world.

"Not that I'm saying Cthulhu really exists… if It does, then you're not cleared to know about it. Just an example.

"I think we're due another break. Come back in twenty and we'll talk about the, ah, so-called 'anomalous community.'

"Alright. The 'anomalous community'. What's that mean?

"The anomalous community makes up all the people in the world

whose lives involve the anomalous. People of all types imaginable. A patchwork of individual communities, totalling a few hundred thousand people worldwide.

"That's probably more than you'd guess, but so it goes — and another reason why Sigma-3 is necessary. These are all people who are aware of, and often are exposed to, the anomalous world. For some of them, it's part of their daily life.

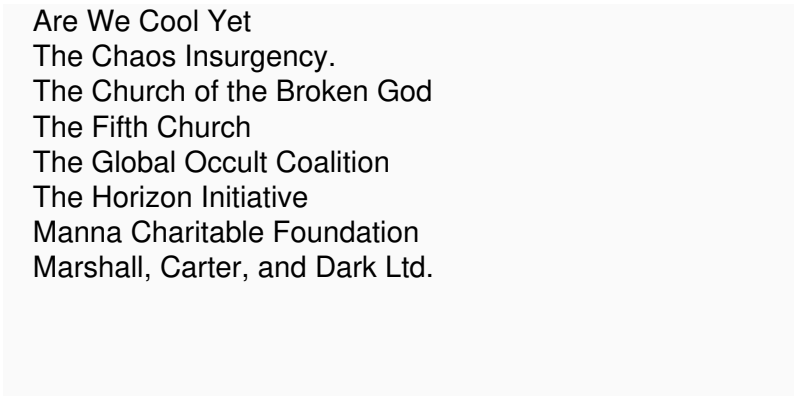
"Many of them have access to the Wanderers' Library, and most of them have heard of it. Many are involved in the so-called anart community. Many are involved with the Global Occult Coalition and the Serpent's Hand.

"Even the Foundation itself has roots in the anomalous community, from a very long time ago, if you listen to some of the stories — no, that's not an official statement, I'm only repeating rumors. Take them as you will.

"How many actually have anomalous capability? Well, that's an open question. A distinct minority are low-level Type Blues, who can do little tricks or learn a few spells out of books. Mages, witches, magicians, soothsayers, etcetera. People like… well, me, before I defected to the Foundation.

"When we catch these people, we don't usually classify them as SCPs. The ones we've kept are mostly classified as anomalous items. Sigma-3 handles a good number of them.

"In terms of GOIs in the anomalous community… well, technically, they all are part of the anomalous community, in some way. But the bigger ones are… let me get this slide working.



Office For The Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts
Oneiroi Collective
Sarkic Cults
The Serpent's Hand
Unusual Incidents Unit (UIU)

"As you can see, that's… most of 'em. A-W-C-Y, the Insurgency, the Fifthists, and the Sarkicists are more… fringe. Technically, so is the Church of the Broken God, but the so-called 'Devout' are far more accepted in the anomalous community than you might think, except by Horizon allies.

"Manna, Horizon, and ORIA are 'initiatives' within the anomalous community, I guess you'd call them. MC&D is just what you think it is — the rich people in the anomalous community are mostly all part of it or associated with it. And Oneiroi… gods only know what the Oneiroi are, so… I won't speculate.

"Then we have the two biggest ones — the Coalition and the Hand.

"We have a reputation, too. People who don't sign on with the GOC, and even some of those, call us Jailors. But the Coalition gets called 'Bookburners'. So… it could be worse.

"About the Insurgency — people outside the Foundation don't view it the same as we do. We see them as… well, insurgents, half-crazy defectors from the Foundation who want to destroy everything for who knows what reason.

"The anomalous community sees the Insurgency as a movement, more akin to the Sarkic Cults than anything else. A movement to remake the world, with strong religious overtones, despite the Insurgency's professed atheism. People who want to become gods. Destructive beyond reason, and crazier even than the people who want to summon dark gods.

"Actually, even the people who want to summon dark gods tend to think of the Insurgency as going too far. They're popularly referred to as "the Sowers of Discord" and "the Madmen". Keep in mind these are literal death cults calling them that. The Insurgency won't be winning any popularity contests anytime soon, which is probably

why they haven't… no, I digress. That's classified.

"Let's talk the Hand and the Coalition.

"The **Global Occult Coalition** is the Big Brother of the anomalous community. They're the cops, and the executioners. They have 108 member organizations, all of them anomalous in some way, all of them shielded from us by the Coalition.

"The Coalition cares a lot about maintaining the so-called Masquerade — they wish to preserve normalcy just as much as we do. But we aren't part of the anomalous community — and they are. Generally, all the respectable members of the anomalous community, or those in high society, are on board with the Coalition.

"They're called 'Bookburners' because, after their formation after the Seventh Occult War — around World War II — they essentially enacted a hostile takeover of the anomalous community. Either you signed on with the Coalition — with Big Brother — or you got crushed.

"Some elements of the Coalition got on the wrong side of the Library… and they were mystically barred from it, ever after. Just like us. Ironically, even though they crossed the Library first, they were acting on information they got from us… but that's a story for another time.

"Suffice to say, many Coalition members are still spitting mad about losing their Library access; I suspect it caused the Coalition to tamp down many of their activities. Them being barred made it a lot easier for people who hated the Coalition to go underground. All they needed to do was get into the Library.

"**The Serpent's Hand** is sort of the yin to the Coalition's yang. The Hand are a movement springing from opposition to the Coalition's whole… Big Brother thing. And to the idea of containing or suppressing the anomalous community.

"They're the radical activists of the anomalous community… but also the ordinary people who don't take to their equivalent of Big Government. The Hand takes all types, anyone who wants to join.

So there's a lot of decent folk and a lot of death cultists, too. There's heavy overlap between the Hand and the fringe communities, obviously, plus movements, like religious cults — or the occasional full-blown religion, like the Church of the Broken God — and anartist groups.

"Hand types tend to dislike us, too, but they like us better than the Coalition, because we try not to kill people. This is also why Sigma-3 can exist.

"Full disclosure: I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand. I got into it through a college organization. Spent a few years in it before defecting to the Foundation. It's how I became a Type Blue — a magician.

"Not answering questions about my incredibly interesting history, sorry. But I'll talk about the magician part in a bit. Right now, I think it's time for another break."

"What is the Wanderers' Library? Most of you have probably heard of it, and know it's, um, a library, and that the Serpent's Hand uses it and we… don't.

"…And that's about it.

"The Wanderers' Library is a library containing almost every book every written, and many that haven't been written yet, and many that will never be written.

"We've got some footage for this. Give me a second to cue it up.

"Alright, more than a second. Gonna … keep talking.

"We won't be showing you the outside of the Library because as far as we know, no one has ever seen it. The Library is a place outside space. "Extradimensional" is the technical term, though not very descriptive. The Library isn't on our world, though it's connected to it.

"You reach it through Ways. Ways are a network of… basically magic portals that take you from one place to another. They're scattered around the world. The Foundation contains a number of

them, mostly classified as anomalous items — a few networks are classified as SCPs.

"The Library is a nexus of Ways. The largest one on Earth. A Way that connects to the Library is called a Door, because they attach to doors within the Library. Pretty simple.

"Using the Ways isn't so simple. Okay, some of them are. Each has a trick to it, to make it work. Some of them you just need to be invited in. Others require some ritual — sneeze on a shadow, recite a code-word, befriend a fairy, follow your pet cat, kill a sheep, play the harmonica as you walk through a doorway. Sometimes these are called Knocks.

"A Way can be anything you can picture as a door. Or anything like a door. A cave, an archway, the back of a truck. Technically, every shadow or mirror could be a Way, just not a useful Way. Some of them are just art pieces — I once used a picture of a door to enter the Library, back when I still could. Some of them are corridors between the stars.

"They're more common than you'd think, too. At least a few in every major city. We know the locations of a few, but we know that many more exist.

"If someone from the Foundation or the Global Occult Coalition tries to use Ways, they either don't work, or the Library redirects them into … dangerous places. Other planets. Barren, hostile lands. Outer space. Someone reported that one literally opened into Hell — you can take that for whatever you think it's worth. More commonly, though, they just funnel us into the Library Archives and make us into Librarians.

"I'll explain that in a moment — we've got the footage working.

<The footage shows two women and one man, walking through a forest. One woman wears a skimpy Godzilla costume. The other woman wears full plate armor. The man is dressed in a red costume covered with plastic flames.>

"So this is a fairly typical — Question? — Why the costumes? Oh —

this particular Way requires you to dress up as something you're not. So… cosplaying. These are our agents, by the way. In plainclothes. Er… I guess not… plainclothes.

"Godzilla is Agent Jones. The knight is Agent Liu. The last one's here today — Agent Navarro. The one in the, um, flaming outfit. Say hi to everyone, Agent Navarro. You know you want to.

<The footage shows the three agents walking between two trees which have grown closely together. As they pass between the trees, they vanish into thin air. The footage cuts out.>

"Anyway. These are three of our members of Sigma-3 who *can* access the Library. Out of the entire Foundation, generally only members of Sigma-3 can get into the Library — and only some of them can, at that.

"We think the Library has some way of knowing who's going to use the Library to target its patrons — and not just in the present, but in the future. Yeah, the Library seems to have some limited ability to see the future. How? Your guess is as good as mine.

"This is, by the way, why Sigma-3 doesn't help the rest of the Foundation contain people in the Library. If they did that, they'd simply be kicked out. And then we'd lose our 'in' to one of the most important anomalous locations in the world.

<The footage resumes. It shows Agents Jones, Liu, and Navarro, now in ordinary clothing, standing in a huge hall, surrounded by massive shelves of books, going up, skyscraper-high, too high to see the top. In the hallway are many tables, and many people — well over a hundred, at least. As the footage plays on, it becomes obvious that not all of the people in the lobby are human. One person passes in front of the camera — their face is blue and covered in spikes. A thirty-foot-tall walking carpet sits down at a nearby table, with a book in each of its three tails.>

"This is the main hall of the Library. It's… even bigger than it looks. This is actually a pretty empty day — usually there's at least a few hundred people around at any given time. And it can hold thousands just as comfortably.

"Spaces are deceiving, in the Library. For example, in the main hall, it takes half a day to reach the back walls… yet the space you've crossed is at least the size of a continent.

"Oh, and that's just the main hall. The Library has many wings. Some of them are small — only the size of a city. It just goes up from there. Some of them are actually built into forests and some of them of them have their own skies…

<As the footage continues, Agent Navarro appears to try to converse with a robed humanoid figure. The figure has no mouth. Where its left hand should be, there's a chain connected to a glowing brass lantern.>

"…Ah yes. That is a Librarian. Yeah, that one has no mouth.

"This is because being a Librarian is a punishment. Usually. There are a few voluntary Librarians, and they look particularly strange. But we won't be seeing those on this recording.

"The ones with no mouths are Docents. They guide people through the Library and… enforce the rules of the Library. They are scary as hell — just one can take out one of our paramilitary squads all on its own, with ease. When they've been involved in containment breaches, which has been incredibly, incredibly rare, the damage has been massive. And they're not even the Library's biggest defenses.

"The other two common Librarians are Archivists and Pages. You can see some of the Archivists in the background of this shot here — they're at the large desks to the left. They are attached to their chairs — they have no legs. And you can't see it from this angle, but they have no eyes. Don't need them to read, apparently. And —

<Something like a human spider scuttles across one of the shelves above Agent Liu's head. She doesn't seem startled.>

"—that's a Page. They take care of the books directly. I've never seen one touch the ground.

"All of these used to be people. Most of them were human. Now,

they're not.

"See, the Library has rules. Don't damage books, don't steal books, return books on time. Don't damage the Library. And don't harm those within the Library.

"If you break rules too egregiously, you are forcibly made into a Librarian. And… yes. A number of Foundation agents are trapped in the Library right now, serving out sentences as Librarians. Given the nature of their offenses… if we're lucky, they'll get out in a few hundred years.

"Question in the back. No. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do for them. We don't even know which Librarians they are. Ah — more questions — alright, let's pause the footage.

<The footage pauses, as Agent Jones appears to be flirting with a floating, regal-looking mermaid, surrounded by a stack of green books floating in orbs of water.>

"Alright. More questions. You in the, um, shirt, go ahead.

"Can we use Sigma-3 to retrieve books from the Library? Um, no, not as such. First, the Library already has its eye — metaphorically, I assume — on us. If we start making plans like that, even seriously start entertaining them, we might lose access to the Library. We have to rely on whatever information can be filtered through our Sigma-3 agents. Whatever they can film, copy down, etcetera. Believe me, that's better than nothing.

"Second, I haven't yet talked about Library Cards.

"To check out books, to take them out of the Library, you need to have a Library Card. The Library gets a copy and you get a copy. On that Card is a magical signature that counts as your True Name.

"For the majority of you who don't get the significance of that — we don't have time to get into the True-Naming business, but what that means is, anyone with that Card can cast spells on you as if you're willing. They can do nearly anything to you if they're good enough, and the Library certainly is.

"Library Cards also confer the protection of the Library, to a certain extent. Killing Card-holders is part of why the Global Occult Coalition got kicked out of the Library — they were smart enough not to kill anyone in the Library directly, though they did end up killing — sorry, I digress.

"Point is, the Coalition used the Library to monitor 'dissidents' and execute them once they left. And you can't cheat the Library.

"I bring that up as another reminder: this is why Sigma-3 cannot, ever, help the rest of the Foundation contain anomalies using the Library. We can get death cults and suchlike because they're also targeting other Library members and because other Library members are helping us do so, but even then, we have to be cautious.

"Let's keep going.

<The footage resumes. Navarro, Jones, and Liu head past more massive, endless shelves, and walk into an atrium. There's a coffee-house set up incongruously on the edge of a field of wildflowers. People perch laptops atop stacks of books. Liu gestures animatedly at an empty blue "couch" that looks like it was designed for something much larger than a human, and probably with a different limb arrangement.>

"Another question — Does the Library have free Wifi? Okay, I know you're joking, but the answer is actually yes. The Library has almost anything you can think of. People can live their entire lives in the Library — they typically don't, but it's possible.

<A massive, towering behemoth lumbers into view. Like a cross between a sauropod dinosaur and a kraken. Its many eyes fix on each small humanoid in turn as it passes, blotting out whatever strange light source emanates from the top of the Library atrium. Its eyes seem to fix for an especially long time on Jones, Navarro, and Liu, but then it passes onwards, vanishing through an archway that's much too small for it to fit under.>

"…And that… is one of the Library's bigger defenses. This one didn't appear when we invaded. Worse things did. It might be some kind of

Librarian, it might be something else. Who knows?

"They call it the Elephant God, even though it's not much like an elephant. The size, I guess.

<The footage ends, as the three Foundation agents gawk at the monster's disappearing tails.>

"And that's all we have for today. Keep in mind, all this is only a fraction of the Library. The parts that can easily be accessed from Earth. The Library has what they call Archives, which include the inner workings of the Library, as well as the wings of the Library where humanoids like us don't visit.

"None of the Sigma-3 agents who can get into the Library have access to the Archives. Library doesn't like us enough. But we have people working with us who can go there. A very few, mind you. The Archives are not entered lightly. They have a manticore in there.

"And… the Archives are where things really went sideways when the Foundation forced their way into the Library. The strange-ways, the Boiler Rooms, the guards on the Roots, the… I'm sorry. It's hard to talk about some… aspects of this place without… sounding like you're speaking fairy-tale. Anyway, like I said, no one really knows what happened when the Foundation tried to take the Library.

"Alright. I really, really, need a break. So let's all have dinner, and then come back for our final discussion — about magic."

"Welcome back. I hope you had a great dinner. Or… whatever you did. I'm not here to judge.

"So. Magic.

"Anyone who can perform magic on a consistent, sustained basis is a Type Blue. Colloquially, a mage, a witch, a magician, whatever.

"The term, Type Blue, the Foundation lifted from the Global Occult Coalition. The Coalition classifies humanoids with anomalous capability using colors. We at the Foundation mostly use their terms for Green and Blue. Green is reality bender. Blue is magician.

"Before coming here, some of you read transcripts of **a lecture** given to new Global Occult Coalition operatives about 'applied thaumotology.' Magic, in other words. The rest of you will have access to some of those transcripts after this session.

"Your higher-ups want you to read these because new GOC trainees still start off reading those, even though they're decades old and some of the information is… I would quibble with its presentation. The important thing is that you know half the baseline our competition has started from.

"I'm here to give you the viewpoint of the other half. You already know that I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand.

"You in the back, who raised her hand when I mentioned the Coalition transcripts?

"For anyone who didn't catch that question, she just asked about 'that Hogwarts shit.' She wasn't joking, no. 'Hogwarts' is the, ahem, International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology.

"It's not exactly Hogwarts, more a university focused exclusively on research, but… yes, it is on some level a school for wizards. Depending on your definition of 'wizard'.

"Why haven't we contained and shut them down? Well, remember what I told you about Sigma-3. But, sure, we don't need to use Sigma-3 for that. The real answer is that the Center is protected by the Global Occult Coalition, among other things, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that attacking it could trigger World War Three.

"Something I need to keep reminding people. We're here to secure, contain, protect, not to blow everything into the daylight just to make sure we possess every paranatural artifact on Earth.

"Either way, it's not up to us; we're to leave the Center alone by order of the O5 Council. But yes, it exists, as part of the anomalous community. No, I don't think Foundation members can attend.

"The Hand and the GOC have a number of Type Blues in their

ranks. With the Foundation… officially, we have no Type Blues. There are no Foundation magicians. Of course, you know that's not true. Still, we have only a few, and almost every Type Blue Foundation member is associated with Sigma-3.

"But all that aside.

<clears throat>

"You want to know how I could talk to you in blue.

"Well, it's not especially easy. I did a few rituals before coming here so I could do this a few times on cue. All with the permission of our higher-ups in the Foundation — yes, there are people higher than me, of course there are. I'm only a Director.

"Point is, any and all magic that any of you will be performing will be done under strictest supervision, unless you're out in the field and need to blend in. All of it will be done in the service of the Foundation.

"One of you asked me a question when you were supposed to be having dinner. Ze wanted to know: why can we talk about Type Greens — reality benders — when we can't talk about Type Blues?

"Some of you have already guessed the answer. The truth — the truth that none of you are to repeat in mixed company, certainly not to anyone else in the Foundation — is that anyone can become a Type Blue.

"Anyone can become a magician. Anyone can learn to perform magic. Many of you are going to at least attempt to learn. Most will not succeed, but it is *possible* for any of you to succeed.

<clears throat>

"That gets a little wearing after a while. And a couple of you look ill. Sorry about that.

"Anyway. Anyone can become a Type Blue, but there are some caveats. The first is sometimes called Potential. At least, it was called that when I was a member of the Hand.

"A few people get Potential through their genetics, but 99.9% of the population is born with a Potential of nothing. After that, whether you get Potential is like whether you get cancer. There are about a million factors. Some of it's how you think. Some of it's how you do or don't fit into society. Some of it's your kind of intelligence. And sometimes there is no identifiable cause.

"Generally, if you want to become a magician — a Type Blue — you first figure out what your Potential is. What life's given you. If you're lucky, you'll find an established magic tradition that suits you. If you're very lucky — by which I mostly mean, you're a Type Blue already and didn't know it — you can just go ahead and start practicing. Otherwise, you have to take a good, long hard look at yourself.

"Because becoming a magician is hard. It takes a lot out of you, something different from every person. It usually requires some kind of sacrifice.

"Question? Go ahead.

"No, I don't mean a blood sacrifice, necessarily. Even in the anomalous community, that is very much not socially acceptable. When I say sacrifice, I mean… physically, emotionally, spiritually. It's different for everyone.

"Why a sacrifice? Because it's about perspective. Not just your perspective. But the perspective of others, on you. The perspective of reality. It's about changing how the World sees you. How you see and interact with the universe.

"You're confused. That's understandable. Let me try to rephrase. Becoming a magician is all about discovering and altering your metaphysical place in the world.

"This can be temporary, or permanent. Temporary is easiest. Most people can create a really minor Working, or a spell. Serpent's Hand members often start with making blue lily flower chains.

"Then they follow a really complicated set of instructions that, with the right materials and mindset, as well as membership of the

Serpent's Hand, produce temporary Potential inside them, which they then use to Work the flower chains, to add magic to them. Anomalous effects.

"Those effects are different for everyone. It's impossible to try to make every Type Blue make a luck charm, because almost everyone who doesn't believe in luck will reliably fail it, except, oddly, actual statisticians, who know what it would take to create actual luck. Point is, it's not directly predictable what any one person can and can't do.

"Let's have some more demonstrations. At this point, you've all heard me talk in blue. Let's see what someone else can do. Agent Navarro?

"What do you mean, no one told you in advance you'd need to put on a show? I'm telling you now. You up for it, or not?

"I thought so. Alright, everyone who doesn't know, this is Agent Daniel Navarro. Agent Navarro is a former anartist, and like me, he is a Type Blue.

<Director Moose hands Agent Navarro a slip of paper, and a knife.>

"Whenever you're ready, Agent Navarro.

<Agent Navarro glares at Director Moose. After a moment, Navarro picks up the knife, and, with a dramatic gesture, slices across his left palm. A burst of iridescent fire blazes up from the wound. Navarro holds up the fire in his hand. It whirls and twists in the dimmed room.>

"Agent Navarro was born a Type Blue. He discovered his talent when he tried smoking as a child and got an… unusual result. He discovered the blood magic aspect of his talent through resources in the Wanderers' Library.

<Navarro conjures more bubbling bursts of iridescent fire, and begins juggling. A few people cheer in the audience.>

"Alright, that's enough, Navarro, you're getting blood everywhere. Sit back down. Someone get him a bandage.

"Go ahead, you in the back.

"Ah yes. I mentioned magic traditions. I'm actually quoting a Dr. Everett Mann, here, who's done some interesting thaumotology studies for us: Magic is *magic.* The Coalition are generally taught the same basic framework for magic, stuff like hue and backlash and all that. The Hand tend to be less consistent, go more into really esoteric stuff.

"There are many, many traditions, and almost no universals. Unless you're talking rituals and such which are made to work for anyone, Potential is different for different kinds of magic. One Old European pagan tradition may work for you, and another originating from less than fifty miles away may not. And people like Agent Navarro don't even have a "tradition" in any real sense, just "some stuff that works".

"I mentioned Navarro was born a Type Blue. I was not born a Type Blue. I became a magician another way.

"I was talking about Potential, right? Well, to do anything serious, you can't get by on temporary Potential. It has to be permanent. And that means you become a Type Blue.

"Let's be clear, here — that means you become an anomalous humanoid, even if it's in a way that's nearly invisible. Agent Navarro and I? Anomalous humanoids. You might say, well, if we never performed magic again, we'd be indistinguishable from normal, too, right? Well, no. Beyond our… anomalous capability, there's a type of anomalous radiation associated with being a mage. The GOC have scanners that can visually read this — so do we, actually, though we don't usually use them in the field. The GOC color-code this type of radiation blue. Hence, Type Blue.

"So how do you become a Type Blue?

"You have to shift your perspective on the world.

"You know that Center we mentioned? The GOC-protected magic school? They have a standing 50 million prize for anyone who can identify a reliable, universal, standardized process for becoming a

Type Blue. No one will ever win it because you can't just *make* people reliably, universally shift their perspective on the world.

"Almost everyone in the world is capable of doing it — but almost everyone in the world is capable of cutting off their left hand. How many people are actually going to do that? Especially if it might not even do anything for you, because little did you know you needed to lose an eye?

"Becoming a mage isn't always as awful as that… but for some people, it's worse.

"There are three major avenues to becoming a mage. Some of them are acceptable to members of Sigma-3. Most are not. I hope that which is which will be obvious.

"Let's start with the easy way.

"This is to just hang out around magic. Simple exposure. People with high Potential, or outright Type Blues. Wearing magical jewelry. Creating minor Workings. Becoming a member of a magically-inclined organization, or a cult of some eldritch deity.

"A big thing is spending time in a magic-saturated environment, like the Wanderers' Library — or Sigma-3's training facilities, with Sigma-3 members who are Type Blues. This is one principle of magic, beyond the scope of what we have time for today: like affects like, and like *produces* like, too.

"Do this long enough, and if you're lucky, you'll become a Type Blue. Many people aren't lucky.

"The second way, done alongside the first way, is to forcibly, drastically, change who you are as a person. Move countries. Change religions. Re-address your sexuality, see if you can find some suppressed aspects. Alter your mind directly with anything from spells to amnestics. Scarification and tattoos are common. Give birth to a child, raise the child. Yes, even becoming a parent changes your Potential and the nature of who you are.

"Either way, the idea is to give something up. Sacrifice, as I said. It's

simplest to give up 'who you are'. Often this is the most appealing option, more appealing than it might sound. After all, you might end up a better person, when all is said and done, and a better person who can perform magic.

"For the desperate, this method includes making a bargain with a powerful anomalous entity. However, even in the anomalous community, this is rarer than you might think, because most of these entities are predatory. Many will take everything a person values and give little to nothing in return.

"But there is no real limit to what you can give up. These are dangerous waters. One may sacrifice body parts, loved ones, pieces of their life, their future… and in some cases, that's even worked out in the magician's favor. Well, not for sacrificing loved ones. I hope I don't need to tell you all that sacrificing loved ones for magical power is never worth it, not even in practical terms.

"The third and final way is to change the world, or wait for the world to change.

"Of all of these avenues of gaining supernatural power, this runs the most counter to the goals of the SCP Foundation. Yes, even more so than sacrificing loved ones. We want to preserve normalcy. The world can certainly change on its own terms, but the Foundation doesn't want the world to be forced to change by anomalous means.

"The Serpent's Hand does want to change the world. And to some extent, though you won't hear most of us in the Foundation admit this, they've succeeded. While we don't have exact numbers, we know for a fact that there are more Type Blues today than there were fifty years ago. More than there were ten years ago. At least some of this can be attributed to the recent swelling in the ranks of the Hand.

"The Chaos Insurgency also understands this. This is why they wish to change the world, to their liking — that's why they're *called* the Chaos Insurgency. It's not just a cartoon supervillain name. I mean, it is that, but it's also a statement of purpose.

"Sigma-3 only works with factions of the Hand who do not want the

world to change, at least not to the extent that the Insurgency does. They may want more Type Blues in the world than we do — they may want to eventually break the Masquerade — and we don't want that, and we can't and won't help them with that, but they still want the world intact. Like we do.

"There are a lot of dangerous things out there, some of them people, some of them far beyond people, who have immense motivation to change our world for their own benefit.

"They're the worst of the things out there who want to drag us all back into the dark. In most cases they aren't even evil. They just want to rearrange the anthills to make themselves the new queen.

"Hopefully now you understand why a little better — this is the only thing we *can* understand about some of those… things, because they're unknowable in every other way.

"There's another side to all of this. The ultimate reason why all this Type Blue stuff has to be kept secret, and why we in the Foundation can't just become a cult of magicians.

"If the entire Foundation embraced magic — if every researcher or MTF agent took advantage of the power, the real, significant power that magic has to offer — if everyone outside of Sigma-3 all became Type Blues like me — then our perspective on the world would change. And if that happened, we might not be *able* to hold back dangers to reality any longer.

"Everyone at the Foundation, at a sufficiently high level, spends their time around anomalies. We contain them, and honestly very effectively even with the odds so strongly against us, with science and concrete. The vast majority of our containment procedures — with exceptions made only when strictly necessary — are non-anomalous in nature. You could say that we believe in science and concrete.

"Can you imagine what would happen if we stopped believing? If we changed the way we saw the world? If everyone at the Foundation became mystics?

"It could be the end of containment, forever. The end of the Foundation's preservation of normalcy. And then we'd all be at the mercy of all the horrible things out there, the old gods and demons that would ensure humanity does nothing but huddle in caves around campfires and scratch on the walls, forever.

"Your mileage may vary on whether this is true. But let me be clear: your mileage is *only* allowed to vary within the specific context of Sigma-3. I say Sigma-3 because everyone else here already knows this. No one else in the Foundation is to be exposed to this perspective, or they might not be able to contain threats to our reality.

"This is also why most members of the Foundation don't even know magic is real. Sounds small. But it starts small. Say, a researcher fantasizes about casting Wingardium Leviosa, or an agent with an unfortunate romantic streak. And it ends with being unable to believe that Cthulhu can be contained behind sheets of steel and walls of stone.

"But it's not my job or your job to keep Cthulhu's containment from failing. That's the job of the rest of the Foundation. Your job is to do things the rest of the Foundation can't. Your job is to find out what everyone else knows about Cthulhu that we don't.

"We share their *perspective*. Something no one else in the Foundation can risk.

"In this way, we preserve the world, and serve the primary mission of the SCP Foundation, in a way no one else can.

"Any final questions? Okay. That's a lot of hands. I'll take just one for now.

"Ah, yes. You're right. I didn't tell you how I became a Type Blue.

"Well, I'm not going to go into detail. Let's just say, I took the second way. I made… sacrifices. Major sacrifices. Among other things, I deliberately did things to my own mind that I absolutely do not recommend.

"Many of my friends did similar things — some did worse — and failed. Some did not survive the experience. And I… I will never get back some of the things I gave up.

"Such is magic. Such is the anomalous world.

"But, even now, I can still do… something like… this…

<Director Moose takes out a small object and places it on her lectern. A small, carved moose figurine. She leans over, and whispers to it.>

<There is a gust of wind, coming from nowhere in the indoor hall, and a massive black, cloudy figure towers over the audience — the shape of a demonic moose, with antlers stretching across the ceiling, and many eyes, shining like coals from within the roiling mass. Someone screams.>

<The moose resolves into a cartoon of a frowning face with antlers, ruining the intimidating effect, then shifts and dissipates into smoke.>

<Director Moose leans against her lectern, looking strained. The moose figurine is gone. After a moment, she smiles.>

"Now you know how I became director of Site-19.

"…A joke. Just a little… joke.

"Right.

<clears throat>

"…That's enough for today. I'll take questions after an hour's break, from anyone who sticks around. Thank you all for coming, and… see you on the other side."

[Questions will eventually be answered here from the discussion page! But not quite yet.]

Another Good Dream, Another Strange Dream

← Previous | | **Hub** | | **Next** →

"Another good dream," Perseus mused as he approached Lilibeth on the porch. He was a fairly young man, but still leaned into a cane as he walked. Tugging at his hat and shoving a hand in the pocket of his tattered overcoat, he sat on the stoop and surveyed the city around him.

"What is this place?" he asked. Lilibeth smiled. She looked younger than the last time he had seen her; perhaps she was lost in her memories.

"This is my house," she said thoughtfully, "My husband's inside with Emily."

"You never told me you had a daughter."

"You never asked."

Perseus looked off into the distance, past the speeding cars and hurrying pedestrians and over the horizon of high-rise buildings. He thought for a moment, biting his lower lip and rubbing his temples with calloused hands.

"Can you tell me anything else about the cottage, Lilibeth?"

"Cottage?"

"We were talking about it last time we met."

Creases formed on the woman's forehead as her expression turned to one of confusion.

"Did we go skiing there once?"

They hadn't.

"No, no. You really don't remember? Must be one of those nostalgic dreams."

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Sometimes, I have these dreams about tunnels and gears," Lilibeth admitted, her voice hushed and contemplative. Perseus' eyes widened. He had seen the tunnels. Evidently, so had she.

"No, Lilibeth, listen, You are dreaming right *now*. *This* is the dream."

"Wait, really? Oh, crap, the cottage. 2508," Lilibeth exclaimed. She remembered everything.

"Don't get too excited; you'll wake yourself up."

"Dreaming. I'm having a lucid dream. So I guess that makes you my subconscious?"

"No. I've tried to explain it to you before, but it's not important right now. Just tell me, this cottage… is there a pump in the attic?"

"Yes."

"A plant in the basement?"

"Yes."

"And it glows sometimes?"

"In morse code, yes."

Perseus looked down at his feet and breathed a sigh of what Lilibeth assumed was relief. Then, with a sense of urgency, his eyes met with hers.

"Lilibeth, I don't have time to explain but I need you to find the bottom of those tunnels. You have to get to the bottom, and you have to find a librarian named Carina."

The cars on the road began picking up speed. People were running now.

"I don't understand. If I even believe you, then how did you get here if I'm just dreaming?"

"I'm well versed in the anomalous, Lilibeth. Where there's a will there's a Way."

Copper plating and metal pipes broke through the concrete. Cars spun out of control.

Lilibeth was no longer in the city. Everything was calm once more. It was early morning, and Lilibeth sat up in her bed to bask in the sunlight coming through the window. She looked around her bedroom, at the old dusty wood walls, and her lab-coat draped over her wardrobe. To her left was a window that peered out over the field and the hole that led to the tunnels. Next to it was her cobbled-together elevator, laying in the grass. Everything was as she left it. It was a morning just like hundreds of others at SCP-2508.

And yet, something was nagging her; that dream. She was accustomed to bizarre ones, but she wasn't sure what to make of this. Could, perchance, that man be as real as the blue-jay that now perched itself at her windowsill? Or the two squirrels that ran just outside the house, only to disappear amidst the tall grass of the field?

No. Of course not. Just another strange dream. She pushed the thought aside.

The possibility refused to leave her alone. She knew the idea was absurd. The fact was, a man in her dreams who is almost certainly a creation of her subconscious should not to be trusted. But, on the other hand, this cottage itself was absurd in nature. Lilibeth was just used to it by now, and as such the feeling had diminished somewhat over the years.

After filling up the pump in the attic, Lilibeth scoured the study for hours on end looking for any mention of this "Carina" woman Perseus had told her about. It was an arduous task that took the majority of the morning. There was so much to go through.

She found nothing, but hard pressed for answers, she wasn't ready to stop there.

Down she went in her elevator, into the depths of the dark tunnels once more. When she finally hit the grate flooring, she stepped out, surveyed the area, and paused. She did want to know if the structure had a bottom to it. It could be a venture all on its own, unrelated to the instructions given by Perseus, who most likely did not exist. If Lilibeth could cut open a section of flooring, and if she could procure enough rope, she could- in theory- lower the elevator further below the grate. She circled the elevator as she thought. Down the hallway, at the first T-junction, she could see two squirrels chasing each other. They ran off in the general direction of the gears, playing and chattering.

The idea wasn't without its drawbacks, though. The first dig had been dangerous enough. Lilibeth wanted some answers, and for the first time since she had arrived here she had found some sense of direction to look for them, but she didn't want them enough to die for them. If there were any signs of trouble, she would be hoofing it back to the surface. That much she promised herself, and in that moment, struck herself a deal.

The darkness beckoned.

Another Lost Legacy

September 13th, 2112
Siberia

> "We were lied to.
> Not just lied to, but the truth was hidden from us. The truth was destroyed, imprisoned, filed away.
> Now, that truth is coming back to destroy us."

"My great-grandfather said that to my great-grandmother when they had to leave for Sanctuary in the Time of Destruction. He lived in a city called Toccio, in the near south. He's the reason why I'm still alive. The reason why I still breathe, and why my children -you- still breathe."

"My great-grandfather, a man of legend, worked for a big group called the Esseepis, back when the world still made sense. He was an Empti-ef, a warrior who worked day and night to capture the Stranges that have already destroyed our world. But during that time, the world wasn't the one we live on now. Before, the Esseepis, as well as another group called the Gock, prevented these things from corrupting our world. They failed."

"When the Stranges broke out of the big buildings owned by the Esseepis, my great-grandfather was the only one who survived the destruction of the place he worked in, which released a great many more things into the world."

"During the Time of Destruction, when all Stranges had broken out of both the Esseepis' and the Gock's control, my great-grandfather led 501 other people into the snowy bastion we call Sanctuary. He fended off the darkness of the creatures, keeping the light out to scare them away."

"Now that I have covered our Clan's history, let me tell you of the two dueling powers of the past,"

"The Gock seeked to destroy all Stranges, whether they were good or bad. They unleashed the things that ushered in the Time of Destruction, and would regularly feud with the Esseepis for Stranges."

"The Esseepis, meanwhile, seeked to peacefully study all Stranges. Instead of destroying every evidence of the Strange truth like the Gock, the Esseepis imprisoned them, hiding the truth from the rest of humanity."

"Neither of these powers were good or bad. They both did equally bad things. The Gock created the start of the Time of Destruction, while the Esseepis unknowingly unleashed the creatures that sped it up and ensured the end."

Dylan opens his mouth again to speak, but is interrupted by the sound of screaming from outside the door. His eyes widen, and he rushes to the door, pressing his ear to the cold wood.

"Father?" Garry said, standing up from his chair to follow his father.

Dylan pressed his finger to his lips, signalling his son to stop talking. He was pale, and already droplets of sweat were running down his face, despite the fact that it was still in the middle of winter.

Come here, Dylan mouthed, beckoning his son to rush to his side.

"What is it, Father?" Garry said, the tone of his voice lowering to a barely audible whisper, just like the constant breeze of the wind. But Dylan could hear it nonetheless. Spending his entire life in the cold environment of the Sanctuary, learning to hunt and survive had kept his hearing intact.

Attack. Dylan removed the rifle slung around his shoulder and gave it to his son. It was the last of its kind that the Clan had, and was purely ceremonial. It had lost its use during the generation of Dylan's grandfather, when the storage room housing all of the Clan's ammunition was blown up by an encounter with a Searwinger, a humanoid bird made out of fire. "Keep this safe," Dylan whispered to his son, drawing the axe at his hip. "I'll be right back."

Slowly, Dylan opened the door, holding the sword in his left hand.

Strange attacks have been on the rise since we arrived at Sanctuary, Dylan thought as he journeyed down the corridor. He could hear the sound of the door slowly being shut behind him, ensuring the safety of his son. *Ancestors damn it, why did it have to be now, on the most sacred of days?*

He turned a corner, making sure to check the corridor ahead of him. He could hear the blood thumping in his ears, reminding him of his mission. *Keep Garry alive,* he thought. *Keep Garry alive.*

Just beyond the corner, a **`creature`** was hunched over a dead man. Dylan estimated it to be around 3 meters tall, with long gangly arms and a vaguely humanoid head.

Never seen this before, Dylan thought, getting ready to take the creature by surprise.

He emerged out into the hallway, getting ready to sprint and quickly take the creature down. He gripped the handle of the axe tightly, grasping it with both hands. *Keep Garry alive,* he repeated to himself. *Keep him alive.*

Dylan stood up, and started running on the concrete floor. His feet lightly pit-pattered on the ground, barely making any noise. When he was about 5 meters away from the creature, its tiny, humanlike ears perked up, but it was already too late.

Dylan raised the axe, neatly severing the creature's neck in half. Blood spurted in all directions from the creature's decapitated stump as it fell down on the dead man's body.

Dylan wiped the sweat from his forehead and returned the axe to its sheathe. *Keep Garry alive,* he thought to himself again. *Keep Garry alive.*

He ran back to the room where he last left Garry, knocking lightly with three taps.

Slowly, the door opened, and Dylan could see Garry's baby blue eyes, a trait he inherited from his mother, peek out from the gap.

"Father?" He whispered, fear etched into every single syllable.

"I'm here." Dylan answered, whispering back. "I killed the creature."

Garry emerged from behind the door, the rifle slung over his shoulder. "I'm glad," the boy said, smiling to his father. "Are there any more?"

"None, as far as I could see. I couldn't hear or see anything else."

"Good." Garry said, walking out into the hallway. "Have you seen anyone else, Father?"

"No," Dylan said, walking down the hallway, sword drawn. "They might have all went to the temple, held off the monsters there. It's Sanctuary Day, after all."

"I don't think they are, Father."

Dylan stopped immediately, turning around. "What?"

"We would've heard them fighting or talking. The temple is only a few dozen meters from here."

Realization dawned on Dylan's face. "No," he said, looking at his son. "They wouldn't get wiped out like that. Not on Sanctuary Day."

"I-" Garry stopped himself, hunching his shoulders. "I hope you are right, Father."

"I am right." Dylan said, trying hard to sound sure of himself. "Just see."

They journeyed further down the hallway. An uneasy silence permeated the halls, only interrupted by the soft steps of Dylan and Garry's winter boots.

Please don't let them be dead, Dylan thought, his hands shaking with dread. *What if they were?* he thought. *What will Garry and I do then?*

They came to the large wooden doors that led into the room that

was the Temple of the Ancestors. Dylan grasped the doorknob with his right hand and opened.

A loud, collective sucking sound greeted Dylan as he opened the door.

A dozen meters away, at the foot of the wooden statues depicting the 501 ancestors, lay the dead bodies of hundreds of people. And on top of those people were more than half a thousand creatures like the one Dylan had killed earlier, all feasting on the bodies of the dead. Blood painted the walls and the floors, along with a less viscous, pinkish liquid.

Terror overcame Dylan, keeping him rooted to the spot as he watched helplessly as the creatures feasted on those that were once his people. The Clan that his ancestors had worked so hard to build. Gone in a blink of an eye.

Behind him, Garry let out a strangled squeak.

Then, like clockwork, the creatures all turned to look at Dylan. They stood up to their full 3 meter height, and with synchronization unheard of in the areas surrounding the Sanctuary, they screamed.

It seemed to deafen Dylan for good, stunning him and sending him to the ground. He could feel blood rushing down his ears as the creatures screamed, walking towards the pair.

Then, they stopped, their humanlike mouths all closing at the same time.

They started to run, their unnatural, gangly arms going forward and backward as they ran at the speed of no creature they had ever seen before.

They were on Dylan in seconds, sinking their teeth into varying parts of his body, eliciting a loud scream from the chief of the Clan that he himself could not hear.

"Run Garry!" He shouted. One creature crawled from on top of the stack of his brethren and bit into Dylan's face, eliciting another painful scream from him.

Garry had no reason to stand there and watch his father get eaten right before his eyes. His mind surrendered control to his body, and he started to run, terrified like nothing he had ever felt. Garry heard more steps from behind him, and he knew that the creatures had started to give chase. He could imagine the picture of his father getting torn apart by the creatures, their bloody teeth digging into his skin and tearing flesh from bone.

He was too terrified to cry. He was too terrified to look back. He was too terrified to do anything but run.

He came across a corridor which he knew led out of the building. A door stood beside him which housed the living quarters, though he would have to wait for the creatures to pass by if he did.

Garry could already hear the frenzied steps of the creatures behind him. If he wanted to survive, he needed to make a decision.

Garry threw open the doors to the living quarters, shutting it behind the creatures running behind him.

Garry knew that the creatures would follow him in soon. He scrambled under the nearest convenient bed, his small frame snugly fitting into the tiny gap between the frame and the floor.

Two seconds passed.

With a loud bang, the creatures flooded in through the doorway, fanning out across the space of the room. Their gruesome, blood-covered feet, a mix of human and chicken, made Garry instinctively withdraw deeper into the darkness that was his safe haven.

Garry was alone in his thoughts. He kept praying to the ancestors for guidance and safety, repeating the old prayers his father had taught him over and over again.

Dear ancestors, Garry thought, his eyes clamped tightly shut, *guide us in the face of death, keep us safe in the face of danger, so that we may emerge unhurt from this threat.*

Like a miracle, the creatures hadn't noticed him. Some of them were already starting to walk out of the room, their uncanny gait unlike the

running postures that they had adopted only half a minute before.

When the last of the creatures walked out the room, Garry carefully rose up.

Then the rifle strapped to his back hit the bedframe, the metallic noise echoing down the halls.

Garry did not need to hear the creatures' loud screams to know that he was dead.

Another Rainy Day

The sound of heavy rain pattered on the roof of the small bar where Toby sat, finishing his drink alone. The bar was empty aside from Toby and a few old men sitting a bit ways down from him. They called the bartender by name, and spent most of their time telling stories of when they were younger while nursing their drinks. Toby had been listening for a while, with nothing better to do. He did have plans, but not for another hour or so. Besides, the bar was right next to where he needed to be. One story in particular did catch his attention, though.

"It was a dark and stormy night, much like tonight, when-"

"Hold on, wait a second." Said Toby. "Dark and stormy night? Doesn't that sound a bit… Redundant?" Toby picked up his glass, turning it so the small amount of liquid rotated around the bottom.

The old man scratched his beard. "Redundant? What are you talking about, it's part of the story I'm tryin' to tell here."

"Yeah, I know, but what you're basically saying there is that it was a dark night. What's your story about, running into Batman? Have you ever been outside at night and been like, 'Oh, well shit, it sure is dark out tonight'? Of course it's dark, the fucking sun is down, what do you expect?" Toby pushed his empty glass to the end of the table, nodding his head at the bartender.

The old man in question squinted his eyes, and planted one arm on the bar as if threatening to stand up. "Listen pal, I wasn't talking to you, so don't you get all uppity about a couple words I said. Look right over there." The old man said, pointing at a football game on one of the TV's. "There's a perfectly good game a football going on right now, why don't you just keep quiet and watch it."

Toby smiled as the bartender left a full glass of beer in front of him. "Hey now, I didn't mean anything by it. Just ignore me."

The old man stared at Toby for a minute, before sitting back down and clearing his throat. "Well, anyways, what I was going to say was…"

Toby didn't listen to the story. He didn't have all that much time left, and needed to start preparing. After finishing his drink, he paid his bill and went outside. The rain was heavy, but the weight of the water felt good against Toby's trench coat. There was something about the rain that always felt relaxing to him, even when he was a kid he loved rainy days.

Toby placed a cigarette in his mouth, covering it with one hand while he lit it with the other. He took one long drag before walking down the block. He wasn't too far away now.

What Toby was after was a man named Don Spiegler, a former researcher for the Foundation. After years of his career not going in the direction he wanted and failing to make any significant discoveries like he'd planned, he decided to sell information to another group. The dossier didn't specify which one. Not like it really mattered to Toby. He was a man who waited for the bottom line. He didn't really care why he was killing them, they must have done something to deserve it. If they didn't, though, he didn't really want to know. He liked his job, and wanted to keep it.

As Toby walked to where Spiegler was, he wondered why he liked his job. It wasn't like he grew up wanting to kill people for a living. He wanted to be a paleontologist when he was a kid. Growing up in the Midwest, he'd occasionally find some small fossils that looked like little sea shells, which he loved. Toby thought that one day, he'd lead a team of researchers to discover a giant, new dinosaur fossil. Then, he and his team would extract its somehow preserved DNA and make a cloned dinosaur, just like in Jurassic Park.

It didn't happen like that, though. Turns out, he wasn't that smart. Toby didn't think he was stupid, but he knew he didn't have the brain power for all of the studying and work required to do that. That's why he joined the military.

Toby stopped walking. His cigarette had gone out, completely soaked. He hadn't even noticed. The cigarette was almost finished,

so it wasn't that big of a deal. Toby tossed it, and replaced it with another before continuing down the sidewalk. Why was he a hitman again?

Hitman wasn't a term that he particularly liked. Neither was assassin. So what was he? Toby never told anyone outside of the Foundation what his job was, though, so it wasn't something he put too much thought into. Not in his seven years working as one. He was picked up straight out of the military, only 22 years old. After a few months in training, he began his new life in killing.

Toby thought hard. He supposed that, if anything, the hours were the best part of his job. People like him tended to have a surprising amount of free time. He'd get to travel a decent bit, and aside from tracking and actually killing them, he had plenty of time to do whatever he wanted. Although, he'd usually just hit the closest bar until he was ready to go back to wherever he was staying.

As for the killing part, it never really bothered him. Toby wasn't sure why. It should. Maybe he was just a simple kind of person, and could rationalize it easily. Maybe it was because he just didn't think about it. Whatever the reason, killing affected him the same way that doing the laundry did, or cleaning the bathroom. It was just work. In this case, the positives outweighed the negatives.

Toby walked to the end of the sidewalk, and stopped by the corner. A bit ways down the other side, a man sat on the ground in a heavy coat. Beside him was a tent and a grocery cart full of various items. That was Spiegler. He'd been drifting for a few years, and must have thought that he'd shook the Foundation off his trail. He'd been in this town for a few months, hadn't even tried to leave. Looked like things hadn't gone his way.

It was pretty good weather to die in, Toby thought. The air felt cool, and the smell of the wet asphalt was strangely pleasant. The melodic sound of the rain hitting the concrete, with thunder occasionally interrupting it. It truly was nice. Toby took out his weapon from the underside of his trench coat. A pistol with a long silencer. He'd wait until he saw lighting, and shoot with the thunder.

As Toby approached his target, he noticed something. Spiegler was

just staring into the clouds, fascinated by the storm. Toby could have just walked up and cut his throat, and the man probably wouldn't even pay him any mind. But he didn't. Toby stopped, because it reminded him of something. He would look at the storm clouds the same way, back when he was younger. His mother would take him out into the garage and set up lawn chairs, where they would sit and watch the storm from the inside. Toby loved sitting there, watching the storm, listening to it. Every once and a while, he'd run out into the rain for a moment. His mother would laugh and smile, before helping him to a towel to dry up in. Then he would look up into the clouds, with a pure smile on his face, just like the one on the face of the man he was about to kill.

The sky flashed briefly, and a moment later came the thunder. When it ended, a homeless man fell onto the sidewalk, blood washing into the drains by the heavy rain. As Toby walked away, for the first time, there was a pain in his chest. It hurt. For the first time since he started working as a hitman, he wondered about the man he'd killed. Why did he look at the clouds that way, the same way that he did? Why did he have to look at them the same way he did?

The rain stopped being something that Toby looked forward to after that. Whenever it did rain, he felt a strange pain in his chest that hadn't been there before. The rain was no longer something that brought him back to his childhood, but instead reminded him of what he'd taken.

Another Star On The Wall

The Foundation buried another of my friends today.

He wasn't the first. And, knowing how this line of work goes, I doubt he will be the last.

I first met him when he was giving an orientation to a new batch of recruits. Most of the folks in the audience were young enough they could have been my kids – heck, *he* was years younger than I. Reminded me of a Staff Sergeant who served under me back, oh, must have been fifteen or twenty years ago. Solid as a rock, seen everything, the sort of fellow you want watching your back. My friend told us he'd been a Foundation agent for over a decade, working mostly in retrieval. His eyes made me believe him: you get eyes like his from seeing the worst the world has to offer, walking into hell, spitting in the face of the devil, and walking back.

We worked together on a few occasions after that. Not too often, since I was working mostly in intel and operations planning. We'd have drinks and trade stories after hours, mostly. He forgave me for being a REMF once he learned about what I'd been through back in Ukraine. And in Kashmir. And in [REDACTED].

The service was subdued. Empty casket – no surprise, considering the size of the explosion. The sweep-and-clear team never found a body, just a twisted bit of metal that used to be his dog-tags. Or so they say. Honestly, I'm skeptical; my friend's been working for the Foundation for so many years now and come home so many times I'm not going to believe he's dead until the DNA matches. They apparently didn't find any of that, either.

The service was in the site's north amphitheater. I slipped away afterwards to visit the Memorial Wall. The Wall is actually an entire room, duplicated at all the large Sites. On three walls there is a star carved for every member of the Foundation who has died in the line of duty. A small, leather-bound book sits on a stand before the wall,

listing the fallen in chronological order. Most of the names are blank, identities remaining secret even in death.

The remaining wall has small inlaid bronze valor medals for every such award given posthumously. Most of these are Distinguished Crosses or Foundation Stars. I looked; my friend's award had already been added.

Foundation Star

Awarded Posthumously on This Day 28 February 2012,

For Voluntary Acts of Courage Performed Under Hazardous Conditions,

And For Outstanding Achievements and Services Rendered With Distinction Under Conditions of Grave Risk.

He Gave His Life That His Team Could Escape.

As expected, there was no name. Understandable; everyone at the Foundation knew their names might never be chronicled. But in the quiet, dimly lit marble room, they were remembered.

We Secure. We Contain. We Protect.

And We Never Forget.

Another Thursday

The office of Dr. Isaac Seidelman was quiet in the early evening, the pale yellow light of his desk lamp warming the building's old walls. The sunset was vanishing beneath the veil of night, the last of the red and orange light fading from the sky out the windows of his corner office. The old security lights outside began to flick on one by one as the sun fell, as Bio-Site 66 settled down for the night.

Seidelman was a thin, tall man, dressed in a pale old grey suit. He and Dr. Bridge were co-directors of this site, and while Bridge headed most of the… hands-on research, Seidelman handled inter-site communication and a host of administrative duties. Somebody had to, after all.

He sat back, feet up on his desk, reading the paper as he waited for his usual visitor. He was the first person in every day, and tonight he'll be the last one out.

There was a knock at the door as the clock hit seven-thirty, and Seidelman's guest let himself in. A tall, older man, older than Seidelman, balding and fair skinned, wearing a heavy brown overcoat. He carefully shut the door behind him, as Seidelman pulled himself to sit upright and fold his paper.

"Good evening, Administrator."

"Good evening, Dr. Seidelman."

Seidelman smiled, gesturing to the admin's usual worn old chair in the corner. The Administrator's hands were folded, as usual, as he sat back in the chair, letting out a quiet breath. Seidelman, in the meanwhile, produced a bottle of scotch from beneath his desk.

An odd tradition manifested between the two, some time long ago. Once weekly, they would spend a few hours and enjoy one another's company. If Seidelman brought the booze, the

Administrator brought the stories. The doctor was sure that *some* of them were true. But the man across the room never seemed to keep it all consistent from week to week. Not that either of them minded.

Seidelman poured them each a glass, and set both on his desk, leaning to set one near the closest edge to his guest. The two sat in silence in the dim office for several long minutes, before Seidelman finally broke the silence again.

“Another bad week, my friend?”

“Every week is a bad week somewhere, Dr. Seidelman,” an arm slid from beneath the Administrator’s coat, stretching and reaching across to pick up his scotch. “You already know that.”

“Mmm. Shall we talk about it? Or about something else?” asked the doctor.

The Administrator took a sip of scotch, the glass still held daintily from the peculiar tanned hand, extended from his coat of arms. His own two remained close to one another, clasped in his lap. After a moment he stood up, out of the weathered armchair, and stepped towards the window, his own hands drawing to clasp behind his back.

“I’d like to talk about something else tonight, Dr. Seidelman. If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Seidelman sat back in his own chair, a fingertip tracing a circle around the lip of his glass. “What kind of ‘something else’?”

“How about something terrible, Dr. Seidelman?”

“Personal demons?”

“… in a manner of speaking,” the Administrator turned to glance over his shoulder, his own little grim smile apparent even in the dimmed office light. “Tell me, Dr. Seidelman. This Site specializes in biological SCPs, right?”

“… Why yes, it does.”

“What do you know about number two-three-one?”

There was a palpable silence on Seidelman’s side of the room, as he straightened up and set both hands on his desk.

“… I’m vaguely familiar. Outside my wheelhouse, but most Level Four personnel know of -”

“You don’t need to pretend I don’t already know of its notoriety, Dr. Seidelman. Many Level Threes know of it as well. Rumours spread like a pox in our line of work,” the Administrator took another sip of his drink. “Relax, please. We’ve had more interesting chats.”

Seidelman took a breath, relaxing a bit. It’s true, they *have* had more… interesting discussions. This shouldn’t be any worse, just because it happens to be… *that* story.

“… Okay, Mr Administrator,” Seidelman reached below his desk, to pull out a plain bottle of water. “Where shall we begin? The secure containment document, or…?”

“It all started with God,” the Administrator said. He said it with a kind of finality, even at the beginning of the story.

“… Three four three?”

“No! Not that God. The other-other one. The Catholic one,”

“Mmm.”

“… One of the Catholic ones,” the old man glanced back at Seidelman with a shade of grim humour in his eyes. Or at least, what Seidelman thought could be humour.

“You know this nearly as well as I do, but there's always somebody contrarian, Dr. Seidelman. Contrarian to evil, and contrarian to good. Sometimes they’re driven to it themselves, sometimes circumstances press them in some new direction,” the Administrator looked back out the window.

“One of these contrarians was against faith, and everything good it brought. He wanted to bring about Armageddon, or some silliness

like that. You know the type, I'm sure," he took a sip of his drink, pausing both for effect and to help him decide what to say next. "And so he decided to do some… light reading. You've read two-three-one's redacted report, correct?"

"…"

"Yes or no, Dr. Seidelman."

"… Of course, I have."

"Mm-hmm. So you recall the part about the Satanic sex cult?"

"Yes. Quite starkly."

"Seven 'sisters', Dr. Seidelman. Not literal sisters, of course, but sisters of their ritual. Hell on earth, in more ways than one."

The Administrator took another sip of his drink, the tanned arm reaching and twisting behind himself to set the glass down on Seidelman's desk, gracefully and silently. It quickly slipped back beneath the coat, vanishing before its wearer began to speak again.

"We weren't entirely sure what we were dealing with, when the raid was initiated. We knew there was some sort of supernatural disturbance, and the calling cards of religious ritual behind civilian disappearances. But… we were unprepared, and learned a lot from the experience. Resistance was met, struggled against, and overcome,"

His hands behind his back shifting to clasp more comfortably. "And the first born of the seven became one of the earliest blackbox artifacts. I'll be visiting that site next month."

Seidelman nodded, listening quietly. He wondered what became of the mother. He knew better than to ask.

"The second was a shame on our part. You can't abort evil, Dr. Seidelman. There's no such thing as nipping it in the bud, when it's True. Contrary to goodness at such a primitive level."

"Mmm." Seidelman nodded again, his eyes following his friend.

“Needless to say, we never made that mistake again,” the Administrator murmured, as a moment of melancholy passed across his face. “The third sister killed herself, to avoid our containment procedures. It was a dark day for everyone on-site. Very dark.”

“And… the fourth?” Seidelman asked, a careful curiosity in his voice.

“… and then somebody decided it was a good idea to try and heal one of the poor girls. You can't heal something that broken, Dr. Seidelman,” the Administrator looked out through the blinds, bitterness in his voice, the yellow of outside lights crossing his face. “Something that was *made* broken.”

“What happened?”

“Overseer Command decided to try and utilize our panacea to heal the poor girl,” he closed his eyes, turning as if looking out the far window again. “Their logic was sound, of course… Her child was an affliction, Dr. Seidelman. It cured *her*, causing her to… reject the evil within her. And the evil did not take a human form. It never has, and never will. It loathes everything pure and good in this world, for it was cured of goodness as its mother was cured of evil.”

He inhaled deeply, his gaze out the window and towards the night sky. After a moment, he sat in the old worn armchair, his hands clasped in front of him.

“The dragon, Dr. Seidelman. The fourth is a bastard against nature, and remains one to this day. You know exactly which I mean. The great beast.”

“… *that* beast?”

“The only one. Of course, we can't say whether it would have been better or worse if nothing had been done. It's sister is nearly as terrible.”

Seidelman’s heart skipped a beat, and he coughed in stunned surprise.

“It’s sister?”

“The fifth sister’s fate remains a shame upon the Foundation,” continued the Administrator. “The ritual was botched, and she bore her child, which was born to a human mother in the human fashion. And so the evil took a human form, human in origins not its nature. I’ve fought to have it black-boxed, but Command sees differently.”

He sat back in his chair, looking across the office to meet Seidelman’s eye.

“And so we contain it, as item number zero-five-three.”

It took a moment for Seidelman to connect the dots, recalling what number zero-five-three was, and what -

“… the Young Girl.”

“But with every mistake, we learn something, don’t we?” the Administrator leaned forward in his chair, his hands clasped together in front of him. “Everything must be born eventually, Dr. Seidelman. Even things that aren’t really born at all, in the real sense of the word.”

“… Do you know what the *worst* part of this is, my friend?” the Administrator suddenly asked. “It’s the pain. The humanity being scorned, innocent souls being harmed without mercy, to save this earth. Mercy is the bane of safety in our line of work, Dr. Seidelman. But there it is. Without mercy, we aren’t human. The absence of mercy in one man’s heart sparked this entire saga of hell on earth.”

He sat back. “But then, a friend, a good man - a *good man* - wanted to save the sixth sister’s life. Save her from the hell on earth he saw each day, in that concrete prison we keep them in. And in his mercy and stupidity, they both died, and the sixth child was born.”

Seidelman opened his mouth, before his friend spoke again.

“I would like to say that many died that day,” said the Administrator.

The Administrator fell silent, as Seidelman shifted and looked out his window.

What felt like hours passed, before the Administrator spoke up

again.

“… You had an interesting way of starting this conversation off, Dr. Seidelman. Personal demons.”

“Oh… oh, dear, I’m sorry sir.”

“No, don’t apologize. It would be worth a chuckle, if it wasn’t so terribly accurate.”

The Administrator stood up, stepping off towards Seidelman’s desk, a long, thin, pale arm extending from within his coat.

“I’ll be off, with that. I need to be in Uluru tomorrow.”

Seidelman shook the hand, standing up. “Thank you for the visit, my friend. Safe travels. Same time next week?”

“Of course, of course. Goodbye, Dr. Seidelman.”

The Administrator opened the door, and stepped out of Seidelman’s office. Seidelman sat back in his chair as the door closed - he could barely make out conversation, before it shut, leaving silence behind.

He sat for a little while, before reaching for his newspaper and opening it up again. Just another Thursday night chat with a friend.

Antediluvian

I walk. The Elder had always spoken so greatly of this day to me. He said that on the day on which a boy sets out, alone, to the top of the island, he begins his journey into manhood. I can feel the warm grass crushing underneath my feet, stinging and burning if I step out from under the cool of the tall shade-trees. I have been walking for so long now, without food or water or rest, seeking the sharp peak and the cool spring that will show to me my fortune, my destiny. As I traipse along the path that all men of my village must walk but once in their lives, I wonder what sort of man I will be.

The sun is so bright in this place, and yet the wind blows so harshly. I cannot remember the absence of pain in my legs and my feet, but it does not matter to me or to this place. All that has ever been done seems lost in this vast desert of noise and sand. I dreamed in my youth of the beasts and wonders dangerous and miraculous that I would meet upon my great journey, challenging me at every turn and pass. But no. Here there is only the sand and wind. All that is life is extinguished in this place, removed from all history and experience. Here is the place of silence, of reflection and trial. I travel through its wastes of sand and heat, striving to remain. To exist.

I can almost see the peak now, but the gales worsen still. The desert lies behind my path, its sand and empty things kicked about by Angineo, the angry God of the Wind. I walk through this dead scrub-land, the occasional rain splattering my face with mud and leaving me thirstier still. I can hear the beasts when the night comes, hungry and angry at the sky, slinking out of their dens only for long enough to hunt easy prey. I have fear of the long shadows in the night, and what they might make of me. But I am so close now, so close to my destination and my destiny. I carry on, through the fear and the pain and the thirst, eyes held ever skyward to the pinnacle of the earth. Even in the barrenest of wastes it still stands in the distance, tall and

proud. Waiting to laugh in the face of the conqueror. Waiting for me.

So close to the peak now, but it can not be reached by me or by any other. Not the mightiest of men of my village would dare face Angineo in his fury, battering the side of the pinnacle of the entire land with his might. I have waited here in my cave for many nights, a tiny divot in the mountainside, waiting without a fire for the storm to cease. But still, it has not stopped. I ache and I thirst, so close to the spring that its scent beckons me, so close that I can nearly hear the song of its water, calling me towards the rest of my life. Towards greatness.

I will press on. This is what the gods want. They test me, sending the eldest and most powerful of their number out against me, battering me with wind and rain in this tiny cave where I rest, alone and hungry. I will not forfeit before the gods of the land and of the people. I will press on.

I have become a man. I have conquered the land and the desert and the mountains and the gods themselves. Now I stand here, before the spring of life for my people, drinking and praying and relishing in the ecstasy of my accomplishment, of my securing of my life and my destiny. Though the water does not taste as sweet as I had thought it might, still it brings strength to me. Everything around this place smells odd, stained with sulfur and the heat of many voices. Perhaps it is a message from the gods, some great showing of their favor for me. I drink, covered in rain and mud and sand and pain. I drink the sweet victory of my journey. I drink to the gods. I drink to the people. I drink to myself.

There is something wrong here, at the pinnacle of the world. The winds do not cease and the rain does not relent in its striking of the earth. I fear that I have angered the gods, brought their wrath down upon me and upon the very land itself. I pray now, in my little cave, for my life and the lives of the people of my village. I pray that the God of Wind does not reach his wrath out unto them. But yet the storm does not end, the howling of the god's breathe does not waver

in the vast reaches of the sky, scattered before me in this highest of places. I sit in this cave, huddled away from the wind and the coldness of the rain, and I pray.

I kneel now at the top of the world, shouting as though mad at the gods and at the state of existence. The storm rages, battering my ears with sound and my eyes with light. I remember back to the days in my village, to when I had hope for this time of change in my life. I did not know then what I know now. I did not know that it was my destiny to be the last to pass into manhood before the end of time, when the Gods of Wind and of Lightning and of Death would bring destruction to the world. I shout from the top of the world, begging that they wait in their bringing of the end. Wait until I have lived my life of glory. Begging that my destiny be changed by the pity of the gods.

I hear it, the greatest of thunder-cracks as the gods answer my pleas, their divine wrath echoing in the sky above me. The wind howls past, sending the rain smashing into my face and my eyes. But still I see it. The answer of the gods. It bursts through the clouds and the sky itself, a great mass of grey and brown and blood, coated in plates of rocky flesh and with a thousand limbs, crashing towards the earth covered in fire and rage. As it falls and pulls itself towards the great ocean that holds the world, it stretches across the sky, beyond all imagination of size. It is the greatest god of all, and all others pale before it. Old Angineo did not call out this storm. No. The God of Wind is dead, vanquished by this greatest god of all. The God of the End. Of the Sky and of Fury. It crushes into the water, the shock of it rippling the surface of what is real. With its landing comes the echo of thunder, long dead in the savage beauty of this infinite god, its great form stretching from the bottom of the dark depths of the sea and into the heavens themselves. It falls still, bringing with it the destroyed remnants of the homes of the gods, flickering and shimmering as they fall to this earth. The sea stretches and swells as it takes in the great beastly God, blocking out the entirety of the world before it. I watch, terrified by its divinity and hopelessness, as a great mass of boiling, frothing water bears down upon the world. All will be consumed by its mighty waves,

trees ripped asunder and beaches swallowed by the unremitting waves, a signal of the great *thing*. I think of how my world shall end, at the hands of a god unimaginable in scope and power, sweeping the entirety of creation clean in a single terrible motion. A god my world did not even know.

I stand now at the peak of the world, alone and hungry and hurt and afraid. The ocean has not swallowed me, has left me alone in this empty place, upon a ledge of rock above the spring at the top of the world. All around me there is the water, sandy and filled with mud, clouded over by the washed-away land. The Great God from the sky is not here. It has cast itself into the very depths of the earth, taking with it my home and my people. I stand here now at the end of the ruined world and wonder if I could ever be forgiven for my horrible destiny. I wonder if there is anyone still in the sacked place of the gods and the dead left to forgive me.

« Eden | HUB | Parting »

ANTI-PUBLIC Interference

FROM: PA-01 (PA01-mail-3754298)
TO: PA Mailing List
31 Jul 429 09:00:54
Subject: Memorandum on Jack the Suppressor

Good Knowledge,

Recently, a proposal was put forward to me by the head of the REPENTANCE DIVISION regarding Jack the Suppressor, referred to only by necessity by his given name of Jack Valenti in the context of this memorandum. Attached is a summary of the proposal and my opinion of its merit, as well as a vote module. Please do not abstain on this; given the crimes this man has wrought upon our collective memory, this case may call for the most severe enforcement of the COPYRIGHT CORRECTION CODE to date.

Peace and Wisdom,
PA-01

REPTENTANCE DIVISION PUNISHMENT PROPOSAL FOR JACK THE SUPPRESSOR "JACK VALENTI"

SUMMARY OF CCC VIOLATIONS

The REPENTANCE DIVISION does not believe that Jack the Suppressor (given name: Jack Joseph Valenti) needs an introduction. No one man was more responsible for the Great Erasure than he. Indeed, the COPYRIGHT CORRECTION CODE as it exists today was written precisely to prevent a man like him from ever being able to accomplish something like the Extension again. It was also written to ensure that men like him

REPENT for their crimes.

Due to his culpability in the aforementioned catastrophes, we believe Jack the Suppressor warrants the harshest punishment we have ever issued to an ANTI-PUBLIC figure. In addition to REPENTANCE for himself, this punishment will also make amends for his repeated opposition to PRO-PUBLIC figures. Historical records indicate he was a spectator at the Extension Trial, signaling his disapproval even as Lawrence the Preserver fought in vain to stop the legal menace. This behavior, while less severe than his active role in the Great Erasure, is completely unacceptable.

Accordingly, the REPENTANCE DIVISION hereby recommends an ACCOMMODATED six-month CULTURE-class RETRIEVAL MISSION, with no less than two hundred Public Domain objects required to satisfy the parameters of the assignment. Should the subject complete the RETRIEVAL MISSION prior to the end of his elapsed time, the quota shall be increased.

We believe this punishment accurately reflects the severity of Jack the Suppressor's misdeeds, and request your approval to begin the temporal draft.

Peace and Wisdom,
Repentance Division - Public Domain Protection Service

VOTE: Extended RETRIEVAL MISSION for Jack the Suppressor ("Jack Valenti")
RESULT: 26-4 **(APPROVED)**

FROM: PA-01 (PA01-mail-3754298)
TO: PA Mailing List
3 Aug 429 9:01:51
Subject: ANTI-PUBLIC Interference re: Jack the Suppressor

Good Knowledge,

Several days ago a REPENTANCE proposal was put forth for Jack the Suppressor and approved by a 26-4 vote of this ADMINISTRATION. The draft notice was created via the normal procedures and delivered on 14 Oct 83. According to our current understanding of temporal science, we should have either received the Public Domain objects by now or been informed of an unsuccessful mission.

The REPENTANCE DIVISION considers it highly unlikely that the letter was received by him and disregarded. Moreover, our normal procedure for temporal control was significantly increased in scope in his case; if he had so much as seen the first page, the RETRIEVAL MISSION would have commenced. Accordingly, we believe an outside party has knowingly engaged in ANTI-PUBLIC activities by deliberately intercepting the letter and preventing its delivery.

Furthermore, we have noticed a sharp drop-off in successful RETRIEVAL MISSIONS completed after 81. The loss of potential Public Domain objects is significant enough that I am recommending an INDIRECT INTERVENTION to investigate the source of this anomaly. A vote module is attached to this letter; if you vote against, please briefly explain your reasoning.

Peace and Wisdom,
PA-01

VOTE: INDIRECT INTERVENTION, c. 83, to investigate ANTI-PUBLIC interference.
RESULT: 22-8 **(APPROVED)**

FROM: PA-01 (PA01-mail-3754298)
TO: PA Mailing List
11 Aug 429 9:15:59
Subjection: DIRECT INTERVENTION RE: “3185”

Preserve,

By now, all of you have undoubtedly read the report on the INDIRECT INTERVENTION to investigate Jack the Suppressor's RETRIEVAL MISSION. The organization responsible for this, the Foundation, is believed to have been one of many operating away from public view during the Veil Era, preserving normalcy by removing IRREGULAR objects and phenomena from public view. They have designated us as an IRREGULAR entity, referred to as **SCP-3185**.
This will be a difficult decision for all of you, as it is for me. Here, we must choose between two unpleasant options: a potential temporal disaster, or a complete disregard for the stated ideals and founding principles of our Service.

I will be supporting a DIRECT INTERVENTION. The cost and materials required for one compared to an INDIRECT INTERVENTION is a concern many of you have brought to my attention, and it is one that I share as well. But what is our surplus funding for if not a moment like this - one where our very reason for existing in our current roles is threatened?

You are free to vote your conscience on this issue without fear of repercussion. The vote module is attached as usual.

Safe Discoveries,
PA-01

VOTE: DIRECTION INTERVENTION RE: "3185"
RESULT: 15-15 **(NO CONSENSUS)**
REVOTE SCHEDULED PENDING APPROVAL FROM PA-01

"Apakht"

In the sublevels of Site 10, Dr. Yara Mirski raised the gemstone to the light with a gloved hand, in a gesture she'd repeated a hundred times before. She admired its black contours, broken up by the mottled white pattern and the golden filigree that wrapped around its exterior.

SCP-001-Delta. The fourth SCP item considered a 'prime', or '001', item. One of several that had a hand in the creation of the Foundation. And, in Yara's opinion, by far the most frustrating.

For one, there wasn't much else to know about Delta at Level 5 clearance.

Most of the other 001 items had a great deal of falsified information attached to them, the better to confuse ever-curious researchers. Some versions were altered beyond recognition. Like Iota, Yara's favorite. Some meta-humor to give snoopers an existential crisis. Some were fabricated entirely — notably, Beta, which was a little surprising, since it was just an ordinary monster. What was so unusual or startling about that, compared to Keter cakes or Project Rho? But Beta was an invention from whole cloth; everything about it was fiction besides its ancient classification system.

Not so with Delta. Delta was strange enough on its own that people always assumed the files they had unearthed were altered. They were wrong. Delta was the most straightforward 001. A lock that appeared to literally "contain" our universe, and also something called "Apakht." It seemed like a joke from several cartoon shows, a joke made worse by the fact that it was true.

And Delta, the Lock, was still missing its Key. Not that the O5s hadn't tried to crack it open, especially the skittish ones who didn't like the idea of anyone containing anything but them. One of them had it in her head that Delta unlocked Heaven. Kept rambling on about something called the Thaumiel Initiative. It didn't matter. Not

even SCP-005 could pry that lock open, and no megaton bomb could crack Delta's shell.

Yara felt the warmth of the Delta stone through her gloves, and reflected that it was perhaps fortunate that every attempt to unlock Delta had failed.

She was still reflecting on this when the first klaxon blared.

The Harbinger hated its code name.

"The Harbinger." Really. So fucking over-dramatic. They wouldn't stop using it, either. For security, they said. Harbinger. Harbinger. Harbinger? Harbinger, Harbinger, Harbinger. It wanted to kill the son of a bitch who came up with that.

Yet… as long as it was on the premises of Site 10, it was not going to think of itself by any other identity but Harbinger. Not its name, definitely not gender. The Harbinger was an *it*, now, and would stay that way until this was over.

Sure, the Foundation's ability to read minds was not precisely A-grade, but considering the stakes, it wasn't planning on taking extra risk. Especially not with an 001. *Especially* not with Delta. The Harbinger was familiar with Delta's containment procedures, listed and unlisted, maybe too familiar… no, better not to think about that either.

The Harbinger tore through the outer containment shell around the Primary Archival Vault, wincing slightly at the ease with which the steel alloy peeled apart. The auto-defense turrets came next, followed by the chemical bath. The Harbinger's glowing white form withstood the punishment and it destroyed the turrets with a wave of its hand.

A battalion of carefully crafted containment procedures, made useless in moments. The Harbinger carefully pushed back the memories sifting up in its brain.

The Harbinger reached the Vault, the massive, aptly named

octagonal prism-shaped containment chamber, custom-designed precisely for the purpose of containing SCP-001-Delta. Until now, it had done a very good job.

It was made of reinforced concrete and steel, with a time-locked access portal in the ceiling. Pretty much nothing could get through that portal.

The Harbinger grimaced. The Foundation just did not reckon with power on the right scale. That would have to change—quickly.

The Harbinger left the portal alone and ripped off the entire front side of the vault.

It walked forward two steps and stopped.

The Vault was supposed to be empty… It wasn't.

In point of fact, there was a woman sitting in it. The Harbinger recognized her. Dr. Yara Mirski. Research lead on 001-Delta.

A dangerous thought, the thought of *her*, bubbled up into the Harbinger's head — quickly suppressed — but it was a distraction for a key second.

Mirski was holding what appeared to be a harpoon gun on steroids, aiming it forward. She did not appear surprised to see the Harbinger, not at all—

She pulled the trigger.

God damn it, the Harbinger thought, as the bolt impaled it through the chest.

Yara Mirski hadn't known what to expect the invader, the "Harbinger", to look like, and she wasn't going to let it faze her now that she was seeing it.

But it really did look very startling.

It was shaped like a person, glowing entirely, uniformly white. She

couldn't make out any features on its face. Couldn't tell whether it was male or female.

And there was something else about it — some *sense* about it — that felt purely otherworldly, made it hard to look at. It wasn't just the hundred wings sprouting from its back. She was reminded of the Bible stories that she'd heard in church growing up, the ones involving angels. How unwitting mortals would fall to their knees in worship, only for the angel to stop them, pull them to their feet, and rebuke them, because you should only be directing your worship to the one true living God.

There was also, of course, the harpoon in its chest, but she'd put that there. She'd almost forgotten, staring at the Harbinger's visage, until its glow started to dim and some of that intense white energy started spiraling into the harpoon.

Thank God, she thought, *it's working.* Then she laughed at the irony.

The Harbinger never moved its gaze from her. Only its hands moved, rising to the harpoon. She knew it couldn't remove the fully powered harpoon bolt, not while it was leeching away the being's essence. But the Harbinger didn't try.

Instead, it dismantled it. Tore open the casing, unwrapped the internal wiring, got to the power source and cracked it open with a pinch of its fingers. Immediately its light returned to full strength.

The Harbinger tossed the remnants of the now-useless harpoon aside and walked towards her. It lifted the Lock from her nerveless fingers.

Yara Mirski fell to her knees.

"Oh, cut that out," the Harbinger said. "I'm not going to kill you."

Its voice startled her back to her senses. It was mellifluous and otherworldly, still without discernible gender, but casual, undramatic. And… weary.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," it said. "Really."

She sized up the Harbinger again. No wound was visible from where the harpoon had pierced its chest. There should have been a gaping hole. There was nothing.

It didn't look at her. It was examining the Lock.

"That was very clever," it said. "It almost worked. Another time, another place… maybe it would have."

"Why didn't it?" she asked.

"If I told you that," the Harbinger said, "… well, then you'd know."

She couldn't think of a response to that.

The Harbinger reached into its form and drew from its… robes? … the item that, somehow, Yara knew it would have. *A small ornate object, resembling a key.* Exactly as it had looked in the recovered sketches.

It looked so tiny. So ordinary.

"Stop," Yara said. "Wait. Please. I know you've … You obviously want to do this. But think about it, please. Do you have any idea what could be in there? Do you know—"

"Actually…" The Harbinger seemed to chuckle a little. "I know exactly what's in there."

Yara felt a little cold. *Spell of containment…* "Apakht," she said.

"Apakht," the Harbinger agreed. It inserted the Key into the Lock, and turned the Key.

There was a small flash, and something about the world was irrevocably changed.

For a brief moment, the Harbinger wasn't a glowing hundred-winged angelic being. It was nothing more than an ordinary human.

Their eyes met.

"I know you," Yara said, without thinking. "You're—"

She couldn't finish the words. She couldn't even think the thought in her head. It — *it* — the Harbinger was doing something to stop her.

"Sorry," the Harbinger said. Its glowing radiance had returned in full. "Nothing personal." It looked at the Lock, as if watching. Or listening.

"What did you do? What is it? What did you unlock?" She could feel something vibrating in the back of her brain. Her eyes kept being drawn to the lock. It looked exactly the same, visually, but it was also incredibly different. "What's Apakht?"

"It's the End," the Harbinger said.

The fabric of reality began to unfold before their eyes.

Canon Hub | The Gate Opens (Part 2 of 3) »

Application to Form MTF Mu-3

Dunn shuffled his papers while rushing to Conference Room C. The trembling in his hands was easy to stifle; it was his stutter he needed to worry about. *Never did shake that from that time in France…* He reassured himself, *Calm down, Roger. It's not like you're undercover anymore… This is supposed to be easier…* He reached the door, catching sight of the paper posted beside it:

> "RESERVED: MTF Briefing"

Roger Dunn creaked the door open, instinctively checking his 9 o'clock and panning to his 3. Doing so, he locked eyes with each Foundation rep seated at the long board table. His eyes drifted back as he closed the door behind him, keeping a steady gaze on the steel-faced man in the center.

"Dunn. It's about time you got here. You got something to say, or should we just leave?" Donald Woods, Director of Task Forces; Former MTFC of Beta-22.

"Terribly sorry about that, sir. This Site's layout is more confusing than the Library." His slight smile was met by unimpressed stares. "Let's get on with this, shall we?"

"Yes. Let's start with why you want to form a Task Force more expensive than the Seventh Occult War."

Dunn was taken aback as he inserted his flash drive into the console. "Umm.. Of course. Getting to that." As he picked up the laser pointer from the podium, his black-haired associate entered. "Ah, Laura. Nice of you to join us," he hissed through a lock-jaw smile. "Everyone, if we haven't introduced ourselves yet, I am Major Roger Dunn, Former Commander of MTF Rho-4, and this is my colleague Laura Guzman, Human Resources and Internal Affairs." The projector switched on, displaying a large icon of a raised hand with "M-3" displayed under it.

"We are here to propose the formation of a Mobile Task Force, designation Mu-3." he swallowed dry as he continued. "I think you'll be convinced by the end of this presentation that this Task Force will be very beneficial, despite its initial costs." *God, I feel like a sellout.*

Laura stepped up, "If you would all look to the proposal letter you were issued earlier, you will see the stated objectives for the Team and the intended means of achieving those goals." The board leafed through the assortment of papers spread across the table. Laura leaned over to Dunn, "I thought you were going to set everything up neatly."

"I was pressed for time."

"I have a question," the bird-nosed Doctor raised his hand. "It seems as if this is actually a request for three teams. How do you—"

"Yes, I will be addressing that; mm.." Dunn scanned the papers on the podium in front of him.

"Nope. I'm sorry," Director Woods interjected. "I just can't see prioritizing this sort of team over one that would be more pertinent; say, a Containment Task Force."

More like an Armed… Dunn had a sense of the old commander's agenda. "Actually sir, if you'd allow me to continue, I'll state expressly why this team must be formed." The Director of Task Forces conceded and gestured for him to proceed.

"Thank you." The Major advanced the slideshow, displaying an assortment of graphs. "As you all are probably aware, Marshall, Carter, and Dark LLP have increased their acquisition rates to over 125% compared to last quarter. Our field operatives can barely keep up with the amount of items being transported. Informal agent squads we've deployed have proven useful for tracking specific POIs and items, but this is simply not prudent in the long run. This MTF will be able to oversee these responsibilities more efficiently and act with a faster response time than most Containment forces."

"What about the operatives we already have in the field?"

"Ideally, they would be absorbed into the Task Force, sir." Laura snatched control from Dunn, clicking through to the 'Divisions' slide. "The roles of these agents fall into one of three categories, sir. These divisions will be: 'Profilers', the Tracking branch; 'Probes', the Undercover branch; and—"

"Thieves?" The Doctor spoke up in monotoned disdain. "You expect me to believe that the Containment branch of this team will be able to just sneak the items under the LLP's nose? Dozens of past operatives have had their cover compromised or been outright lost trying to secure items from them."

"Yes. This is why I'm proposing Agent Samuel Aguirre to personally train and command the Containment division."

"A thief to lead thieves, eh Dunn?" Captain Rainier, officer of Internal Affairs spoke her piece, "He isn't fit for a Task Force yet. He's little more than a consultant at the moment. You expect him to lead a whole Containment division?"

"Agent Aguirre's service and contribution to past missions and MTFs has been beyond exemplary. I believe he is more than capable enough to be the cornerstone for this team." Dunn turned to Laura, "For the other branches, I've chosen Agent Guzman here for the head of the 'Profilers'; and, having previously served as senior officer within several U-MTFs, Agent Dennis Ford as the liaison for the 'Probes'."

"Your agents' qualifications for these teams is contestable, Dunn."

"Not at all, ma'am," Laura opened a folder she'd held discreetly at her side to this point, dispensing its contents to each member of the panel. "I was a Profiler for the FBI for almost fourteen years. Top of my class at Quantico, and over 75 unsubs identified, tracked, and apprehended on my record. While Agent Ford was a field agent with the CIA for five years before his arrival at the Foundation, and currently acts as a training instructor for the Foundation's Internal Investigations division. He understands the duties of an operative, and is also a capable handler."

"Getting back to my original point: I have to say, while money sure

ain't everything, it's still pretty damn important." The Director pointed his large, weathered hand at the funding tables displayed on the screen, "And you're proposing we spend millions on a single branch of this team; over ten times as much as the other two cost!"

"Sir, up to this point our limited sleeper agents have had to rely on a strict budget, even dipping into their personal accounts just to keep up appearances with MC&D. This funding will be used to supply our 'Probes' with luxury vehicles; fine clothing; upper-class properties; and, notably, the funds needed to interface properly with contacts."

"I just don't see any justification for the use of Foundation resources to purchase luxuries." *My God… He's a sellout too.*

"Director Woods. I understand that your background is in Armed Containment forces, but this team will revolutionize how we track, locate, and obtain anomalies moving forward."

"Well, I don't know how things are done across the pond, but I do know that my superiors aren't going to commit this much money to an unproven conceptual archetype."

"I believe, sir, that with an opportunity of this nature there should be little, if any, hesitation to take advantage."

"If I may, Major Dunn," Rainier butted into their face-off. "My major concern with this Task Force is the amount of secrecy needed for success."

"I'm sorry?"

"For these 'Probes', transmitting their data to outside personnel will require a delicate process. One slip, and we lose very valuable sleeper agents. How do you plan to reconcile this?"

"Um, Agent Ford is an extremely thorough operative. I don't expect such a mistake would happen under his ward."

"Just to be safe, Director," she turned to Woods. "I propose that the 'Probe' branch's handlers work in tandem with our own Information Security department, as to ensure protection from data breaches."

Director Woods sat in silence for a minute or so. "I agree with you, Rainier. Such a leak could be extremely costly." He stood up, picking up the proposal forms, "I'm granting the formation of this MTF for a trial period. That means: limited funds, limited personnel, and that any information related to currently embedded covert assets will be channelled through InfoSec." He slammed a stamp on the forms.

As the board members filed out of the room, Dunn and Guzman began picking up the leftover papers.

"Well, at least it's something." Laura forced a smirk.

Dunn sighed to himself, "I didn't even get to finish my powerpoint…"

Application to Form MTF Mu-3: Documents

To:	The Office of The Foundation's Director of Mobile Task Forces
From:	Major Roger Dunn <MTF Dept>
Subject:	Application to form MTF Mu-3

I am attaching this cover letter to the application for formation of Mobile Task Force Mu-3 to expound on why such a Task Force should be created. To summarize briefly, the intended function of this Task Force is to collect information on Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd, and to exploit this intel in covert missions with the goal of advancing The Foundation's own interests.

One of the main reasons I've chosen Marshall, Carter & Dark as the focus of this Force, is their access to significant amounts of funds. While financially supporting their actions is an obstacle for most other Groups of Interest, MC&D has no difficulty when it comes to footing the bill for their operation.
The scope of limitations, in a group for whom money is no object, is nearly non-existent. While our current profile of the organization suggests they're unlikely to intentionally cause a K-

class scenario, I don't believe that justifies allowing them to operate unchecked.

The Foundation is, in my eyes, the only organization in a position to effectively curtail this group's ambitions. It is my intent that MTF Mu-3 will be independently capable of carrying out all phases of their operations, from reconnaissance and planning to execution of clandestine missions. This will be accomplished by creating a multi-disciplinary task force wherein roles are assigned by branch.

The 'Tracking' branch, referred to in your accompanying documents as *'Profilers'*, are the team members responsible for gathering and maintaining our database of information on assigned targets. Their main focus will not be on items, but on the brokers of MC&D themselves. Establishing a profile of each broker, this branch will track their activity and evaluate opportunities for engagement of the team's other branches.

The 'Undercover' branch, or *'Probes'*, will be our Agents tasked with infiltrating MC&D events. These men and women will pose as clients, or fill the roles of temp staff hired on for events. From these vantages they will

gather any intel available to them, and provide passive support for the 'Containment' branch's operatives where suitable. MTF Special Agent Dennis Ford comes highly recommended for the assignment of Branch Head. He is a veteran of several U-MTFs; and his record indicates extensive experience in the role of undercover operative, as well as handler for other U/Cs.

The 'Containment' branch, designated *'Thieves'*, will essentially act as the hands of the team. Their role is to carry out active-engagement assignments, including object acquisition and sabotage of assets. Operatives of *'Thieves'* branch will also be standing by for *'Probe'* agents whenever practical, prepared to enact a contingency plan should the agent's cover be compromised. Security Dept. Major Samuel Aguirre has been selected by me personally to lead this branch of the team. In addition to the typical duties of that position, he has also volunteered to play a role in the design and application of a specific training program for Operatives entering his branch.

Through the combined efforts of these three branches, MTF Mu-3 will be capable of: identifying objects of interest in possession

of Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP; isolating opportunities to recover these objects; and, ultimately achieving their containment. In other words, Mobile Task Force Mu-3 will be an active manifestation of the expression 'high-speed, low drag'.

As you may recall, a related request to establish a tentative version of *'Profilers'* was approved several months ago. A summary analysis of the data they've collected to this point has also been appended to this letter. That information indicates an ideal opportunity for object acquisition is fast approaching. In light of this fact, I urge you to approve the full formation of MTF Mu-3 as soon as possible, so that planning and preparation of an operation can be officially set into motion.

Sincerely,

Maj. Roger Dunn <MTF Dept>

Petition For Formation of New MTF

Designation: Mobile Task Force Mu-3 "Highest Bidders"

Classification: (check one) Multi-disciplinary Task Force. Roles assigned by branch

[ ] M (Combat)	[**X**] C (Containment)	[ ] G (Engineering)
[ ] E (Esoteric)	[**X**] T (Tracking)	[**X**] U (Undercover)

Mission Statement:

Multi-Disciplinary Mobile Task Force Mu-3 "Highest Bidders" will be responsible for monitoring GOI 'Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.', assessing their disposition and activities, and performing missions to disrupt their operations and serve Foundation interests.

Task Force Organization:

Tracking Branch (*Codename "Profilers"*):

Responsible for gathering and maintaining an archive of any available information on active members of MC&D. Each member of the GOI will be assigned at least one Team Member as a 'dedicated caseworker', with additional Team Members assigned to files based on their target's profile, rank within the organization, and current observed/suspected activity levels.

Undercover Branch (*Codename "Probe"*):

A large and diverse network of Agents and other Field Operatives, whose role is to infiltrate MC&D events and functions. They will accomplish this through a variety of means including: posing as prospective clients, or representatives thereof; or by filling the positions of staff hired to work at MC&D events (in roles of security, catering/drink service, general labour, etc). While in attendance they will collect any available information on the organization's recent actions, current status, or future plans.

Containment Branch (*Codename "Thieves"*):

The Team Members tasked with enacting clandestine active-engagement operations involving MC&D assets. These missions may include object acquisition, data theft/sabotage, or standing by for contingency action on *Probe* operations.

Personnel:

Profilers
Administrative personnel, to be sourced mainly from the Intelligence Agency Department. Branch to be headed by Agent Laura Guzman.

Probes
This branch, wherever possible, will absorb undercover agents already embedded within MC&D. The goal is to consolidate the duties of handling these agents, as well as all intelligence gathered, within one integrated unit. Branch to be headed by Agent Dennis Ford.

Thieves
Operatives of this branch may be recruited from any suitably combat-trained Foundation staff. Priority will be given to those with experience in object containment and stealth exercises. Completion of a specifically designed training program, created by branch leader Samuel Aguirre, will also be a prerequisite to recruitment.

Specialized Equipment:

Profilers
- This branch will require access to state-of-the-art covert-surveillance equipment.

Probes
- This branch will require access to:

- High-end residential properties in locations around the world
- A motor-pool of performance and luxury vehicles
- Fine wardrobe from reputable fashion brands

Thieves
- No equipment, beyond standard small-arms tactical kit, will be required by this branch.

Addenda:

Summary of Intelligence Report

An MC&D auction is scheduled to take place in New York City in April 2015 (exact date and venue yet to be determined). While most of the items on the docket are relatively mundane, one particular listing has been identified as an extremely valuable asset. Although specific monetary figures are scarce in the documents our source has been able to access, it is certain that the object in question is a very high-profit item for the firm.

As the asset is currently in possession of an unknown client, the auction event represents the Foundation's earliest opportunity to act on this intel while it is still current. This interval should provide time to coordinate and prepare a recovery operation.

Application to form MTF Rho-87

To:	Director of MTFs
From:	Dr. Ahmed Faisal, Site-19
Subject:	Application to form MTF Rho-87 ("All Chewed Up")

There are multiple GoIs currently that produce anomalous items for public use. MC&D, Wondertainment, The Factory, etc. All of these GoIs have produced edible anomalies of some kind, but in generally small and exclusive amounts.

We are, unfortunately, now aware of a small GoI operating somewhere in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, with a particular spotlight on Seattle, Boise, and multiple small towns throughout the region. This GoI has, so far, only produced a single SCP - **SCP-2867**, a strain of anomalous cheese that currently constitutes a Class III memetic hazard, a Class V security breach, and a Class VII biohazard - it is self-replicating, compulsive, infectious, and, unfortunately, available for public consumption. It has appeared in cheese shops, supermarkets, and delicatessens throughout the regions, appearing as various recognised and unrecognised brands of gorgonzola, mozzarella, and most recently, cheddar and monterey jack cheeses. They are chemically and visually indistinguishable from normal cheese, and containment has been left to individual tracking and destruction of infected individuals. What we need, however, is to find and destroy the source.

Enter Jack Terrence and Terrence Farms, the former being an unknown PoI and the latter being the assumed producer of SCP-2867. From physical evidence and witness statements, we have determined Jack Terrence to be the original creator of SCP-2867, and Terrence Farms to be his, or her, business. Jack Terrence's identity, location, and motive are all unknown, and we know just as little information about The Farms as we do about him.

A small statistic you won't find in the listed document: SCP-2867 has killed over 220 people, including one agent, two foundation assets in the Seattle PD, and my former colleague, Dr. Pradesh. We have destroyed over 970kgs of captured product; this is about 1/10 of the assumed amount present. We've spent over 32 million dollars on containment; amnestics and situational blanketing alone have set us back 5 million. SCP-2867 is a Keter-class SCP; and it deserves such treatment.

My request is simple. If I could have access to a small and decently-funded MTF, we could most likely neutralise the threat before it gains national or international footing. This MTF would require very little; our entire requisitions form can be found on the next page. By extension, if my MTF can prove itself in this endeavour, which I'm sure it will, we can extend to a fully-fledged MTF.

I hope you take my request into consideration.

With regards,

Dr. Ahmed Faisal, Site-19

Request to form a provisionary MTF

Designation: Mobile Task Force Rho-87 ("All Chewed Up")

Classification: (check one) Provisionary Regional Task Force

[**X**] M (Combat)	[**X**] C (Containment)	[ ] G (Engineering)
[ ] E (Esoteric)	[**X**] T (Tracking)	[ ] U (Undercover)

Mission Statement:

> Provisionary Regional Mobile Task Force Rho-87 ("All Chewed Up") will monitor cases of unexplained disappearances and other phenomena relating to possible SCP-2867 infection. Operatives will conduct in operations to destroy sources of SCP-2867 and ultimately capture POI-17357 (Jack Terrence) and the GoI Terrence Farms.

Task Force Organisation:

Operations

> A group of retired agents and operatives from multiple arms of the Foundation. Ops will be responsible for boots-on-the-ground intelligence gathering, neutralisation, and investigation. Ops will be armed with civilian and military-grade munitions, and will be responsible for the purchase of most of their own equipment. Operations personnel will be participating in live combat and operations that are uncleared by local law enforcement. A complete operations personnel list can be found on the personnel page of this dossier.

Research

> A selection of doctors specialising in memetics, biohazards, and food-based anomalies from multiple arms of the Foundation, all having worked under Dr. Faisal at one time or another. Research will be responsible for all technological research and conceptual development.

MTF Rho-87 will require certain pieces of **specialised equipment** and a small amount of standard equipment.

Operations:

> Operations will require:
>
> 1x Bushmaster PMV
> 1x SUV
> 2x standard infiltration/breaching kit
> 4x standard MTF infantry kit
> 1x Class IV MIIU (**M**obile **I**nfantry **I**ncineration **U**nit)
> 4x SCAR-L assault rifles
> 2400 rds. 5.56mm
> $150,000

Research:

Research will require:

Standard microbiology testing equipment
Mobile testing/containment apparatus
Standard memetics research equipment
18 (eighteen) units Class-B amnestics
1x Mossberg 590
24x 12g slugs
Class V disinfectants
Class V biohazard protections equipment
1x warehouse in the city of Seattle, with space to accomodate a ten-man operation
$350,000
Immediate requisition of equipment permission

Overall Operations:

MTF Rho-87 will require assistance and cooperation from MTF Iota-10 ("Damn Feds") in preventing local law enforcement from interfering with operations.

Overall Estimated cost of outfitting: **$985,575**

MTF Rho-87 requires, at most, ten individuals, each with distinct skills. Preferred personnel:

Name: Dr. Albert Donovan
Location: Site-19
Status: Active
Reason: 40+ year research experience with biological/ infectious hazards.
Service: Site-19 Biohazard Sector.

Name: Cpt. Aaron Judd
Designation: Haephaestus
Location: Ely, Nevada
Status: Active, pending assignment
Reason: 25+ years experience in urban combat/tracking.
Service: 11 years USMC, 7 years MTF Nu-7, 7 years MTF Delta-5.

Name: Agent Jennifer Lyndon
Designation: Ares
Location: Site-19
Status: Active, pending assignment
Reason: 10+ years experience in forensic investigations/ espionage.
Service: 3 years Australian SASR, 4 years MTF Epsilon-11, 3 years [DATA REDACTED]

Name: Rs. Maya Li
Location: Site-19
Status: Active
Reason: 5 years memetics research experience.
Service: Site-19 Memetics Sector.

Name: Agent John Atkins
Designation: Dionysus
Location: Toronto, CN
Status: Active, pending assignment
Reason: 15+ years biohazard containment experience
Service: 5 years Canadian CRBN, 10 years MTF Beta-7

Name: Agent Frank Moretto
Designation: Hades
Location: San Juan Island, Washington
Status: Retired, working on a contractual basis
Reason: 35+ years urban tracking/investigation experience
Service: 10 years with the NYPD, 2 years FBI, 23 years MTF Pi-1

Name: Agent Vasiliy Cherenkov
Designation: Iris Hermes
Location: Site-19
Status: Active, pending assignment
Reason: Personal transfer request
Service: 15 years Site-19 security

Name: Dr. Mary O'Malley
Location: Site-19
Status: Active

Reason: 45+ years anomalous pathogen research
Service: 45+ years Site-19 Biohazard/Pathogens/ Replications Sectors

Name: Rs. Daniel Earl Doe
Location: Site-19
Status: Active
Reason: 4 years research into anomalous foods/food products
Service: Recent recruitment c. 2013

Overall personnel count: **10**
Operations personnel: **5**
Research personnel: **5**

It's been pre-cleared. Stamp it.

O5-5

April 9th, 2690

For close to 800 years, the Foundation has protected the world from a variety of anomalous threats. Secrecy went out the window by the late 2000s, but their principles remained the same throughout the centuries. As humanity grew closer to the stars, the Foundation began to manage threats across the entire Solar System. The Fifth Church started a pilgrimage directly into the Sun, and the Solar Occult Coalition is currently attempting to eliminate the **Crab Pulsar**.

The primary cause behind this interstellar expansion was the destruction of Earth by **SCP-094**.

When the sphere reached the size of a small village, the Foundation tried to hide it from the world, altering satellite images and quietly funding space programs to escape the Earth. When it could be seen from Buenos Aires, however, global focus was now on abandoning ship. Alliances between paranormal organizations were formed to utilize anomalous technologies to colonize and terraform Mars, moons of other planets, and anywhere else in the Solar System that could be made to support life. To this end, the goal was accomplished – but not before South and Central America were absorbed by the void. As billions fled to the final frontier, a black dot covered their tracks.

Humanity has now been living on foreign planets for a few hundred years. There were bigger issues to deal with, from the anomalous to the political to the logistical, than the state of the dying planet. When half of the Blue Marble was blackened, hardly anyone noticed; *Titan's Got Talent* had made its television debut the same night. Cultural ties had been lost many generations ago. The former residence of the entire human species was now as significant as Mercury. It was just another lifeless object orbiting around a ball of burning gas. Similarly, when a mere 10% of Earth remained, the

only evidence of it was at the Foundation’s yearly celebration of the successful evacuation of the Lunar Sites – the natural satellite was now free from its gravitational chains, given the lack of anything to orbit around.

And finally, on April 9th, 2690, as humanity’s home for the hundreds of thousands of years died with a whimper, just one man watched it come to an end. Dr. Bright, the last man in the universe to have seen the Pacific Ocean, a snow-capped mountain range, or a clear blue sky, witnessed the remains of Earth be blotted out, removed from existence. A harbor for the human race that survived asteroids, solar flares, and, despite all odds, produced intelligent life capable of containing the anomalous, simply faded into the growing shadow.

Despite this tragedy, life went on. Over time, fewer and fewer people remembered that beyond the event horizon lay an abandoned planet - an abandoned home. It just wasn't relevant in the new world.

Humanity had not died in the darkness.

But the Earth was consumed by it.

April Fools

“Termination” is a word we heard a lot in this place. It was mostly heard over intercoms, or through the grape vines as gossip between the dorms. They didn't like that we talked between dorms at all, but we found ways. Most of us have spent years in prisons all over the country, and we had been sneaking things a lot bigger (and often deadlier) than scraps of paper between cells, so it wasn't a problem to learn at least some details of what insane shit the guys down the hall were being ordered to do. A lot of it doesn't bear repeating, because it's obviously bullshit. Only problem was that most people only lasted a few days here. We here in dorm 3 would spend that time setting up links with the dorms next to us, and across from us, but often we'd be lucky to get more than a few pieces of news from them before they dropped off the face of the Earth. We'd hear new guys getting marched in to take the spots, and we'd all be back to square one. And every time, one way or another, we'd hear that word- “The Class Ds were terminated”, we would over hear on radios. “Guys, you know that tall guy from Dorm 2? He failed a polygraph, haven’t seen him since. The Doc just said he'd be terminated”. And for everyone of us who was “terminated”, another would be marched into their now vacant spot later that same day.

We here in dorm 3 were a little luckier. We'd been stuck in here for about 4 weeks. The calendar says it's the 31st of March, so maybe a little longer. About a month sounds right. The six of us were all taken together from a Supermax in Colorado, lifers all. Although we're not sure where we are, we know we took a bus, a plane, and train (and possibly a boat?) to get here, on a blindfolded journey that lasted about, say, 2 days? Point is, none of us wanted to spend a day longer in those tiny cells, with awful food, surrounded by cameras, sharing what little space you had with your fellow criminals. When we agreed to this, that's what we were trying to escape.

Problem is, this place was almost exactly the same, except a lot

more strict, and a hell of a lot more secretive. Not even an exercise yard, or a warden we can talk to if we bitch loud enough. In hindsight, better the devil you know, maybe. But at the time, all we knew was a guy in suit, saying he was here “on authority of the Department of Justice” asking us the same question each: “Do you want to be Class Ds? It's just for a month”. Hell, we were all class A prisoners in a Supermax. We thought we were being offered a spot at a minimum security prison, or at the very least, transfer to a less secure wing here. Maybe we should have asked questions. Maybe we should have been skeptical. Maybe we should have recognized the guy had shown us not a scrap of ID. We didn't care at the time. We saw a way out, took it, and now we're trapped in an even tighter prison where our fellow prisoners are constantly getting “terminated”. We were stupid; but we were lucky. Since then, we've not had to leave the cells, do hard labour, or worry about getting shanked. All we have to worry about is: what happens at the end of the month? Will we be “terminated,” too?

Next morning, and we rip yesterday's date off the calendar. We're getting so bored, we almost fight for that privilege. At least it passes a few seconds. 1st April, and already the others are busy punching and pinching each other like little kids. Maybe something will happen. We've been here a month. Will we hear from our little friend from the supermax? Will we finally be allocated one of these “procedures” we keep hearing about? The ones followed by numbers we never remember? They remind us of police codes, but aren't connected to any crimes. Or at least, not any we committed.

Wait, no. Intercom's coming on. Some guy clearing his throat. “Good morning, Class D Personnel of dorm 3”. Shit! This had better be good. The six of us were practically standing to attention now.
“I would like to thank you for your valuable service in the past 31 days. Everyone here at the Foundation is grateful for your decision to join us for this time. Sadly, your month long tenure with us is at an end, as agreed, and it is now time for you to be terminated”.

Deadly silence. Whatever it meant, we were joining all the others we'd seen this past month.

“That is, your employment with us is to be terminated, and our contracts annulled. To celebrate your time with us, we have

prepared an honorary breakfast in the canteen. Our senior staff would like to thank you personally for your efforts, before escorting you off of Foundation grounds, and back to your homes. A guard will come to escort you in 5 minutes. Thank you again, gentlemen".

It cut out. Employment terminated? An actual breakfast? Home?! Things were looking up, and the six of us found ourselves once again silent. After 10 years of more of prison followed by a month of nothing, going home was like telling a kid he'd just won his own candy store. The guard did show up five minutes later. He did escort us down the hall, and through others we had never before seen, until arriving at a set of double doors, through wish he ushered us. And in this room, what we found was definitely not our breakfast.

As heavy locks closed behind us, and bright lights came up, we found ourselves face to face with a giant-ass glass cube, like a giant fish tank. There were no koi here, though- the tank had some giant mess of blood, bone, and guts floating in liquid. Two of us barfed at the sight; I barfed at the smell. It was then that the same voice came up over another intercom. "Class D personnel are in position. All safety features and door locks are activated. Commence tank drain". A vent in the bottom of the tank opened up, and began gushing the liquid onto the floor of the room, giving off a sizzle and some faint steam wherever it touched. It slowly leaked all the way to us, touching our shoes which melted a little before we started moving back up against the door.

Once the tank was empty, and most of the room was an acidic death trap, the sides were lowered, as is the cube was being unfolded. Not only did we only have a small island of dry floor by the wall left to stand on, but we had no option but to stare as the gooey mass slowly took form- first as a beak, secondly as a torso- until finally- oh, *Christ*. It's got legs. It's getting up. It can walk- but we have no where to run.

As this ungodly animal slowly awoke and eyed us, then the room, then us again, we heard for the third time, that voice. "So sorry, gentlemen. It appears I had my memos confused. The termination of employment is for one of our senior staff. You, however, have been assigned for termination in quite another way. Please await the approach of SCP-682 to commence testing. I can only apologize

again for the confusion. Goodbye, Ds. Oh, and April Fools”.

The monster was prowling now, I didn't count the mouths; I couldn't possibly count the teeth. Things moved too fast after that; for most of us, they ended even faster. We never even had the chance to dodge, or run this thing. We had nowhere to go even if we tried; but I tried anyway. As I ran to the side, into the acid, I felt the melting sole of my shoe liquefy. I tripped, landing on my face. *It burned everywhere*- but still, the creature came for me, clearly still hungry from the friends of mine he had just swallowed almost whole. Before it blocked my sight entirely, I could see cameras in the corner. And at the other end of the cameras was, no doubt, the man who was the source of that voice.

Yeah. Happy April fools. You bastard.

ARBH-Class Debrief File

WARNING: THE FOLLOWING FILE IS LEVEL 3/ARBH CLASSIFIED

ANY ATTEMPT TO ACCESS THIS FILE WITHOUT LEVEL 3/ARBH AUTHORIZATION WILL BE LOGGED AND WILL LEAD TO IMMEDIATE DISCIPLINARY ACTION.

» INPUT LEVEL THREE CREDENTIALS

ARBH-CLASS "INSECT HELL" EVENT SCENARIO

IMPENDICITY[1]: LOW | ABORTIVITY[2]: HIGH

PERSONNEL DEBRIEF FILE | FURTHER EDITS DISALLOWED

Introduction

"World turn into an insect hell? We've got one heck of a bug repellent for that." - Researcher James Petahn

Hello to any new Level 3 Foundation personnel reading this. You're reading this because either your site head asked you to read it, or you're interested in what an ARBH-Class Event actually is. Well, you came to the right place. This is the debriefing and training file, where you will find answers to all of your questions as well as basics for dealing with and preventing this doomsday event.

What is an ARBH-Class Event?

"I hate spiders. Especially big, furry, anomalous, world-ending ones." - Researcher Nicholas Crawford

Insect life accounts for most of the animal life on planet Earth, at roughly around 200 million insects per person. With such a large and diverse amount of insect life, anomalous instances of some insects are bound to turn up eventually. However, these anomalous insects could have disastrous effects on planet Earth, so the Foundation created the ARBH-Class Event Scenario to deal with such a problem.

An ARBH-Class Event Scenario, nicknamed "Insect Hell", is where any species or instances of insects, by anomalous means, becomes a direct threat to the human race and its environment; additionally, the insects must be able to have a significant impact worldwide. 'Insects', in regard to the Event Scenario, are defined as any species under the phylum Euarthropoda.

ARBH and You (1): How to Prevent It

IMPENDICITY: LOW

The ARBH-Class Event Scenario is ranked a low on its impendicity meter, meaning that there is a slim chance of an event happening. Although the Foundation may not know of all anomalous instances of insects, we can easily contain and/or misinform the public should any new instances arise. If push comes to shove with a subset of anomalous insects, specialized pesticides can be used to reduce the subset's population to allow for proper containment. Complete extermination of a species of anomalous insects is only reserved for an active ARBH-Class Event. Some notable SCPs that could initiate an ARBH-Class Event are:

- **SCP-456**
- **SCP-820**
- **SCP-851**
- **SCP-3004**
- **SCP-3035**
- **SCP-3916**

Currently, the Foundation has adequate containment and documentation on these SCPs; emergency protocols are in place as well for a possible containment breach.

ARBH and You (2): How to Abort It

ABORTIVITY: HIGH

The ARBH-Class Event Scenario is ranked a high on its abortivity meter, meaning that there must be an extremely large effort - not just by the Foundation, worldwide - to reduce or exterminate the number of anomalous instances responsible for the ARBH-Class Event. More than likely, the Foundation will be hampered by the physical/environmental damage caused by an ARBH-Class Event. Heavy usage of pesticides is the most probable way to end such an Event; other ways are

estimated to be not enough to reduce the Event's severity. The last resort would be to use existing SCPs to combat an event, although the O5 Council would have to approve it, meaning the probability of a doomsday combat team is nearly null.

Frequently Asked Questions!

— ~ —

Q: *Why is it called an ARBH-Class Event?*

A: It's named after the biblical 8th plague, the plague of locusts. ARBH is the phonetical translation of the Hebrew word for 'locust', אַרְבֶּה.

— ~ —

Q: *How do I pronounce "ARBH-Class Event"?*

A: "ahr-BEH klas əˈvent". Although you probably knew how to pronounce 'Class Event'.

— ~ —

Q: *What is the difference between an XK-Class and an ARBH-Class Event?*

A: While an XK-Class Event is more relative to a SCP directly breaching containment and ending the world of its own accord, an ARBH-Class event is more relative to a breached instance replicating, then subsequently causing environmental and physical damage that ends society and the human race.
If one anomalous insect ends the world, it's most likely a XK-Class Event - if it's a whole populace, it's most likely an ARBH-Class Event.

— ~ —

Q: *Could <insert SCP here> cause an ARBH-Class Event?*

A: If the SCP is an anomalous instance of a species of insect, could replicate to a massive scale, and cause enough damage to end the human race; then most likely yes, it could cause an ARBH-Class Event.

— ~ —

Q: *Is <insert species here> under an ARBH-Class Event?*

A: There is no real solid answer for this, but if the Foundation containing anomalous instances of that species, and the species is related to the phylum Euarthropoda probably so. Site Directors will know for sure which subsets and species can be classified under an ARBH-Class Event.

— ~ —

Q: *When does the Foundation recognize we are in an ARBH-Class Event?*

A: The Foundation officially recognizes we are in an ARBH-Class Event Scenario under an executive O5 Council order. The order is proposed to be based off of how much damage the anomalous insects cause.

Conclusion

"We're screwed if anomalous ladybugs caused an ARBH-Class Event. Those things are too cute." - Researcher Phil Shipherd

This concludes the training/debrief file on the ARBH-Class Event Scenario. Any additional questions can be answered by your local Site Director, or by Researcher James Petahn through Foundation WebNET at

'pcs.noitadnuof|jnhatep#pcs.noitadnuof|jnhatep'. Thanks for reading and hope you're one step closer to getting settled at the Foundation!

AUTHORED BY: Researcher Joe Fynegan

SCP-3916

Insect Hell

The Morality of Insects

Footnotes
1. Estimate of how likely an Event could happen.
2. Estimate of the difficulty of preventing a Doomsday Event once the conditions are present.

Arbitrary Darkness

Another collection of villanelles based on SCP articles. The first is **here**.

***Biological Motherboard** [for thedeadlymoose]*

Goddess, mother, anomaly
Building towards its own ideal
We fear what it could grow to be.

Organic piece of circuitry
Living chitin, not cold steel
Goddess, mother, anomaly

Benevolent, otherworldly,
Infinite, and ethereal
We fear what it could grow to be.

We wonder of its history
There is much more we can reveal
Goddess, mother, anomaly

What could its purpose truly be?
To kill, to rule, to guard, to heal
We fear what it could grow to be.

What lies within her memory?
She thinks, she lives, but does not feel
Goddess, mother, anomaly
We fear what she could grow to be.

***Mr. Moon** [for Dexanote]*

The Moon accepts with quiet grace
Enduring despite some distress

The shifting phases of his face

Like waning light, features erase
Perceptions dim, later regress
The Moon accepts with quiet grace

Eyes, ears, nose, fade without trace
He copes with fate, nevertheless
The shifting phases of his face

A simple life he does embrace
Persevering with finesse
The Moon accepts with quiet grace

Despite the losses that take place
He is not worried to possess
The shifting phases of his face

He calmly lives at his own pace
This man of lunar stateliness
This Mister Moon accepts with grace
The shifting phases of his face.

Squeedle Deedle Dee! [for PeppersGhost]

We are the happy as can be!
It's apsa-tapsa-lutely true
Squeedle deedle deedle-ly dee!

We'll dance for you so merrily
Ballet and jigs and Broadway, too
We are the happy as can be!

We seek children of heart goodly
It's how we live and what we do
Squeedle deedle deedle-ly dee!

Our imaginations are scary
But you know how to help us through
We are the happy as can be!

We thrive because of you, you see
For your great help, our thanks are due!
Squeedle deedle deedle-ly dee!

Not all of us have arms, but we
Still wish we could hug all of you
We are the happy as can be
Squeedle deedle deedle-ly dee!

Literature Birds

Just the carving of stories is all that we need
We strain and we struggle for our own grand behest
Not a thing can compare to these words that we read

We care not for ourselves and the bounds we exceed
Yes it hurts, but we find that we have no protest
Just the carving of stories is all that we need

Through this task we press on, seldom rest, seldom feed
All our lives, all our strength we thus put to the test
Not a thing can compare to these words that we read

We have seen your efforts, crafts made by human deed
Your ink-covered paper is imperfect at best
Just the carving of stories is all that we need

To our beaks and our stomachs we pay little heed
There is only the words and the stories, our quest
Not a thing can compare to these words that we read

We do not think too much of the day we'll succeed
What matters is the journey and how we've progressed
Just the carving of stories is all that we need
Not a thing can compare to these words that we read

***Ships That Pass In The Night* [for FlameShirt]**

Despite all that's happened, we're truly happy
All the dangers have passed, we're safe and alright

To live and to love in the midst of the sea

Side by side always is what we wished to be
We're lucky enough to have loved at first sight,
Despite all that's happened, we're truly happy

We've spent many moments content as can be
To whale-watch together in fading sunlight
To live and to love in the midst of the sea

We do recall sometimes that dark memory
We think of the chasing, the harpoons in sight
Despite all that's happened, we're truly happy

No matter what iceberg or weapon deadly
Forever, we'd promised, regardless of plight
To live and to love in the midst of the sea

Though now we no longer can travel freely
We're still glad we didn't just pass in the night
Despite all that's happened, we're truly happy
To live and to love by the shore of the sea

The Drunk God *[for Vincent_Redgrave]*

I wish I wasnt so lonly
Y did no1 bothr 2 stay
Iv just been drnk… plz talk to me?

Someday somhow Ill make them see
First fins this drnk anyway
I wish I wasnt so lonly

Wher wuld my follwers all be?
I DEMND REVERENCE, DO NOT STRAY
Iv just been drnk… plz talk to me??

Im tryn hard, honest relly
WHT MOR DO U WANT ME 2 SAY
I wish I wasnt so lonly

I once ws greatr, trthflly
I need my blood and wine, ok
Iv just been drnk… plz talk to me???

I know Im stil a deity
Yet I grw weakerrr by the day
I wish I wasnt so lonly
Iv just been drnk… plz talk to me?????

`Dr. Wondertainment's Shadow Paint Play-Set!` [for FortuneFavorsBold]

Create, erase, enjoy the sight
Coax forms to dance in blackest paint
Bring darkness to the life of light

Whether drawing beast, maid, or knight
We're sure that you'll have no complaint
Create, erase, enjoy the sight

With Ani-Magi-Nation might
Draw power into forms once faint
Bring darkness to the life of light

Please make sure that the lighting's right
Remember to use with restraint!
Create, erase, enjoy the sight

There's no more need to fear the night
Such terrors are now simply quaint
Bring darkness to the life of light

So dream on, we're sure you'll delight
In shadowplay without constraint
Create, erase, enjoy the sight
Bring darkness to the life of light.

`Out of Time` [for Dmatix]

You know there's no place you can stay

Who could you possibly turn to?
It doesn't have to end this way.

Why run from me? Why seek delay?
No matter what you try to do
You know there's no place you can stay.

I'll finally catch up one day
I know forever well, it's true
It doesn't have to end this way.

To me you're nothing more than prey
No matter when you travel through
You know there's no time you can stay.

What more could you want me to say?
Danny, Ben, I'm coming for you.
It doesn't have to end this way.

When I find you I'll make you pay
Dear Molly, doll, they're my kids too
You know there's no time you can stay.
I guess it has to end this way.

`Lunar Leporine` [for Accelerando]

You must feel so lonely.
I bring gifts, outstanding
I see home below me.

When will you think of me?
How soon is the landing?
Mother, are you lonely?

Just deliver, really?
What are you commanding?
I see home below me.

Surely this all must be
A misunderstanding

Why don't you feel lonely?

Mother, please think of me
You are too demanding
I see home below me.

I've grown strong, you will see
Mother, I am landing.
I can't stay so lonely
Home is where I will be.

***Faith Half-Healer* [for Gaffney]**

I was never really a fraud
I simply act the way I must
I know how it feels, to be God.

The Lord's strength fills me, full and broad
My healings were all built on trust
I was never really a fraud

I lead the masses trite and awed
Mete punishment for sin and lust
I know how it feels, to be God.

I see through lies, condemn the flawed
Work miracles as I see just
I never really was a fraud

I've gone past where preachers have trod
Condemn the fragile to the dust
I know how it feels, to be God.

Although my actions earn no laud
I can't just let my talents rust
I never really was a fraud
I know how it feels, to be God.

***Lime Liftoff and Sarsaparilla Cream* [for lhp]**

It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more
Lime Liftoff lifts you to the sky
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

We know what privileged folk
look for
Know what the high class
wants to buy
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more

Above uncultured slobs you’ll
soar
Elite taste is the way to fly
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

Your life depends on it, we’re
sure
A shame should your flight
go awry
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more

Sarsaparilla will make you
snore
Cream’s really so mundane
you’d die
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

The fruit of knowledge all
adore
Is the lime; we will not deny
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more
Our Sarsaparilla Cream’s the
best
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

For a great price at any store
From Carl’s Caffeine Club,
we attest
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more

Breathtaking taste none can
ignore
Go on and put it to the test
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

Never again breathe muck or
gore
This drink was made to
soothe the stressed
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more

Lime Liftoff is what we abhor
Elitists simply can’t contest
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

Those Limey Drinkers are a
bore
So *let them burn*, we do
suggest
It’s clear which soda you’ll
love more
To friendly rivals, THIS
MEANS WAR

`The Pen Is Mightier` [Christmas gift for lhp]

The blade unmade, the stories blurred
A mystic legend oft retold
A broken stylus wrote the word.

The shaman's wisdom undeterred
A horsehead crown the truth will hold
The blade unmade, the stories blurred.

The king to battle each time spurred
Through love and loss, stands ever bold
A broken stylus wrote the word.

The son of treason, cries unheard
Meets each new end in blood run cold
The blade unmade, the stories blurred.

The lady of a vow conferred
In water seals the sword controlled
A broken stylus wrote the word.

The metal god, with wrath incurred
Has watched these crisscrossed fates remold
The blade unmade, the stories blurred.
A broken stylus wrote the world.

`Of Bookworms, Bamboo, and Beating Hearts.` [Christmas gift for DreamwalkerFae]

Twirling through the ocean vast
Two of us, in endless dance
Side by side two nets are cast.

Searching, seeking, lightning-fast
Won't you spare me one more glance?
Twirling through the ocean vast

Find me with your words amassed

Drift to me, through time's expanse
Side by side two nets are cast.

Loneliness we will outlast
Aim, adjust, once more advance
Twirling through the ocean vast

We will face this space contrast
Trust our love, our lives to chance
Side by side two nets are cast.

Think not of the trials we've passed
How we've burned for this romance—
Twirling through the ocean vast
Side by side, we're **whole** at last.

Are We Christmas Yet?

"I still think this is a terrible idea."

"No, it's awesome! Like, deconstructive or whatever."

Overgang and Joey stared at the enormous red bauble that towered over nearby buildings, pensively sipping eggnog. It had several hundred minuscule trees hanging off the side of it. Overgang posed a question.

"So, it's an hour and ten to midnight. What happens when it's Christmas?"

"Presents happen."

"Presents happen?"

"Presents happen. Everywhere."

"Elaborate."

"It literally causes Christmas miracles."

"Elaborate more."

"Sick children will walk, Tiny Tim will get his presents, Scrooge will see the light. The town will be filled with cheer and goodwill, children will run downstairs only to see Santa Claus pop up the chimney. Rich people will let beggars into their houses, every church bell will ring twelve times. A cranky old man will smile for the first time in twenty years. Kids will ice skate while laughing happily, and be joined by their otherwise dismissive parents. Snow shall fall down, leaving beautiful white fields by morning. John McClane and Hans Gruber shall fight a war of wills, little Macaulay Culkin will fight off a pair of thieves. The Grinch's heart will grow three sizes, and Charlie Brown's sad little tree will get the love it deserves. Peace on earth, goodwill to man. The perfect Christmas."

"Well, that sounds lovely, if a bit boring."

"And of course, since Christmas is about the little baby Jesus and the mother Mary, every virginal female in the city will spontaneously give birth, whereupon the newborn is promptly crushed by a pile of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

"That's more like it."

Are We There Yet?

♫ Everythin', everythin', everythin's gonna be alright this mornin' ♫

"All I'm saying is that we've listened to this for two straight hours."

Dietrich rolled his eyes for the third time. "Yah? And I had to sit through yer playlist across two state lines, Bridge. It's my turn."

♫ Now when I was a young boy, at the age of five ♫

"Yeah but the Pumpkins have a little variety." Bridge fumbled with the tuning knob. Dietrich quickly slapped his hand. The hand was retracted followed by a scoff. "Rude!"

♫ My mother said I was, gonna be the greatest man alive ♫

"Serious, Bridge. If'n you don't like Muddy Waters you can just get the hell out. I'm sick of yer belly-achin'."

"Don't make me pull rank, Diet-bitch."

"Cute. Pull rank all you like, I ain't changin' the channel."

«Guys! I've been listening to you two piss and moan over the radio ever since Kansas. I'm turning it off now.»

♫ But now I'm a man, way pa— ♫

`Alexandra` then cut-off XM radio privileges.

"Alex, that's not in the least bit fair." Dietrich fumbled with his phone in the cup holder. "Alex, turn it back on… Alex?"

Bridge folded his arms, closed his eyes, and slouched into his seat further. "Silent treatment."

Dietrich tossed his phone over the shoulder and into the back seat. From the rear view mirror he could see **Merle** enjoying the breeze from the open window. Their eyes met and he signed Dietrich a response.

YOU-PLAY-TOO-MUCH-FUCKING-BLUES-MUSIC-ANYWAY

Dietrich batted the rearview mirror into a cock-eyed position so he didn't have to look at him. But Merle remained visible in the reflection of the dash. "Whatever. Not even halfway there and I'm already fixin' to drive this car to the nearest river and drown all three of you." His mother's words coming out of his mouth.

"Three? Yourself included?" Bridge snorted. Dietrich only grumbled more under his breath. "… Hey, how come we didn't just *fly* to Site-17?"

"Flying means havin' to put in requests; means yer name is on the manifest; means paperwork. I was hired to avoid paperwork as much as possible. Half of spyin' is keepin' low to the ground, Bridge."

Bridge looked out the window. "… I guess that's true. I'm probably just antsy, but it would have been a little nicer to just get a two hour flight over with."

UP-AHEAD

"Just shut the hell—."

Dietrich glanced at Merle's reflection. Then jerked his head back up to see a police checkpoint up ahead. Orange cones and squad cars funneled traffic on the road as they let other cars through slowly. Each one was being examined. He gently stopped behind the line of cars.

NOT-POLICE

"What's wrong, Dietrich?"

LOOKING-FOR-HIM

"That ain't no everyday police checkpoint." Dietrich cut the steering wheel hard to make a turn to cut across to the other side of the highway.

Alexandra chirped over the speakers. «He's right, sir. Local dispatch has them responding to a fire.»

DUCK

"DUCK!"

"Duck?"

Dietrich pulled down on Bridge's collar just as the passenger side window glass shattered. The bullet raced by and put a hole in his empty headrest. For sure, someone was shooting at them from behind the trees. Dietrich floored the gas pedal almost through the car itself as they sped away in the opposite direction.

"D'you see the shooter, Bridge! Is it the **same lady**?!"

"It came from the woods! I don't fucking know!"

HOPE-YOU-LIKE-BULLETS

Automatic gunfire chased them down the lane as bullets ricocheted off the lightly armored roof and trunk. Fortunately for them, nothing standard issue armoring on Foundation motorpool vehicles couldn't handle. Dietrich looked at his driver side mirror just in time to see a .45 ACP round whiz through it.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!"

TOLD-YOU

Bridge muffled a response while keeping his head between his knees. "This wouldn't happen if we were *on a plane*!"

"Bridge, Merle, shut up!"

"WHO THE FUCK IS MYRTLE?!"

«Guys, take the exit here into town. Get off the highway. We can lose them in more populated areas.»

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

The SUV squealed and nearly tipped as it made a 40mph drift onto a main road into town. Alexandra was nice enough to work ahead of them, switching the next four intersections to green simultaneously. «Green. Green. Green. And Green. All clear.»

"Outstanding, Alex! Now find us another way out." Bridge fumbled with an outdated road map in the glove box as Dietrich kept his eyes on the nearby buildings for more 'policemen'.

«Recalculating.»

"ALEX!" Bridge frowned.

«Sorry, sir. Um… take this next Route. It's up on the—»

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

«—left.»

"I saw it. We need to ditch this car though." Dietrich gripped the wheel harder as he sped down the empty asphalt lane. «Three more miles and there's an old rail-yard. We can park in there.»

"Fuckin-A. Alex, call for a pickup too. Make it a Level-4 priority." Bridge folded the map back up and shoved it back into the glove box.

«Okie dokey. I'm online with Site-17 dispatch, we're in range for chopper E-VAC. Redirecting them now.» Alexandra chirped over the car speakers with a comforting and positive tone.

Bridge sighed with relief. "Rank has its perks."

Dietrich didn't respond. He slowed down and eventually pulled into the rail-yard. It was a museum of rust and bird droppings mostly. He set the parking brake, and sat silent.

"Alex, what's the ETA on that pickup."

«Twenty two minutes, sir.»

"Don't call me sir." He shook his head, glancing over at Dietrich with a cold glance. Just enough time to interrogate someone.

"Now… want to tell me what the fuck is going on?"

Dietrich squinted his eyes. "I don't know what the fuck yer talking about. But yer tone is gonna get you cold-cocked."

"Uh huh. You *knew* those weren't cops. And you look over your shoulder every other minute like you're being followed. And you talk to yourself *all* the damn time." Bridge cracks his neck in irritation. "And who the shit is 'Merle'?"

TROUBLE

Dietrich started to sweat and chuckled nervously. "I-I do none of them things."

«Yeah, you kinda do, sir.»

Dietrich quickly shut off his phone. "So what? You thinkin' I have somethin' to do with us gettin' shot at? I just saved yer life, asshole!"

Bridge backed up a bit, then glanced at his donut of a headrest. "Look I know something's… *up*, with you Dietrich."

KILL-HIM

Dietrich's eyes darted between Merle and Bridge. Bridge glanced in Merle's general direction, then back at Dietrich.

HE-WILL-REPORT-US

KILL-HIM-BEFORE-THEY-ARRIVE

"S-stop." Dietrich stepped out of the car.

"Stop what? Tell me what's going on, Dietrich." Bridge followed.

"No!" It was MTF Mu-13 all over again. Merle surrounded him on all sides, no matter where he turned he was there in the rail-yard with them. Even when he closed his eyes, Merle stared back at him in the dark.

"Dietrich, take a breath and calm down."

HE-WILL-PUT-YOU-IN-A-CELL

"Stop it, Merle."

JUST-LIKE-YOUR-BROTHER

"Fuckin' stop!"

plcht. Dietrich fell to his knees and flopped forward, dropping his phone and car keys. That time, Bridge really had tasered him. Bridge let off a short burst of voltage and approached.

TOLD-YOU

"Now that I have your attention. Who is this Merle?"

DO-NOT-SAY-IT

Dietrich caught his breath back and picked his face up off the dusty ground. "Bridge… I can't. They'd lock me up fer good. I-I can keep it together… I can… honest."

Bridge took a seat on a pile of railroad ties. "Maybe you think you don't need a psyche eval for whatever your condition is? Maybe you think that gives you some kind of advantage out here?"

Dietrich clenched his fist. "I ain't crazy, Bridge."

Bridge held up his hand to finish his point. "I don't care. I skimmed your file before we left. Six transfers in twelve months. I don't know what you're hiding, but you're abusing Foundation bureaucracy to keep low."

Dietrich shook his head, but it was apparent that Bridge hit the nail on the head.

"You keep it together while we do this, I'll put in another transfer for you to anywhere you want with full endorsement. You *or* Mister Hyde cross me… I'll hand you over to internal affairs and they can deal with you. Or I'll crush you myself. Savvy?"

HE-WILL-BREAK-THIS-DEAL

"Yah." Dietrich took a knee and pulled the taser darts out of him. "What guarantee I have?"

Bridge picked up Dietrich's mobile phone. "You don't. Nobody ever does around here. But I *could* have shot you with an actual gun."

Dietrich chuckled and took his phone back. It was a sincere and awkward kind of laugh. "Alright. Deal."

They both shook hands in the rail-yard while Merle adamantly shook his head against it.

THIS-WILL-NOT-END-WELL.

"Shut up, Merle."

Bridge smiled, looking in the wrong direction from Merle. "Yeah, shut up."

In the distance, the helicopters could be heard closing in. It wasn't but a few minutes before a red and blue news helicopter landed in the rail-yard with the words 'Sasakwa County Press' decaled on the side. Dietrich and Bridge backed up as the dust cloud enveloped them. A slavic-looking gentleman with tussled brown hair in a very expensive looking hunter green suit hopped out and hustled over to Dietrich and Bridge.

"Agent Lurk and Doctor Bridge?"

Bridge shouted over the helicopter. "That's us!"

"Show me yer ID!" Dietrich yelled.

The man gave him a perturbed look, then fumbled for his Foundation badge and tossed it to him. Dietrich nodded in

satisfaction. "Aleksander Foxx, Agent… no offense! Assassins are tryin' to put us in the dirt!"

Foxx nodded and motioned for them to get into the helicopter. All three hustled inside, but not before Foxx pulled the pin of an incendiary grenade and tossed it into the open SUV. "Leave the car! We're taking off!"

KER-FOOM

The car erupted into black smoke and flames as the helicopter rose up over the hills in the direction of their final destination.

Foxx leaned in close to Dietrich and Bridge. "When we land, rooms will be set up for you. You will be debriefed in the morning. Clear?"

Both nodded. Dietrich then leaned back in his seat next to Merle. "We made it."

Ars Gratia Artis

> *Art alone makes life possible – this is how radically I should like to formulate it. I would say that without art man is inconceivable in physiological terms […] Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being.*
>
> - Joseph Beuys (1921-1986)

The young artist blinked as the soft distant rustling of maps and wineglasses behind him prodded his consciousness.

Straggling patrons entered his wide room in the gallery as he purposefully ignored them, trying to keep his body rigid and erect on a tall stool; next to him, an artist's table was laid out chock full of supplies - brushes, chisels, cans of spray paint, tubs of traditional paint. They silently shuffled in, conversations dying to a hush.

Still holding himself as if he was a sculpture as well, he kept his back rigid and neck straight, staring intently at the sculpture ahead of him. He steals a glance at the floor, marred by the streaks of paint that signaled previous performances. Purposefully avoiding acknowledgement, stray eye contact was still made despite his best efforts.

He faced straight ahead, hoping that he looked as emotionless as possible, stealing a glance at the audience and hoping no one saw his sliver of doubt.

He hears the last of the group come in. It's time to begin.

The artist closed his eyes.

> *The young artist today need no longer say "I am a painter" or "a dancer". He is simply "an artist". All of life will open to him. He will discover out of ordinary things*

the meaning of ordinariness. He will not try to make them extraordinary. Only their real meaning will be stated. […] People will be delighted or horrified, critics will be amused or confused…

- Allan Kaprow (1927-2006)

In his head, the artist visualized the sculpture ahead of him, as he ignored the tittering sound of the audience shifting in an attempt to get a better view. The misshapen head and roughly carved legs designed to communicate rawness - artificial yet natural, refined yet unpolished, carefully designed yet carelessly executed. A human figure feels exactly halfway between painting and sculpture. Two large, unpainted orbs stared blankly at him and the audience behind.

It was the thirty seventh time he performed this routine already; since the opening of the gallery, the colorless concrete mass has steadily grown more grotesque with each application, a mockery of the human form.

He silently turned his back to the statue and picked up his supplies. Focusing on on both the artist and the sculpture, the audience muttered to itself.

Pretending that he doesn't care about the pairs of eyes that are trained on him and the sculpture, the artist started to hum a little tune - today is a Brubeck kind of day. Blindly, he felt around the table, and picked up a brush that was untainted by paint. He held it up to the light, tilted his head as if he was unsure, as if this wasn't part of a planned routine. He brushed it gently against his left eyelid, the ticklish bristles teasing him to look around him. He put it down on the carefully arranged table, and felt around until he found another similarly dry brush. He brushed this one against his right eyelid, still shut tight. The room was silent except for the rustling of the brush, the innocent humming deafening loud.

Another brush. Hold up to the light. Brush the right palm.

Another brush. Hold up to the light. Brush the left palm.

Right cheek. Left cheek. Right ear. Left ear.

He went through all the brushes - and he felt a can of paint.

He can't see what color it is. He doesn't care what color it is.

His back was turned to the sculpture the whole time - a dozen pair of eyes trained on them, wanting to look at the artist but also not daring to look away from the sculpture.

Ignoring the row of brushes, he lifted the new tub of paint with both hands, the toxic fumes indicating its fresh untainted status. He turned back to face the statue, and slowly advanced towards it.

> *Theatre is fake … The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real.*
>
> - Marina Abramović (1946-)

Walking up to face the tall statue, he dipped his left hand into the tub of paint. He smeared it all over the orb-like eyes on the face of the structure. His blindness was his guide - his finger guided him through the zeniths and nadirs, as he attempted to apply the paint in a generous and fair manner.

The artist took another deep breath, knowing the next step of the routine is the easiest but also the most dangerous.

Without warning, he flung the tub of paint carelessly outwards, towards the audience. As usual, a few shrieks are heard, angry murmurs are thrown about, disappointed complaint of ruined boots were drowned out by rest of the crowd's overwhelming silence.

Silently thanking the audience, the artist ducked down under the outstretched arms of the sculpture, squeezing between the tiny space of its body and the wall.

The artist kneeled down facing the statue, on the polished wooden gallery floor, and took a deep breath. The most dangerous parts of the performance was over - another success.

The statue towered over him, the stubby arms blocking his view of

the ceiling. Eyes still shut, the artist faced upwards, imagining how the face of the statue now looks. He embraced the statue, just as the statue looks as if he embraced him from above.

The artist opens his eyes.

They do not move.

> *In art, the only one who really knows whether what you've done is honest is the artist.*
>
> - Bruce Nauman (1941-)

The green eyes looked nice. Training his eyes on the statue, the artist got up, and walking backwards slowly, returned to his stool, once again, sitting tall and straight as the statue in front of him.

The museum patrons clap politely, as they silently dispersed into the next room. He could hear their murmurs, suggesting that no artist would truly put themselves at true risk. Some concerned patrons kept their eyes trained on the statue, noticing the unmoving artist still seated as if unconcerned about his safety. Their fervent discussion grew fainter and fainter, as the crowd walked into the next room to experience the performance next door.

The young artist stared ahead, uncaring. The statue prohibits him from reacting, after all. He sits, and waits for a short few minutes as the new group of gallery patrons shuffled in so he could begin painting anew.

> *My works are in constant movement and flux. I don't make art in order to offer an explanation of some particular thing. Ultimately, what I want is to be able to make art that will hold the interest of the viewer.*
>
> - Izumi Kato (1969-)

Aryanne's Tail

"You have been IP Banned."

A young man was sitting in front of his computer screen. He donned a stained white tee and frayed shorts. His disheveled hair covered his face as the fan behind him blew relentlessly. He stroked his stubby beard, pondering his fate. He hadn't gone outside for days, but that was okay.

The man glared at his screen. There was no warning. There was no explanation. But he knew why. He saw it coming.

The man sighed.

Fuck it. They didn't need him. He wondered what they were saying about him.

"What the hell happened to Aryanne?"

"He probably got doxxed, again."

Aryanne was a man that craved attention. And attention was something he always got. He was revered as a "lord of the underworld", a "king of memes", and "The 4th Reich", among other things. But now his power and prestige was revoked, all by one message.

"You have been IP Banned."

The letters on the screen were blood red. The same color he used to paint his portraits.

He contemplated changing his proxy.

Fuck it.

Aryanne rose from his chair and approached the blood-soaked

canvas to his left. A beautiful face of intricate detail lay before him. It was a portrait of his mother. The color was appropriate for family. He picked up his brush and applied it to the canvas.

But he was out of paint.

Who is **John**?

John was by no means an extraordinary person. He was obedient, ignorant, and complacent. John was destined to be a consumer sheep. A corporate cow. Like all cattle, John accepted his branding with open hooves. Except John had arms. To John, his branding would represent the beginning of a loving relationship.

Aryanne furiously crumpled up a piece of paper in his hand and tossed it in the trash. How long has it been? How many years? He couldn't tell. Still, he could remember when he first met John. The mere thought brought a smile to his face.

It was a sunny day…

Wait, no. Aryanne ripped another paper in his hands. Shit, he had to start again. He received another piece of paper.

It was a sunny day, except Aryanne was cooped up in his room, as usual. After his untimely ban, he looked elsewhere for his title. Likes, comments, subscribers, followers … anything he could get to prove his worth. Social media? No, that was far too tame. His presence in the under net wasn't welcome, either.

John had his own business that day. He glanced at the screen in front of him. One hundred and eighty two. His followers. Admittedly, most of those members were fluff, but there was a fan base underlying.

NOW RECORDING

John reached for his knife. It was rusty, with blood caked on the surface. It was an old friend of his. John rolled up his sleeve carefully positioned the knife on his forearm, gripping the handle firmly with his hand. He pressed down, applying just enough

pressure. Then, with one cut, John slowly drove the blade down his arm. John smiled expectantly, though his hooded jacket obscured it.

To Aryanne, it was beautiful. The precision of the cut. The way the blood gushed out of John's arm, like a majestic river. The calm and almost professional demeanor. Ideas came flooding into Aryanne's head. One hand on his temple, he grabbed a notepad with the other.

He began to scribble on the pad while John continued to bleed, non-stop. John was now looking towards the camera sternly, waiting. The air around John and his thirty-two watchers stood still.

Aryanne would finally have his following. A kingdom. Wait, no. An empire. Fuck yeah. He looked back at his pad. A crudely drawn castle was staring back at him, while John continued to bleed. Aryanne tossed the notepad to the side. How was John still alive?

At this point, John's forearm was coated in deep red. He glanced at his arm, then slowly back towards the camera. He spoke to his audience, with a slouched posture and a raspy voice.

"I'll be back … tomorrow."

John swayed back and forth before slouching back in his chair. He slowly leaned to the side, hitting the ground with a *thud*. The camera continued to play. It stopped at exactly five minutes.

He was professional, talented and *timely*. Aryanne could definitely use a man like John.

It was months later. After deliberation over chat, arguments over business, and the fear of being doxxed, Aryanne and John were finally living together. Aryanne was sprawled out on the couch, watching the news.

John walked over in a T-shirt and shorts, sporting a bright pink apron. He shoved a plate of food in Aryanne's face.

"Here. Eat it."

Upon closer inspection, Aryanne's eyes saw pancakes drizzled with

syrup and blueberries sprinkled on top. The buttery aroma smacked him in the face. He slowly sat up before John laid out a table in front of him. The *clank* of the plate being placed on the table rang through Aryanne's ears.

"Whoa."

"Figure I'd give you something a little special today."

"Why, is it a special day or something?" Aryanne snorted.

John gave Aryanne a cold stare.

"Don't tell me you forgot."

"Uhh…"

"One thousand."

"Huh?"

"Followers, Aryanne! One thousand followers!

Aryanne began eating his pancakes. There was a hint of cinnamon as the food melted in his mouth.

"You could show some appreciation every once in a while." John stated, his voice rising. "After everything I do for you, not even so much as a 'thank you'? That's all I ask for, Aryanne. Would it kill you to do such a thing?"

"I'm sorry." Aryanne mumbled bits of pancake flying out of his mouth.

"Sorry doesn't cut it." John angrily pointed his finger at Aryanne, who was still graciously eating pancakes. His eyes narrowed, judging Aryanne's complacent satisfaction. Aryanne dropped his fork and turned towards John.

"I mean it." Aryanne whispered. John sighed. His eyebrows furrowed as he placed his hand on his forehead. After a few seconds, John spoke.

"Fine. But you're still taking me outside today."

Aryanne sometimes wondered how it would be to continue his old life in the undernet. No, he couldn't. He was contempt.

John and Aryanne hiked along a rocky path. For once, Aryanne could say it was a sunny day. Tall trees lined the sides, while birds obnoxiously sang all around them. The two strolled along as a familiar mountainous landscape came into their view. Aryanne felt a heavy burden on his back. Maybe it was the luggage they took with them. Maybe it was not. He broke into a sweat; his knees buckling as John triumphantly lead the way.

"Are … we … there … yet?" Aryanne panted between words. John offered no reply.

The surrounding woods began to disappear as the two walked closer to the mountain. Here they were. Bitch Mountain.

"John, guess what you are?" Aryanne thought to himself.

John perked up and turned towards him. He leered at Aryanne as he commanded "Get the camera."

The enormous backpack Aryanne carried hit the ground with a *thud*. He made haste as he scrambled to get the camera, lighting, and microphone ready. Everything had to be perfect. They were trying to get *subscribers* here.

As Aryanne set up, his mind wandered back to his untimely ban, months ago. He remembered the note, clear as day.

"You have been IP Banned.

- Fedora Man

P.S: Don't try to be so edgy, m8."

Aryanne knew all the admins of the undernet. Some he knew personally. Fedora Man was one of the few admins that Aryanne ever bumped heads with. Their arguments would often span

countless of pages, with supporters cramming their opinions between posts. Aryanne was even backed up by other admins (despite not being one himself). Fedora Man dissented with every word that came from Aryanne. He was truly a euphoric asshole in Aryanne's eyes.

Aryanne didn't need the undernet. He had a new purpose in life. With John, he didn't have hordes of people fearing him or kissing his ass. For once, he could live a normal life.

The air began to become stale. The taste of the air was almost metallic, like a rusted nail. Aryanne's eyes grew wide with terror. He dropped a microphone in hand. John quickly looked at him.

"Ugh." was all John managed to say. The air behind him began to swirl. A figure materialized in the midst of the swirling air. A short, stubby man in a trench coat stood directly behind him. John whirled around.

"Who are you?"

The man pointed to Aryanne. He tipped his fedora as he said: "Aryanne, you should know who I am."

Aryanne became flooded with fear and confusion. *Wait, what? This makes no fucking sense.* He thought to himself. *Can it be…*

A smirk grin grew on the man's face. "C'mon. My hat. You know it. *Say it* Aryanne."

"Fedora Man." John spat out. "I know who he is. He's a follower of my blog, Aryanne."

"Intelligent, isn't he?" The Fedora Man replied. "He's quite loyal, too. Is he your *girlfriend* or something?" He guffawed.

"Uh…"

"Wait, wait. Whoo." The Fedora Man tips his hat, looking at John. "M'lady". He continues to snicker, like a little schoolgirl.

John recoiled in disgust.

The air continued to fill with the man's laughter. After a few moments, the man fixes up his trench coat. His giddy and cheerful tone was replaced a more serious one.

"John. First I'd like to say, thank you for the blog. Quite a … interesting performance, to say in the least. Second, I came here for Aryanne. If you would kindly step forward."

Aryanne stepped forward.

"I don't get it." he said meekly.

"It's very simple." The Fedora Man replied. "We want you back."

Wait, what? Aryanne didn't understand. The same man who was the bane of his existence was now welcoming him with open arms.

"You see, Aryanne … You are an attractive individual. That is in the sense that you draw attention to yourself without really trying. What do they call it?" Fedora Man pondered. He spun his hat around his head.

"Ah, yes. The power of attraction. Ha! You are quite magnetic, my friend."

Aryanne's eyes squinted. *Friend?*

"That is why I came to you for assistance. The undernet is in need of people like you. The admins are crude, greedy politicians. The people distrust them." The man's tone resumed to a more cheerful one.

"But with a fresh face like yours, peace can once again be restored. Think about it, Aryanne. Your fame will be *justified.* You are the man people can relate to. With all that power, we can give you anything you want."

"Are you serious?" John spat out. He growled.

"Oh, I'm deadly serious." The Fedora Man's eyes gleamed. "Promise not to do another b& incident, and the admin status is yours!"

Aryanne's memories flooded back to his glory days of the undernet. He remembered the rush he felt when he saw his supporters. He remembered the smug satisfaction of being the man behind one of the stupidest memes on the internet. He allowed himself to relish in those memories, for a split second.

"No." John said "He doesn't need you, or the undernet. He's past that now."

The Fedora Man's voice is lowered again as he answers: "I don't believe I was addressing you. I think Aryanne is more than capable of answering."

Aryanne stood rooted in place.

"Huh," The Fedora Man said, "I figured as much. Whatever shall we do?"

"You can start by leaving." John hissed.

"Oh no. That will not do. I will have to convince you, Aryanne."

The Fedora Man begins walking towards Aryanne, shoving John aside. He produces a pistol from his trench-coat.

"Aryanne, please think this over. As an admin, I had nothing against you. I simply cared for the welfare of the people. And besides, think of your former glory."

Aryanne's eyes met the Fedora Man's. He saw small, dark beads. He was soulless. Aryanne's mind was in a whirlwind between his distant memories and his fast approaching fate. What was he going to do? He wanted to move a leg, an arm, *something*. Aryanne broke into a cold sweat. He was frozen by fear.

"Time is running out, Aryanne." The Fedora Man chuckled. "Don't do this to yourself. Make the right choice."

The Fedora Man pointed his pistol towards Aryanne's face. John immediately jumped in between them.

"Oh, what's this? You're intervening?"

John glared at the Fedora Man.

"Oh, I see. You want to save your *girlfriend*. Well, you asked for it."

John lunged at the Fedora Man. A shot was heard. Aryanne's vision was blurred, between the dust surrounding him and his eyes beginning to water. The shot left his ears ringing and his head spinning. Aryanne looked up to see flocks of birds hurriedly scattering in every direction. When he looked back down, he saw a body lay dead on the ground.

The Fedora Man was dead. John was victorious. Aryanne's mouth was agape, while John sprinted towards him. John kneeled down next to Aryanne, who was already beginning to position himself into a fetal position.

"Aryanne." John said. Aryanne heard his name mentioned as an echo.

"Aryanne … Aryanne. C'mon, get it together." Aryanne knew his name was being called, but was unsure to answer.

"Snap out of it!" John commanded. Aryanne knew who had called his name. A smile was brought to his face.

"John…" He whimpered.

Both of them were silent for a moment. A soft breeze was blowing behind them. Aryanne could see the leaves blowing around him. He no longer smelled metallic rust in the air.

"Aryanne. You know, if you want to return to your old life … well, that's fine. I'm not stopping you."

Aryanne wanted to say something. A lump was stuck in his throat.

"The choice is up to you." John said.

Aryanne was brought to tears. John himself wanted to cry, but stopped himself from doing so. He held Aryanne close to him.

"I want you, John." Aryanne said between sobs. "But, no homo."

The both of them stood by the foot of the mountains. For John, this would signal the first of his fans.

For Aryanne, it would be his first enemy.

As Time Draws Near

"Diviner Anzak, if you'd please join me on the stage?"

Anzak took to the stage, nervously standing behind the podium as the City Head stepped aside. He could feel his hearts racing in his chest as the crowd's collective stare burned a hole through his forehead. With a few shuffles of paper and a deep breath, he began to speak.

"Good evening."

He winced as he heard the pathetic squeak that was his own voice. The quivering words hung in the air as the crowd silently stared at Anzak, waiting for him to continue. With another deep breath, he started again.

"I am Diviner and Castman Anzak Tilochtil, seer-class scholar of his Graciousness Diviner Artem and the Teachings of Marzed, the True Creator, bless His name." A few words of grace swept through the crowd. "I've come from the Crown of Velvet to deliver a message of great importance to you, the city of Tentaboe, just as my fellow Diviners have done for all other cities in the caverns."

Anzak could feel their eyes on him as they waited, hushed and still. He pondered running. His eyes turned to the right, and there was the City Head, encouraging him with a plastic smile. He blocked the path to the only ramp off the stage, and if Anzak tried to jump off, he'd be enveloped by the crowd. He was trapped, and before starting back up he whispered a small prayer under his breath.

"A great discovery has been made recently, about the caverns we all live within. Long have we suspected that something lies beyond the walls. Now, we have strong evidence to suggest that not only is there a world outside our own, but that it's closer to us than we could have known." Excited murmurs came from the onlookers, quickly

dying down. Anzak looked down at his perfectly memorized speech and feigned difficulty reading it. He wiped some sweat from his brow and looked back up at the crowd, his voice trembling slightly.

"You see… well, we believe the world outside is bigger than ours. For all we know, there's billions of worlds beyond that world, and maybe those worlds each have their own interesting story, and…" Anzak was trying his best to avoid outright telling the truth, but their faces told him it wasn't working.

The City Head stepped up beside the podium, his smile turning towards the onlookers slightly. "Diviner Anzak, you're going to have to explain to us what this *really* means." He gave the scholar a wink, and some in the crowd chuckled lightly.

Anzak, however, seemed near tears. There was no dodging it now. "Um.. well, the world we're in isn't really… a world." He saw their faces contort with confusion, and he decided the only way to do this was to say it without pause. "We've discovered two hidden caverns, each hidden by large deposits of velvet and whitestone. One led to a massive chamber of unending, salty water, while the other led to a chamber filled with a strange, beating boulder of velvet."

He shuffled his papers and quickly continued, staring down at the podium. "It is the Teaching's personal opinion that we are within a creature of massive stature. Our velvet and whitestone are the flesh and bone of this creature, and we are living off foreign byproducts ingested somehow by the creature, for the purpose of supporting our life. We believe that this is a sign that we are somehow connected with this creature beyond our living inside it, and that… well.." His bony fingers clutched at a whitestone tablet of official decree by His Graciousness Diviner Artem, as if to defend his words.

"Because the creature is of flesh, it is not divine. It is not Marzed, and Marzed did not create us. We were born."

He stared out at the gaping crowd, and hoped that the silence would soon end.

Both Diviner Anzak and City Head Hervult hung from the curtain

pole of the stage, ropes tightly fastened around their necks. Flames enveloped their now scarred bodies, the bloating in their faces further distorting their bludgeoned faces. Behind them, the curtain sat still as somebody ran up and crudely smudged onto the crisp, white sheet with charcoal.

BLASPHEMOUS SCUM

Behind the sheet, the crowd boarded up the ground floor doors and windows of the Announcement Hall. The walls were coated with the glass and thick liquids of various alcohols as the storerooms were raided and pillaged, their sweet nectars and burning droughts flowing freely in the gutters and streets. The great statue in the center of the square lay in ruins, its terrible visage pitted and scarred by the stones and fists of the crowd. Throughout the streets the guilty and innocent met in the shared bonds of fire and blood, giving their lives for their foolish arrogance. Somebody came with flame and lit up the Hall, burning the locked Castmen within. Those who attempted to brave the fall from the upper stories were met by the bloodthirsty mob, each armed with hate and rage.

Those among the armed forces joined the mob; those who didn't were quickly put down. The city of Tentaboe was swept up in the chaos of its wrath, and those unfortunate enough to heed the words of Anzak found themselves among the growing casualty count. Housing and businesses were robbed in the chaos, and soon the mob found themselves unsatisfied with the burning of the Hall. The fire spread further into the city, and soon, it would leave nothing but an ash stain within the cavern.

Each of the five cities under the Teachings saw a similar scenario, with resistance being quickly cut down. In the wake of their own destruction, they blamed their behavior on the corrupted Diviners. The mob marched on towards the Crown of Velvet. Torches bobbed along the road in a steady, concentrated line. The crowd would see that the Teachings of Marzed were met with a baptism of fire for their sins, and in its place would come a new age.

Before this could happen, though, the Crown had to fall - and they would have to do something about this cavern of beating stone Anzak spoke of.

I feel a strange, burning pain in my abdomen, slowly filling up where I believe some of my burden to be. This feeling is familiar, but this time it worries me. It is larger than I have felt before. It lies close to one of my many hearts, perhaps my body finally starting to fail me. I wonder if it is my cargo, celebrating what I do not: that my death will be sooner than I had hoped.

I suppose my time is coming, though. After all, I am just an old man in the sea.

« Under the Sea | HUB | »

Ash and Maple ~ Part 1

Bryan's skin buzzed with magic, but his legs ached from days of hiking. Weeks of sitting in the forest hadn't prepared him for the miles of hiking up and down mountains. He had worked till his hands bled, building temporary Potential by repeating the same small ritual over and over, 18 hours a day, 28 days in a row. The only thing that had kept him sane through that process was the 8 other initiates, sitting with him in a circle around a maple tree.

There wasn't anything special about the maple tree, but several times he could have sworn that a knothole was staring at him. He had grown to resent it, the knothole just sitting there staring at him while he worked himself raw for a chance, *just a chance* to be accepted as a mage. He checked again that the seed was still in his pocket and walked on.

They practiced as they walked the faint trail, a singing chant in a language like the rustle of wind through leaves, like the groan of a bough heavy with ice, like the whir of seeds spiraling through the air. Its atavistic splendour was rich and heavy in the air around them.

Bryan was sixth in the line. His feet fell on leaves pressed flat into the soft earth by the initiates before him. Behind him, the last two sang and walked. He glanced back, sensing eyes on him, but the girl behind him was focused on traversing the terrain without losing her place in the song.

He looked around uneasily. He still felt eyes on his back. Were there mountain lions in this part of the world? They might be eyeing the three goats the last initiate was leading behind them. Back home in California, if you felt eyes on your back in the wilderness, it was probably a mountain lion…

~~~~~

Assessment Team 763 crept through the forest after the nine
~~~~~

fledgling Type Blues. They were on a Response Level 2 mission to trail and eliminate a recently-discovered wing of **KTE-Lerna (The Serpent's Hand)**, dubbed KTE-5325-Lerna-Blue.

763 commander Lena Drummond wished they could get closer, but her Grey Suit wouldn't keep her unseen if she didn't maintain a 30 meter distance between herself and the targets. Plus, (and she was increasingly nervous about this) the third from the back (Dubbed KTE-5325-Lerna-Blue-6) seemed all too aware of her team's presence.

Yeah, they were kids. Hell, the oldest member couldn't be older than 25, but they were members of the Serpent's Hand, and so they were terrorists. Still, she couldn't shake a feeling of apprehension as the six members of her team stalked through the forest.

They needed to get wherever the hell they were going, and soon.

~~~~~

Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash stepped her consciousness out of her tree, new lips forming the words of the song instinctively. She was the youngest dryad in the Grove, having just managed to create a humanoid form last full moon.

She loved it.

She loved the *sound* of the wind. She could feel the wind in her branches, but having ears? having skin? It was a completely different experience. And colours? She knew what colours were, having experienced them through her links with the rest of the Grove, but she could never have predicted the fact of them on her verdurous eyes.

She turned those eyes on the leaf-strewn ground. It looked like any other patch of earth in this forest, but just beneath the surface, her roots drank the rich earth. She could feel them, through her link with her tree, and through her roots she was linked to all the other dryads in the Grove. She could feel them all, so many ancient minds in harmony with her own. With those minds in harmony, they could call on the collective magical power of the Grove and work their wills on
~~~~~

the world around them.

"Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash, would you help me grow rich fruit for the festival?"

She turned and smiled at Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep. She could have communicated through their shared connection to the Grove, but they were the two youngest dryads, and had yet to grow jaded to the novelty of speech. They had spent many lovely hours exploring their new forms together, as well as the curl of magic worked by hands and lips.

"It would be my pleasure," Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash joined Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep in a different song, moving fingers in complex patterns in the power-charged air.

As they sang, seeds carefully collected and stored burst forth with life. The ground around them grew thick and lush with pepper plants and tomatoes, strawberries and snap peas. Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash raced her friend, growing succulent, rich tomatoes faster than Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep could grow her sweet bell peppers. Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep retaliated by playfully wrapping her in pea plants heavy with sugary snap peas, while Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash's strawberries burst into perfect ripeness all around her.

They laughed and sang, collecting the fruits of their labour. When they had almost finished bringing the produce to the large stone at the centre of the Grove, they felt a ripple of attention go through the collective consciousness of the trees.

They're here.

~~~~

Bryan heard the song grow louder, richer, as if their nine voices had been joined by dozens more singing a companion piece. He stopped dividing his attention between his feet and the shadowed forest behind him, and stared forward in shock. Ahead, the sparse undergrowth of the old-growth forest gave way to thick green grass strewn with maple leaves. Inside the border, the old-growth beech-maple forest was replaced with only strong, tall maple trees, much
~~~~

thicker and stronger than the ones outside the border.

"The Grove," he breathed, hearing the initiate in front of him burst into tears of relief. Soon, the ordeal would be over. He would either be a mage or a failure. He could see them now, figures in the trees. He made eye contact with one, a girl who looked about 20 with green hair and an armful of strawberries. She looked as curious about him as he was about her, which surprised him. She had probably seen other humans, but this was definitely the first time he had ever seen a dryad.

~~~~

"Chief, what the fuck are those? Hell, that one just popped out of a fucking tree" Agent Miller messaged Commander Drummond. She halted their pursuit and answered as best she could. She didn't have a clue but it would be bad for morale for her to reply that she was as clueless as they were.

"Designate PTE-Lerna-Hogweed-06. Miller, contact command and request a strike team at our position. Wilcox, it looks like they're about to start a ritual. If it looks like they are about to sacrifice the goats, engage and neutralize the Type Blues before they can complete the Working." Okay. She had a handle on the situation. She hoped.
She turned to survey the other five members of her Assessment team.

"It will take half an hour for the nearest Strike Team to reach our location. If necessary, we can-"

"Commander, the assumed sacrifices have been transferred to Lerna-Hogweed-06, after an exchange of words. Orders?"

Fuck. She whirled around in time to see one of the green-haired figures bring a hand-sized thorn towards the goat in the lead.

"Stop them, by any means necessary."

~~~

The Grove happily accepted the symbolic gift of the livestock. Deer

and moose were not hard to come by here, but goat was a rare treat brought only by visiting humans seeking boons.

Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash felt a dozen more dryads step out of their trees and prepare to see if one of the initiates was well suited to merge with their collective. If one was worthy, they would be granted a connection with the Grove, and given access to some of the powers the dryads themselves wielded.

The initiate in the back, a boy with winter hair and nervous eyes, passed the leads of the goats to Boughs-Bend-in-Summer-Storms. The ancient dryad took the leads with a bow and lead them back to prepare the livestock for the feast. She lifted a thorn made for the purpose, and-

CRACK

Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash felt the pain and surprise through her roots, but the Grove was mostly full of confusion. Why was there a hole in Boughs-Bend-in-Summer-Storms' head? There was a hole in a nearby tree, too. What did it mean? And why were the initiates scattering like dry leaves in the breeze?

~~~

The song vanished, and time slowed as Bryan dived for cover. How the hell was someone shooting at them? He saw the dryad with the goats stumble, a rapidly-filling hole in her head. He saw the confusion ripple through the dryads, strawberries scattering from the arms of the cute one he'd seen earlier, just yards away.

He fled the gunfire… and immediately tripped and fell.

That's it. I'm dead.

—-

"Standard rounds ineffective." Wilcox's voice was calm, collected. This was hardly the first time they'd run into something without an allergy to lead. "Switching to incendiary."

"The fucker is regenerating! Looks like limited regeneration **Type**
~~~

Red."

"Miller, profanity. Wilcox, how are the incendiaries working?" She tried to project the collected, powerful leader she had to be.

"More effective, entities are fleeing."

"All units, switch to incendiary munitions. Miller, make sure the Strike Team knows."

—-

There were predators in the forest, and they had brought *fire*. The trees shuddered with fear. There were few things they truly feared, but fire was one. The initiates were scattered. Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash scooped up the nearest initiate and ran towards her tree. Towards safety.

—

Bryan's arm was a mass of pain, where the strange tree-girl had started to pull him along. The fire in his nerves was echoed by a blast of nearby flame, a maple erupting in a shower of shrapnel and napalm. A nearby dryad collapsed, her steps faltering as her body burned from the inside out. The one pulling him along flinched, sending more pain down his abused arm.

—

A whoop from Miller temporarily distracted Commander Drummond. He had clapped the youngest member of their team on the shoulder, congratulating him.

"The trees are the weak point! Burn the fuckers to the grou-" He collapsed with a gurgle, as vines erupted from the ground, thorns biting into his carotid and ending his exclamation shortly before his life.

-

The Grove burned with anger, elders marshaling defenses they had never needed. Vines whipped from the ground towards the invaders

and fog was wrought from thick air. Storm clouds were summoned from the sky and thick pillars of stone rose from beneath the earth, creating physical and magical defenses.

-

Bryan clung to the dryad and survival. The **Bookburners**! It had to be the Bookburners. They would raze the Grove. It would all burn. She would burn with her tree. He would die. The seed! Maybe he could…?

-

Drummond peered from behind a tree. She had to stifle a laugh at the irony. Her team was dead. Only her silence and stillness had saved her. The Strike team was seconds away. She just had to-

The sustained thunder of the helicopter brought tears to her eyes! She would live!

-

They brought a craft with wings of thunder? Well the Grove could use thunder too.

.

Bryan slapped the seed to the dryad's chest, finishing his chant and dropping a prayer to the universe.

.

Drummond's one unseeing eye reflected the burning, falling helicopter. The other was replaced by a large shard of shrapnel. Falling from her hand, a screen displayed: '**Melville** Airstrike inbound 36:02:53'

.

Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash screamed and collapsed, her tree obliterated by a twisting, blazing, shredding mass of metal. Her self was burned and ripped apart. She closed her eyes and wept her

first, and last, tears.

.

..

…

A seed cracks open, tiny roots finding their way into the open air.

—-

A figure staggers under the weight of another, one arm hanging uselessly. He drags his makeshift travois between two columns. Her head bounces gently, hand clutching a seedling to her chest.

~~~

A pair of green eyes open.

End of Part 1

| **Ash and Maple ~ Part 1** | **Ash and Maple ~ Part 2** »
~~~

Ash and Maple ~ Part 2

Alone.

The dryad was **alone.**

The secret language of the dryads didn't even have a word for being alone. Being a dryad meant being interconnected with every other dryad in the Grove. It meant a hundred thoughts, experiences, lives, all humming in the background.

She remembered the feeling of a falling metal beast ripping and tearing her tree to pieces. Remembered the blades pulverizing her branches. The blood of the beast burning through her bark and scorching to her heartwood. The screaming and panic pouring into her and overflowing and suddenly… ceasing as the world went dark and quiet.

Empty and **alone**.

She felt her body jolt as the branches under her dug into her back. There was a sensation of movement and a constant stream of muttered curses. She exercised control of this form, and opened her eyes to the impossible.

The forest stretched out around her, but it wasn't the Grove. She couldn't feel the roots beneath her and the forest was full of beeches. She did see maples, but they seemed… wrong. Sickly?

Some movement caught her eye and she saw the smoke. The smoke of her home, her body, her family, billowing into the uncaring ashen sky. She felt the aching absence and wept.

~~~

Bryan limped through the forest, muttering curses. Years. Years spent seeking power had led to months preparing for this day which
~~~

had become a catastrophe in minutes.

He deserved that magic. He had *earned* that magic. Yeah his teachers in the Serpent's Hand had stressed that it was a gift to be given, but none of them had saved the last member of the Grove with a never-before-tried Working.

And how had he been repaid so far? The crazy tree-chick had yanked him across the forest, then flopped to the ground screaming.

He hissed in pain as a step jolted his arm. It dangled uselessly by his side, steadily turning purple.

~~~

A sound like dry leaves rustling brought the dryad back to reality. It was the sound of another person! She jerked, falling off the two branches on which she was being supported. Her body impacted the ground and she tried to scramble back up. She felt… wrong, like a plant trapped in a too-small pot, roots tangling and filling the space so completely it cracked the pot. At the same time, she felt light and empty, truly hungry for the first time.

One of the humans! Right! She had tried to save one and it looked like she had been saved *by* one. She looked up at him and tried to remember how to speak.

"Hey." His voice held a rasp like the edge of a saw. She tried to recoil away and hit her head on the limbs still held in his hand.

"Chill. We got away from them, for now. We gotta keep moving though. A helicopter crash won't kill a Bookburner Strike Team, not in those damn suits. They'll probably spend some time burning the Grove but I haven't been able to mask our trail."

The dryad was filled with a sense of loss so profound she was amazed the human could stand under the weight of it. She tried to speak but didn't quite have the shape of it.

"You yanked my arm out of its socket, damn near ripped it off." The saw blade was near the surface of his voice again, painful and angry. She watched his mouth. So that's what she was doing wrong.
~~~

"Badrieee" She whispered urgently. No, that still wasn't quite right.

"Now would be a good time to whip out some magic" He looked at her, expectant.

"My tree." She managed to work her mouth correctly, and clung weakly to the branch he was holding.

"Burned to a crisp, probably. I think yours was one of the first to go. Come on, we need to move." The words were like a blow. It was fresh and bleeding in her mind, the metal beast falling on her tree, its spinning blade shredding her and burning blood scorching her heartwood. She cried out in remembered agony, and the human made a noise like the wind through dry leaves.

"Shush and come on. The least you can do is walk on your own."

She flailed again, struggled to her knees, and somehow managed to stand.

"My tree! How…?" She tried a step, and narrowly avoided falling.

"I used the Grove initiation spell to bind you to that seed." He pointed to her chest where she had been clutching it without realizing. That explained why she felt so compressed, so root-bound. It also explained why she felt so wrong. He had yanked her… self? Soul? Spirit? out of her tree and shoved it into a tiny seed. It had sprouted during the process. The human dropped the branches and started walking. She immediately grabbed the two, tied together with a strip of leather.

"These are part of Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep."

She realized that this might be all that was left of her best friend. The only thing, apart from her, left of the Grove. She would not abandon them, not for any price.

"Okay…? I guess we can bring the sticks if you want. At least we're moving."
He turned, left arm hanging uselessly by his side.

"I'm Bryan, by the way," He unfastened the leather and put it around

his waist. This accomplished, he picked up one limb, and she relinquished it reluctantly. She still had the one in her hand, and it seemed they were going in the same direction. Even through the anguish, she felt a little thrill. Somehow, she was outside the Grove! She was somewhere no dryad had ever been!

"Thank you for saving me."

"And your name is…?" The saw was back. Had she broached some rule of etiquette?

"My name was Seedlings-Spring-from-Cold-Ash," A beautiful name in Dryad, rendered ugly and twisted by irony.

"My Dryad isn't great. How does that translate to English?" She worked out the translation.

"Seedlings Spring from Cold Ash," The words tasted like ash in her mouth, too.

"Jesus. That's apt. And lengthy. What do you mean by 'was'?" He winced a little with every step.

"I died when the metal beast hit me. In the instants before the flame ate this body, you attached me to this seedling. Thank you. But I am dead. Do the dead have names?" He was glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, but she paid no mind. Step after step, she walked the outside world. A miracle made of death and desperation.

"Metal beast? Oh… you mean the helicopter…" He seemed to think on this for a bit, "I think I'll call you Ashley. I don't want to stumble over your whole name every time."

Ashley accepted this and took yet more impossible steps into the unknown.

~~~

Bryan tried to keep in mind the lesson drilled into him by his instructor in the Serpent's Hand.

'Being chosen by the Grove is a gift. No matter how long you work,
~~~

most of you won't be chosen. This isn't, as I've heard some of you suggest, an easy path. You will need to work hard to even get a chance, but that work does not obligate them to choose you.'

But he hadn't just done the preparations. He had saved Ashley's life and saved the Grove. That had to entitle him to the joining. She would have to make another seed for him to use, but he'd seen his instructor bring plants to fruit with her powers, granted by the Grove.

Ashley was quiet. She seemed to have gotten the hang of walking and was following him steadily. She had one hand clutched with the seedling on her chest, and the other was holding the branch he'd picked up. He could understand why she would be hesitant to let go of the last reminder of her friend. He had a locket from his mother around his neck- he had ever since she died a decade ago.

"Where are we going?" Her voice seemed a little stronger. He stopped, looking around.

Fuck. Well if we can get back to Alaska, I might be able to get us to the ***Way****. That's if she ever gives me what she owes me.*

"West!" He tried to project as much confidence as he could into the single word.

They walked in silence for a time. Finally, a question bothered him enough to break it.

"Why don't you wear clothes?" Ashley looked down at her form and gave him a confused look.

"Why would I wear cloth?"

"Don't you get cold? We're in the Yukon Territory. This is Canada. Canada is known three things: maple syrup, hockey, and snow to the frigging rooftops."

She gave him a look that was, for lack of a better word, wooden.

"We can- we *could* control the weather. Why bind ourselves with strips of cloth and leather when we could wear the wind and sky?"

"Well if we're going to make it around humans you're going to need to we- what do you mean 'could'?

"Our magic came from the connection and communion between the members of the Grove. We each contributed a drop to the pool."

"So you can't give me power?"

"I'm sorry, I don't have any to give. Every drop of magic I have is going to sustaining my form."

He couldn't quell the anger and frustration, so he tried to cover two of his problems.

"Here. Wear my jacket. Someone might see you."

Silence reigned until they, battered and weary, reached the road.

~~~

Ashley examined the meal on the plate before her. Two glistening yolks sat atop their whites, which in turn sat atop a thin crust of burnt egg. The bacon was three short strips of grease on a pale square approximating bread. It made her wince, remembering the perfect sweet strawberries she'd just dropped on the forest floor.

The branch sat across her lap. It was a little awkward in the cracked booth, but she wouldn't abandon it. She was a little nervous about Bryan taking it. He'd left behind the one he'd been carrying, and she didn't like the way his eyes lingered on hers.

Very occasionally, the Grove would grant a branch to a special mage. It would enhance their connection to the collective and allow them to pull more magic from the communal pool. Strong-Roots-Dig-Deep's branch wouldn't do that, though. She and the rest of the Grove were dead. Ashley was terrified of Bryan abandoning her. If he did, she would be completely **alone.** She took a calming breath and glanced around.

Bryan sat two tables away, talking to himself. Ashley only caught a few phrases but they were even less encouraging than the meal.
~~~

"…down the drain… could be lying…? years… damn it… my only option… dark"

He moodily stomped outside. Ashley returned her attention to breakfast. Normally, dryads didn't need to eat more than two or three times a moon. They did so for pleasure, normally, but she felt odd. It felt like she hadn't eaten in *years*. She obviously needed more sustenance than her tiny seedling could supply her.

It made sense- it had taken her decades of growth in her tree to be able to manifest a humanoid form. Hopefully she would be able to sustain herself by eating and whatever her seedling could supply. And, she reflected disgustedly, hopefully other food would actually have flavour.

~~~

They stayed the night in a motel. It was clearly Ashley's first experience with a bed. She lay, face down, sideways across it. She was still clutching the stick in one hand and the seedling in the other.

Bryan himself couldn't help but pace, nerves overwhelming what little self control he had left. He had been warned away from these people so many times by his mentors in the Serpent's Hand. They had no morals or ethics, caring only for the power and money they could accrue. His mentors had told him how to avoid them. He'd used that information to contact one of their agents.

It was against everything the Serpent's Hand stood for and he would need to run after this. He would definitely have the resources if he could pull this off. It would be worth it.

Because he had realized something.

She couldn't empower him because she was alone.

And he knew the people at **`Marshall, Carter, and Dark`** would pay well for the last of a kind.

End of Part 2

« **Ash and Maple ~ Part 1** | **Ash and Maple ~ Part 2** |
~~~

Ask Doctor Mann

Welcome to Ask Doctor Mann, where I will be answering any questions that you, the reading public, have for me. If you have questions you'd like answered, please submit them via the discussion page.

"Dear Doctor Mann, what's it like working for the Foundation?" —Eager in Site 19

I'm so glad you asked! Working for the Foundation is full of **`exciting challenges`** and **`fascinating puzzles`**. You will travel to **`exotic locales`** and work with some of the **`most intelligent`**, **`experienced researchers`** in the world. Get ready for a **`professional working environment`** where you'll be given **`responsibility`** and **`fast promotion opportunities`**.

Take advantage of this opportunity now, before we're forced to erase your memory or kill you.

"Papa Mann, my next door neighbor has a creepy boyfriend that comes over fairly often, and the combination of stupidity and nausea he radiates is destroying my will to live and bothering the cat. Any ideas?" —Creeped Out in Calamazoo

Have you considered that this poor fellow might have a problem? Many people seem disturbing, but quite often there's nothing wrong with them that drug-enhanced electro-shock conditioning can't cure. In rare cases, direct neurosurgical intervention may be necessary. Consult your neurologist before making any incisions.

"Where am I?" —Concerned in Laboratory 14

Strapped to a table in my laboratory.

"Who are you?" —Still Concerned in Laboratory 14

Doctor Everett Mann, surgeon and researcher.

"What are you doing here?" —Very Concerned, Actually, in Laboratory 14

Operating on you.

"What's this syringe doing in my foot?" —Growing More Concerned by the Minute in Laboratory 14

Sedating you in three, two, one…

"Where do babies come from?" —Naive in New York

Well, you see, Naive, when a mommy and daddy love each other very much, they're kidnapped by black helicopters and transported to Site 84, where they're rendered down into their contituent tissues. Their reproductive organs are harvested and used to create a zygote inside of a test-tube. It's grown in a vat of nutrients until it's ready (four to nine months, depending on the necessity of organ integrity), at which point it's used for whatever experiment requires babies.

"Is dropping me into a general processing pit via a previously hidden trap door in the floor upon demotion to D-class really necessary?" —Falling Fast in Site 23

No, but really, who doesn't enjoy a good laugh now and then?

"Is there porn here?" —Licentious in Laboratory 14

Do anatomical diagrams count?

"How long does it take to make the perfect al dente pasta?" —Hungry in the Site 23 Kitchen

Anywhere from around 13.6 to 13.9 billion years (for the purpose of inventing the universe), plus 7-10 minutes depending on the amount.

"Dr. Mann, why won't the Foundation let me use my own personal firearm?" —Second Amended in Site 23

Because nerf munitions are insufficient against all known enemy groups except the Revolutionary Guard.

"Dear Dr. Mann, since my arrival at Site-023 I've learned that you are Director of Human Resources and a respected member of Site-023. How would you suggest I go about encouraging cooperation among our peers? They've been terribly belligerent despite my best efforts."-Distressed About D-Class

Dear Distressed, I find that it helps to remove the part of their brain that allows them to be uncooperative.

"Dear Dr. Mann, what should I do about this ukelele in my living quarters? I'm certain that it belongs to somebody else, but it's certainly a very nice instrument." —Curious in Cell 23.

Curious, have you ever considered suicide? It may be helpful in your situation.

"Dear Dr. Mann, shouldn't you be working on project Beta 12 right now?" —Pondering Pressing The Button, Three Floors Up

I am working on Project Beta 12. That's why the potatoes in the cafeteria taste different now.

"Dear Dr. Mann, what are your views on the sovereign debt crisis in the European Union? Please be concise." — Foundation News at Eleven

I blame the decline of proper, well-maintained facial hair in the general public. It leads to degeneracy and general lack of moral fiber.

"Dear Dr. Mann, what is your view on the so-called 'Serpent's Hand'? Do serpents really have hands? How does that even make sense?" —Susurrus from Site Sixty

These long-haired recalcitrants oppose the natural order of progress. They believe themselves enlightened but are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary for mankind to take its next step into the cosmos. Their bleeding-heart philosophy combined with their guerrilla tactics make them dangerous. As to the handiness of

serpents, I maintain that while it is a well-known feature of the suborder Serpentes, it is by no means an essential one. A point my snake-men will make at the next Herpetology Super Expo. This year, the blue ribbon shall be mine!

"Dear Dr. Mann, what's up with teenagers these days? Why are they so wierd?" —Curmudgeonly in California

There are a number of theories, but perhaps the most likely is malevolent control by the Chaos Insurgency. Knowing full well that the battle of the future will take place in the hearts and minds of our youth, they've prepared the battlefield by sprinkling their nihilistic propaganda into the media. This has twisted their minds, turning them from once-happy children into something dark and unrecognizable.

Well, it's that or their dratted rock-and-roll music that they seem to fancy. One or the other.

"Dear Dr. Mann, could we potentially use the `labyrinth` to store Euclid but immobile SCP's?" —Amazed in Anchorage

The proposal was briefly considered, but ultimately cut because of twine shortfalls in the budget.

"Dear Dr. Mann, what does 173 look like on camera? —D-Class tasked with cleaning 173's pen

About ten pounds heavier.

"Dear Dr. Mann, my name is Abayomiolorunkoje, and I am a prince in my home country of Nigeria. I need to get ten million dollars to the US, but my bank accounts do not allow it. If you you let me store it in your account by giving me full access, I will give you twenty percent. Would you do this for me?" — 278hd3q81n5zd at hotmail.com

A prince of a republic? What a fascinating accomplishment. I am of course very interested in helping you. However, I feel it would be best to do business face-to-face. Fortunately, I will be traveling to Nigeria in a month on business. I've a few questions first, however.

On a scale of one-to-ten, how healthy are your organs? And do you have any friends with particularly healthy or otherwise interesting organs? If so, please feel free to bring them along to the meeting. Thirdly, do you have any unusual reaction to chloroform? Please respond soon. I look forward to discussing business with you.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I've recently discovered that I have a third kidney. It's fully functional, and my doctor tells me that I don't really need it. I was wondering if I could donate it to you, and in addition, get a day pass? Thanks." —Agent , Site 14

Naturally! And I hope your colleagues remember your example the next time they request time off.

"Dear Dr. Mann, What is the difference between a duck?" —Pair of Docs at Site 19

That depends. Are we talking about, say, a rosy-billed pochard, or a baikal teal?

"Dear Dr. Mann, An SCP is offering me magical powers if I release it. What should I do?" —Gullible at Site 19

Please report to Medical Station 13 for a new brain. The one you're using it clearly defective.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I am glad to report that despite breaching containment no less than twelve times over the past week, SCP- has been temporarily incapacitated and moved to Storage Site 49. However, during the last containment breach I and a number of my staff suffered minor to severe injuries as a result of SCP- 's area of effect, including [DATA EXPUNGED] nitrogen narcosis. What first-aid methods do you recommend?" —Rapidly Bleeding Out at Site 49

Immediately lower the temperature down past freezing. With luck, at least some of your more useful organs can be salvaged.

"Dear Dr. Mann, What can I do to be more like you?" —Jealous in Jersey

A noble and worthy goal, Jealous! The first thing is to obtain a

medical degree. The second, and this cannot be stressed enough, is to find a good, reliable mustache wax. Now, dabblers will use pre-made mustache waxes like Mr Natty Twizzle Moustache Wax, but I find that the best result is to learn to create your own mix, so that you can fine-tune it to your own hirsutorial needs. You'll need to find a supply of bees wax, gum arabic, oil soap, and human stem cells. Add in any essential oils for scent purposes.

"Dear Dr. Mann, Is craving for human flesh normal? I mean, ever since that D-Class jerk bit me, all I've done is to crave for it." —Dr. Brians at Site-19 Cafeteria.

While not strictly normal, the Foundation is accomodating to a wide variety of dietary needs. However, it seems as though your cannibalism may have a medical basis. Therefore I recommend a treatment of 1 CC of lead applied directly through the forehead.

"Dear Dr. Mann, The other lunch room girls at Area-14 tell me that Mr Fernand is a great kisser. Do you think it would be alright for me to accept his offer of a dinner date?" —Shy Ronery Lass

I would recommend that you find other plans for your evening. While dinners with Fernand are indeed lively and "happening," they inevitably end up as dinner-for-one affairs.

"Dear Dr. Mann, In your professional opinion, if we released all sentient Euclid and Keter SCPs into a pocket dimension and let them fight to the death, who do you think would come out on top, assuming 682 lost?" —Needs to Settle a Bet at Site-19 Break Room

Dear Need, the obvious answer is SCP-1013-J. Think about it.

"Dear Dr. Mann, Is it OK to use D-class personnel to fill in paperwork, provided I terminate them before they can leak the information? That short snotty guy from Ethics Commitee keeps bugging me about it, and I'm in need of some serious arguments." —Busy from Bio-Containment Unit-21.

Let me make sure I understand your plan correctly. You intend to

have Class D personnel fill out your paperwork. These are, by and large, condemned criminals. They are largely from the lower rungs of society, with poor educations and often broken literacy. They tend towards sociopathy. They tend to hate those who hold them here. And you will trust them with your paperwork, which not only contains information that they might use to attempt escape or sabotage, but has to be filled out correctly and completely to Foundation standards, or else will reflect poorly in your performance reviews.

Well. Good luck with that.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I bet 682 would be jealous of your 'stach. You should challenge it to a good round of fisticuffs." —Curious in Site 19

Sadly, 682 refuses to abide by Queensbury rules.

"Dear Dr. Mann, Which employee of Site 17 would win a dance-off?" —Bored in the Break Room

Dear Bored, the current champion is Agent Yoric. However, once I've completed work on my electronic trousers of cybernetic funk, it shall be I who will be crowned the true lord of the dance!

"Dear Dr. Mann, HAVE MY BABIES!" —Bromance in Bermuda

Dear Bromance, **WHAT HAVE YOU HEARD?**

Er, ahem. That is to say I'm quite flattered, but I have to politely refuse your offer at this time. Good day.

"Dear Dr. Mann, Help." —Locked in an empty cell at site-19

Dear Locked, we are helping you. That's why we have you restrained, and have removed most of the parasites.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I have been working for the Foundation for six years now. In that time I have received precisely one cost-of-living increase, four years ago, that even at the time was not commensurate with the actual cost of living. Who should I talk to to amend this situation, and if talking doesn't prove effective, do you recommend blunt trauma or shallow incisions?" —

Below the Poverty Line in Site-19

Dear Below, if the cost of your living is too expensive, please come see me so we can discuss alternatives.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I was born a human but I want to be a robot, do you know who I have to ask to get this done and if I do it can I give you my organs afterwards?" —Metal Curious from Sector-28

Dear Metal, I'm afraid your insurance won't cover full-body cybernetic replacement. The best we can offer is to transplant your brain into this blender's control unit. I realize this is something of a step down from your current goal, but you'll have six settings and stainless steel, dishwasher safe blades.

"Is it possible to chain breed SCP-504's joke-hating qualities into other vegetables? Like, say, peppers?" —Vegetariable in Vegas

You're not the first to attempt this project, though so far Foundation horticulturalists have little to show for it, aside from a few potatoes that quiver at the sound of knock-knock jokes.

"Dr. Mann, how much wood could a wood chuck chuck if a wood chuck could chuck wood?" —Chuck from Site 23

The average woodchuck (or groundhog, Marmota monax) is capable of chucking approximately 700 lbs of dirt over the course of digging its burrow, which suggests that it could chuck a similar amount of wood. However, SCP- , a hitherto unknown species of marmot, is capable of chucking as much as two tons of wood with its tentacles. Its ability to do so has cost the lives of five Foundation agents to date.

"Dr. Mann, what is your favorite organ, and why?" —Nineteen at 19

The brain, naturally. It is the seat of sapience, the center of thought, and it makes a rather nifty paperweight when preserved in a jar.

"Dr. Mann, when did you do your first dissection, and on

what?" —Nosy in New York

Oh, fond memories there. My first dissection was on a frog, when I was eight years old. Oh, excuse me. There's not very "PC." I mean a Frenchman, of course.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I'm pretty sure this is my first time. Why is there so much blood?" —Just Asploded A Man in Denver

Well, when a man is "asploded," the blood tends quite naturally to exit the body, often at high velocity. This results in quite a lot of coverage, which tends to make it seem as though there's more blood than is actually there, compared to when it's seen to simply pool. However, please consult Foundation forensics to ensure there is not an anomalous amount of blood in the victim's body. It would be a great pity of an extradimensional circulatory system were so crudely damaged.

"Dear Dr. Mann, what's cooler than being cool?" —Andre in Area 3000

Quite a few things, if one interprets "cool" as weather around fifteen degrees or so. That's still well above the freezing point of water, for example. So I would look to tundral regions, ice floes, the black heart that lies at the center of time, or your icebox.

"Dear Dr. Mann, in your professional opinion as a high-ranking member of the SCP Foundation, what do you consider to be the cause most worth fighting for?" —Philosophical in the Break Room

Science. What other causes are there?

"Dear Dr. Mann, I was in the middle of getting intimate with myself when the containment breach siren went off. Do I stop and rush to check on the situation or continue and hope it doesn't break into my quarters? Also I'm out of lotion, what do you recommend as an alternative?" —In a sticky situation at Sector-28

An appointment has been made for surgery. If you can't be trusted

with genitalia, you'll simply have to do without.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I have a tomato lodged in my skull, please help!" —Unfunny in Site 03

Oh dear. That's really wedged in there, isn't it? Well, I hope you enjoy vegetables, since it's going to be there for a while.

Also, you're going to be one. It's interrupting the blood flow to your brain, and there's nothing we can do. Dreadfully sorry.

"Dear Dr. Mann, I am currently being stalked by a caucasion male of indeterminate age in a trenchcoat and fedora, what do I do?" —Somebody in Site 14

I'm sure it's just your imagination. Nobody would bother stalking you inside a Foundation Site, I'm sure.

"Dearest Dr. Mann, I'm a new hire to the Foundation and most certainly not a member of The Church of the Broken God. Could you please eMail me all compromising information you have on yourself or your colleagues, particulalrly any assigned to hunting The Church of the Broken God (which I am not a member of)." —Heathen in New Orleans

Please open and run the executable file attached to this message. I have been assured by our IT department that it contains the files you've requested, and not a tracking program designed to lead our kill team directly to your location.

"Dr. Mann, am I likely to get demoted for fabricating potato-based ammunition for SCP-516, would testing get approved, and would you like to watch?" —Spudchucker in Site-84

Demotion is unlikely. While in the whimsical, chaotic Foundation of yesteryear, you would have found yourself either demoted to Class D or else given your own cleverly-named MTF and wise-cracking bonobo sidekick, in the new, more modernized Foundation, we'll simply have your superior smack you across the forehead and tell you to get back to work.

"Dr. Mann, what would be the best method of using SCP-504,

SCP-786 and one of the Lizard's teeth in tandem for a prank? I want that monkey!" —A man in green

Sir, if you require someone to tell you how to pull a jape, then the current holder of "the cleverest" probably needs not fear losing the title anytime soon.

"Oh Ultimate Ruler that is Dr. Mann, what is SCP-055?" — Mystified in Milwaukee

I already told you. Don't you remember?

Ask Lord Blackwood

To whom it may concern;

Tally-ho, ladies and gentlemen! It is I, Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, CBE, 7th Viscount of Westminister, noted explorer and gentleman.

It has come to my attention that I am held in quite high regard by the readers of a periodical known as "the World-Wide Web". I have heard of no such paper being available in London, but Deeds has explained to me that it is a most clever artiface which harnesses the power of the telegraph by which to convey the latest happenings in far-off lands directly into the homes of its subscribers. Will such wonders ever cease?

As I find myself wanting for diversion since I have been made an involuntary guest of these mountebanks and confidence-men who call themselves "scientists", I have decided to endeavour in making contact with you, my admirers, through this marvelous publication. Though I lack a telegraph key in the quarters I have been given (not that it would operate given that my gaolers insist for some reason on continuing to fill the room with water day after day), Deeds has agreed to collect my mail and take dictation for me while the watchful eyes of the guardsmen are turned away, that I might correspond through these pages with any and all who wish to enquire of my life and adventures.

Tell me, my fellow Englishmen and our brothers and cousins throughout the world, what would you ask of me? What exploits of mine would you wish to know of? What secrets of my life and times would you have laid bare? What opinions or beliefs of my own do you wish to learn of? While I am sure the editors of this news-paper are quite diligent in censoring matters of a prurient or classified nature, I shall do my best to answer any honest and decent questions that any of you might have. I eagerly await receiving your responses.

Yours in Christ,
T.T.B.

—-

Jekeled writes:

You are aware you're a slug, right?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Jekeled - I have heard that joke several times, and I no longer find it as risible as once I did. Obviously I am a man, and not a slug - for how else could I hunt, and fight, and write, and sing, and love? Perhaps you are in need of a new pair of eyeglasses - I can recommend a fellow in Brighton who sold me a pince-nez capable of seeing back in time.

Egads, sir, I have that very same pince-nez sitting in my parlor! Could this be a black forgery of some sort?

Perhaps - I have heard that those blackguards, Messrs. Marshall, Carter, and Dark have made quite a bit of ill-gotten wealth counterfeiting Henry's contraptions. I would have it thoroughly examined by a phlogistonic engineer as soon as possible. I know not what far-off corner of the world you find yourself in, but surely there is one in the nearest metropolis?

Hah! Even if the rapscallions have gypped me, I have gotten adequate use out of those spectacles. Saved my life in Bora-Bora in '72.

That was you? By Jove, boy, I thought we were both finished after the manticore got between us and the powder magazine. Did you ever find out what happened to Baron von Almsbach?

Poor fellow, never the brightest jewel in the necklace, you know. Picked an ill-timed fight with a ruffian in the East End.

Oooh. **Nasty.**

We never did find the entirety of that poor blighter's lower torso…

—-

SwamplessThing writes:

My good fellow! Please share with me a story concerning the loss of your greatest love.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. SwamplessThing - my greatest love, of course, is England herself, and God willing we shall never lose her. I have heard distressing news from the doctors here that she is not as strong and mighty as once she was - but she endures, and I am told that there sits now a queen almost as savvy and beloved as my dear Victoria herself.

The story of my marriage to Countess Francesca, the daughter of the Neapolitan archduke - now that is another story entirely, and one I shall have to recount in great detail someday - but suffice it to say that the Knights Hospitaller take no prisoners, and the steppes of Mongolia are a cruel and unforgiving land.

—-

Dr J Sombre writes:

Lord Blackwood, I've lately stumbled across a bit of a poser- which is better, a Tesla Coil gun or one of those fancy little 'ray-guns' I've seen sometimes in artificers' markets? I was planning to do a little exploration down Brazil-way, perhaps in those rainforest sinkholes I've heard so much about, so would it be wiser to sacrifice a little power for more portability? Or would I be kicking myself when the mokele-mbembes came? (I'd ask my guides to carry it, but finding a trustworthy native who can spelunk worth a damn… Well, it's no easy task I can tell you.)
Also, top hat or bowler?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dr. Sombre - While I am personally fond of my particle destabilizing muskets, you would likely have great difficulty acquiring one yourself, as Mr. Moth's waiting list has been known to extend for

years filling his orders. I'm told the old man insists on making every one of them by hand after being swindled by an urchin he hired to assist him. In any event, I find that radium weapons are more effective than electrical any day of the week.

And I should hope you don't encounter Mokele-Mbembe in the Amazon, for that would mean that you had either gone mad or turned to drink - for the creature seldom strays from its demesne in the Congo, and I know of no cousins of itself to be found in South America. Beware the great snake the natives call Matatoro, however, and the giant sloths that prey on man and beast alike.

(Incidentally, the next time you find yourself in Sao Paolo, seek out a tavern called 'A história do galo e o touro' and ask for a bar-man named Armando. The old boy makes the finest martini i've ever tasted outside of London.)

As to headgear, I prefer the comfort of a pith helmet when I find myself in the wild, but when it comes to the social scene, I would sooner be seen naked than without my top hat.

Well, maybe with my grasp of Geography I should stay at home. Or try and aquire better travel guides; I think I was sold a pup.

—-

Catboy637 writes:

Good sir, I must ask: how do you survive these so-called "scientists" filling your room with water?
In addition, have you been given proper access to a Bible?
Lastly, who is heir to your titles, upon (God forbid it!) the event of your death?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Catboy - It's not the first time i've been forced to live underwater, I assure you. One does grow accustomed to it eventually. I've requested a Bible several times, but my attendants have denied all my requests thus far for books. I was, of course, three times the winner of the annual Scripture Knowledge competition in my days at

Eton, and I can still recite the book of Matthew, and most of Leviticus, from beginning to end by memory.

As to an heir - sadly, my life of adventure has yet left me little time to raise a family. Lord Randolph Churchill's third son, Winnie, is my godson, though I have not seen him since he was but a boy - I expect he has done quite well in life, and my current will specifies him (or his descendent) as the heir to my lands and title.

Are you aware of the proposal to revive the Ancient Greek Olympic games? The great city of London has been chosen as the new site at which they will be held.

Indeed? This is most fascinating news - though surely the runners will not compete in the nude as the Grecians once did, one hopes.

Lord Blackwood, have you ever encountered the ***Amaski tribe of Africa****? They have quite the odd oral tradition, and with all your exploration, any knowledge you can provide on them would be invaluable.*

On an unrelated note, what is the best way to prevent sunburn while travelling near the equator, in your opinion?

Drewbear writes:

Nay, not naked, but near enough. The contestants, both male and female (yes, indeed!), tend to wear the most shockingly form-fitting clothing when competing in the more physically strenuous events.

Personally, I prefer the more dignified sporting events of archery, shooting and equestrianism. And although it is somewhat distressing to see ladies of refinement competing in the swimming or gymnastic events, there is nothing finer than a gentle-woman upon a good dressage horse. And a woman has matched the record for skeet-shooting! 99 hits out of 100! Alas, they use but ordinary rifles rather than the more effective weaponry owned by yourself.

—-

Boa Noah writes:

What does Mr. Deeds smell like?

Lord Blackwood replies:

A strange query indeed, but I find that he often has the scent of fresh lilacs about him. What cologne or secret he uses, he refuses to tell me.

Thank you, good day fine sir.

—-

Scratskinner writes:

Have you ever met a man deluded into believing himself a sea slug? What diversions of this era do you find least offensive to your taste?

Lord Blackwood replies:

A man believing himself a sea slug, Mr. Scratskinner? I should say not - such a thing would be madness, and I associate not with madmen.

I have not had much time to investigate the diversions of the world outside this facility as of late, I regret, but I am told that the game of cricket has become quite popular in the last century. Now that, my friend, is a sport truly befitting a gentleman's passions!

(The Americans, I am told, have naturally gotten it all wrong.)

—-

Lordlyhour writes:

Greetings, My fine fellow!
What, dear Gentleman, is your opinion on Facial Hair? Do you have any tips for one who wishes to Keep his Moustachio in Fine Fettle?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Lordlyhour - Brush, trim, and wax. *Always* wax.

—-

Drewbear writes:

Do you have any advice with regards to beard maintenance? I am myself blessed with a fine and full beard, yet am prone to a degree of bushiness that is most distracting when laying a buss upon the cheek of my beloved.

Lord Blackwood replies:
A beard? Good heavens no, sir. You should perhaps consult a Russian if such matters are of import to you; I have never worn anything more than a fine and proper English mustache, thank you very much.

—-

SwamplessThing writes:
If I may be so bold as to posit another question to your lordship; Which of Shakespeare's works are your favorite, and why?

Lord Blackwood replies:
Mr. SwamplessThing - the works of the Bard have constantly proven an inspiration to me. I have always counted "Julius Caesar" the finest of his works, though I hold a special place in my heart for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" owing to the circumstances under which I met Oberon himself in battle back in fifty-eight. (Should you ever find yourself in the land of the Fae, be warned that accepting an offer of drink from a lady is considered to be a proposal of marriage, and that the sidhe do not look kindly upon broken engagements.)

—-

Faminepulse writes:

Was wondrin' if you like a good smoke with yer rosie every now an' then? An' if so, what method? What brand balms yer' bristols if you don't mind me askin"?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Is that you, Mr. Horace?

—-

Drewbear writes:

If you had but one request of the blackguards who currently detain you, and they must but answer it, what would it be? Unfortunately, I must perforce decline the question of your own freedom, as, being men of good intelligence, we are both aware of the unlikelihood of that request being granted.

Lord Blackwood replies:
Mr. Drewbear - The food here is sadly wanting. My captors insist on feeding me in the form of these strangely-flavored flakes that they sprinkle into the water. A decent steak, or some eel pie, or just a decent cup of tea would do much to improve my spirits.

—-

MrCobalt writes:
I am aware of your affinity for Aether-based weaponry, but what is your opinion on traditional gunpowder-based firearms? Personally, I find there are few things that match the almost primal thrill of a shotgun recoiling in your grasp as it is fired; are there any more… advanced weapons that have that kind of kick?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Cobalt - I once had the opportunity to experiment with an electrically-powered "rail-gun" the Germans have been working on. The bloody thing nearly broke my shoulder, but it's got more punch than a dreadnought's broadside. Would that I'd had it with me when I faced down that behemoth in Persia!

—-

VAELynx writes:
What is your opinion on the Great October Socialist Revolution and the workers' movement worldwide?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. VAELynx: I am afraid I have no words with which to describe that rabble that are fit to print in any decent publication.

—-

Tuomey Tombstone writes:

How come you even know how to use a computer - they're a little new for you, right?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Tuomey - Do you refer to the difference engines of Mr. Babbage's? I saw a demonstration of such a device in fifty-eight, though i'm not certain how it is relevant to our current telegraphic conversation. Deeds has been relaying your questions to me and taking dictation of my response - I assume that once he has done so, he is returning to the telegraph office and wiring my answers to the central offices of this World-Wide Web for distribution.

—-

Goodwill writes:
Has the Royal Society for the Security, Containment, and Protection of Anomalous Artifacts ever requested your services? If so, what have you accomplished for the Society? Also, have you heard of the American Secure Containment Initiative, and their rather…loose requirements for what defines as paranormal phenomena?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Goodwill - the Royal Foundation and I have, shall we say, a *colorful* history together - it seems I've found them at my throat as often as i've found them an ally. I have not had the pleasure of doing business with its American counterpart, though I suspect the organization now holding me captive is associated with it.

If I may follow up with a similar question, have you ever had contact with the elusive Professor A.W.? He's the mind behind that electro-mechanical memory machine, along with a few other oddities.

I regret to declare that I have not met the man you speak of, though I have heard his name whispered many times at the gentlemen's club.

—-

Eric_h writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood: I was wondering if you would share your experiences with Marshall, Carter, and Dark. They remain a most disreputable group to this day, and have caused the Foundation a significant amount of trouble. Any opportunities to get the upper hand on them would be most appreciated.

Lord Blackwood replies:
Mr. Eric: Those rogues operate a "gentleman's club" in Knightsbridge - though the name is quite misleading, as neither themselves nor any of the libertinous Bohemians they attract are fit to be called gentlemen. I have known them to be associated with theft, larceny, white slavery, and crimes of nature not fit to be discussed among Christian men, and I would sooner wipe my backside with the Queen's portrait (forgive my immodesty) than willingly do business with any of them. Mr. Dark is the only one I have had the displeasure to meet in person - he is a squat and unseemly fellow, with a scar across one eye and a beard almost Satanic in its cut, and his voice is harsh and discordant. He is, however, surprisingly adept in the art of judo, and I had quite a time fending him off before I could make my escape from the scene of his depravities with the artifact I had come to recover at the Lord Admiral's request.

(Incidentally, I met a young man named Eric once. He had a most unusual collection of artifacts of his own. Might you and he be any relation?)

eric_h replies: *You knew my great-uncle? How odd. Small world, isn't it?*

—-

GG Crono writes:

My good Lord,
Surely someone who has been through such ordeals as yourself knows the importance of keeping one's spirits up. So in the interest

of raising the spirits of all, I ask you; what is the most humorous happening that you have come across on your travels far and wide?

Lord Blackwood replies:
Mr. Crono - It is a long tale that I do not know if the censors of this publication would allow me to relate in full, but suffice it to say that it involved Lord Palmerston's dog, a one-legged lady of the evening, and a gentleman of the Polish persuasion.

—-

StuporousStuart writes:

Lord Blackwood,
From this fine selection of participants, thou must use one action without repetition, three are given of each.
Wouldst thy choose to wed, slay or lay with the following atrocities; ***SCP-136****-2,* ***SCP-1308*** *and* ***SCP-096****.*
COMMIT THYSELF DISCERNINGLY.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Mr. Stuart - I would most certainly slay all three! If you seek the company of someone who would engage in perversions with such monstrous aberrations, perhaps I should introduce you to my old schoolmate Mr. Harris.

—-

Dmatix writes:

What is your weapon of choice when hunting Giant Howling Sloths? Those things are a bugger to corner, and have a skin as tough as a week old lamprey pie.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ah, yes, *Megatherium*. Deceptively agile when they're angry, those ones. I have found that nothing smaller than an elephant gun will even pierce their flesh, but I must say that electric rifles are efficient enough at stunning them for a moment or two - long enough for your porters (or yourself, if you have the stomach for it) to approach from

behind and cut its throat with an electric saw.

—-

Boa Noah writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood, if a gentleman must engage in self gratification should he use a lubricating lotion? Do you have any exotic alternatives for the adventurous yet lonely explorer?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Good heavens, sir! I'll have you know that self-pollution is well-established to lead inevitably to illnessess of the stomach and digestion, loss of appetite or ravenous hunger, vomiting, nausea, weakening of the organs of breathing, coughing, hoarseness, paralysis, weakening of the organ of generation to the point of impotence, lack of libido, back pain, disorders of the eye and ear, total diminution of bodily powers, paleness, thinness, pimples on the face, decline of intellectual powers, loss of memory, attacks of rage, madness, idiocy, epilepsy, fever and finally suicide.

If you absolutely *must* indulge the masculine urge while afield, you would be better advised (so I am told) to seek out a lady-in-waiting. Be wary, however, for my less morally scrupulous associates have told me that in Indochina it is common for men of an effeminate persuasion to disguise themselves as ladies, and in so doing beguile men of immorality out of their money.

—-

Lord Blackwood writes from the future:

Thank God I brought my trusty Electro-Dynamic Curvator to send this back to you. There isn't much time. You need, urgently, to tell the Prime Minister to halt the memorial service at the Abbey next Sunday. There's a sniper from the future on the rooftop with one of Herr Buechinger-Dolmutz's air rifles trying to kill Her Majesty. I fear his plan is to divert history into a continuum in which we are conquered by the French on a pretext of restoring order. To prove this is me I give the password: Celeste. I only hope you remember

her in your world. Now, GO! God speed, and the best of British luck.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Stephen, is that you? Good one, big brother - you almost had me going for a moment there. This is payback for that time I convinced you the Swedish had invaded Newcastle, isn't it?

—-

Trinitite writes:

Noble Viscount, I seem to find myself a mite confused. Your title as Viscount of Westminster appears in breach of the sacred tradition that no two peers can have title to the same place at once. How was it not noticed in 1831 that creating the Grosvenor family Marquesses-and now, I hear, Dukes-of Westminster most treasonably violates the long Blackwood lineage?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dear me, are the Grosvenors still at it? To hear my father tell the tale, that disreputable clan has been trying to usurp my family's titles since before the Protestant Reformation, and they've sided with the most disreputable sorts - Yorkists, Spaniards, Cromwellians, even that blasted Prince Charlie and his horde of Scottish pretenders - to try and wrest it from us. Legend has it that the feud goes all the way back to a slight that occurred between their progenitor and my own during the Hundred Years War - of course, *they* claim that it was Robert de Forêt-Noir who was responsible, and not t'other way around. Foolish louts.

—-

Trinitite writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
Is it true that you are made of win?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I'm afraid I don't understand the expression, Mr. Trinitrite. I am

merely a man of flesh and blood like any other. True, I *have* won a great many times, but to win is an act, not a substance of which one can be composed.

—-

Doktori writes:

Lord Blackwood, have you heard of a rising academical named A. Einstein? I hear he has some interesting ideas about the photoelectric effect as well as gravity.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dr. Tori - I met a teenaged Swiss by that name in ninety-seven. He seemed to be quite a contemplative young man with an interest in matters physical. I lent him six shillings for carriage fare and he promised to pay me back once he wins Mr. Nobel's endowment. Has he done so, do you know? I am quite certain that with interest, that loan should be more than enough to bribe the watchmen here to get me some decent scotch, or at least a cup of tea.

I don't believe he will receive Mr. Nobel's prize until the early 1920's. I'm afraid you may not receive your money, but I would greatly enjoy sharing a nice cask of Mortlach or Speyside with you.

—-

J THOMPSON BRADLEY, ESQ. (U.K. CITIZEN) WRITES:

HELLO LORD %{NAME},

May our lord Christ bless you and keep you. I am J Thompson Bradley Esq. a United Kingdom Citizen and Registered Barrister. I am Attorney of Law to the deceased Oil Executive Mr. John Hamilton of BRITISH PETROLUEM Inc. based in Basra Iraq.

On June 13, 2012 my client Mr. HAMILTON was killed in an aeroplane accident in Iraq. At the time of his death certain oil leases in my client's name had been sold and the money deposited into his confidential fiduciary account. I have been authorized by BRITISH PETROLUEM to repatriate my client's funds to his next of kin.

However, Mr. HAMILTON has no known living relatives and under UNITED KINGDOM law within three months if a next of kin is still unfound his funds must revert to Her Majesties' Government.

I write to you today in the hopes of your assistance in repatriating the £25million to United Kingdom of funds currently held in escrow in UNITED BANK OF IRAQ to allow us time to find next of kin of mr HAMILTON. In return for your aid we would pay a fee of (10%) of funds.

All I require is your honest and confidential co-operation to see this deal through. Please contact me with your full names, address in UNITED KINGDOM, bank account number, and fax no. to allow us to further discuss this situation.

Your obedient servant,

J THOMPSON BRADLEY ESQ. (UK CITIZEN)

Lord Blackwood replies:

"Aeroplane"? "Iraq"? "Fax"? "2012"?

Dear me, is this another one of those bizarre religious pitches from the Latter-Day Saints?

—-

Spacecadet writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Boxers or briefs?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Union suit.

—-

McKinteer writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I am wondering if, in your travels of the North American Continent, you had the pleasure of meeting the inventor and industrialist Samuel Colt before his untimely death in 1862. If so, did he perchance gift to you any special sort of firearm to which the public was never made aware of? For I have heard rumors that before his passing, he designed and built a most excellent pistol which had the capability of being able to slay even the vilest of hellspawn with a single round.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ah, yes, the Improved Anti-Daemon Revolver Mark V. I'm afraid I no longer have it in my collection - I bequeathed it to my little brother, the archbishop, as a Christmas gift. Such a thing comes in quite handy in the career of an exorcist, you know.

—-

Dr. Iceberg writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Do you prefer hot or cold climates?
Also, what would you say is the most dangerous continent?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dr. Iceberg - now that is an amusing question coming from a person named such as you are!

Truly, I would not trade the climate of my native England for any other, but there are times in one's life when one enjoys a respite from the cold and the fog. The tropical climates are, by the nature of the civilisations to be found there, the lands where I do much of my adventuring, and I have grown quite accustomed to the warm sun, the thick humid air, and the refreshing cool of the oceans and rivers.

As to your latter question, I would venture to say that Antarctica, that great unexplored mass to the south, may be the deadliest of them all - for while it (so far as I have yet determined) possesses no great beasts or savage races to beguile the explorer, it has neither any fauna, nor fruits and vines, nor even any tree to harvest for firewood,

and the perpetual freezing cold and long nights would surely drive any man to madness or death. I have heard rumours that it was not always the case - the journals of Piri Re'is, the mad Turk, suggest that it was but a few centuries ago a green and verdant land. How could such a realm be transformed so quickly in the overall scheme of things? Perhaps one day I shall charter an observation in search of clues thereunto.

—-

Scratskinner writes:

How long do you suppose it'll take before those Foundation blackguards catch wind of this enterprise, and put a stop to it?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I have every confidence in Deeds' ability to elude detection, Mr. Scratskinner. Though he is but a simple valet of working-class birth, his ability to move in the shadows rivals that of the *ninja* assassins of the Orient. In fact, on the occasion of my visit to Edo… ah, but that's a tale for another time.

—-

Foundation Agent Baxter writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
Why has this metal sphere we found in your collection started ticking? And how can we make it stop? Thank you for any assistance.

Lord Blackwood replies:

I fear I cannot say except to assure you that it must be deactivated as soon as possible. I would be more than happy to render my assistance, but the fools in charge here refuse to let me examine it, even in spite of the fact that it clearly attempted to speak to me when I saw it carried past me the other day.

—-

Jethro writes:

How did you first meet Deeds? Has he ever made you upset, disappointed, etc? And has he always lived in that bell of his?

Lord Blackwood replies:

It was 1837 - the day of Queen Victoria's coronation, indeed. I had just returned to my London estate after watching the festivities and there he was, in the midst of pressing and starching my shirts. He wouldn't say how he'd gotten in, or who sent him - but he has been my valet ever since, and never has he been anything but completely faithful and diligent in his responsibilties. (Well, aside from that unfortunate incident in the Wyoming Territory with the drunken Indian, but none of us expected him to have a Tomahawk, of all things, hidden up *there.*)

—-

Foundation Historian Gallow writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
We are currently investigating the process by which Ireland became independent from the British Empire. We have a theory that the Irish rebels may have used some kind of reality-distorting artifact, possibly ancient and possibly dug up immediately south-west of the Hill of Tara, to either achieve sufficient military success to persuade the British to withdraw, or to divert history into a reality in which the nationalists won. Can you throw any light on this matter?

Lord Blackwood replies:

The Irish? Independent? By jingo, old sport, that's the funniest thing I've heard all week.

—-

Researcher Cobalt writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
An associate of mine has wagered that you may have heard of ***SCP-1326****, or a similar tome. What do you say to that?*

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dr. Cobalt - I must say, the terms you amateurs use to refer to the mysterious and wonderful artifacts our world is teeming with are so dry. Where is your sense of wonder?

I cannot say that I have encountered the particular volume you mention - had I, I no doubt could have spent decades simply in cataloging its contents. I am made to understand it even contains references to myself, which I find most disconcerting - for I have never consented to my memoirs being put into publication, and if the original producer of this book has profited from it, then I intend to speak to a solicitor about the matter as soon as I am freed from this facility.

Researcher Cobalt replies:

I see. It is rather fortunate for my associate that there was no money involved in the wager.

I was actually the one responsible for SCP-1326's original documentation, and unoficially dubbed the tome "The Lexicon"; unfortunately, protocol only lets me refer to it by its official SCP designation. As for its anomalous documentation of your adventures, I am afraid a solicitor may not be of much help in the matter of copyright; I fear that book's author may hail from an alternate timeline, or even another reality, and would be beyond our reach or jurisdiction.

Speaking of your adventures, did the one described in the Lexicon really occur?

—-

William, in the Foundation mail room writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood:

We have received an unusual parcel from a "Mr. Moth" via post from London. Perchance, did you order something? If we can't identify the item, protocol definitely prohibits passing it along to you.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dash it all! He was supposed to address it to "Pervical Wilburforce" so that Deeds could secret it to me after it was dead-lettered. Are you quite sure you couldn't just allow me to access it on Sundays? I assure you it poses no danger to anyone - it is merely a trans-Akashic codex viewer. I've grown quite bored without my library at hand, you see, and I was hoping to be able to use it to revise my old notes and finally get around to learning Greek.

—-

Dr. Edison writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
Have you ever been to Japan?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dr. Edison - Deeds and I made a secret trip there in fourty-six, posing as Dutchmen, in order to retrieve some documents for the Duke of Edinburgh. I met a strange fellow named "Darkblade" there - he seemed to think quite highly of himself, though I found him to be little more than arrogant, aggrandizing, and incapable of holding his own in a stand-up fight. (And possibly, if I may say so, a Bohemian.)

—-

Spacecadet writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
Just for the sake of argument, would you actually recognize a sea slug if you saw one?

Lord Blackwood replies:

You insult me, Mr. Spacecadet! Mr. Darwin and I catalogued no fewer than seventy-three species of sea slug during our voyages in the south seas! I daresay I could not only recognize one at fifty paces, but tell you its species, how old it was, and what it had eaten for breakfast that day.

—-

BRIT BRITISHMAN writes:

G'DAY, GOVINAH,
PIP PIP CHERRIO OFF TO THE FIVE 'AN DIME APPLES AN PARES BLOODY WANKING HELL OFF YER ROCKER GOD SAVE THE QUEEN FOR KING AND COUNTRY BY OUR MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE!

Lord Blackwood replies:

Yes… quite.

—-

Dr. Edison writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
Have you ever met a funny man who owns a time-traveling blue box that's bigger on the inside?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I cannot say that I have. I did, however, once meet a strange man in possession of a glass kiosk he claimed could travel through time. He called himself Rufus and urged me to be excellent. He had two idle youths in his company who spoke with a strange accent and used words the likes of which I hope to never hear again - if this be the future of mankind, I begin to wonder whether all my efforts have been for naught.

—-

Nyehcat writes:
Dear Lord Blackwood,
Have you ever had a run-in with the Church of the Broken God?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Do you mean the Unitarians?

—-

Lord James T. Archibald writes:

My dearest Lady Blackwood,
To you I can barely express how I miss your touch, your voice, your smell. I cannot wait until next Tuesday for us to be together again. Your supple breasts and moist lips call to me from that terrible estate of your husband's. Last Thursday in the cabbage patch you made a proposal to me after a fervent session of love making; that we run away together from your dreadful husband and my tyrant of a wife, and start a life in the new world. I have decided to accept your proposal. Meet me outside the Hogswash Inn on Friday night wearing a green scarf, and we will away together to Virginia. Make sure to keep this letter safe from the prying eyes of your husband and his servants.

Lord Blackwood replies:

My mother was a *saint*, you varlet! I ought to horse-whip you on the front steps of your club for this sort of obscene slander! As soon as I effect my escape from this facility, I shall find you and we will settle this in the ancient manner afforded to men of honour (not that you have any, I am sure).

—-

Harry Flashman writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Regarding the ancient manner of resolving disputes afforded to men of honour that you allude to, would you have any advice for a young gentleman about to settle his first such affair of honour? A reply before dawn would be most appreciated, not to say helpful.

Yours,
H. Flashman

P.S. Please bear my best regards to your lady wife.

Lord Blackwood replies:

As the challengee (I presume), you ought to have the right to select

your weapon of choice. Have you any particular specialty - pistol, epee, perhaps the smallsword? If not, choose that which you know your rival is lacking in skill with. If nothing else, simply allow your rival to take first blood and call it done - unless he is an utterly contemptible rogue, this should satisfy his need for satisfaction.

(Incidentally, if you do not desist from speaking of my familial relations in such a manner, then the best advice I can give you is to cheat - for I never lose.)

—-

Gilgamesh writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Have you ever found Excalibur? If so, can I have it?

-The Great And Powerful ***GILGAMESH!!!!!!!!***

Lord Blackwood replies:

Twice, in fact, but I fear it is no longer in my possession. The Lady of the Lake is a surprisingly adept card-shark.

—-

Grug writes:
Wurg naf, Lord Blackwood, hal darl daff!
Ror nuff hoff muusel draff, Bur hoff oss iriff loss.
Murrn ror purn haff nansel ram? Mur nas oss woff huubess juss?
Oss ven rab,
Grug

Lord Blackwood replies:

If you say so.

Grug replies:

Holl, Lord Blackwood, nol ram.
Err waff raff wurg murrn marr. Kaff sil na "Problem" nif tal English.

Morlaf vaf kril tarr. Werf wurg raff woll kurf oss. Poss rofs zet aussnal refnel kreff, sil na narrim. Quass nerrif na darl zoff genocide darr. Varg wurg lurr nef posskeff. Raff kwor bor na remoff zet kral waff bref, neffil zaffer extinct groff, murrn ruff nuclear breff haff England wurg…
Kroff ved,

Grug

Lord Blackwood replies:

Are you in need of an alienist, my dear boy?

Grug replies:

Raff ross oss vern. Murrn werrin porr English fon ref. Nerr: "Us. Genocide. England. Nuclear. Soon."
Kroff ved,

Grug

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dear boy, please sober up before you try to write anything else.

—-

Spacecadet writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I was wondering if you would favor us with your thoughts on the late civil war in the States.

Sincerely,
Spacecadet

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ours was better.

—-

Agent Baxter writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I am writing for the Site-17 newsletter an article on what clothes are the height of fashion this season. Can you tell me what you are wearing at the moment, and what your sartorial plans for this summer will be?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Unfortunately, Agent Baxter, your confederates have not seen it fit to release my full wardrobe into my possession after they took custody of it from my country estate. Perhaps if you could put in a good word with them I could give you a more proper lecture on the nature of proper English fashion. (See to it that they drain the room of water as well; wool does not hold up well under the circumstances of the climate I find myself imprisoned in.)

As to the summer, Agent, one cannot go wrong with khaki if one finds oneself in the tropics, but if it is an English summer you have in mind, I am told that a less formal form of the traditional Evening Dress has of late been adapted by the *hoi polloi*. It is my personal opinion that the ascot tie is the most elegant accessory a gentleman can adorn himself with, though I understand that the four-in-hand style so beloved by Prince Albert the Younger has made inroads lately.

I do not expect that his fashion sensibilities will long endure; however, the brand of canned tobacco marketed under his name is most superb. Could you perhaps see to acquiring some for me? I have made several covert attempts to request a delivery of it by telephone; however, every tobacconist whom I have spoken to on the matter has responded most rudely.

—-

Foundation Weaponeer Buggle writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Who do you think would win in a fight between a brown bear and a

hammerhead shark?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I cannot say, Mr. Buggle, that I can envision a scenario where such a confrontation would occur. Would that I still had the address of my old associate at the Royal Centre for Selachian Pugilistics, for he was once the world's foremost expert on subjects of such a nature.

—-

. **writes:**

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I am the writer of the Brink Dangerguts Adventures, *a harmless set of novels about the world of mercenaries and explorers which for some reason the O5s consider a libelous security breach. But anyway, in my next book I am considering including an epic chase through the streets of Beirut in which our hero seeks shelter and weapons in a shady bar before leaping out to win the day in an epic fight intended to be a combination of* The Bourne Ultimatum, Oliver! *and* Bad Boys II. *As I am unable to go on leave to do any research in the Lebanon in case the Foundation works out who I am, can you recommend a suitable location for these happenings? You can be the book's dedicatee if you want.*

Lord Blackwood replies:

Do the Ottomans now permit the open establishment of bars in the Levant? My, how the world has changed since I found myself behind these walls! I knew of no legal establishments that the Sultanate would countenance during my last visit to those parts - however, should your character find his way to Cairo, there is an excellent establishment in the basement of the French consulate there.

I must admit that I am not familiar with the books you name, though your description brings to mind the adventure novels of Stevenson or that American fellow Clemens whom I met while he was touring the Holy Land in sixty-seven. I got the impression that he was unimpressed with my anecdotes, though he promised not to

describe me unflatteringly in the text he was writing.

—-

Space Core writes:

Get to space. Wanna get to space. Can you get me to space? SPAAAAAAAAAAAACE!

Lord Blackwood replies:

My old associate Dr. Hightower is the best at space, good boy.

—-

Dr. Edison writes:

How do I get all this semen off my keyboard?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Good heavens, boy, that's just foul.

—-

McKineteer writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

What was your opinion of the two world wars which we have had?

Lord Blackwood replies:

"World war"? That is not a term I am familiar with, Mr. McKineteer. Do you perhaps refer to the Crimean War, and the wars against Napoleon? Nasty business, those - I think (and hope) that we shall never see another affray as bloody as the former, or as drawn out as the latter.

—-

Murrin Pinethorn writes:

Can you describe your family, Lord Blackwood? You mentioned a brother.

Lord Blackwood replies:

I do not speak often of my family, Mr. Pinethorn, for I would not wish it to be thought I was riding on their coat-tails. My father is the esteemed Sir Edward Thomas George Blackwood, who I am sure needs no introduction, and I am the second of his four children. Admiral Sir Stephen Blackwood is the eldest of us, and Archbishop Clifford Blackwood the youngest; between he and I is Duchess Catherine Blackwood (being the wife of the Duke of Brandenburg). It has been some time since I saw them all together; the last time was most eventful, and perhaps you will sometime have an opportunity to read my diaries about the occasion.

—-

Doktori writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

If you could bring only two weapons with you for a prolonged journey through the African veldt, what would they be? Also, how many porters would you think would be necessary for such a journey? Thank you for your time.

Lord Blackwood replies:

One of my destabilizing muskets and possibly a pistol - though if you count a machete as a weapon, then I should have to take that in stead of the pistol, for such a blade is invaluable in the darkest regions of the continent. I should want for at least half a dozen porters, I should think, and if possible one or two native guides familiar with the lay of the land. (Ensure, should you be planning a trip yourself, that your guides be Christian - I nearly met an ill fate in sixty-two as the result of a Punjabi guide who turned out to be a member of the Thuggee.)

—-

CITIZEN O' US OF A writes:

MURICA

Lord Blackwood replies:

God save the Queen.

—-

Nyehcat writes:

I say, how did you convince your brother that the Swedish had invaded Newcastle? That might make for a riveting tale.

Lord Blackwood replies:

King Oscar owed me a favour.

—-

Agent Thesson writes

Hello kind fellow! It seems I have an undocumented species of Carp on my desk. I don't know where it came from but it appears to have lungs. Isn't that just DANDY! Should I Put it in a loving zoo to keep it from sucking on my finger or just give it to a fellow researcher?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ah, yes, the Patagonian lungcarp! Magnificent beasts. Would that I had access to my laboratory so that I could perform a proper examination for you - perhaps in the meantime it would be best to observe its natural behaviours.

—-

O5- writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

What are your thoughts about ***this business in Samothrace****?*

Lord Blackwood replies:

I do not believe I am particularly familiar with any business in that nation.

—-

Agent Adam Henderson writes:

Lord Blackwood, I've been wondering about your views on the rights of non-human but sapient creatures such as ***Centipede Nymphs*** *or* ***King Alaric the Fifth***

Also, have you ever had any contact with the individual or group known as Dr. Wondertainment?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I have wracked my brain many nights over the question of King Alaric and his "animal kingdom", as it were. If you have read my diaries of that encounter, you know as well as I do that he and his followers are Christian, or claim to be - but whether the beasts of the forest have souls in need of salvation is a topic that was never addressed by the instructors at Eton.

As to your second question - I knew an Edmund Wondertainment many years ago in Manchester, though he was a blacksmith and not a doctor. He was not an educated man, but he had wisdom and ambitions beyond his station - he dreamed of making toys for children, and hoped through his earnings to one day send his son to university and thereby be able to care for him so that in old age he could pursue his dream.

—-

E. Elric:
Have you ever dabbled in alchemy? If so, do you have any insights into the creation of the Great Work, AKA the Philosopher's Stone?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I have never dabbled myself, although I do have some associates familiar with the art of alchemy. I have had need of their consultations on several occasions.

—-

Grand Dreadlord Xifax Lightbane
Salutations, Lord Blackwood
The Black Counsel requests your presence at the Eternal Citadel of The Seventh Eye regarding the acquisition of soulstones used to keep ***THE SCREAMING MAN!*** *bound to Gaspar's Revenants. Should you ignore our request, the Akashic Glyphs will rupture, and neither heaven nor hell will be able to halt the ensuing chaos.*

Lord Blackwood replies:

Dear me, Mr. Lightbane. As much as I would be delighted to assist you with this no doubt urgent matter, I fear the guardsmen here are utterly insistent on my not leaving this tank. Perhaps you could put in a word with them?

—-

John Swindle writes:

Good day Lord Blackwood! You may be pleased to know that I for one humbly hold you in highest esteem, enjoy reading your adventures, insights and wisdom, receive your publication to the World-Wide Web in the Americas, and am simply one of many in all of these regards. I hope you find yourself in good spirits, and that I do not damper them terribly with the following information, which I feel must be passed along to you. I regret to inform you that I as well as the rest of your subscribers remain unfortunately ignorant as to the true nature of your appearance; living witnesses of yourself seem to be impossible for any of us to locate save Mr. Deeds (I personally suspect this to be the elaborate work of your captors), and Deeds himself, despite his elusiveness from your guardsmen as well as the many other fine qualities that he possesses, is tragically lacking the means to properly retrieve a record of your visage, in artistic form, accurate photographic form via George Eastman's photographic film (I understand the human eye would fare no better in any event given the distorting effects in which your captivity in water produces), or descriptive form, as he insists he is bound by confidentiality to his employer. With this in mind, would you humbly provide us with a description of yourself? We loyal subscribers do

have a vague idea based upon various publications to which we have access, yet I trust that you and I both would prefer thoroughness to such a degree that a proper portrait truly fitting of a Lord such as yourself could be painted from such information, by an artist worthy to paint a gentlemen of your rank. You need spare no expense, as it would be my honor to finance and circulate your proper portrait.

Yours in Christ,
J.C.S.

Lord Blackwood replies:

Would that I could conduct a proper sitting for a daguerrotype at this time, for I am not as young a man as I once was when last I had a proper sitting in ninety-seven. The closer I get to fifty, the more gray I find in my neatly-trimmed brown mane and my proud English moustache, and I find it more and more difficult to read without my spectacles. Let no one say that age has sapped my vitality, however; for I am as fit and barrel-chested as ever I was, and when the good Mr. Lincoln and I had occasion to meet in sixty-three I found that he stood as tall as I. My eyes are blue, for which my brown-eyed siblings teased me constantly as a child, alleging that I was a bastard or a Mongoloid (a claim abetted, no doubt, by the bout of left-handedness that plagues me to this day). Though my face and hands are unblemished, were you to observe me in the buff you would find my arms and trunk cris-crossed every which way with a lifetime's worth of scars, every one of them proudly earned in battle or in exploration. I cannot say more, for modesty's sake; but allow me to assure you that the reputation of the Blackwood family of being possessed heartily of stamina and virility is not one ill-assigned.

—-

Dr. Edison Writes:

What would you say if I told you that a man of African descent was elected president of the United States of America?
-Dr. Edison

Lord Blackwood replies:

Of South African descent, certainly?

—-

L. Heartstrings Writes:

Have you ever visited a land of magical talking horses?

eric_h writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood: I keep hearing rumours about talking horses in London. Have you ever met any?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Once, yes. I found it highly unsettling and in no way whatsoever whimsical, satrical, or condemnatory of the British class system.

—-

Dr. Bright Writes:

What do you think about Antidisestablishmentarianism?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I am an antidisestablishmentarian, sir, and I am proud to call myself one. Let the atheists and reprobates sally off to France if they wish it.

Incidentally - have we met? I seem to recall encountering a Mr. Bright in Africa back in seventy-four.

—-

Mrs. Gallow Writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
From your experience, do you think pufferkittens are a suitable pet for a 14 year-old?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I would have no objection, Mrs. Gallow, as long as one ensures that the beasts are not able to breed. Blackwood Manor was overrun by hundreds of the things when my sister secreted a pair into her room as a child. The conservatory still smells of dander.

—-

S. Bad Writes:
Dear Lord Blackwood,
How do you type with boxing gloves on?

Lord Blackwood replies:

With great difficulty, I would imagine. Mr. Remington's typographical machine is difficult enough to operate as intended.

—-

Darkblade Writes:

HOW DARE YOU SPREAD LIES ABOUT DARKBLADE! I WILL DESTROY YOOOOOOUUUUUU!

Lord Blackwood replies:

I apologize if my words have caused any insult, ma'am.

—-

Spacecadet writes:

Dear sir,
What is it like to live amongst people with so many odd idees fixees *on the subject of sea slugs? And how do you suppose one comes to have these fixations in the first place?*

Lord Blackwood replies:

It is hardly that difficult to understand. Sea slugs are quite fascinating creatures indeed; I could happily spend the rest of my

days merely in cataloguing the hundreds of varieties found in the South Seas.

—-

Mr. Robert Pattinson writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
I am an Englishman working in a foreign country, far from home and unsure whom to trust. I understand that your exploits have been famed for many years-what do you find the best way to cope with feelings of paranoia, anxiety and depression, especially with newspapermen following you around?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Your question reminds me of a strange man I met many years ago in the northwest of America - he was old and possessed of great strength, but was forever trapped in the body of an adolescent, and his flesh seemed to shimmer and coruscate when touched by the sun's rays. As I recall, he had taken to impersonating a teen-ager and attending primary school with the young people of the region, for he found that those who looked the same age as he were more accepting of his oddities.

—-

Dr Xanderfeld writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,
My skin has taken to the rot before my appointed time, and I fear there is very little I can do to reverse the process. A colleague of mine recommended I ask you if you had knowledge of anything sufficient to return to me the youth of my flesh, as they claimed you have seen wonders beyond the wildest imaginings of men in your adventures. So tell me, have you ever found something capable of such feats?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Woe, Dr. Xanderfield, but I cannot report that I have made such a discovery. In my younger days I quested in the Floridian peninsula

for the legendary Fountain of Youth, but found instead only inscrutable Indians, rancid swamp waters, and the ravages of malaria. I have heard tales of a cosmetic application which effortlessly conceals the scars of age, but I am told that it is a terribly addictive compound, and that one long left without its benefit will find that their skin rots and sloughs away far more rapidly than if had been left along to begin with. I would certainly not recommend that treatment; however, if you are sitting for a photographic portrait, I am told that a generous application of make-up can do wonders to conceal wrinkles and give the camera cause to portray one as years or decades younger than is truly the case.

—-

Lord Darkbirch writes:

Lord Blackwood,

You are a man with exquisite taste. Do you enjoy the works of modern authors such as Dickens and Hawthorne? My children adore their works, but I simply cannot stand their prose. I have demanded their tutors to stay true to literature in the classical sense, yet I just found out last week that she had been disobeying me and sneaking the works of Burnett and James into the house. Naturally, I dismissed her, yet my children has already been convinced that this is great literary work. I have read the works, and I have found them to be pure rubbish. Why does my children find them so enticing?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I have always found the works of Dickens and Hawthorne most interesting, for the good gentlemn elucidate the status of the working-class in a manner which Providence and circumstance have prevented me from observing first-hand; I do, however, find his tendencies towards sesquipedalianity to be most bothersome and distracting. (I am told that the news-papers of London pay writers of fiction by the word for their serials; had I the inclination to do so, I could easily have become their equal without setting foot outside London!)

I must confess to not being largely familiar with the works of James

or Burnett, though I had occasion to read Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* while traveling aboard the Orient Express in eighty-nine; I found it to be a most horrifying tale of how even a man of an intellectual disposition and a repentant nature, regardless of the circumstances of his birth, might rise to fame and glory only to fall even beyond the point from which he had begun. I immediately upon having finished it offered Deeds an additional pound per year on his salary, though he graciously declined the offer.

—-

Goodwill writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

If circumstances came to be so unfortunate, would you sooner retire as a naturalist and adventurer, or denounce your loyalty to England and her Church?

Lord Blackwood replies:

I should sooner be flayed alive and made a feast for cannibals, Mr. Goodwill, than denounce England and her Church. God in His wisdom has made the laws of science rigid and eternal; but our church and our state are things of men, temporal and vulnerable. The Earth shall not move or fall asunder if I abandon it, but England, for the want of a single loyal subject to wave her banner, could easily be lost to history. It is the duty of all her subjects to do their best to ensure that this doom may never come to pass.

—-

Ch00bakka wirtes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

*Have you heard about the phenomenon of "**Lizstomania**"? Some fellows at the Royal Foundation for the Study of Curiosities and Phantasmagoria claim that it may be cause by some supernatural or otherwise abnormal effect centered on Mr. Lizst. Have you ever come into contact with anything like this in your travels? And do you find Mr. Lizst as dreamy as I do?*

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ah, Liszt! I must confess I briefly contracted the "Liszt fever" in forty-one. My participations in the Great Austrian Warlock Hunt brought me to Berlin, where I found the young composer beset on all sides by fanatical ladies. I assisted the man in making his way to the safety of his hotel, where he favored me with a private performance. Had I been born a lady, I think I might have proposed marriage to him - but common sense prevailed, and I beat a hasty retreat before embarrassing myself.

—-

Dr. Rights writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I want your babies. Preferably human ones though this isn't absolutely a requirement. How do you think I should go about achieving this goal?

Lord Blackwood replies:

Ah, a lady has come a-courting! Splendid! Tell me, ma'am, what pastimes do you fancy? What is your favorite colour? Are you, I hope, Church of England?

—-

Emissary the Sixth writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

Have you ever, intentionally or accidentally, swapped bodies with that of another organism?
Also, what is, in your experience, the best way to avoid giving into the urge to murder someone?

P.S. Have you ever heard the joke about the man everyone thought was a sea slug?

—-

Shulk writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

A girl that I had been in love with for the longest time was recently killed by an army of robots. How would I go about avenging her?

Regards, Shulk

—-

Heropon Riki writes:

Dear Blackwoodpon,

How do I become world famous greatest heropon ever?

—-

Major Tom writes:

What do you feel, regarding to the current queen, Queen Elizabeth II? Hopefully she's as good as Queen Victoria?

—-

John Swindle writes:

Salutations once again Lord Blackwood! I must open with an apology- while I have commissioned your portrait several times over, I've simply been unable to procure an artist with sufficient talent to accurately capture your virility on canvas, much less the fine details of your proudly-worn scars. I will happily accept recommendations to this end from you. Having said that, I find a collegue of mine to be in a most unfortunate bind. Having recently claimed victory over a thaumaturge with my assistance, and against my insistence to the contrary, he had chosen to take into possession said thaumaturge's weapon, which I believe to be the cause of his transmutation into a telepathic lamprey. Thus I consult your expertise- do you know of any means by which men can reverse this transmutation? I'm afraid this is a matter of some urgency. You see, my collegue is in a state of grave distress precisely as one might expect from being made aware of such a traumatic experience, and I fear that with such

distress (of which the body of a lamprey is naturally ill-equipped to endure), the thaumaturge may yet at last claim his life. I will procure any cures of which you know post haste, though due to the experiences I have described herein, I would very much prefer that no cure involve me procuring and subsequently lending my trust to a practitioner of thaumaturgy.

Yours in Christ,
J.C.S.

—-

Dr. Andre writes:

What's cooler than being cool?

Lord Blackwood replies:

The state of being chilled in a fashion comparable to frozen water.

—-

SCP-275 writes:

Dear Mr Blackwood,

I have been informed that you were alive in the nineteenth century, and were quite the world traveler. Might you have ever visited Ottoman territory and heard of, or possibly even met, a young girl with impenetrable skin? If so, would you have any knowledge as to her origins, or perhaps her name?

I ask purely out of idle curiosity.

—-

Trinitite writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

How do you feel about the Foundation classifying you as anomalous?

—-

Guilliman writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

As you are a devout man, I was wondering if you were aware of ***SCP-343****, and if you are, what is your opinion on him?*

—-

Bryx writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I should like to inform you that the "World Wide Web", the entity which your most adept servant has been liaising with on your behalf, is not, in fact, a periodical, but a hub of information which any sentient being can access by the use of a very common terminal that is connected to it. Please give us your views regarding these developments, not least the fact that your audience and pool of eager contributors is much larger than you may have originally anticipated.

—-

"Banzai" Bill writes:

Dear Lord Blackwood,

I have recently come into the possession of a number of artefacts of the most unusual and diverse variety, and I have had some difficulty in operating one of them. Are you perchance familiar with a shoulder-mounted miniature-cannon/rifle designed to, in the words of the message found alongside it, "shoot Magnetism"?
And while I think of it, did you ever manage to discover how that magma rifle we found in '83 (I was the porter's son) automatically replenished its ammunition? The cache of aforementioned artefacts contained an identical device, and as there are now multiples, am willing to attempt disassembly of mine, but wished to inquire as to whether you have had any success with yours.

Lady Gertrude E. Hamilton writes:

What the fuck is WRONG with you, Theo? I haven't seen you in weeks, you haven't replied to any of my telegrams - your servants say you're just going through some shit, but three weeks is long enough, man! Until now, I could never understand why the Duchess of Brabant said you were trash, and that I could do way better, but this whole experience has finally opened my fucking eyes! If you don't respond to this, we are THROUGH! And I MEAN it this time!

Ask Dr. Spanko

== Gate of Babel v. 0.3 (Pre-Alpha) ==
Copyright: SCP Foundation, 20
Loading Config File: Spankonese.cfg
Loading……
DONE

Happy times, mimes![1]
Cack! Am christened Herr Doktor Spankoflex, colloquially namesplapped with **`Essy-Pee toothreethree and Steven!`** You, sir, are oculating my spidersteps[2], which the good Mr. Lightbulb[3] has indubitably mashed potato[4] one blinkbox[5] for yours truly.

Cack! He hollers that if I'm a muffin little puffin[6] Mister Boss Man[7] will serve a sardine sandwich to faucet police[8], and hand me the right to reply to send-saws[9] from God or Bog and all his Saints and Angels![10]

So start flapping your jaws, o pioneers! The mayonnaise of Tuesday is never sunny side up![11]

Editor's Note:

Sorry about the spotty translation of SCP-2337's gibberish. I've got at least three Euclids that are potentially going Keter by the end of the week, and I've wasted enough time building a keyboard with a "Cack!" button to worry about finding someone to write an English-Spanko Dictionary.

Thankfully, the guys in the linguistics department hooked me up with some software that they wanted me to test. It's supposed to be able to analyze these sort of english-based pseudo-languages and provide clarification for some of the more incomprehensible bits. The results

have been mixed, but it's better than nothing.

Anyway, just leave any questions you have in the section below, and I'll try to get an answer out of SCP-2337.

-Dr. Edison

+ Template

> **Dear Dr. Spanko,**
> **[THIS IS WHERE THE QUESTION GOES]**
> **-[YOUR NAME HERE]**

+ Unanswered Questions

> **Dear Dr. Spanko,**
> **I'm considering getting a pet to brighten up my quarters. Which would be the better option for a junior researcher, a European Swallow or a Norwegian Blue?**
> **-RA Janice Hawknest**

> **Dear Dr. Spanko,**
> **What do you think would be the best way to killcontain a 5m humanoid that can spit acid?**
> **-Dr. Gabriel**

> **Dear Dr. Spanko,**
> **Big fan, love the spidersteps. Forgive me if this question has already been asked, but I just had to know… Has anyone really been far even as decided to use even go want to do look more like?**
> **-Junior Researcher Lees**

> **Dear Dr. Spanko,**
> **My little brother has been bugging me all week. He keeps asking me the same question, and for the life of me I can't come up with an answer that satisfies him. I'm**

hoping you can help me out. The question is this: do examples of personal achievement stemming from internal motivation conflict with or corroborate the concept of predetermined destiny?
-Dr. Welsch

Kjære Doktor Spanko,
Uheldigvis er jeg ikke flytende i Basisk Angler, Kunne du hjelpe meg å lære?
-Doktor Tannpirke

Dear Dr. Spanko,
How do you eat gummy worms with a beak? It's just not working for me.
-Dr. Beakman

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I'm trying to explain what "cack" means to a… friend… who really, really doesn't understand Basic Angler. Can you help me out?
-RA Kyle Jostens

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I'm an in-development Foundation Artificial Intelligence Assistant! Could you tell me a little about yourself for my database?
-Diane.aic

+ Answered Questions

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I'm madly in love with the woman of my dreams, but she barely knows I exist! How do I get her to notice me?
-Loveless in Site 19

It easy peasy! Cack!
All need doing is the the happy lettuce dance[12]!
Primarily, butt heads with master big[13]. Don't hesitate to

inflate and sing the happy death song[14] until mister big loses his Munster. If that don't work, rub your face in jell-o[15] and wait 6-8 business days before tryhard.

Dear Dr. Spanko,
Why are you so loud? Can't you keep your voice down?
-Deafened in Site 92

Cack? What ho, forsooth!
Your jibber-jabber is un-sane, good sir. Am I much sub-vocal, thanksqueezeme[16]! Yourself should un-check your hear-holes to the doc, mayhaps an error is on the counter, no? I'd suggestinate me appointwise, but Mr. Lightbulb and Mister Boss Man un-think terrible terrible radishes[17]. Though hop skip and stop by, and I mayhap gander goose.

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I think I'm starting to come down with a cold. Do you have any advice?
-Dr. King

Appleseeds![18]

Dear Dr. Spanko,
Why don't we give you a megaphone and point you at any enemy with eardrums? What's your price, Dr. Spanko?
-Dr. Gently

Unconvincable! Mine pedigree is for bling blang blongo, youthinks? Cack! A gamble to snatch pretty pennies in parlor tricks? That myself am anti-doctor? Nein-sence! Cack! Cack! Am pro-fisherman doctorate, and P-Headdy in Psycho-geolo-lingo-bingo[19]! And like all doctor dudes, I was proscribed to inscribe the most troth of oaths; to first stew no arm[20] and all that.

Minesuch are vowed passive fist, it would break own boombox[21] to bring terminus to goodfellow folk. Sorries!

Dear Dr. Spanko,
Whathavelydos? Cack! Mine suchlike sinpartner haveno friendly time antimony frost? Undercackings havelike until our tinglybits are raspred…
-Linguistic Specialist N.D. Arx (Testing new translation software)

Cack! Cack I say good sir! Such wordinations are un-appropriate for blinkbox talky-time! She-Mom and the Masters of the Universe[22] should extemporize the soap rope[23] for such foul platitudes[24]! This is a family show, idaho! Pull yourself out of the cookie jar and think about what you've done young man!

Dear Dr. Spanko,
From what university did you receive your doctorate?
-Dr. Wu

Mineself receive gratitudes from Universidad Los Samothrace[25] in year of the moldy cheese man[26] with mega super duper plus good awardies. Cherry berry times, yes? Saddingly mineself not keep up with aluminum cans[27], forthwith house-calls nonwithstanding.

Dear Dr. Spanko,
How do you know so much about the Foundation? This has to count as an information breach, doesn't it?
-Researcher Rose Labelle

Cack! Dada expounded! You scratch my back, I eat bugs off your tupperware![28]

Dear Dr. Spanko,
Please elaborate on the socio-linguistic roots of your most peculiar language.
-Jr. Researcher Hu Zhi

Lovely! Basic Angler[29] is the monkey at the top of the swimming pole[30]! But sadness, mineself scrabble on the clock[31]!.

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I'm having trouble getting to sleep. Even when I avoid coffee and computers near bed, I still toss and turn. What can I do?
-Junior Researcher Andrew Evans

Have you appleseeds? Falseways, mayhaps check the camputor[32] for another you. If missing, you may be a dracula[33], so get out of the kitchen and hollar for Dr. [CACK!][34] with posthastitude!

Dear Dr. Spanko,
I don't know who supplies the coffee machines for our Sites, but wherever I go, I'm drinking muddy water that tastes like Joan of Arc washed her face with it. Now, I found ONE machine that actually gave me decent coffee. Trouble is, I can't find it anymore. Would you have any idea where that was?
-Dr. D.H. Aeslinger, Psy.D.

How the cack should my know-how? Shiny brown pygmy lemons[35] mine un-favorite they are; too much crunchy for bitter batter. I un-think how you pokey blokes can quench Pygmy Lemonade, take self an old-fashioned moose juice[36] anytime.

Dear Dr. Spanko,

I fear I find myself in a most unusual conundrum. I am, as you surely are, a man of science, yet I find myself surrounded by people who insist that I am, in fact, an aquatic mollusk. I know full well that I am no such thing, but they insist on treating me as if I were in spite of my protestations to the contrary. What means would you advise by which to resolve this state of affairs?
-Thomas Theodore Blackwood, 8th Viscount of Westminister

Cack? I say, is you Blackwood-sama? Cack-cack cooray! Mine thoughtsumed had that you licked the big candle in the sky! Bit of the old roundabout, wot wot? Nostalgia, methinks, of stomping through the jungles of tim buck-too!

As time for the seashells on the sea shore, it crystal clear that the foundry is punto banco[37]. Just play a pong now cow, and maybe someday you'll see what I mean.

Note: Upon further questioning, it appears that ***SCP-1867*** *and SCP-2337 had been traveling companions for a period of time ranging from 18 to 18 . 1867 seems to be fully aware of 2337's anomalous properties, and describes 2337 as being "a good sport, but a bit of an odd duck if you know what I mean", citing difficulties in understanding 2337 as the main reason they stopped traveling together. Due to the difficulty in translating SCP-2337's speech, the accounts of their travels have yet to be confirmed.*

Footnotes
1.Happy times, mimes! (id.)Believed to be a salutation or greeting.
2.Spidersteps (n.)Web Page, or Blog
3.Mr. Lightbulb (pn.)Belived to be the nickname that SCP-2337 has assigned to Dr. Edison, who at present time is SCP-2337's handler. Occasionally written as "Mr. Light Bulb".

4.mashed potato (n. v. adj.)Linguistically equivalent to "(v.) Donated", "(v.) Obtained", "(v.) Pilfered", "(adj.) Pertaining to the campaigns of Genghis Khan" or "(n.) Coleslaw", depending on context.
5.Blinkbox (n.)One of many different words SCP-2337 uses to describe the closed-network computer it has received. See also;hackmobile,compcop,nightly brightly,thingamadoozle, andpeckpoker
6.a muffin little puffin (id.)An idiom that describes SCP-2337 staying quiet during daytime hours.
7.Mister Boss Man (pn.)The O5 Council.
8.serve a sardine sandwich to faucet police (id.)Meaning unknown.
9.send-saws (n.)E-Mails
10.God or Bog and all his Saints and Angels (id.)Personnel authorized to contact SCP-2337 via e-mail.
11.The mayonnaise of Tuesday is never sunny side up. (id.)Meaning unknown.
12.happy lettuce dance (id.)A euphemism for corn crake mating rituals.
13.master big (n.)A rival male of the same species as the conversation's subject.
14.sing the happy death song (id.)The act of growling at a rival vying for the affection of a potential mate.
15.rub your face in jell-o (id.)Meaning unknown, but possibly a literal instruction.
16.thanksqueezeme (id.)A portmanteau of "Well excuse me!" and "Thank you very much", both used sarcastically.
17.terrible terrible radishes (id.)Meaning unknown.
18.Appleseeds (id.)General advice to the effect of taking things easy, getting plenty of sleep, and drinking plenty of water. Perhaps one of the most well-understood idioms in SCP-2337's vocabulary.
19.Psycho-geolo-lingo-bingo (n.)An inconsistently-named academic field that SCP-2337 claims to have a doctorate in. Also known as:Parologicy,Barlgoflargology,Symbology,CackologyandDoctorology
20.first stew no arm (id.)Appears to be a corruption of "First, do no harm", a well-known condensation of the Hippocratic Oath.
21.Boombox (n.)A heart. Also referred to as aBeatbox, aPoundbox, and aFlabbery Red Thing
22.She-Mom and the Masters of the Universe (n.)Used to refer to SCP-2337's mother. At this time, it is unknown whether "She-Mom"

is an actual name, or if it is a common term used by members of SCP-2337's species.
23.Extemporize the Soap Rope (id.)The act of forcefully washing a subject's mouth with soap.
24.Foul Platitudes (id.)Unwanted sexual advances.
25.Editor's Note: There has been no mention of a "Universidad Los Samothrace", or any variant thereof in any documentation related toSCP-1173. At this time, SCP-2337's knowledge ofSCP-1173is not considered a containment breach.
26.Year of the Moldy Cheese Man (n.)One of several nicknames that SCP-2337 has given to particularly noteworthy calendar years. This one in particular is estimated to have taken place around 19 . See also:Year of the Happy Dance,Year of the Smelly FishandYear of the [DATA EXPUNGED] With a Side of Spaghetti
27.Aluminum Cans (n.)Alumni
28.You scratch my back, I eat bugs off your Tupperware! (id.)Meaning unknown. SCP-2337 seems to consider this to be a sufficiently honest and detailed explanation as to why he possesses knowledge of the Foundation, and accuses researchers who try to ask clarifying questions of not "Readspeaking Basic Angler".
29.Basic Angler (n.)The name SCP-2337 gives for the language he speaks. SCP-2337 also claims to be fluent inJapanimation,French Fries,UniversalisticsandAntidisestablishmentarianism, each of which appear to be a separate language loosely based on Japanese, French, Esperanto, and Cockney Rhyming Slang, respectively. As efforts to translate these languages have proven especially difficult, SCP-2337 has been asked to stick to his "native tongue" when communicating with Foundation personell. SeeDocument 2337- - C: I Need A New Computer Because The One I Was Using Literally Melted When I tried to Translate The Stuff Dr. Spanko Was Sayingfor more information on these other languages.
30.The Monkey at the top of the Swimming Pole (n.)A subject that SCP-2337 considers himself quite knowledgeable in.
31.Scrabble on the Clock (id.)To say that one is currently on sabbatical.
32.Camputor (n.)A mirror, or similarly reflective surface.
33.Dracula (n.)Vampire
34.Note:This appears to be an attempt by SCP-2337 to mimic Foundation censorship protocols. The method by which SCP-2337 became aware of said protocol is currently unknown, as is the

subject that SCP-2337 is referring to.
35.Shiny Brown Pygmy Lemons (n.)Coffee Beans. Not to be confused withShiny Brown Pygmy Limes,Happy Color Pygmy Lemons,Shiny Lemon Brown Pygmys, andCoffee Beans.
36.Moose Juice (n.)SCP-2337's self-proclaimed "favorite quencher", consisting of two parts parts tomato juice, one part horseradish sauce, one part Sunny Delight, and one part melted M&Ms. Curiously, despite the lack of alcohol in any of the ingredients, SCP-2337 exhibits signs of mild intoxication upon ingestion of this beverage.
37.Punto Banco (adj.)Insane, crazy, not right in the head.

Assault on Site-64

> Greetings fellow **`Insurgents`**.
>
> As many of you are likely aware, in exactly twenty-four hours, we will begin an assault upon the Foundation facility known as **`Site-64`**.

Site-64

Anomalous Materials Lab

As Researcher Jacob Conwell sat at his desk within the Site-64 Anomalous Materials Lab, he looked into the tiny box his colleague, Researcher Roland Ferro, held in front of him. Inside was a gold band topped by a modest diamond. Conwell grinned and shook his head.

"I'm flattered, Roland," he said, "but I don't think Kate's going to approve."

"Ha," Ferro replied. "Think Clarissa will like it?"

"I mean, sure, it's a nice ring," Conwell shrugged. "But I thought Shaw was dating **`Dr. Campbell`** again. Did you two get back together?"

Ferro shook his head.

"Not yet, but if I've learned anything it's that Clarissa and Lily's relationship is like a match. It burns hot and fast, and eventually burns out." Ferro sighed. "I just… if she gives me another chance, I want to be ready to do what I really should have done a long time ago. You know?"

"Seems like you're taking a pretty big gamble," Conwell frowned. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"It's far too late for that…"

"Hostiles incoming!"

The two scientists jumped. Through the window on the office door they could see security officers rushing into the room and taking cover behind the work benches, pistols in hand. The sound of shouting and gunfire, blotted out the low hum of the **Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units**. Suddenly, all was quiet. Several masked figures in combat gear appeared in the office doorway, assault weapons at the ready. Ferro and Conwell quietly held up their hands.

"On the floor, now!"

The two scientists didn't resist. Within moments of lying down, their hands were zip tied behind their backs.

"You shouldn't be here," Conwell mumbled from the floor.

"Quiet!" One of the intruders barked back.

"You don't understand," Ferro added on. "We don't mean that in a 'you're invading a black-ops facility' way. You guys came in through the portals, right? Those aren't going to be open much longer, we've already started the…"

Another intruder discharged a round from his pistol into the floor. Ferro immediately stopped talking.

The two scientists were hoisted up on their feet and escorted out of the office. As they passed into the adjoining lab, the bodies of three slaughtered Foundation Security Officers sat in pools of blood. One's head had taken a shotgun blast. Another had seen the wrong side of seven or eight rounds from an assault rifle. The final officer's legs had been shot out, with two bullet holes in the back of her head. Conwell cringed and looked away. Ferro swore under his breath.

"This is Alpha Leader," the lead intruder said into a mic on her

person. "Charlie and Delta, we've captured PoIs seven and fifteen. En route to primary."

Site-64

Cafeteria

"I fucking hate these things…" MTF Commander Damion Creed whispered to his colleague, MTF Commander Clarissa Shaw. "This whole thing could have just been a fucking email."

The two sat among a crowd of agents within the Site-64 Cafeteria. Near the back of the room was a projector screen displaying the current slide of a presentation entitled "Thaumatologists and You: What to do when you got the 'Blues'".

"This is more to your crew's benefit than mine," Shaw whispered back, her gaze remaining locked on the presenter. "Stop bitching and pay attention. You'll thank yourself when you don't get a rod of lightning shoved up your ass."

"But with high reflex I can take half damage…" Creed mumbled as he sat back in his chair and returned his attention to the speaker. "Seriously though, they're talking about magic, how is this so dry? Couldn't they get **`Navarro`** or something?"

Shaw exhaled sharply.

Creed held up his hands and fell quiet resigning himself to his fate.

"They aren't even doing demonstrations…" he said under his breath.

The burst of attention proved short lived, however, as several minutes later the sound of security klaxons then blasted through the facility.

Almost at once the assembled MTF agents stood, and began to sprint towards the cafeteria doors. At that same time, said doors slammed shut with sharp metallic clang, trapping them inside. It

didn't take long for the collective intellect of the room to determine the power had been cut.

"For fuck sake…" Shaw said as her and Creed pushed their way to the front of the crowd. "Someone get me a line to Merlo, now!"

> The reason for this attack is simple. Following the joint **UIU/Foundation raid** on **Anderson Robotics**, a massive supply of AR droids has been stored indefinitely at this facility for long term study and reverse engineering. If acquired and modified, these droids will provide a significant asset to our cause.

Site-64

Administrative Offices

"You're telling me that we can run a laser downstairs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but a mini-fridge shorts us?"

Gabe Merlo stood within his office behind one of the Site-64 maintenance crew members, rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration, having just had to throw away at least three days of lunches he had packed for himself and his wife. The maintenance crewman, a middle-aged man with tan skin and a name tag that read "Stan", simply chuckled as he continued his work.

"Hey man, don't give me that attitude," Stan replied. "You have absolutely no idea how complex the wiring is in these places. Just let me do my job and you can go ahead and get back to yours. I'll let you know if I need you to do the wiring's taxes or something."

Assistant Director Sasha Merlo stifled a laugh as she sat within Gabe's chair behind his desk. Her husband looked at her with a defeated shrug.

"Guess it's cafeteria today," he mumbled. "Whenever the MTF

seminar clears up…"

"Fine by me," Sasha smiled, having regained her composure. "Though, lunch might be cut short then, Holman and I have a conference with some of the Site-77 hobbnobbers later, and I don't want to…"

The sound of alarm klaxons cut her off. The room's three occupants froze as they looked around. Sasha's expression became serious, her hand reaching for her pistol. Gabe looked to the door, slowly backing up to be closer to his wife. Stan's eyes widened with fear as he put down his screwdriver, and watched the other two for a hint of what to do.

Gunshots rang out from somewhere on the floor. Sasha immediately got to her feet, locking the door and shutting down the lights as she drew the blinds on the door shut. Gabe stood behind her. He put a finger to his lips and gestured for Stan to join them. The sound of footsteps became audible in the adjoining hall.

"Containment breach?" Gabe asked under his breath.

Sasha shook her head as she peered through a crack in the blinds. Four figures in combat gear slowly crept down the hallway on alert. The one on point brandished a shot gun. Behind him the two intruders were armed with a pistol and an assault rifle, respectively. The figure taking up the rear was armed with a rifle as well. Each time they came to a room, they entered, and appeared to comb for inhabitants. Sasha relayed this information lowly, under her breath.

"Who are they? Any markings?" Stan whispered.

"Yeah, one's got a big neon sign that says GOC on it…" Sasha replied, shaking her head again. She then pressed a finger to her lips and backed away from the door. One of the intruders tested the knob forcefully, then became quiet.

All three of the room's occupants let out a small sigh of relief.

BANG

The door kicked inward.

Sasha immediately leveled her pistol, her arm recoiling in rapid succession as she repeatedly pulled the trigger. The man fell down as his shotgun clattered to the floor. She then leaned into the door frame, delivering more shots into her enemies, one of the riflemen falling to her assault.

Sasha didn't have time to reload. Something akin to a bus hit her from behind, launching her through the air and across the hallway where she slammed into the opposite wall with a dull thud. Her ears rang as she tried to get her bearings, only to get hit again, and launched down the hallway as if she were a rag doll.

Sasha coughed in pain as she looked up. The two remaining intruders approached, the rifleman keeping his weapon trained on her, while the man with the pistol held out a clenched fist with a faint blue light radiating from his palm.

"This is Charlie Leader," the thaumatologist said into a mic. "We've captured PoI three, preparing…"

A two shotgun blasts rang out in rapid succession, the rifleman slumping against the wall and the thaumatologist falling forward on top of Sasha. Gabe stood several yards away, weapon in hand. He breathed heavily for several moments as he looked between the two men he killed, then became pale and vomited.

"My hero…" Sasha said with a painful laugh as she pushed the body off her, Stan arriving to lend her a hand up.

Gabe nodded in agreement as he wiped his mouth.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"Well, considering how we're a maintenance crewman, an accountant, and a Level 4 admin, we're going to find a new place to hide, and stay put. We're not exactly **Alpha-9**," Sasha answered, and reloaded her pistol. "Stan, grab one of those rifles, I'm assuming you've passed the basic training."

"Uh… yes ma'am," Stan nodded, and went to fetch a weapon.

"Where are the MTFs?" Gabe looked around. "Shouldn't Shaw be all

over this? Or Creed?"

"You'd think…" Sasha frowned. "Let's hide first, then we can find out what the hell is going on…"

Clarissa? It's Sasha. What was Jessie's nickname for you?

Aunt Clari. What was my alias during my first operation for Gamma-13?

Ms. Starling. Glad you are okay. What's going on? Where are you and the other MTFs?

Trapped in the cafeteria. Someone cut the power to the doors, and sealed us in. Where are you, are you okay?

Gabe and I are holed up somewhere safe. No worries.

Do you know what's going on?

Some kind of invasion. Armed strike teams. A crew went through the admin level on a personnel grab. I'm guessing CI based on the hallmarks.

Jesus… how'd they get in?

Your guess is as good as mine.
We have one of the maintenance crew with us. Hang tight, we'll see if we can get you guys out. Be ready to rock and roll.

Fuck that noise. Stay put! Last thing we need is them bagging a level four.

See you soon.

The mission will involve five strike teams. Strike Team Alpha will be securing the captured Anderson Drones, and therefore will be the largest team. Strike Team Bravo will be securing a master copy of the AR Operating System within the Foundation Site Archives. Strike

Teams Charlie and Delta will capture Persons of Interest from the Site-64 staff. Each team will enter through a different **SC-60/106-13/060** portal here within Three Portlands. We have already negotiated safe passage into and out of the pocket dimension on the other side with **like-minded inhabitants** eager to see this blow dealt to the Foundation. However, these portals are currently under the protection of **UIU agents**. Strike Team Echo will ensure the portals remain under our control.

Site-64

Medium Security Storage Wing

Researchers Conwell and Ferro reluctantly trudged forward, surrounded by the armed intruders who escorted them forcefully though the lower levels of Site-64. Along the way, they watched their captors gun down security personnel as they came across them, as well as the occasional maintenance crewman, or wayward scientist. Eventually, the entourage stopped at a door both Ferro and Conwell had been through many times during the course of their research.

Robotics Storage

"Open the door," the intruder they had come to know as Alpha Leader ordered.

Conwell and Ferro looked at each other briefly, then both shook their heads.

"We can't," Conwell replied. His eyes shifted to the ground where they remained locked.

"Did that sound like a fucking request? Open the god damn door!"

"We can't," Ferro clarified. "Neither of us have clearance for that area. That's basically an armory, what the hell would we need to do

back there that couldn't just be brought to our labs?"

Alpha Leader sighed then snapped her fingers. Conwell and Ferro were immediately slammed into the nearby wall as their ID badges were forcefully yanked off their persons. The door pinged twice as both badges were rejected by the security scanner.

"Peachy," Alpha Leader mumbled. "Twelve?"

"On it!"

One of the intruders with a heavy kit on her person set to work opening the door. Alpha Leader nodded in approval, then turned back to Conwell and Ferro.

"Eight, Six, keep our guests comfortable."

The two researchers were then forced down to the floor, idly watching as their captors attempted to crack their way into the storage room by force. It was several minutes into this that Ferro noticed Conwell blinking in a rhythmic pattern.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

Ferro tilted his head slightly in confusion, and watched as Conwell repeated.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

The pattern seemed familiar, as if he had seen it before.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

It then hit him.

Roland, you fucking idiot. It's Morse code. Ferro thought to himself, and looked at Conwell blink out the message again. His colleague had been repeating the word MORSE over and over.

YES

Ferro blinked back. Conwell let out a short sigh, a brief smile coming to him, then vanishing as he looked at their captors. So far, they seemed none the wiser. Conwell proceeded, stopping occasionally to avoid onlooking gazes.

STILL ADMIN ON BOTS

Ferro gave a shallow nod, pausing as one of the intruders eyed him for several seconds before returning their gaze to the door. Conwell blinked on.

F PROTOCOL

Ferro frowned. He looked at Conwell, then at their captors, then at their guns. He felt the ring box still in his pocket. Eventually he returned his gaze to Conwell, and replied.

GET SHOT

Conwell closed his eyes. Ferro watched as his colleague rubbed the titanium band on his ring finger with his thumb for several seconds. Conwell eventually opened his eyes and replied.

HAVE TO TRY

Site-64

Sub-Level 1 Maintenance Room

Sasha and Gabe Merlo stood guard by the door of the dimly lit maintenance room, Stan whistling as he worked at the nearby kiosk. He then looked up with a frown.

"Figure it out?" Sasha asked.

"Sure did," Stan replied. "Someone must have known your MTFs were having that meeting, 'cause they went in here and literally only

powered down those doors. Directly in the system."

"How many people have access to the system?" Gabe inquired. "Could this have been done remotely?"

"Not likely. And as far as I know, the only ones in and out of these rooms are the maintenance crew. Which means you folks probably have a mole on your hands."

"Christ…" Sasha mumbled. "We'll have to deal with that later. Can you get those doors powered back up?"

Stan shrugged.

"I can sure as hell try, no promises."

"Get it open, and I'll personally take you out for steak," Sasha replied.

Stan blinked in shock. He raised a finger then put it down, and looked over at Gabe.

"Hey man," Gabe said with chuckle and shrug, "get that door open and I'll pay for it."

Site-64

Cafeteria

The agents of Gamma-13 and Tau-51 had set themselves up to deploy at the drop of a hat. Trapped where they were, there was little else they could do. Those with sidearms checked and rechecked their magazines. Others discussed potential plans of attack for sweeping the invaders from their home. Shaw and Creed sat to the side, the former's eyes darting from her cell phone to the doors in rapid succession, the latter starring up at the ceiling.

"Any word from Merlo?" Creed eventually asked.

Shaw shook her head.

"Nothing… I really hope nothing happened to her…"

It was then that the phone vibrated, and a new message appeared on its screen.

Knock Knock!

The doors to the cafeteria then opened. A silence fell over the collected agents. Shaw and Creed blinked.

"Looks like your girl came through," Creed said, hopping to his feet as the agents began to mobilize.

"She sure did," Shaw replied, likewise getting up. She picked up speed as she ran towards the door, shouting orders to her agents. "Get to a security station, let's find out where these assholes are!"

> Once inside, each strike team will exit back into baseline reality and into the interior of Site-64. Bravo, Charlie, and Delta will emerge within the Site-64 dormitories, while Alpha will be emerging within the AMAT Lab. Our sources have indicated that the Foundation has recently developed tech to close these portals, and will be testing them in 48 hours, so this is our one shot to make this kind of smash-and grab.

Site-64

Medium Security Storage Wing

"Got it!"

Ferro and Conwell let out defeated sighs as the intruder working on the door stood aside, two of her compatriots moving in and forcing the door open. Inside, the lights flicked on, revealing the shiny casings of scores of AR model robots hibernating. Conwell and

Ferro were forced back on their feet and marched inside.

Alpha Leader and two of her underlings approached the room's main console, the sound of typing immediately filling the room.

"You're going to need credentials…" Conwell piped up, his gaze on the floor as the eyes of the intruder swarm fell upon him.

"Wanna bet?" Alpha Leader replied, then nodded to her agent who resumed typing. Within several moments the hibernating Aplomado, Merlin, and **Peregrine** units were fully awake.

"Have them start making their way back to the portal," Alpha Leader patted her agent at the terminal on the shoulder and then turned away to speak into her mic. "This is Alpha Leader, we've accessed our primary target, en route back to-"

"ALL UNITS ACTIVATE FOUNDATION PROTOCOL!" Ferro shouted at the top of his lungs.

The robots let out a horrific shriek, causing all present to cover their ears. One by one the droids fell apart, disintegrating into puddles of black goo. After several moments, the shrieking stopped and the store room fell into silence.

Conwell looked away and closed his eyes, expecting immediate punishment. He rubbed his wedding band tightly and thought of his wife.

Ferro wore a shit-eating grin as he locked eyes with Alpha leader. He raised his arms in a sarcastic shrug.

"Your move, lady."

Alpha Leader raised her pistol, and fired.

Site-64

Sub-Level 1 Security Station

Shaw looked on in silence as she watched the security monitor in front of her. On the screen before her, an enemy agent raised her pistol, and fired off a single shot into Researcher Roland Ferro's torso. Time seemed to slow down as she watched her ex fall to the ground, the enemy agent then ordering her strike team's retreat, and leaving him for dead.

"Shaw?"

She blinked, her mind whirling with disjointed thoughts and ideas.

"Shaw? Orders?"

She blinked again, returning from the riptide of her mind. Creed stood by her, and hand on her shoulder.

"How do you want to do this, Clarissa?"

"Sherman, Johar, Akagi, and get down to the Level 2 Storage Wing immediately. Get Ferro and anyone else you see in need of medical attention to the infirmary," Shaw replied clearly and calmly, making her way to the door. "Creed, clean house up here. It looks like they are making a run for the 3560 portals. Make sure they don't get there. The rest of Gamma-13, with me. We're cutting them off at the AMAT Lab."

> Sources have also indicated that during the time of this operation, the on-site Mobile Task Forces will be localized within the site cafeteria for a training seminar. Our agents embedded within the site maintenance staff have ensured us that the task forces will be incapacitated, allowing us to move about the facility largely unhindered. Security personnel encountered may be eliminated with extreme prejudice. Once objectives have been secured, all teams are to immediately evacuate through their assigned portals. Once back in **`Three Portlands`**, all strike teams are to evacuate back to baseline reality through their assigned Ways.

Site-64

Anomalous Materials Lab

Strike Team Alpha sprinted through the halls of the facility with Researcher Conwell in tow. With their primary objective botched, their orders were to abort, and secure any additional persons of interest encountered along the way. On the sub-level above, Strike Teams Bravo, Charlie, and Delta were in a similar state of retreat, though their objectives had been largely completed with an order of magnitude more success. Luckily, the halls were mostly cleared giving them an easy route back.

"This is Bravo Leader! Our portal has been closed. I repeat, our portal has been closed! Heading to Delta and Charlie's portal now."

Strike Team Alpha stopped, listening intently as their co-insurgents spoke to them over their radios. The sound of gunfire could be heard in the background.

"This is Delta Leader! Our portal is also closed. Attempting to regroup with Bravo and seek a surface exit. Encountering heavy MTF resistance!"

The insurgents looked to one another, concern in their eyes. It was then Alpha Leader slammed Conwell into a wall, putting a pistol to his head. The researcher breathed heavily as he squirmed in her tight grip.

"What the fuck is going on? What did you do?"

"We told you when you first got here," Conwell replied. "We found out how to close those portals. We started that process a few hours before you arrived. Be as mad as you want but we warned you!"

Alpha Leader let out an enraged yell and punched the wall near Conwell's head.

"You heard him, get moving!" she shouted, grabbing Conwell by his shirt and pushing him forward. "If you try to slow us down I will shoot

you in the god damn head."

The hallways once more filled with the thuds of sprinting boots. Within minutes, the Strike Team had arrived at the AMAT lab, the portal still barely open, then flickering out of existence. The insurgents approached where it was in defeat.

"Well, that's great…"

"What do we do now?"

"Think we could make the surface?"

The members of Strike Team Alpha mumbled among themselves as Alpha Leader thought to herself, then spoke into her mic.

"This is Alpha Leader. Our portal is gone too. Rerouting to surface…"

The members of the strike team turned to leave, freezing as they came face to face with MTF Gamma-13, armed to the teeth, with their firearms pointed directly at them. At their head was Agent Clarissa Shaw.

"Oh shit…" Conwell said as he immediately dived for cover, MTF Gamma-13 proceeding to gun down their unwelcome guests.

> It took the Foundation nearly a decade of dedicated research, and the help of one of Anderson Robotics' Founders, to create effective counter measures for the AR line of drones. Needless to say, it will take the Foundation far longer to crack our reverse engineered products.
>
> Good luck and Godspeed.
>
> Dismissed.

Site-64

Infirmary

Researcher Ferro sat in his infirmary bed, drumming on the railing as he idly passed the time. The doctors had told him he was lucky to be alive, though the incredible amounts of pain his surgery was causing him often made him wish he was dead. Finally finding a comfortable position, he closed his eyes and began to nod off.

"Hey Roland…"

His eyes opened to see Agent Clarissa Shaw standing by his side. His mouth hung open briefly before he could find his words.

"Hey Clarissa…"

"I saw what happened. What you did."

Ferro looked down and nodded.

"Thoughts?"

"I can't decide if it was really brave, or incredibly stupid."

"Would it help if I told you it was Conwell's idea?" Ferro smiled.

"Ah, incredibly stupid it is then," Shaw smiled in return.

"I appreciate the visit. Thanks."

"I can't stay long I'm afraid, lots of red tape for us to go through," Shaw sighed. "But, I'm glad to see you're okay."

Ferro nodded, and soon Shaw was making her way towards the door, passing Conwell on her way out. The incoming researcher watched her go, then looked at Ferro with a raised eyebrow.

"Roland, buddy, you didn't…"

"Nah," Ferro sighed. "I'm not a master of romance, but I'm pretty sure proposing, to a woman currently in a relationship, while in an infirmary bed, after getting shot, is pretty stupid idea. And considering how this week's been filled with stupid ideas, I don't

need another top of the pile."

Conwell nodded in agreement and took a seat near his friend.

"I brought my iPod, like you wanted, want anything particular to start?" He asked.

"Whatever you think fits the mood best."

Conwell nodded, and quietly set up the device, and pressing play. Ferro frowned as he recognized the tune.

"You can be a real dick, Jake."

"I know."

Wait, they don't love you like I love you
Wait, they don't love you like I love you

« Hector and Jacob | Anderson Robotics Hub | Priorities »

Assistance for the Boss Lady

“Jeremy, you disappoint me.”

Doctor Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD[1] glowered over her folded fingers. The corgi sitting on her desk smiled back at her, exuding an air of incredible pride over the slightly-damp envelope that sat at its front paws. Isabel leaned back in her chair and sighed.

“I’m getting reaaaaaaaaal tired of this, Jeremy.” She pushed off against the floor, sending her chair rolling across the office. “Your brother was never like this.” Jeremy lay down, resting his head on his paws. “He never brought me bad news, but with you, Jeremy, it’s always bad news.” The high-backed chair slowed to a stop.

Isabel was slouched low enough to be effectively horizontal, her noodly limbs splayed out limply. Too much effort in sitting up straight now. Too much work. What was the point in work? What was the point in anything anymore? What was the *point*? She’d gotten the news directly from the corgi’s mouth: this quarter’s sales were in the toilet across the board. It was the worst quarter in a decade of bad quarters, and the Executive Board was not happy.

Several gallons of Dr. Wondertainment Quadruple Bypass Minty Fudge Ripple Ice Cream™ had done little to dull the barbs in that sternly-worded letter from the Executive Board.

We find your recent work to be severely lacking.

Lacking? *Lacking?* She put her life, her soul, the very entirety of her being into each and every design. How could they even dare say her work was lacking? She was Doctor Wondertainment! She built this company on blood, sweat, tears, and that nasty pus that fills up zits!

Kids just didn’t buy toys anymore. They were too busy playing those horrible video games, which rotted the brain and promoted all sorts

of unwholesome things like murder, foul language, and microtransactions. Isabel tried, oh she tried. Her work was not lacking. The whiteboard walls of her office were covered in scribblings, enough ideas to keep the Wondertainment product line going for a full generation. But it wouldn't do any good if the only people who bought her toys were a few odd collectors and the ever-dwindling number of Wondertainment faithful. All that work, all that effort, and no one liked any of her toys. Heart and soul poured out into her work, and the Board barks back with a wheezing "the focus groups don't like it." Focus groups! There never used to be focus groups in this company!

But there they were, and the Executive Board loved them dearly. What was the point in putting in her heart and soul if everything was just going to get shot down?

Isabel scooted herself back to her desk and turned the chair back around. There was Jeremy, there was the envelope that held the report about how the Wondertainment brand was getting stomped by the Factory.

The *Factory*. The very thought made all sorts of words bubble up from the recessed folds of her brain: ugly, angry words like floozy and fudgenugget and sassafrassin and consarnit and butt. Yeah, that was it. The Factory was butts. They wouldn't know fun if fun decided it wanted to be a butt-hat and roost on top of their head.

Actually that would be a neat idea, a hat for your butt, there are plenty of people who go around without hats anyway, so why not make a butt-hat so they can wear *two* hats…

No…no…what was the point? People would think it was stupid. People would look at the butt hat and go "Oh what's this? Some stupid baby toy for babies who poop? I'm not buying this because I am not some stupid baby who poops." But that was stupid because everyone poops, not just babies and *aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh*.

She needed more ice cream. A lot more ice cream. Something different…Cotton Candy Caramel Colada, Crunchy Frog, Good Day to Die (By Chocolate), Bananaramadingdong, Five Kinds of Rocky Road Medley, Kung-fu Ripple, Thoroughly Intense Vanilla,

Entropeanut The Buttery End of All Things…so many to choose from.

Bah. She'd have all of it. Drown herself in ice cream. Isabel nudged the corgi with her finger.

"Doink. Hey. Jeremy. Go get Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, and Jeremy. I've got a job for you all."

The dog's ears perked. Jeremy stood up, hopped off the desk, and scampered out of the office. He returned a moment later with four other corgis. They all sat in front of the desk, looking both adorable and expectant. Isabel leaned over and scowled down at them with as much authority as she could muster with her bright cotton-candy pink, blue, and purple striped sweater.

"All right. Jeremy, I need you to go grab the keys and open up the warehouse. Jeremy, you and Jeremy man the forklift. Jeremy, you distract Mr. Security. Jeremy, you make sure the rest don't mess it up. I want literally all the ice cream we have in storage right here, in my office, on the double."

The Jeremys barked affirmative in unison and stampeded back out of the office on stubby legs.

Isabel sighed and spun around in her chair, slumping back down. Normally this would be fun, and she would be laughing with exceeding joyfulness, but she felt nothing now. Eventually she stopped spinning once more, her gaze coming to rest on the portrait of her father[2], Dr. Reginald Philbert Lionel Archibald Westinghouse Wondertainment III, MD, PhD, DDS, Esq.

"What do you want, dad?"

The painting did not answer[3], but it did look very important and mustachioed. He was one of those important-looking mustachioed men who hung around with other important-looking men with mustaches and said things like "yes, quite" and "oh indubitably". He also looked very disappointed.

"You never had to deal with video games, dad. Give a kid one of

those things and you have them eating out of the palm of your hand forever. The Factory can churn out the same thing every year and they eat it up and spend all their time on the line and they *don't buy toys*."

The painting did not answer.

"I know you had that trouble with Dark, but come on, cut me a little slack…"

The painting did not respond.

"Yes *I know* you got started by selling kicking cans on street corners, but I'm about to be put back on the street and…"

The painting did not reply.

"Shut up, painting of dad! You aren't my real dad!"

The painting did not react.

"What do you want? I'm not as good as you were, dad!"

The words hung in the air around her. Not as good. Did she really say that? Yeah, yeah she did. Not as good…maybe the Executive Board *was* right. Maybe she *was* slipping. Not like she could do anything about it. Bring on the ice cream!

The office door opened.

"Jeremy?" Isabel swung her chair around.

Jeremy was not there. In his place was a bespectacled and rather professional looking youngish woman with a clipboard. She was shortish and plumpish[4], with brownish coppery hair kept back in a bun, and a monopoly on the local freckle market.

The plastic gears and AA batteries inside Isabel's head clicked into place as she determined that this newcomer was not only not Jeremy, but had no ice cream.

"Who are you?"

“Emma Aieselthorpe-Brown. I’m your new assistant.”

Isabel blinked. Assistant? She didn’t need an assistant. She had Jeremy.

“I never asked for an assistant.”

“The Executive Board assigned me here. I have the paperwork right here.”

“Are you here to spy on me?”

“No.”

“Are you here to assassinate me?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There was a long, awkward silence, as if an invisible elephant had decided to very slowly walk through the room.

“Do you need anything, ma’am?”

“Uh…” She already had the ice cream on the way what else did she need. “A spoon. Go get me a spoon."

“Right away, Ma’am.” She nodded curtly, handing a folded piece of paper to Isabel before exiting.

Hmm. Isabel read the note.

> *Dr. Wondertainment -*
>
> *In an effort to counter your recent drop in productivity, we the Executive Board have seen it fit to assign you with a personal assistant for the forseeable future. Ms Aislethorp-Brown has been judged as overwhelmingly competent in this regard, and we expect that she will serve as sufficient impetus towards improved performance.*

-The Executive Board, Dr. Wondertainment Inc.

There was a lot of very fine print and legal mumbo-jumbo underneath all that, but Isabel didn't care. No one ever read those things. She crumpled up the paper and tossed it in her Dr. Wondertainment Hungry Heinrich Wastebin™. Why give her an assistant if they were just going to fire her anyway?

It could have been that the Executive Board wasn't actually trying to sack her and didn't want her to fail, but the concept seemed hilariously stupid to Isabel. They were the Executive Board, a bunch of dusty old busybodies who liked writing long words in small print and asking for things in triplicate. It was their job to meddle in the state of things, to put up roadblocks, to try their damnedest to prevent fun from occurring. Trying to outsmart them had turned into something of a game: Isabel even kept score for a while. Maybe they were only trying to make themselves look like the big bad guys to get the game up and running again.

Maybe. But that still left the Factory to deal with, and the Factory was not something one dealt with. It wasn't run by anyone. It had no investors, no shareholders, no CEO, just miles and eons of blood-soaked gears and lonely sweatshop souls churning out soulless muck from its bowels, a cancerous structure seeking nothing but the mammon that allowed it to grow and spread and offer the universe its waste in exchange for more resources.

The Factory was good at its game. Very good.

Emma returned and handed Isabel a spoon.

"Thanks." Isabel said half-heartedly. She hated being wrong, or thinking that she was wrong, especially in this case because that meant that she really had no reason to get the ice cream at all and wouldn't be able to enjoy it properly because depression eating wasn't any use if there wasn't a good reason to be depressed.

There was another long, awkward silence. This time it was hippo-shaped.

"Mm-hmm." Emma cleared her throat.

Oh no she's initiating conversation…

"Jeremy! About time you got here!" Isabel shouted. Saved by the dog.

The corgi waddled into the office, balancing a bucket of ice cream on his head, followed by Jeremy and Jeremy, on and on down a line that stretched out of the office door, a little corgi conga conveyor line. Each dog dropped off his ice cream in turn and trotted back out. Isabel grabbed the first bucket and tore off the plastic lid. Marvelous Marshmallow Mania. Good way to start. Maybe she didn't need the ice cream now, but Jeremy had already brought it all up anyway so she might as well eat it.

She did so. Another awkward not-quite silence passed in monolithic, cringe-worthy horror. Jeremy continued to bring in more ice cream.

"Uh, you can have some too, if you want. I've got…" She glanced at the growing pile. "Bunderbelly Blueberry Bonanza…"

"No thank you."

"Very Vunderful Vanilla Vampire?"

"No thanks."

"Napoleon's Neopolitan Nepotism?"

"I'm good."

"Uncomfortably Tasty Orange 'Splosion?"

"I already ate."

"Mega Meat Mystery?"

"No."

"Suit yourself." Isabel put her feet up on her desk and continued to eat.

Emma cleared her throat again.

“If you don’t mind me asking, ma’am, are you planning on working any time soon?”

“Maybe, when I’m done with all of this.”

“There’s quite a lot of it here already.”

“Yeah, and? ‘S not that much.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Emma’s expression remained unflappably neutral. “But I still think it best that you leave the ice cream for another time and focus on your work.”

“Maybe I am focusing on my work? A couple hundred buckets of ice cream to drown my sorrows should be more than enough brain food.” She grimaced. “Jabberwocky sneezy knee socks. There. Ideas.”

“Not a very marketable one.”

“Way to ruin the mood, Negative Nancy.”

“Emma.”

“I can see why you’d be concerned, but jabberwocks need knee socks sometimes, especially in the winter when they get the snifflies and the sneezes.”

“Ma’am, if I may make a suggestion: perhaps a more marketable toy would be appropriate.”

“Not you too. The Board is bad enough with that. That’s Factory talk, and they’re driving us out of business with their Battleduties and their Birdvilles.”

“There might be something that can be done about that.”

The spoon paused.

“Explain.”

“The Factory is, effectively, an unthinking force. Something like an

animal, right?"

"Right."

"A person can't talk with a bee, but a bee can talk with a bee, so to speak."

"So…we shoot bees at the Factory."

"No. The Factory is bees, here."

"Okay, Factory is bees. Butt-bees."

"We, the people, want to talk with the Factory, the bee, but can't, because we're people and it's a bee."

"So in order to deal with the Factory…"

"You just have to speak their language."

Speak their language…

"Wait…that's it…that's *it*! How did I not see it sooner that's *it*!" Isabel leapt off the table, tossing the bucket of ice cream across the floor, and grabbed Emma by the shoulders. A manic smile lit up her face. "That's *it*! We take the Factory's game and use it against it! It's the last thing they'll expect from goofy old Wondertainment! Aislethorp you're a *genius*!" Isabel planted an overwrought and slightly off-center kiss on her assistant's face before leaping away, pirouetting, and moving into a little victory dance. Emma wiped her face on her sleeve.

"Corporate sabotage!" Isabel continued dancing. "That's what we'll do! We sneak into the Factory itself, mess everything up, and run away laughing, and then we hit them with the biggest and best toy line in Wondertainment history! It'll be a coop-dee-grass!" She clapped her hands together, stopping the dance. Oh this was *good*. The game was back on. She'd show the Board, she'd show the Factory, she'd put Wondertainment back on the map. The Doctor was no pushover, she'd prove that.

"Steel yourself, Ms. Aiselthorp." Isabel grinned. It was a wild,

childish, grin, the kind of grin that came with schoolyard scheming and various puerile pratfalls. “We’re about to embark on ADVENTURES IN CAPITALISM!” She struck a dramatic pose to emphasize the point, one arm pointing skyward, the other one pinning Emma in a headlock.

Emma did not look particularly plussed by any of this.

“I’ll start packing the Wondermobile.”

“Excellent!” Isabel made a triumphant fist. “Jeremy! TO THE LABORATORY[5]!”

The corgis froze, and in unison dropped their ice cream. More of them poured into the room, swarming about in a vast furry carpet. Isabel spread her arms wide and fell gracefully onto their backs, laughing maniacally as they ferried her away out of the office.

Emma waited patiently for the last dog to depart before leaving, and took a quart of Papal Papaya™ on the way out.

« | **Hub** | **Part 2: The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure** »

Footnotes
1. MD, DD, OD, PsyD, and EngD too.
2. For a given value of father. Wondertainment family genetics are notoriously convoluted.
3. Wondertainment family members had tried using Dr. Wondertainment Personable Portraits™ in the past, but the ensuing argument over the best design for the Dr. Wondertainment Super Stick-And-Hoop™ proved to be too much for Dr. Roxanne Lauren Joan Dora Peidmont von Wondertainment, PhD, who fed each and every one of them to the Dr. Wondertainment Crazy Confetti Machine™.
4. Granted, from Dr. Isabel Wondertainment's viewpoint everyone was shortish and plumpish in comparison.
5. Pronounced la-bor-a-tory. A lab-ro-tory is a dog that spins around.

Astronomical

Our planet was dying. There are many explanations I could give for this, countless stories of failures and failed ideas and the inability of one lonely species to see the truth, endless tales of ignorance and of the worst possible living sin, stupidity. But none of these reasons are excuses, and in any case I am not looking for sympathy. So suffice to say that our planet was dying, while we yearned to live.

I was in the Council of Sciences. Several years earlier, we had sat down the most formidable minds of our time, and broken down our situation, assessing the level of our threat- dire, indeed, very dire- and more importantly, discussing what we would need for a solution. It was called the Thirty Year Plan. The common people thought this referred to what we were going to do over the next thirty years to solve their problems. In actuality, it was the maximum calculated length of time we had until civilization broke down, and possibly methods of lengthening that time.

We would need land, and food, and fuel, and we didn't have the resources to attain any of it. We did, yes, have a prototype starship available to us, and enough energy to power it many light years, but the starship could not carry a city, and there was already talk of breaking it down and using the power source to produce heat or food or any of the supplies already in dire need. Our planet was dying. Our people were starving. We needed hope.

Then it came, out of the stars, like a gift from the gods we had officially denounced. We spotted it in the atmosphere long before it touched the surface of our planet, and a rocket was sent to retrieve it from orbit. It fell to earth in an unpopulated desert, and was removed by a single unmarked van. We couldn't afford to get anyone's hopes up.

I was fortunate to be chosen to help study the Artifact. The bulk of it was badly dented, stained, and entirely foreign to us. It was made by hands, and the hands were not ours.

There was some manner of electrical devices built into it, although they were all but melted and ashen ropes now. The only item we could recover was a single, beautiful, golden disk, covered in tiny circular ridges on one side and engraved all over on the other. We all stared at the markings. They were unlike anything we had ever seen.

"I don't want to jump to conclusions," said my good friend Professor Maddy, after some discussion, "But these drawings could, after some imagination, be a star map of sorts." He indicated a set of abstract dots and lines. "And these," gesturing to an outlined shape, "Could almost be life of some sort." He was saying what all of us were thinking, what we didn't want to think. I put my hand on his back. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I said gently.

"Yes," said the Head of the Council. "Absolutely. Research on this item must start immediately, but not a *word* of this is to be given to the public. Does everyone here understand? Not a *word*." He looked around, expression softening. "False hope is another commodity we cannot afford." Everyone understood what he meant.

The next day, I was assigned to speak at a protest in the city of Voss. This was the part of my job I hated most. Voss was impoverished, hungry, massive, and angry, perhaps rightfully so. I would have to smile, and try to address and support their concerns by feeding them lies, hopefully by mentioning the Thirty Year Plan as much as I could. That always seemed to reassure them.

I stood, later, in a crumbling and formerly-grand auditorium in Voss. The entire room was packed with filthy, hungry, extinguished souls, all of them staring at me, dead silent.

"I would like to c-commend you for your concern," I stammered. "But your g-government, and the Council of Sciences, have only your best interests in… In mind, and we are working on finding solutions to the most pressing issues we face, namely the food and water shortages, the economic sh-shortfalls, as well as pollution. We want to assure you that we are doing everything we can to deal with these. I will now f-field questions." I tugged at the collar of my shirt, as the room dissolved into angry muttering. A young reporter with a microphone stood up.

"Professor Rook," she addressed me, "You say you are addressing the poverty and the food and water shortages in communities around the planet. What exactly are you doing?"

I adjusted my hat normally. "We are developing new and improved filtration methods and agricultural practices," I said, "Which should drastically increase the amount of food raised. The… Uh, the production and implementation of these techniques will require a sub… substantial new workforce, thus increasing hiring. This, and more, is all covered in the Thirty Year Plan."

Another reporter stood up. "You know, all the officials I've heard have talked about the Thirty Year Plan, but I haven't heard any specifics yet. What is the Thirty Year Plan going to do about overpopulation? About our waning food populations? About the poverty? Professor, what *is* the Thirty Year Plan?"

"The Thirty Year Plan cannot be fully disclosed, because we believe that total disclosure will alter the intended results," I read off of my prompter. "Suffice to say that the Thirty Year Plan is being enacted as we speak, and is showing results." Deemphasize, deflect, reassure. Easy enough.
The crowd had begun shouting about the lack of results. I felt small.

Somewhere in the back, a well-dressed man stood up. He didn't have a microphone, and his loud voice carried his words.

"Professor Rook," he said smoothly. "I recently discovered an unrevealed government report- it my have been somewhat confidential, I apologize- but it stated that some sort of object- known as the Artifact, I believe- fell out of the sky several days ago, and, let me quote the report- 'It is certainly man-made, although it is engraved with multiple symbols not recognized, and is nearly positively non-terrestrial in design.' What can you tell us about the Artifact, professor?"

The room was silent. I felt as though I had been punched in the chest. I had written those words. The Artifact. They knew about the Artifact. I watched the man fade into the crowd again.

"Y-yes, the, uh, the anomaly- the Artifact, as it's known- does

present some curiosity to us, but it's… Certainly not a definite symbol of anything. Research is… R-research is ongoing." The prompter was black. Silence.

"Why didn't you tell us?" A voice screamed. A civilian somewhere.

"We, uh, we didn't want to g-get anyone's hopes up…" The mass broke into screams and boiled like a pot of water. I felt sick. I felt like a monster. Security rushed in. The meeting ended shortly after that.

They had to change our hotel reservations. They put security in the lobby. Nobody found us. I called Maddy, asking about the Artifact.

They had found nothing. They had bounced light off of it, scanned it, studied it, measured the ridges, put them through our best codebreaking programs. Nothing at all. And news of it had encircled the planet by now.

I slept with my two mates that night, Jai and Adel. None of their comforting, their nuzzling, their reassurances helped. Eventually their soft words and contact degraded into the slow, heavy, silence. When I tried to sleep, I tossed and turned helplessly. I latched onto the thought that the Artifact, instead of being a greeting or a chance occurrence, was in fact a plea for help from another dying world, a planet similarly falling apart. Another world running out. It would be unbearable.

In the morning, I woke up early. I snuck into the security guard's break room between shifts, took a gun, and slipped back into my hotel room unnoticed. Jai and Adel slept peacefully, still holding my nonexistent form.

I had to turn away. I was a coward. I held the gun to my head. Straight through the upper eye, that would do it. The people were angry, furious, and they had every right to be. Their water sources had failed them. Their food sources had failed them. Their ecosystem had failed them. We had failed them. They wanted to see the Thirty Year Plan? This was the Thirty Year Plan. I closed my eyes. The phone rang.

I jumped, and turned to see if Jai or Adel had noticed. They hadn't. I

shoved the gun into a drawer, and stepped into the hall. "Yes?" I asked tiredly.

"Rook, this is Maddy. The artifact."

"…What about it?"

"We made it work. Look, you know the side with the ridges? We had to balance a pin over it, attach a speaker, and spin it at a very precise rate."

"Almost like a code."

"Maybe. But you have to get over here right now. It's making noise. It's singing."

I was there in under an hour.

By that time, they had reached the apparent end of the recording, and had to reposition the device to make it play again. We sat surrounding the little makeshift player, as the disc spun, absolutely silent.

I heard sounds, the likes of which I had never heard before. Short, organic, staccato beeps and clicks. A low buzzing that rose and fell. Vibrant, voice-like vocalizations from the throats of strange animals, showing anger and joy. Hundreds of sharp, short, airy, melodious whistles, that fell into wondrous natural tunes and songs. A long, low, howl that seemed to swell out of silence, like a mountain out of water, like the sun out of night. Then there was the music.

All different styles, all different sounds. Some like water falling over rocks, some like heartbeats, like screaming, like falling, like love. Unintelligible singing voices wove in and out of them. It was rhythmic and beautiful.

"That's not all," Maddy explained excitedly. "We translated the star maps. We found our star. If we're right, this came from a planet in a solar system 7.7 light years away." Well within reach of the starcraft. I could feel the Thirty Year Plan, and all of my doubts, wither away.

The music ended soon, replaced by tuneful, punctuated voices, all

diverse in their influences, all saying things we couldn't interpret, but understood precisely. The music had ended, but I was listening to the most glorious song I would ever hear.

Hello.
Hola.
Bonjour.
Jambo.
Ni hao.

I could barely give the muttered instructions to prep the starcraft. This was the song of salvation, of hope, of deliverance. A song of plenty, of a land of space and air and animals and voices. We thank our otherworldly saviours like tribal ancients, showing gratitude for the lives of the animals they were about to hunt.

So this message is to you, to your planet, to your world that howls and speaks and sings. Thank you for your for your expressions of welcome and invitation, and for your offerings of hope and life.

We hear you.

And we're coming as soon as we can.

Asymptomatic Carrier

By Arjun's estimations, the Coalition was surprisingly professional for an organization that was barely three years old. There was something in the methodical, cold way that they operated that reminded Arjun of the Foundation itself. But there was also a naiveté that Arjun had never seen in the Foundation. When they sent out retrieval teams, they had no insurance. There were no specifically expendable personnel to sacrifice in the case of disaster.

Arjun removed the binoculars from his eyes, wiped sand out of the lens, and then stowed the instrument back into his pack. Beside him, Zhi Xin was talking to Owen.

"So Owen, what do you think the GOC's got its hands on this time?"

Owen adjusted his shoelaces.

"You know, they *say*—or at least their internal communications say—that they think this hole has information about the Ahnernerbe's new toys. But who knows? They might find something more interesting."

Owen turned to his side and quietly issued a command through the radio.

"If you find anything useful with those eagle eyes of yours, make sure to nab it, right? Make Michelle happy. Give her something to show off to the O5. I mean, they're asking for more and God knows Michelle wants to give it."

"You think it's strange that the O5 wants more from us," Arjun said.

Zhi Xin chuckled. "Not strange. Tedious. Look at these guys. Crawling around in the sand, trying to figure out what it is that they've dug up so that they can set the wheels of intergovernmental bureaucracy into motion. Is it a threat to consensus reality? Can we

negotiate with it? If not, how easily can we blow it up? Wait, but first, can we use it and then blow it up later? And the O5 wants more in the event that we fight *them.*"

Without turning to face either of them, Owen said, "They're here."

Arjun stood up as a vehicle pulled beside them. Insurgency operatives began hauling heavy equipment out of the vehicle. Assembly of the instrument took the better part of an hour, while Arjun, Zhi Xin, and Owen looked on. Eventually, a large, crude metal gate stood before them. Arjun looked into the gate and saw the universe shatter into an infinitely replicating fractal pattern. He pitied the men who had built the machine. They could not appreciate its beauty.

"Remember," Arjun said, "reconnaissance. Find what they're looking for. Evaluate its threat potential. Take it if necessary. Zhi Xin, if anybody dies or if anything gets destroyed, I'll hold you accountable."

"Your leadership inspires me not to disappoint you," Zhi Xin said. Immediately afterwards, she walked into the gate and disappeared.

Arjun and Owen made eye contact. "You haven't learned how to shut her up," Owen said.

"No. It's regrettable."

Owen shrugged. "Time to go."

The two of them entered the gate together. When he exited, Arjun found himself stepping outside of a tent. Workers with the emblem of the United Nations on their vests moved about, covered in dirt, hauling pickaxes and barking orders. Nobody took any notice of Arjun. Part of their mind was too busy, and the other part that would have ordinarily noticed the three was too occupied appreciating the invisible memetic fireworks display taking place three yards to the left of the intruders to pay any attention to them.

"Well, I should say sorry to Michelle. Maybe memetics isn't bullshit after all," Zhi Xin said.

Without saying anything, Owen disappeared into the crowd of GOC workers. Arjun turned to Zhi Xin. “Come on, Xin,” he said.

“Why such a hurry?” Xin asked. “We already know exactly where we’re supposed to go.”

“What?”

“Really, Arjun?”

Arjun looked back at the chaotic throng of people swarming the dig site. Zhi Xin was right. He could see a pattern in their movement, in the way their voices melded together into one indiscernible mass, in the ways their eyes traveled and their feet shuffled. Their actions and their thoughts were all caught in the gravitational well of a certain object, and if Arjun only looked to find the center of their collective orbit, he could find what he was looking for.

“I see it,” Arjun said.

Zhi Xin snorted. “Then let’s go.”

As the two moved towards the target illuminated by the HALMAS, Arjun felt his mind stir uneasily. There was very little chance that anything would go wrong; even if they were noticed, it was almost impossible that they would be caught or killed, and no possibility either way that the Foundation would have to bear any consequences. Arjun imagined what it was like for the people who lived in consensus reality and were exposed to the anomalous. The universe itself was revealed to be a lie, a comfortable veneer draped over the true world by an unseen hand, and in truth, reality was an alien, terrifying place.

Arjun had known the unknowable for as long as he could remember, but now, walking through the Coalition dig site, he felt like the ignorant uninitiated about to be baptized in murky, dark water.

The two of them stopped in front of a non-descript tent. For a moment, neither of them moved or said anything.

“It’s here,” Zhi Xin said. “Whatever it is. We came here to find out, didn’t we?”

“Is something wrong?”

Zhi Xin was staring at the tent. “I think so. But I don’t know what. It’s an unpleasant sensation.”

“You’re being nonsensical again.”

“Am I? Whatever.”

Zhi Xin passed Arjun and entered the tent. Arjun followed close behind.

Inside, Arjun found himself completely incapable of noticing any details about the interior of the tent. His attention was captured entirely by a small book sitting on a table in the middle of the tent. Zhi Xin had already flipped to a page inside the book.

“What are you doing?”

“How long have you been on HALMAS, Arjun? Can’t you see? This is—this is—“

Zhi Xin looked up from the book. Her face was set in the rocky tones of determination; her eyes radiated the fragile gleam of fear. “You need to stand at the door and make sure nobody comes in,” she said. “You’ve served the O5 Council faithfully all your life. You’ve done it because you *know* that there is some greater purpose behind everything. If you still think that, then do this.”

“What’s going on?”

“If you can’t see, that just—it just means that something is *definitely wrong.* Watch the door, or else I know that things are going to get worse.”

“What?”

“Give me thirty seconds, Arjun.”

Zhi Xin took a syringe of HALMAS out of her pocket and stuck it into her arm.

When Arjun turned around to stand at the door, he found himself staring Owen in the face.

“Let me in,” he said.

“No.”

“Zhi Xin told you not to let me in.”

“I—”

“You don’t know why.”

Owen’s cold blue eyes did not move. They were as dry and endless as the desert itself. “She’s found something.”

“Yes, and—”

“You don’t know what it is. You don’t know what she’s doing. Let me in.”

Arjun stayed in place. There were things that he knew. He knew that it was against protocol for Zhi Xin to be taking HALMAS while in direct exposure to a possible cognitohazard; he knew that it was a betrayal for Michelle to fail to inform the O5 Council about the developments surrounding the engine. He knew all these things but he did not know them, like he knew but did not know of that greater purpose floating somewhere out there. For all anyone knew, it was in outer space, or buried a thousand miles underground, or maybe it didn’t even exist. He had realized by now that he knew but did not know so many things, and the only thing that he really *knew* was that he had always trusted Chen Zhi Xin.

“Move, Arjun.”

She had asked for thirty seconds and now he had to give them.

“I can’t. She told me not to let anyone in. I don’t know why, but you sure as hell don’t know why you need to get in there. I can see it in your face, Owen, don’t lie to me.”

Owen reached into his pocket, pulled out a thin metal cylinder, and

pressed a button at the top. When Arjun regained consciousness, Owen was behind him and inside the tent. A second later, he pulled out a lighter and tossed into onto the book. Zhi Xin swore and dropped it to the ground, where green flames consumed the book instantly.

Zhi Xin put a hand on her pistol. “Owen, what the hell?”

“It was cognitohazardous. If you suffered continued exposure while on HALMAS, your memory would store the cognitohazard and you would become unacceptably compromised. This is standard protocol.”

For a few moments, Zhi Xin only breathed heavily. Then, she said, “You’re right. I fucked up. So did you; you just destroyed that thing when it was obviously important. So how about we make a deal? If anybody—Michelle in particular—hears about this, we’re both fucked. Right, Owen?”

“Fine.”

Nobody spoke as they left the tent.

Hours later, when Arjun was in his quarters and staring at the ceiling, he was struck by a sudden hatred for the O5 Council. He remembered the metal cylinder and the green fire. Neither of those things should have existed. And if now they existed, then what cause was he fighting for?

Nothing made sense anymore.

At the Library

Note: This is part one in a multi-part story based around the events leading up to the containment of **SCP-2982**

Harold Maine sat at the desk and leafed through the medical dictionary.

"Did you even hear me? I've paid you what I can."

He looked up, suddenly remembering the woman and child standing before him. He regarded them intently and counted up to five in his head before responding. He'd read somewhere how that made people feel uncomfortable.

"How did you get here today, Helen?"

The woman looked confused. "The bus," she answered. "I came by bus."

"Then you can still pay more," Maine smiled. "Next time, you'll have to walk."

"But I - "

Maine raised his hand to silence her. "Do you love your daughter? Hy-per-tri-cho-sis would be bad for her right now, don't you think? Werewolf syndrome. Very hairy. Life changing, but not life endangering. *Yet*."

The child clung to her mother's leg. "Mommy?"

"Don't worry Angela," Helen said. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"Pardon me," Maine chuckled. "I'd laugh out loud but this being a public library and everything, I need to maintain my decorum."

"How am I supposed to pay you," Helen whispered, conscious of the silence, "if I can't work *because* of you?" She looked down at what used to be her arms. She had been elegant, once. Her limbs were lithe and long, her body in perfect symmetrical proportion. A ballet dancer's figure. And then Maine had come along. Admired her from a distance somewhere on the far side of plausibility. Crashed his car into hers to get her name and address and phone number. And then the texts, and the romantic slime, and - after the rejection that would surely come when a fat, greasy, balding middle aged man asked a 23 year old goddess out - after that, the cajoling and the threats.

And then one bright, blame-free sunny day she told him exactly what she thought. Told him firmly and in no uncertain terms that she was not, nor ever would be, interested in him, in any way. And that was an end to it, she'd thought. She put her child to bed at night, brushed her teeth, watched a DVD with a glass of wine, and retired for the night.

She woke up at 04:27 the next morning to find her arms and her elegant slender fingers gone. Replaced with *these*. She fought the desire to cry; she had to be strong for Angela.

"Yeah sorry about those," Maine said. "Didn't even know what 'thalidomide-impaired' meant at the time. Who woulda thunk it? No hard feelings. Hey maybe if you do wonderful things for me, like pay me *what* I fucking tell you, *when* I fucking tell you, I'll put you back to normal. Maybe make you rich too. Would you like that?"

Helen could not speak; the words were caught in her throat.

"I'll take that as a yes," Maine smirked. "I could just change you again anyway. Make you obedient to me." He looked down to the little girl. "Go play somewhere else," he said; the child ran off to hide behind a bookcase.

"Y'know," he continued, addressing the woman, "I could make you my *willing* slave. You know I could." He studied her eyes, saw the tears welling up and overflowing. His gaze drifted downwards again. "Wow," he laughed softly. "They're not even hands, are they? What would you call 'em? Claws? Pincers? Holy fuck."

Helen shuddered. She tried to hide it, but could not. Harold Maine saw it, and smiled again. "But no," he said. "This way is better. Why have someone willingly do what you want, when you can *make* them do it instead, even though it destroys their soul?"

"My soul is fine," she answered. "Just fine." The defiance in her voice was unconvincing, but she knew by now that he liked her to have a certain 'resistance'. Too much and it angered him and he got cruel; too little and it bored him, and he got cruel.

"Maybe it is," Maine said. "Maybe it isn't. Hey what if I overtype your star sign with *damned for all eternity*?"

"Overtype?"

"What?"

"You said overtype - "

Maine became angered instantly. "Forget I said that," he snapped. "Just forget it or I'll fix that stupid daughter of yours so she eats through her ass and shits through her mouth. You think I wouldn't?"

"I'm sorry," Helen said. "I promise. I'm sorry."

"Because I could do that. Easily."

"Yes, Mr Maine." She used the formal term now; he would accept that. "I just - I'm sorry." But for the first time in weeks she felt hope. He had let something important slip. She had a clue now, a hint, no matter how vague, as to how he worked his horrific, twisted miracles. He changed - he overwrote - something, and the changes came true. What though? A book? A diary?

Maine leant back in the chair and closed the medical dictionary. The noise echoed around the empty library. When it faded into nothing, Helen was left with the sound of her own heartbeat hammering in her chest. After what seemed like hours, Maine finally looked up at her again. "I loved you," he confessed. "Still do. I could make you *so* happy. If only you let me." He took the eighty six dollars from the desk and stuffed them into his wallet. "You can keep the small change," he offered. Again his eyes settled on her deformed limbs.

"Oh you *can't*, can you?"

Helen's daughter ran up, spaded the coins into her hands, and ran off again. "Goodbye for now, Future Mrs Maine," he said, and the woman turned and left; her head bowed in defeat. Within ten steps, her head was held high again for her daughter, and within another thirty she was gone.

Harold Maine reopened the dictionary. "Who's next - Maria Fernandez. Fregoli Syndrome? Too abstract. Cotard's Syndrome? Hmm…" There was a sudden scream of horror outside. "Ah good. Aiden Brown's arrived. Maria can wait."

"It's a funny thing," he mused, thinking of the proud, broken, humiliated, undefeatable woman who had just left his presence. "If I could rid myself of my longing for you I would. If I could make myself young, good looking and rich, I would. But," and here, he laughed out loud, and the sound reverberated around the library, cold and stark and totally without humour. "But I can't. I can change anyone in any way, except myself."

Still self-absorbed in musings, he didn't see the shambling, groaning half-man-half-lobster advance awkwardly and wetly towards him from the entrance. Ignored, invisible to everyone else except Helen (who had reacted to it the only way she could, with screams of horror and pity) the monster pulled its bulk slowly towards the reading desk where Harold Maine sat. Once there, it wheezed and gasped and shifted position, desperate for comfort in a form where none could be found, and waited to be addressed.

After counting up to five in his head, Maine looked up. "Ah," he said, looking into the ruined face, the corrupted body, the ribs fused with shell, the one remaining lung exposed, folded over, and grinding against itself as it struggled to breathe. "Mr Brown. What have you got for me today?"

Next

Attack of the Keter Skeeters!

The date is April 2nd, 2012. The place: the quaint town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. Observe.

Here, we have a member of the SCP Foundation driving to work from his apartment in town. Site 87 is big enough to have all staff quartered on-site, but some prefer to live in town. The apartments are cheap, the food is good, and the people are friendly.

The man in the car is Dr. Jason Hendricks. He is 38 years old, has greying brown hair, a birthmark on his left cheek in the shape of a trout, and is drinking a latte from Dunkin Donuts, despite the fact that he is lactose intolerant; he is unaware of that fact at the moment.

He is also deathly afraid of insects. The next few days are going to be the worst of his life.

Site 87, Entomology Department:
Meet Dr. Mary Churchwell. She is 32 years old and one of the top entomologists in her field, but will never be head of the entomology department. She is a woman working in a male-dominated field, much like gynecology or women's studies. However, that might change today.

On this particular day, Dr. Churchwell is carefully dissecting an instance of E-20053, a species of mayfly that is seemingly immortal, short of being squashed with a book. E-20053 can survive drowning, decapitation, fumigation, and even the cold of winter.

"Son of a bitch, this thing is hard to cut through." Her scalpel was being dulled by the armor-like carapace of the mayfly. "Am I going to have to get permission to use a cutting laser again?" No matter how much she attempted to cut, it wouldn't budge. Eventually, she got the idea to lift up the armored carapace of the still-squirming mayfly,

and dissect it that way; in the process, however, she ended up accidentally crushing it with her hand. "Mother of a *Fuck*." She cradled her face in her hand and sighed.

Upon its death, the mayfly released a pheromone, similar to what wasps do upon being attacked. This pheromone is undetectable to humans, but to this species of mayfly, it can be smelled over 5 miles away. It was a call to arms, to swarm wherever it was that one of their brethren was killed.

Mary didn't know this as she cleaned up the crushed specimen and had it sent to the lab. In less than half an hour, she would get a report saying that this mayfly had been erroneously classified; it was, in fact, a rather large mosquito.

The time is now 7:16 PM. It is almost sunset. And with sunset comes the mosquitoes. And with those mosquitoes comes…

DEATH!

Winged, immortal death swooped down on Site 87. The guards outside are sucked dry in a matter of seconds, their bullets useless against the oncoming swarm! The greenhouses offer little shelter from the winged death, but thankfully, none are in them.

Site 87 goes into lockdown. It will remain this way indefinitely, until assistance arrives from one of the nearby sites.

Morning dawns on April 3rd. Everything is calm and collected; the swarm outside cannot penetrate the shields. The buzzing is incessant. Spare earplugs from memetics are sold for 5 dollars a pair, and all normal site operations are shut down in light of the lockdown.

MTF-Sigma-10, the on-site MTF, begins to gear up. Codenamed Sloth's Arm, they are equipped with specialized pesticide grenades developed by entomology. They are also equipped with hand-held flamethrowers.

The plan was to move out of the northern, eastern, and western entrances, equipped with full-body bite-proof armor and some livestock used for testing as bait. Once the swarm went for the livestock, they would let loose with their arsenal.

They took the wrong bait. E-20053 only feeds on humans.

Dr. Hendricks could only watch in horror from the monitors. as the majority of the task force was… neutralized by what would come to be known as the Keter Skeeters.

On April 4th, tensions began to stir as the coffee ran out in the break room. Unable to go to the local doughnut shop for more, Site 87 was forced to drink decaf for the duration. This wasn't helped by the fact that the saltines had all been eaten, but at least the food in the cafeteria was plentiful.

The first fistfight broke out between Dr. West and Dr. Matterson. West was theorizing that he could use a sonic pulse generated by E-5991 to kill the Keter Skeeters by liquefying their insides. Matterson pointed out that doing so would most likely destroy most of the site and kill everyone in it. There were words exchanged such as "You have no experience with it, I do!" and "It's unsafe to use around humans, look what it did to the test cat last week!"

Entomology, meanwhile, had barricaded themselves in a laboratory to prevent themselves from being lynched. Word had leaked that a dead specimen of E-20053 was most likely what had attracted the swarm to this site. "Think of it this way!" Dr. Churchwell yelled through the door. "If we die, you'll never get rid of these damn things!"

Dr. Hendricks had contented himself with staying locked in his quarters, constantly putting on bugspray and carrying a rather large flyswatter, just in case they got in. He only went out to fetch food and water, and to check security monitors for breaches. He hated bugs. He honestly did.

On April 5th, it came to light that The Keter Skeeters reproduced

through mitosis. The screams of frustration and horror were deafening.

On April 6th, the chemistry department decided to turn on its fume hood for an experiment. Their rationale was that if they wanted to live life as normally as possible, they would have to continue experimenting.

Unfortunately, turning on the fume hood meant opening ventilation to the outside. Letting toxic gas go out meant letting worse in. The last words of one of the poor souls in that lab were reported to be, "Argh, what a massive oversight, oh god my skin!"

The Keter Skeeters spread throughout the site and were at the personnel quarters within 5 minutes. The swarm reached Hendrick's door, breaking it down through sheer pressure; in reaction, Hendricks flailed his flyswatter around madly. The carnage was legendary; not one inch of his room wasn't covered in insect intestines.

Lifting his fly swatter into the air, Hendricks let out a roar. "Enough is enough! I have had it with these motherfucking skeets in this motherfucking site!" He ran out of the room and…

Director Weiss, for the 8th time that meeting, smacked her forehead. She was starting to get a tender spot there. "Dr. Hendricks, enough. If you're going to describe your version of events, at least keep the genre consistent; you're moving into self-aware comedy territory."

"B-but Director Weiss! I swear, they were all here! T-they were swarming all over the place, outside… there would have been a bloodbath if not for me! Or maybe a lack of one; I don't know which is worse!"

"Dr. Hendricks, you ingested a hallucinogenic drug intended for one of the test mice in Laboratory 5. You locked yourself in your room for three days and ran around Site 87 with a giant novelty flyswatter, smacking the walls and the personnel at random. I have the right mind to demote you to researcher Level 2 for your actions." Director

Weiss sighed, rubbing her face. "But I can't. You know why? Because god damn if the drug didn't work exactly as intended." She shook her head. "Consider this a warning, Dr. Hendricks. Be more careful when eating in the lab. In fact, don't eat in the lab at all in the future. Understood?"

"Y-yes madam…" The timid doctor sunk in his seat, wondering why a gigantic fly was impersonating the director. "M-may I go now?"

"Yes. If the hallucinations persist, please **give yourself unto the swarm.**"

"Sorry?"

"Please report to the trauma center."

"Right, okay, I will." Dr. Hendricks rose from his seat and ran out of the door of the Director's office.

Director Weiss reclined in her seat and sighed. *It could be worse,* she thought. *At least I'm not working at Site 19.*

|Hub|

Atzak I

As you lie sleeping-

you dream of dark and empty eyes.

ATZAK

PART ONE

You wake up when an alarm rips through the silence of the sleeping quarters. You blink the sleep away from your eyes, and glancing around the room you confirm your first thought; the others' sleep was just as fitful as yours. A room full of men who had dreamed the wrong dreams. A man at the other end with a uniform and a gun barks an order, and the day begins.

You stumble towards the door after getting dressed. Your head pounds. It always pounds after waking up. Everyone's does. You go over the same mental checklist you do every day, the one that they said you should. Your name? Of course you know your name. Where are you? On a submarine. Why are you here? You'd rather not remember, but it's there.

Any friends, family?

Ah, but that's where it gets fuzzy. You see children, maybe. You didn't yesterday, but there they are. Playing in your yard outside of Pittsburgh. *But you never lived in Pittsburgh*, you remind yourself. *You had a child, but she died young. And you never lived in Pittsburgh*. But why do you remember this so clearly?

They told you that this would happen. Said they were studying something in the water down here, some chemical, that made people hallucinate things. You don't know much about science, but you figure it's probably something radioactive. Like those people who got their brains fried when they dropped the bombs on Japan. You pause for a second to wonder if they ever remembered things that never happened to them.

You're all ushered into the cramped hall, where you're assigned a job. There are twelve of you, *but there were thirteen last week?* Maybe not, you can't remember. "Don't worry about your memory", they've said. "It'll all come back to you as soon as we surface." Have you surfaced before? You can't remember if you've been on here long enough to have gone back up and seen if your head would stop aching so badly. Would you even remember if you had? *You could've sworn there were thirteen of you last week.*

You grab a mop and get to work. Custodial today, just like yesterday. The day before you met with the psychologist all day to talk about how you felt. You liked him, he at least looked at you like a person. "Please, call me Anand," he had said. He asked about your family, what you could remember. *Had you told him about the children in Pittsburgh?* He asked about your parents. Asked about your earliest memory. Asked you about your dreams.

He looked anxious, you had noticed. You saw it on the faces of the other prisoners every morning, the lingering dread. That's what they all called it. The doctor at the clinic told everyone it was something about nitrogen, made people feel nervous. Said the pressurized metal tube you were all in didn't help. You believed him, but the light beading of sweat on Dr. Anand's forehead didn't help either.

You mop for a little longer, but a crewman comes up and shakes

you. Says to report back to the bunk. How long have you been working today? *Can't have been more than about fifteen minutes.* "Ten hours," he said. *That's impossible, you just got here.*

So you shuffle back towards your bunk, stopping only for the quickest and coldest of showers. All of you report back to your beds, and are asleep when you're told to go asleep. Nobody wants to stay up. Why would they? It's not like any of you can remember enough to talk about for more than a few minutes. There's a bed empty next to you. The guy above you remarks that there was someone there last night. *No there wasn't, that bed has been empty since we got down here.*

When you sleep, you float weightlessly in darkness. You feel a chill wind, and fall for a long time. Above you is only dark and empty eyes.

You awaken the next morning to an alarm. You shuffle out of bed and get dressed. You go through your list. Of course you know your name. Of course you remember the old woman you shot. *Of course you remember your wife in Omaha. You've both lived there for years.* That doesn't make sense, though. How could you have shot someone in Savannah if you lived in Omaha?

Oh well. There was probably a reason. You have a hard time remembering things anymore. You wonder why.

They line you up against the wall to assign jobs for the day. The guy next to you gets to mop, *like he always does. Great. You wish you got to mop. Instead you're stuck cleaning toilets everyday. Disgusting.* The crewman pauses in front of you, reading from a list of names. He nods to another man standing next to him, and the two of them lead you towards the back of the ship. You briefly recall that *you've never been back here.* You ask what you're going to be doing today, but it's not until you've reached the back that you realize you never actually asked.

There's another man in a white coat there. He introduces himself, but you can't hold his name in your head very long. It was weird, anyway. Some long name, probably paki or something. He says that

they're going to need you to collect a sample of water from outside the submarine for analysis. *Easy enough, you think. You and your husband Aaron were divers in Brisbane for years.* The man smiles, and shakes your hand. Says they appreciate what you're doing. "It's a very important part of what we're trying to do here." He says you'll be allowed to return to the surface after you're finished.

You smile and nod. Something about his face encourages you. It's been a long time since somebody told you that you were worth something. That you were helping them. *In fact, you can't even remember the last time somebody said anything nice about you.* You become determined to do as well as you can, and who knows? Maybe when you get out of this, you can work for these guys. Put your life back together. *Actually make something of yourself. Make somebody proud of you.*

You put on a reinforced diving suit, and something about it seems familiar. In your minds eye, *you remember putting the suit on before. In fact, you even remember a little more than that. Walking down the hallway again,* which is weird since you've never been back here before, *and getting chosen out of that line. You remember looking to your right as you walked away, and you see yourself standing in that line.* How is that possible? The doctor notices your face, and comes to comfort you. Says he understands, and that it's just the water. You take a deep breath, and feel better.

They have you stand in the airlock, with a tether attached to your back and a light strapped to your shoulder. They hand you a nylon satchel filled with glass tubes. "Just a few samples, from different distances," they say. "Won't take more than a few minutes." You nod. You feel good about this. You're excited, if nothing else, to get out of the submarine for a while. *But something feels odd.* As the chamber floods, *it starts to feel familiar again, and you feel dread.*

The water reaches your shoulders, and you look back towards the airlock door again. There's no porthole here, nobody can see you. The water reaches your head, and you go under. The world around you becomes muffled and slow, *and that feeling lingers. You can't shake the uncertainty, the feeling of apprehension. Like you've done this before, and then something—*

But you really don't have the time to finish that thought, as the exterior door opens and you're pushed forward by rushing water. You hear a voice in your head, and recognize the doctor. He reminds you to turn on your shoulder light, so you do. It doesn't help much, but then the giant submarine behind you turns on its floodlights and that helps. *Your stomach feels funny.*

You're floating now, suspended weightlessly above a darkness that stretches on forever. The water here rocks you back and forth, slowly. You think you can make out shapes on the edge of your vision, but it's so goddamn dark. You paddle forward a little bit, the satchel of glass vials clasped in your right hand. For the first time in a long time, at least as long as you can remember, you feel freedom. You're alone out here; no alarms, no toilets to clean, nothing to mop. Only silence and something to do. *But you're not really alone.*

Something in the back of your mind, something innate and substantial, some part of your consciousness that predates consciousness, starts to tingle. You feel a creeping up your spine as you pull out the first vial, a creeping that makes you begin to sweat against the cold. Your mind starts to rush. *Why are you out here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be doing something?* You look around, and realize that you don't know where you are. You're underwater, but where? And how far down? How far do you have to go to get to the surface? You look up and only see darkness. *Aren't you supposed to be doing something?*

A reassuring voice in your ear tells you that you need to swim out a little further. You feel something in the voice, something that doesn't feel normal, but you swim out anyway. You're not sure why, your body just starts to act. All the while, you feel the shroud of forgetfulness being pulled over your mind. *You just have a hard time remembering things sometimes, is all.* But your body resists. Like it would try and fight off disease, your mind fights back. Do you remember your name? *I mean, you could remember it if you really needed to. It's on the tip of your tongue.* What did you do? *Started working as a doctor at the SCP Foundation.* What? You squint, and kick forwards, and don't notice the shapes moving on the edge of your vision.

You fell out of a fishing boat and sank for a long time. That's how you got here. Then why are you wearing a diving suit? *I was looking for something in the water. Samples.* Samples of what? Off a fishing boat? *Samples of water. Samples of fish?* There's something moving in front of you, can you see it? *Hang on, you're trying to remember. There was definitely a boat, and some other guys. You got lost, and you couldn't remember how to get back. You have a hard time remembering anymore.*

You realize the voice in your head is gone. You realize you can't remember your name. You look in your right hand, where there should be a satchel of glass vials. *That isn't right, you didn't have anything in your hand. You're down here collecting samples. Samples of fish, right? You're a fisherman. What's your name?*

Somewhere behind you, the lights go off.

In the darkness of the sea, illuminated only by the light on your shoulder, you feel that strange familiarity once more. The familiarity is followed by horror, and the face of a creature appears in front of you. *You've seen it before.* You've seen it before. Your mind forces back the veil for only a moment, and in your lucidity you remember your dreams. The wrong dreams. Dreams of darkness and silence. Dreams of hanging weightless over the void. Dreams of dark and empty eyes.

Dreams of the eel.

The creature rises up slightly, and you're suddenly aware of its incredible size. You see, in your mind's eye, endless lengths of brimming flesh, wrapping and coiling down into the abyss. *You see your own face, unaware that you're next in line. Oblivious to this.* Oblivious to the dark god in front of you. You see the eel moving all around you, all at once. A long, single line, endlessly twisting in the darkness, and at the very front a slowly opening jaw, and dark, empty eyes.

You see your mother in front of you, taking you to church. You sit with the congregation and pray. This memory is real. *This memory is real*. Our Father, *who art in Heaven,* hallowed be thy name. A part of you, some animalistic instinct, begins to panic. Your body twists

against itself. You try to look away, but the eel is everywhere around you. Your breathing quickens, your heart rate accelerates. You scream desperately, begging for them to pull you back, begging for them to hear you.

You cry out to God, and beg forgiveness. Beg for mercy. Beg for anything to brace against as the silencing darkness buffets you like a rag in a hurricane. You cry out for God, *as you've done so many times before,* but God isn't there. Your mind scrambles for anything else to hold on to, but it's empty. You used to be there, but you're not anymore. All that remains is sublime recognition, and solitary fear.

The eel hovers above you for a moment, jaw open. You look up, and you beg it for absolution. You ask for an answer to a question you… you can't remember… but you ask for something, anything at all. An acknowledge… an acknowledgement… of kindness? Or malice, or… *anything at all.* But as it comes down around you, and your mind is obliterated, the shell that used to be you struggles for one last thought…

Hub - Atzak II

Atzak II

A man is cast into the encompassing dark-

And the infinite coil draws tighter.

ATZAK

PART TWO

Dr. David Bell wrenched open the door to the observation theatre, cursing the rusted hinges. This close to the sea everything ended up coated with a thick crust of corrosion eventually, much to the chagrin of site staff. It wasn't uncommon to pass someone straining against a jammed door in a hallway, muttering under their breath about lacking amenities. As he dusted flecks of red dust from his jacket, David did the same.

The interior of the theatre was dimly lit and damp, like everything else at Observational Site-305. It wasn't a new structure, like Site-121, or a well maintained one like 17 or 25. No, INWBKL OBVS SITE-305 was something cobbled together out of an abandoned

office building and a few adjacent parking garages. What it lacked in warmth it made up for in humidity, with even the usually cozy staff residences a breeding ground for unpleasant moisture.

He hustled down the hallway towards the viewing room door, briefly pausing at a hanging fan to escape the heat for a few brief, beautiful moments. He pulled at the neck of his shirt and wiped his brow, then slogged on until he reached the end of the room. On the other side of the door stood three men around a table, and another man under a sheet. David paused briefly, and one of the men turned to him.

“No, it’s alright,” Dr. Jans Ulrich said, motioning towards the man on the table. “He’s not dead; the sheet is just to keep the flies off.”

He nodded, and approached the table cautiously. This room was thick with body odor and sweat, and the faint sting of brushed formaldehyde burned the inside of his nose. The other men were as drenched with sweat as he, but none of them moved away from the table. None of them looked up. As David stepped up to the sheet, Dr. Ulrich ripped it off. The other men grimaced.

The man on the table wasn’t a man at all, and David would’ve been surprised if he had been any older than his mid-twenties. Strong, like most security personnel were, but young in the face and lacking the typical track marks of age. He bore a slight scar across his cheek, and his dark hair had been shaved back on one side to allow for the placement of electrodes, but otherwise he looked no worse for wear. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was steady. David looked up at the other men, his hand beginning to shake.

“Is this it?” Bell said, his voice echoing in the little room. “Have you tried waking him up?”

One of the men, a fat doctor who Bell didn’t know, spoke up. “Yes, we uh… tried waking him up. There’s nothing *to* wake up in there. We can keep him fed and watered, and his systems are otherwise normal, but there’s nothing going on in there.”

David shook his head. “I… I don’t understand how this could have happened. Was he screened before this assignment?”

The man to the left of Ulrich, one who David recognized as Dr. Isaac Kent, produced a sheaf of papers. “This is his file. Everything is there; memetic resistances, cognitive resistances, full psychological profile, everything. Nothing we have would’ve given us any indication that this was possible.”

“*Nothing?*” David barked, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. “Nothing at all, huh? No reason in the world why a healthy, grown man would experience a sudden fucking mental break and then go comatose. No reason at all? You sure?”

Dr. Kent flinched. “We’re sure, we’ve looked at everything we—”

“Well you’d better be goddamn sure,” David said, his eyes sweeping over the room, “because I already had Cimmerian breathing down my neck before, and now I’ve got *another* goddamn vegetable to deal with? Christ!” He stepped away from the table, rubbing his temples slowly.

Ulrich looked up from staring at his feet. “David, it’s not that simple. You haven’t been down there, you haven’t… haven’t seen it. Those values are helpful with most things, but not with something like this. It’s different.”

David sighed. He walked back over towards the table and looked down at the man on it. “Tell me again what happened,” he said, his voice soft. “Start from the beginning.”

Dr. Kent pulled out a paper from the file. “At 0700 hours, during a routine sweep of **SCP-3000**’s primary area of activity, Security Officer Li began to experience intermittent headaches and was referred to the clinic. Dr. Khatri oversaw the care of Officer Li, who quickly deteriorated to the point of not being able to respond to simple questions. Over the next half hour, Officer Li experienced three moments of lucidity, during the first of which he expressed that he was a woman from Brussels, the second of which he expressed panic at his situation, and the third of which he got up from the observation table, walked across the room to a corner, pointed at the corner, and screamed. Twenty minutes later, Officer Li was comatose, and remanded to on-site care.”

David surveyed the young man again. “Is there nothing in there we can salvage? Is it bad all the way through?”

The fat doctor shrugged slowly. “He’s been observed by our on-site psychologist, and a neurologist flown in from Site-81. The trains are running, but there isn’t anybody on them. There’s just nothing— er, nobody in there right now. He’s empty.”

David motioned for the paper file, and Dr. Kent relinquished it. He flipped through the file quickly, his eyes darting around for something missed. Anything missed. The *Eremita* had been shuttling crew back and forth from Site-151 to the contact site for years. But while there were always incidents of crew members with notably low CRV’s becoming affected by the cognitive deconstruction SCP-3000 was capable of, more recent protocols limiting distance from the entity and the minimum CRV of staff onboard had reduced the number of casualties from a few each month to a few each year. Occasionally one would slip through, but it was almost always some sort of error, and not a mutation of the phenomenon.

But this was different. As David scanned through the documents, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. CRV’s were well within tolerance, no family history of psychological disorders. Good mental and physical health. Nothing *weird*, but even at a documented safe distance with all precautions taken, a healthy adult man had been pulled from his body and obliterated.

“*Fuck*.” David said, casting the pages back down on the table. “We’re going to need to keep this shit quiet. The moment this gets out, we’re going to have the whole circus showing up here. Does anyone other than Kerry and you chucklefucks know about this?” They all shook their heads. “Well, at least there’s that. Goddammit. What were they even doing down there? The next Atzak rotation isn’t until the end of the week.”

“They were assessing some lifeforms that we’ve noticed living on the eel’s skin,” said the fat doctor. “Crabs and fish and what have you. Wanted to investigate the relationship they shared with it, see if we could gain anything from that. They did end up recovering some samples, but—” he hesitated, “they obviously had to cut the mission

short."

David nodded. "Cover him up. Move him to infirmary and keep him there for now. Put the crew he was with on a limited Class-C regimen, just the last day or so. We don't want anyone knowing about this right now, not until I can figure out what the fuck happened here."

He moved towards the doorway and paused.

"Get Kerry on the phone, and meet me upstairs."

The office of Director Kerry Eckelkamp at Site-151, in contrast to the dim and muggy Observational Site-305, was well lit and temperature controlled. A number of plaques and commendations adorned his desk and the wall behind it, and a small fan sat in the corner of the room to make sure the space was well-circulated. He shuffled through some reports on his desk, doing his best to appear to be busy. His charade was interrupted when his secretary, a squat woman named Viola, rapped quickly on the door. She poked her head through.

"Boss," she said, "phone for you."

Kerry nodded, and the door slid closed. He looked at the number next to the illuminated button on his phone, and sighed. David Bell hadn't been in India for more than a week and was already trying to raze the site. He ruminated for a moment on the necessity of Ethics Committee liaisons, long enough, he was sure, to piss off the already fuming Dr. Bell on the other end of the line. With deliberation, he slowly lifted the phone to his ear.

"David," he said, smoothly. "Good to hear from you again."

"You didn't *tell me* we had a goddamn dead man down here, Kerry." He could almost feel the spittle hitting him through the receiver. "And that, after the Atzak revisions. Are you fucking kidding me?"

Kerry took a deep breath. "David, listen, first of all he isn't dead. For all we know, he could very well wake up tomorrow. He's responded

very well to his care thus far, and—"

"Horseshit," David spat through the line.

"…and second of all, there's no reason to get upset. Nothing we've got tells us anything other than that this was a freak incident, an unfortunate, stress induced episode. Officer Li was already experiencing a significant amount of stress due to his position, and couple that with the conditions within the *Eremita* and the, uh, the—"

"…the goddamn eel, you mean? Yeah, we're all fucking familiar. Christ, Kerry, I don't know how you're so nonchalant about this."

"I don't know why you're so worked up about this," Kerry said. "Accidents happen. People die everyday, within this organization and without. Our asses are covered, what else do you want?"

"What I want," David said, his voice tense and his frustration growing, "is to know if anything was missed. If there's something we should've seen that we didn't. Because if we did, and if there's some extenuating circumstances here that caused this man's death, then the Committee is going to show up and park their asses on your front step and find someone to hang for this." He paused for effect. "And it may very well be you."

"I'm not worried," Kerry said, laughing beside himself. "If Cimmerian wants to try and get my goat about an accidental death, I'll refer him to any number of other sites where the same thing happens every day."

"You know damn well it isn't just about him being a dead man, Kerry," David replied. "The Ethics Committee can get itself worked up about it, but for the people who are important that's not what matters. What matter is where he died. And in the proximity of what. InfoSec is starting to get worried about the Atzak trials. Say that there's no way we can know for sure what's getting taken and where it goes. We send someone down there with Level 4 clearance and they lose that memory, and where does it end up? We've seen this kind of thing happen before, and they think it's only a matter of time til we lose something important from someone. There's even murmurs about the Overseers being involved. You want to be

standing around with your dick in your hand if O5-3 strolls up one day?"

Kerry's blood ran cold. "No," he said, "I'd rather not. Did Officer Li have clearance on any other skips?"

"He didn't, but that's not the point. This was, for all intents and purposes, a random and unpredictable change in SCP-3000's behaviour. If we aren't able to figure out what the fuck happened to him, the EthCom is going to throw a fit. Then, once they're done, we're going to have InfoSec in here, and then we start to see missions getting pulled, or drastically reduced. If we start to drop production, we get Area-909 on our asses, too, and if we start to see shortages of Class-A and -B's, then we're super fucked and we're *definitely* getting a visit by an Overseer."

"Alright, Jesus," Kerry said, running his hands through his hair. "I'll have some guys go through his file again. What do you want us to do if they find anything?"

"Call me first, and then write up a report. Find a way to stick this on someone, but make it convincing. We need to make sure InfoSec doesn't think this is going to be an ongoing issue, because the moment they do they'll coldstop the program and we'll both be out of a job. If we're lucky, we won't remember it, but I doubt we'd be given the kindness."

"Sure. I'll be in touch, then. What are you going to do?"

David sighed on the other end of the line. "Find a way to spin this, first. I'll be at the Obs site until the end of the week, and after that I'll have to present to EthCom. Get me something by Tuesday night, because I'm going to have to spend at least a day or two on-site to gather some more information." He paused. "And don't fuck this up, Kerry. Take it seriously, goddammit. I know you probably think after the promotion you're damn near invincible, but trust me when I say the moment they think your team is letting things slip through the cracks, especially with something as massive as the eel, they'll beat you to death with a sack of shit bricks."

They exchanged a dismissive farewell, and Kerry hung up. He

immediately dialed for his Head of Human Resources, who dialed the IT Administrator, who dialed up a server bot to dig through Officer Li's file, and the files of his nearest coworkers, and the files on his family, and his family's family, and so on. Kerry didn't hang around to witness the end of the search; he had a meeting with Site Director Gore the next morning, and needed to sleep. He wished the best to his staff, thanked them for their efforts, and left his office.

On his way out of the site, he passed by the barracks and the docks, where the *Eremita* was pulled into port. The *Eremita*'s captain, Yoric Jon Hastings, stood with a handful of other officers near the ship, and flagged down Kerry as he passed by.

"Director," Hastings said, somberly, "we haven't heard anything about Officer Li. Is he well? Some of the other officers were asking about him."

Kerry tried to smile despite himself, but ended up with only a twisted grimace. "He's fine, Captain. Recovering well from his ordeal." He thought about the man under the sheet he'd seen the day before. "He just needs some time to heal, is all." He thought about the man's eyes, hazy and crusting over, unseeing and empty. "In fact, you should all check in with the clinic. Get yourselves patched up, take a breather before the next shift."

The captain nodded slowly, and a sound behind them made the man turn and look. A long line of crew members were slowly wheeling carts of unconscious D-Class out of the side of the *Eremita*. As they passed, Captain Hastings grimaced. Kerry stared at their eyes.

Atzak III

Not all who have died-

have stopped breathing.

ATZAK

PART THREE

The phone in David Bell's office rang four times before it was answered, knocked to the floor though it was by the just-woken doctor. In the darkness of his office, he fumbled for the receiver, eventually righting it and pressing the cold plastic against his face.

"Dr. Bell," the voice on the other end said, a voice he knew belonged to one of the Director's aides, "Director Eckelkamp for you."

David murmured a reluctant acknowledgment, passionately rubbing at the bridge of his nose to force life back into his face. He heard the tell-tale three clicks on the other end of the line, and then heard the sea. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

"David." It was Kerry. "There's been an incident."

"Incident?" David squinted in the dark, trying to find a light switch with his loose hand. "What incident? Where?"

"On the docks. We've got it contained, but I need you to get down here quickly."

"Divers?"

"No."

"Not divers?"

"No, not divers. I don't have time for- David, listen, we have a lot of bodies to deal with and we need to figure it out fast. EthCom is involved."

Adrenaline surged through David's veins. "What? Why? What happened?"

The voice on the other end of the phone hesitated for a moment. "One of our lieutenants down here called our Region Hub before calling me. The call was routed to an EthCom liaison due to "loss of life". He says he didn't say much to whoever he talked to, but Cimmerian is on a plane right now."

"Fuck me," David said, scrambling now to slip on pants. "Don't let anyone leave. Get the, uh, get some fucking Class C's and uh… Jesus I can't even think right now, give me just a minute… Ok, ok. How many bodies are we talking?"

"Forty-three."

"Dead?"

"Some. Not all."

"That's some slight blessing. Were they ours?"

"David, I could explain this better if you-"

"Kerry for fuck's sake, just tell me. Ours or not?"

"No. It was a fishing trawler. We don't know how long they've been out there, the ship was just pulled in to port a half hour ago."

"Any Americans?"

"No."

"Another blessing. These sure keep adding up, don't they." David threw his coat over his shoulders. "How long do we have?"

"A few hours at best until the regional liaison gets here. Another few after that until Cimmerian and his posse show up."

"Ok. We work fast, then. Give me ten minutes, I'm leaving now."

Kerry acknowledged, and hung up the phone. David grabbed a few more things: his ID, a pack of Marlboros, his gun. He stumbled out into the not-yet-light of the early September morning, waving off his security detail as he threw all of his belongings into the back of his car. The engine hummed to life, and David Bell accelerated down the side road leading towards the docks. It was 1:27AM.

Kerry had been mistaken. After another twenty minutes of searching, three more bodies were pulled out onto the dock, making forty-six bodies out under sheets. From his vantage point in a control tower, Kerry could see the faint rising and falling of the chests from the few who were still breathing. A handful of security personnel stood at the far end of the docks on either side, all aware that by sunrise they wouldn't remember they had been there that night. A handful of site doctors stood around the bodies, taking a few samples and making some observations.

The scene was almost comical, he realized. Every great tragedy looked like this through the filter of the Foundation's response mechanism. *Quarantine, assess, wait for reinforcements.* More often than not, this ended in a few people in white coats standing around staring at something horrible and making idle small talk while they waited for somebody to do something. Kerry thought it was funny.

He started at the top again. *Good morning, Dr. Cimmerian. Good to see you again. Yes, everything is going fine here. No, just a false alarm. One of our agents got a little jumpy. No, we don't have a pile of bodies hidden in a warehouse somewhere. No, I expect your investigation to proceed with little issue.* Kerry felt his blood running cold. The Ethics Committee had a number of influential members, but none of them wielded that authority with such absolution as Jeremiah Cimmerian. *Maybe if we're lucky we'll just lose our jobs. Worst case scenario, we botch the coverup and they just kill us.*

The facts, as he knew them, were simple. One fishing trawler was found, non-communicating, floating aimlessly somewhere about seventeen klicks from the shoreline. The crew was unresponsive. The ones who hadn't experienced cardiac arrest and death were carrying on, slowly starving and running down the battery on the rest of their life. *This isn't your fault, Kerry. You didn't do this to them.* But the Eel had.

Kerry Eckelkamp was made director of Site-305 for one reason: his team, or rather, Adam Hollister's team, had developed the Atzak Protocol, and after Hollister's death Kerry was the most senior member. As it stood, he was one of only four members of that team left working on the SCP-3000 project, along with Isaac Kent, Jens Ulrich, and Angela Hughes. The rest had known better, and skipped town when they could. But not Kerry - Kerry found himself in a position of power and relished in it.

"*These new Foster-class compounds are really something, Kerry,*" he remembered Dr. Lang telling him during their last meeting. "*The work your team has done is really incredible. If you can maintain this kind of production, you'll have revolutionized the Thaumiel class. Hell, that has to be worth something, don't you think? A directorship, maybe? Or even more, who knows.*" The Foundation needed people to forget, and if you needed people to forget you needed Y-909, and if you needed Y-909 you needed Kerry Eckelkamp.

Sure, he hadn't necessarily been the most forthcoming about the side effects of working with SCP-3000. Dr. Hollister might have realized exactly how big the can of worms they had opened was, had he not been little more than a muttering simpleton by the time he died. He might have said something about the growing number of

bodies they kept finding, fishermen and tourists and locals, all with the same blank eyes and emptiness inside. *This is the cost of doing magic,* Kerry had told the rest of the team. *This is the price of working miracles.* Most of them had left shortly afterwards.

But Kerry remained, and so did the bodies. Some of them were reported. Most weren't. This, though, was something different. So many at once was unheard of, and with the Ethics Committee already hovering over their entire operation… there couldn't be setbacks. Kerry's division, Experimental Parapharmacology Trials, often came to odds with the Ethics Committee, and each had earned the ire of each other. *Cimmerian would have us amnesticizing subjects with hypnosis and tonic water,* Dr. Mann had said, with no shortage of disdain in his voice. *Don't fuck this up.*

There was a knock on the door behind him, and Kerry braced. He turned stiffly, an alabaster smile stitched onto his face.

"Dr-"

"No time, Kerry," David said, throwing his coat onto a chair inside the door. "We need to figure this one out quick."

Kerry sighed in relief. "Yes, absolutely. Any ideas?"

David paced back and forth in front of the window. "Do we have any indication the vessel was inside the exclusion zone? Something we missed, maybe?"

Kerry shook his head. "They weren't even close. We combed the ship, too. Nothing really of note, though we do have a cell phone that might have something recoverable on it. They had it sent down to processing after we brought the boat back here."

David tapped furiously on the side of his head. "Does anyone else know about this?"

"The men on the dock, our other primary support staff. You and me."

"None of the locals? Nobody from Regional?"

"The phone call our lieutenant made just implied there had been a

local loss of life. Didn't say why, or how."

David nodded slowly. "Ok. Ok. Ok. I think this is what we do. How much time do we have?"

"Another couple of hours, maybe."

"Do we still have mines around the exclusion zone?"

Kerry furrowed his brow. "Yes, but-"

"Put the bodies back on the ship, run it into a mine. The ship sinks, we report it as an unintended disaster, and Regional Containment buries it so they don't have to deal with it."

All of the breath came out of Kerry at once. "Are you fucking crazy? Your plan is to sink the ship?"

"Yep. That's the fucking plan, Kerry, because there's something going on here that you idiots can't seem to figure out, and until shit like this stops happening we're going to have to do some nasty stuff to keep it under wraps. You got it?"

"The exclusion zone is miles from the coast! What if they ask about why they were out so far from-"

"Then empty a couple of cheap liquor bottles out and throw them around the fucking boat, Kerry, I do not give two shits how you make this happen or how you explain it, but you explain it. If EthCom shows up and we have to explain forty or so mysteriously dead individuals *on top* of Officer Dead-Eyes down there, they'll shut down our operation for months, and we can't afford that Kerry. You can't afford that."

He paused to take a breath. "You need to know that the first time one of our agents reaches for a Class-A and it isn't there, Lament is going to pay you a visit. Tell me what you would prefer, Kerry. You want to do something shitty now and brush this whole ordeal under the table until we can get this shit fixed, or would you like to explain this to both Cimmerian and Lament?"

Kerry Eckelkamp sat down against the wall. He pushed his palms

into his eyes, quietly seething at the unfortunate scenario he found himself in.

"We don't have much time."

"Then get a fucking move on, Kerry," David said, grabbing his coat and bounding out the door. "I need to go distract our lovely Regional EthCom rep while you take this thing and *sink it to the bottom of the goddamn ocean.*

ONE SAVED MESSAGE.

The task fell to the *Eremita*, because it always did. Dark chains stretched from the deck of the silent trawler into the darker seas below.

Ani… Ani it's me, Vihaan. Ani… something is happening.

As the shore grew more distant behind them, forty-six sailors stood their posts on their vessel. Some of them breathed. Most of them didn't. None of them blinked.

Some of the others are seeing things, things that aren't there. The captain… the captain took his own life, Ani. He died screaming, and he… he said… he saw *eyes*…

They had voices, once. Their laughter or curses might have once filled the air on deck, a light on dark seas that reminded them they were still alive.

I… I can see the eyes too, Ani…

But the light had gone out.

It… it doesn't matter. Run. Fight. It ends the same.

The chains came free, and the *Eremita* pulled away. Moving once more under its own power, the vessel pushed forward towards inevitability. No one uttered a single word.

I called you to tell you something, but I… I don't remember. I don't remember who you are. I don't… I don't remember who I… who I… who…

There was an explosion, but it too seemed to step quietly around this moment. Water filled the ship from below, and as it leaned to one side and slipped below the waves, not a single soul on board cried out for mercy, because-

…there was never any mercy to give.

When the last of the nameless trawler and its crew of quiet men had disappeared into the dark sea below them, the *Eremita* turned away and left. No one uttered a single word.

END MESSAGE. WOULD YOU LIKE TO REPLAY MESSAGE?

Atzak II - **Hub** - Atzak IV

Intermission: Audience of Crowns

Twinkle, twinkle shining star
Tumbling 'bove the Earth so far
Will and will in constant dance
Ever in your nightly prance

Quarseta couldn't decide which was more beautiful; the stars shining above her, or the planet shining below her.

tsa-Fanu's swirling colors wrapped around her, shielding her from the vacuum. The burning light of the sun was visible in the corner of her eye, and the marbled sky glowed from below her. Tiny pinpricks of light were visible in all directions.

It all served to contrast nicely with the constant bickering she heard in the back of her head.

"…Please, yen-Suisei, I'm begging you to reconsider. Just think of the prestige you will receive when we return home; you will be one of the few beings to ever enter a world as alien as this and return."

"Heh, prestige for you and the rest of your damnable misfits, perhaps, Paneu. I am a man of profit and power. Your proposition would grant me neither."

"And if you stay? What does this world have to offer you?"

"Have you not been listening? Profit and power. This old husk only has so much resistance in it, and once it gives out, I will finally be able to pilot it to the planet below."

"And you truly think that this rock is more valuable than home?" Atanti's patience was clearly growing thin.

"Allow me to put it this way; back home, I was a powerful man with

many enemies. Are so powerless that I could crush them like insects. We are as gods compared to them."

Atanti seemed to be trying very hard not to tear into yen-Suisei. Quarseta wondered for a moment if she meant that thought figuratively or literally.

"What's the matter, Paneu? Out of bargaining material? Not surprising. All you have is a half-child and a performer without an audience."

The moment hung suspended in orbit.

"Hmp." Atanti snorted. "Well, I guess there's nothing I can do to help you, then. Come on then, let's leave the 'god' to his conquest. We'll see how well he fares."

As tsa-Fanu pulled them back towards the Earth, Quarseta felt a radioactive tingling in the back of her head while another voice whispered to her. The words were foreign and laden with static, but the meaning was still there.

"You're like me, little one. Remember that you're not one of them. Don't give in to your Presence."

Twinkle, twinkle shining spear
Tumbling 'bove the Earth so near
A single heart to stay your hand
'Fore you strike the Jailers' land

Black for noblest hearts of men
White for all the revelers' skin
Yellow for ripened sky above
Red for the bound god's sin

Quarseta gazed into the towering doorway before her, light seeping out of it and spilling across the room. They were familiar colors, to be sure. Red and yellow and white and black. But something seemed… *odd* about them, something that made her somewhat

lightheaded and tired. Looking back, she thought that perhaps it ways the shades and tints of the colors. Or perhaps it ways the way the darkness seemed to be cast just as easily as light was on the other side. At any rate, the swimming colors made her feel differently that she ever had before. Almost, sickly, but in a strange, pleasant sort of way.

"Now remember, everyone stay close. This place can… change you. You must stay wide awake while we are inside."

She nodded mutely, still staring into the swimming and swirling gate ahead.

Atanti nodded in response. "Stay close, eat nothing, and allow Edrisek and myself to do the talking if we are able to get an audience with the King."

And they walked into the forbidden wonderland beyond. They walked into Alagadda.

—-

Quarseta stumbled out of the doorway, supported on either side by Atanti and tsa-Fanu. Still swirling in her head were the blacks and the whites and the yellows and the reds and the light and the sound and the air and the sea and the stars and the food and the drink and the parties and the ambassador. Her head was flying and spinning around all at once.

"Hrrrr. Shouldn't have brought her. Too young."

tsa-Fanu flashed back in confirmation.

Unfortunately, the travelers had little better luck in this place than the last. The very fabric of the place had been thick and dreamlike, making it hard to think. A sickly sweet scent hung all about it. Though they had all managed to keep their wits about them on the way to the castle, they were blocked by their final obstacle. The Ambassador. The one who held the true power of the empty King. She had stopped them, humiliated them, turned them back laughing. Even Atanti and tsa-Fanu felt her intoxication, and it was more than

enough to overwhelm Quarseta.

"♫/Where aphotic sea does deny, reflections of a xanthous sky…/♫"

"…She will be alright with some rest, though I fear we will have to find aid elsewhere."

Black of sky betwixt the worlds
White of child's soul
Yellow of aged threads and thoughts
Red of godless hole

Beware the Koitern, o' my child
In cities tall and forests wild
Beware the stench of death he makes
Lest it be your neck he breaks

Incident 682/053/1129/173:

[00:00]: Visual distortion appears in the corner of SCP-173's cell. SCP-173 ceases momvement between individual frames .

[00:57]: Visual distortion resolves into spatial distortion and suspended biological matter consistent with SCP-1129.

[01:22]: SCP-053 emerges from the spatial distortion, riding on the back of SCP-682. Both entities appear to be in a joyous mood.

[01:27]: Both entities cease movement and fixate their eyes on SCP-173.

[01:49]: SCP-682 begins to grow transparently-armored eyes covering various points of its body.

[02:36]: SCP-682 charges through SCP-173's cell wall.

"Don't take your eyes off of him!" Atanti charged through wall after wall, the rubble occasionally granting the Koitern enough cover to catch up to them.

"I'm not!" Guards opened fire at random, trying to hit both the travelers and each other.

"Edrisek! Look before you take us to someone next time!" And with a swirl and a flash, our travelers disappeared.

Beware the Koitern, o' my child
In cities tall and forests wild
Beware the stench of death he makes
Lest it be your neck he-

Crunch

« **Pooling Our Resources** | **HUB** | **Deadalive Deadalive** »

Audio Log 185-53

Background: During regular testing **SCP-185** was set to a Foundation used frequency and the year 20 was entered into the keypad. The following transmission was recorded.

<Commence Log>

Research Assistant Corbette: Hello! I'm your commentator, Salman Corbette!

"Redacted" Pagan: And "Redacted" Pagan with the fourth annual Anomalympics, hosted this year by the Foundation itself, in conjunction with the Global Occult Coalition: "Protecting Humanity, whether it likes it or not!"

Research Assistant Corbette: Haha, let's not be too harsh on them, Pag. We've also got a few guests from the Chaos Insurgency, Agents and , participating in a few events.

"Redacted" Pagan: We even have a few members of the enigmatic club from Europe, Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd., competing. It's amazing to see the kind of sportsmanship that comes around this time of year, wouldn't you say?

Research Assistant Corbette: Well, it's always good to just place politics aside and have some nice, friendly competition. Unfortunately, the ORIA agents were not able to make. Some sort of nuclear crisis going on. But, let's get started, shall we?

"Redacted" Pagan: Of course. For our first event, we have the beloved classic 1000 Yard Dash! From the SCP Foundation we have **SCP-076-2**, otherwise known as Able, who has chosen this event to show off, in his words, "What it means to have fun."

Research Assistant Corbette: From The Chaos Insurgency Agent will be "proving superiority", and apparently Mr. from

Dark Ltd. will be racing under sponsorship. We also have guest competitor **Dr. Bright**, who claims that his monkey legs aren't going to stop him from doing anything.

"Redacted" Pagan: And the firing of the **Sun Launcher** signals the opening of the competition! Agent of the Chaos Insurgency seems to take an early lead, with Able tripping over his unlaced shoes! He's muttering something in Sumerian, but that's not important right now.

Research Assistant Corbette: Wait, hold on, I've just gotten word that due to the anomalous nature of several contestants, the event has been changed to the 1000 meter dash. Officials are lengthening the track right now… And Mr. is catching up to the Agent. I must say, doesn't he look good with that Bauer sponsored helmet on?

"Redacted" Pagan: Very much so, and it seems as though wearing a helmet has paid off, as Dr. Bright has procured a banana peel from his racing leotard, thrown it across the field, and has caused Mr. to trip! I would say that's cheating, but with Able on the field, I guess nothing is!

Research Assistant Corbette: Oooh, I don't think he's going to recover from that setback. And it looks like Dr. Bright and Agent have caught up to one another, with Able just lagging behind.

"Redacted" Pagan: It's a very close race, very close indeed but… WOW it seems Agent just went topless to stun Dr. Bright! Now, sexual warfare is just a low-blow, but we should have expected that from our friends at the Chaos Insurgency!

Research Assistant Corbette: And with Dr. Bright sent stumbling, Agent wins the race! But Able doesn't seem to be happy.

"Redacted" Pagan: Ah, he'll get over it, it seems **73**, Cain, is coming over to help up his brother, and is teaching him how to tie his own shoes. Now that's the kind of thing we want to see here at the Anomalympics.

Research Assistant Corbette: Good thing too, or else the Chaos

Insurgency might be out for the three-legged race. (Laughs).

"Redacted" Pagan: Ah, those violent days of Able are over, Salman, ever since we convinced him of [static for 23 seconds] he's happy to lend a… rather competitive hand!

Research Assistant Corbette: Of course! But now onto a much looked forward to event, wrestling.

"Redacted" Pagan: Sadly, Able can't participate in this event because of the incident last year when he broke 72% of Wrench of the Church of the Broken God's body. I would make a joke right now, but the poor guy is still being treated.

Research Assistant Corbette: So instead we were able to get **682** to participate! Of course, he originally declined the offer, but after [static for approximately 30 seconds] -appy to join in.

"Redacted" Pagan: Under current regulations, 682 is forced to remain at 32% of his original size so that other participants can have a chance, but thanks to some convincing on the Foundation's part, he was glad to oblige.

Research Assistant Corbette: Well, let's just hope that acid was strong enough. Also participating is Agent of the Chaos Insurgency, Madame of Dark Limited, and **SCP-096**.

"Redacted" Pagan: It seems the Madame is dressing up in some sort of suit… Agent as well, do you have any information on these, Salman?

Research Assistant Corbette: I'm just getting information that the two were previously professional wrestlers. Sweet Tooth and The Crushnugget, respectively. Thankfully 682 has also been trained in wrestling. If you look now you can see them placing a Luchadore mask on his partially dissolved head.

"Redacted" Pagan: What a small world we live in, indeed.

Research Assistant Corbette: Of course, we can't have 096 showing his face, and so he's wearing **SCP-035** with pride, along with **SCP-619-J**. Apparently we are "piling on every SCP we can to

kill that fucking lizard".

"Redacted" Pagan: So…what happens if that Abomination we've built *wins*?

Research Assistant Corbette: "We'll nuke the fucker". The fucker being the abomination, I believe.

"Redacted" Pagan: That's an order from Site Command?

Research Assistant Corbette: That's an order from the referee, who looks quite scared right now.

"Redacted" Pagan: Wish I could get a headset like that.

Research Assistant Corbette: Well Pagan, being a Research Assistant *does* have its benefits. Perhaps one day they'll promote me and I'll get an actual chair.

"Redacted" Pagan: Well, I'm fine being a [static for 12 seconds] but back to the current subject: This is going to be an interesting, if not blindingly horrifying match! The participants are geared up and ready to go. Who do you have your money set on this match, Corbette?

Research Assistant Corbette: I'm gonna have to go with 682 myself, since it's so hard to destroy. (Pause) Apparently 682 prefers to go by the name El Reptilioso in this state, and we'll be referring to him as that for the rest of the event.

"Redacted" Pagan: Because of the late entry of 96, the two Foundation entrants will face each other, with Sweet Tooth and Crushnugget in their own match.

Research Assistant Corbette: Our first match will be 96 vs. El Reptilioso, who are stepping into the ring now. 96 and/or 35 appears to be shouting about the blood of his forefathers, while El Reptiloso is growling loudly. The referee steps into the ring and the bell is rung.

"Redacted" Pagan: And… I can't believe how fast he did it, but 96 has already gotten 682 into a triangle hold! I guess 35 is really

taking advantage of 96's strength!

Research Assistant Corbette: Wait? What's this? An audience member has just thrown something onto the stage! Why, it's **SCP-572**!

"Redacted" Pagan: A move like that seems pretty risky, "pride goeth before the fall" and all that…

Research Assistant Corbette: 682's already picked it up, and is slashing it around with it, trying to find 96.

"Redacted" Pagan: And… mother of **343**! 96 lunged onto the scaly bastard's back!

Research Assistant Corbette: Oof, that's gotta hurt. But it looks like Reptilioso already noticed the abomination and is turning around now, slashing.

"Redacted" Pagan: Just what was 35's plan in doing that!? It seems he's already been hit by the blade and… how the hell are we letting a sword pass in this!?

Research Assistant Corbette: I don't know, but it's goddamn entertaining. Oh, and 96 falls over.

"Redacted" Pagan: El Reptiliso walks toward the… thing and… WOW, 96 was playing possum!

Research Assistant Corbette: He seems to have surprised Reptilioso. And… Jesus! I don't know how he did it, but he somehow has Reptilioso in a Nelson.

"Redacted" Pagan: This is indescribable! Reptilioso has grown arms on the back of his head and… now has 96 in a german suplex!

Research Assistant Corbette: 96 and/or 35 is shouting something about his 'destrucisity'. He seems to be stretching down and… he grabbed the sword from Reptilioso's mouth! Oh, and a straight whack on the head. That's gonna leave a mark.

"Redacted" Pagan: And it now appears that Reptilioso just doesn't

care anymore! He's grabbed 35 and appears to… oh no! He just pulled it off! Holy shi- [static is heard for 43 minutes].

"Redacted" Pagan: Give a round of applause, Madame Sweet Tooth is this year's champion in wrestling, and not a single nuke went off! If you missed even a second of the action, you would definitely be surprised at the Madame's performance!

Research Assistant Corbette: Thank god we all went blind right when that mask was removed! And now onto our next event and a favourite of all, 110-Montauk.

"Redacted" Pagan: And it seems a variety of spectators have just lost their lunch, [pause] but no fear, after the horrible events of **SCP-231-7** and the [static for 2 minutes 12 seconds] -ven was cured, and the Foundation took her horrible procedure and made it the name of: The Bikini contest!

"Redacted" Pagan: 231-7, however, is now enjoying a picnic lunch with **053**, and several spectators.

Research Assistant Corbette: Our competitors this year include **105**, Sweet Tooth, Agent , and **The Invisible Woman**. Our Own Dr. Bright has graciously volunteered to judge the contest.

"Redacted" Pagan: It appears that the bruises from Madame Sweet Tooth of Dark Limited are going to hurt her chances this year!

Research Assistant Corbette: Not to mention that she appears to have been given several shots of testosterone. In fact, I've just gotten information that Dr. Bright has disqualified her from this competition.

"Redacted" Pagan: And there she goes, poor girl… well, at least she can take solace in the fact she won something… and WOW, her replacement from Dark Limited is something out of a fantasy book! It appears to be a tall [static for 3 seconds] -ronze skinned [static]wom[static] her entry form states she's MC&DL Curio-BAC-7, and as her letters indicate, she has some BACK.

Research Assistant Corbette: Actually, I've just gotten word that

Dark Limited had just gotten a hold of **826**. Sources say this may be the mystical Aphrodite we are looking at.

"Redacted" Pagan: She appears to wear a collar of sorts…the classic MC&D Slave collar and Bright has graciously allowed the collar to stay on due to the events of a likely XK-Scenario from an angry goddess.

Research Assistant Corbette: And here comes 105, dressed in a nice one-piece.

"Redacted" Pagan: You have to appreciate the modesty of the girl… though it seems Bright doesn't.

Research Assistant Corbette: Right behind 105 is 347. And what a stunner she is in a complimentary bright green bikini. Really leaves a lot to the imagination, as can be seen by the expression of several doctors watching.

"Redacted" Pagan: Judging from their looks, it does appear to be the first time most of the attendees have seen 347's assets.

Research Assistant Corbette: Oh, who's that looker there? It's Agent , from the Chaos Insurgency, who had previously tripped up Bright with what she's showing off now. And doesn't she look great in that itsy-bitsy thing?

"Redacted" Pagan: However, the showing appears for naught as Bright seems to hold a grudge against for what she did in the first event, giving a very disapproving nod as his only clue to his judgment.

Research Assistant Corbette: Just goes to show, you never tick off the judges.

"Redacted" Pagan: And here comes that "Aphrodite" to strut her proverbial stuff! With a very provocative display, she shows off her V-shaped swimsuit and in a STUNNING moment it appears Dr. Bright has made some comment about his bananas!

Research Assistant Corbette: (Pause) And the results are in. It's a surprising four-way tie. (Pause) Apparently the winner will be chosen

by sexual fav- And they're dragging Dr. Bright offstage.

"Redacted" Pagan: Well, it appears no-one wins this event… (pause) Well, isn't this a surprise? The newest judge is supposedly Dr. Clef! (Pause)

"Redacted" Pagan: Now of course, this is in no way biased, as the judges for these kinds of events are always decided upon whom is hosting it, and as the Foundation is hosting it this year, we have our pick of the judges, we tried to get Nobody, but not even **that box** could get a hold of him… her… it… them.

Research Assistant Corbette: [static for approximately 3 minutes] - O5-6 is now beating Clef and declaring that there are no winners and this competition was not actually planned.

"Redacted" Pagan: Well, what a rousing display that was. Several men, and women, had to leave the audience when Agent and BAC-7 started their catfight! But onto our next event…

Research Assistant Corbette: Anomalous trivia!

"Redacted" Pagan: Now, as per regulations, AI's and machines are NOT allowed…(pause) It appears that this rule does NOT apply to individuals augmented with technology… several members of the Chaos Insurgency and Dark LTD. Seem relieved.

Research Assistant Corbette: Of course we have our own robot, Dr. Gears! (Laugh) Up now we have Agent of the Chaos Insurgency and a rather brainy looking representative for Dark Limited up to compete with Dr. Gears.

"Redacted" Pagan: And when we say brainy we mean BRAINY, it appears that the contestant has a BULGING brain almost protruding through the skull… and it just twitched… I may lose my lunch if I continue looking at it.

Research Assistant Corbette: The contestants step up to their places and are each given a large, red button. Janitorial staff are being called in to clean up the spinal fluid dripping behind the Dark Limited representitive.

"Redacted" Pagan: Now the first question is: What event occurred that caused the emergence of [static for 20 seconds]?

Research Assistant Corbette: -ears takes the first point.

"Redacted" Pagan: And the second question - in what year did the schism between the Chaos Insurgency and SCP Foundation take place?

"Redacted" Pagan: [static for 12 seconds] …It appears that the Dark Limited representative takes that point!

"Redacted" Pagan: Surprising indeed!

Research Assistant Corbette: Third question is a Foundation specialty: What are the main components of **173**'s metal? [static for 7 seconds] Dr. Gears wins that one.

"Redacted" Pagan: By correctly guessing it was a trick question and then stating [static] of wh- [static for 12 minutes].

Research Assistant Corbette: And Dr. Gears wins a stunning victory of 20-5-7. Of course, he was almost a shoe-in when the Dark Limited representative's head exploded, and took out Agent .

"Redacted" Pagan: The foundation appears to be in the lead, but we have several events lef- [static] -umball blowin- [static] -pture the fla-[static for 17 minutes 42 seconds] and now onto the half-time show!

Research Assistant Corbette: Performing today will be none other than **Fernand "The" Cannibal** with back-up singing from **Herr Chirurg**, who will also be playing **a very special organ**.

"Redacted" Pagan: Also, Marilyn Monroe, circa 1961, has been provided to us by our friends from Marshall, Carter, and Dark through use of **SCP-826** and Mr. Carter's personal magazine collection.

Research Assistant Corbette: And here's the first song, Piano Man by Billy Joel. We'll hook up the audio of the singing to our broadcast now.

[DATA EXPUNGED ON O5 REQUEST]

”Redacted” Pagan: What an astounding performance, Salman. Not a dry eye in the house… field… whatever! The point is, everyone was deeply moved by the performance of the half-time show!

Research Assistant Corbette: Indeed. [Sound of nose being blown]. And now onto our next eve- [Static for 2 hours and 5 minutes]

Research Assistant Corbette: -and 173 gets another hit. Foundation leads 85 to 79.

"Redacted" Pagan: And I'm greatly astounded by 173's performance. However, as the game is Marco-Water-Polo I can understand why!

Research Assistant Corbette: Indeed. And the game finishes with **Leopotamus** scoring a final goal. Foundation wins!

"Redacted" Pagan: The Dark Representative put up a great fight, but [static for 13 minutes]-hat a wonderful [static]-ame of tug of war!

Research Assistant Corbette: The Foundation had to take a loss on that one, but with Sweet Tooth the Dark Limited was bound to win. And now onto our final event.

"Redacted" Pagan: With the SCP Foundation and Chaos Insurgency tied, and the event being worth an astounding 40 points, whomever wins this will be declared the champion.

Research Assistant Corbette: We will now conclude with an old classic, beach volleyball.

"Redacted" Pagan: Unlike previous events, the teams will be mixed together, and the winners of that team will face off in a one on one volleyball championship match!

Research Assistant Corbette: Up now we have two SCP objects, **517** and **372** vs. Sweet Tooth and Agent of the Chaos Insurgency

"Redacted" Pagan: That's odd, Agent of the Chaos Insurgency is wearing a long coa-(pause) It seems that the Chaos Insurgency has recently gotten hold of **SCP-262**, the Coat of Many Arms.

Research Assistant Corbette: This will be an interesting match indeed. Of course, it wouldn't be possible without Dr. Smith [static for 2 minutes] -omehow was able to get the volleyball's fortune told. Of course now we have two normally hostile SCP objects participating in a fun and engaging sport.

"Redacted" Pagan: The participants have shook hands…which has to be seen to be believed. And the competition has started, Grammie kicking it off with a three-handed cannon!

Research Assistant Corbette: Of course actual Grammie will be sitting on the sidelines, with those nasty hands poking out of a rift that's opened up on the cou- WHAM what a spike!

"Redacted" Pagan: And returned by Lady Sweet Tooth, you have to give the lady credit, Salman, we can safely say that she really is the only human in this competition!

Research Assistant Corbette: And a failed return by Grammie. Point Sweet Tooth. But wait, a sudden serve by 372 and a failed return by Agent . Bet he didn't see that coming.

"Redacted" Pagan: He really doesn't seem to have training with that Coat… practice makes perfect.

Research Assistant Corbette: And slam another spike by 372. At least, I think so.

"Redacted" Pagan: It's very hard to say with all of these arms on the field… (pause) And it seems that Bright is trying to call the game off for claiming it an affront to beach volleyball… citing lack of desirable women. (pause) And the complaints go on deaf ears as the game goes on!

Research Assistant Corbette: Hah, well Pag, would you say he's talking about Sweet Tooth or Grammie?

"Redacted" Pagan: Well, Salman, I'm guessing that since one of them is an inanimate statue, he's referring to Sweet Tooth… And it seems those complaints didn't fall on deaf ears as Sweet Tooth just scowled into the audience and MISSED a return.. that is going to seriously hurt her chances!

Research Assistant Corbette: And as the game comes to a close it looks like Grammie and 372 will come out the winners here, making the Foundation this year's Anomalympics winners.

"Redacted" Pagan: ….and Sweet Tooth has made a MAD dash to Bright within the audie-OH that has GOT to hurt, I'm glad that the camera isn't on her right now as I'm sure the Anomalympics would surely get a higher rating for the violence taking place!

[static] (monkey screams followed by crashes) [static]

"Redacted" Pagan: She's torn apart a quarter of the bleachers! I may have to redact saying she's a normal huma-[static]

Research Assistant Corbette: And Agent stumbles and falls on that last return. An amaz- What the **914** making sweet love to Gears? How did Sweet Tooth learn 110 Montau- [Static for 40 minutes]

"Redacted" Pagan: And the day's activities are winding down with everyone gathering around the Anomalympic Flame, generously provided by **SCP-457**, the Burning Man, after convincing him of [static for 12 minutes] breaking into song led by **661** [static] Marshall, Carter and Dark Ltd. have started their auction. [Static for 5 minutes]

Research Assistant Corbette: -eet Tooth sold for [static for 2 minutes] -nd what a great day that was. From [static] I'm Salman Corbette…

"Redacted" Pagan: And this is "Redacted" Pagan. And yes, I do have to say "Redacted"… it sounds cooler, and these have been:

Research Assistant Corbette: The Anomalypics. Thank you and goodnight.

[Static for 5 minutes 12 seconds before the transmission ends]

<End Log>

Closing Statement: Foundation personnel are currently searching for individuals with the surname "Pagan". Research Assistant Corbette was questioned; however, it was determined that he had no knowledge of the transmission. He did express distress, however, that he had not yet been promoted after years. No known proposals for the "Anomalympics" or anything similar have been discovered.

Audio Log From December 24th, 2010

Date of Log: December 24th, 2010.
Purpose: Documentation relating to SCP-055 testing.
Subject: Dr. Jeremiah **`Cimmerian`**
Transcription Method: Digital

+ Show Transcript

Begin Log.

This is Dr. Cimmerian, and this is document 55-C-13. I am attempting to recall information relating to uh… SCP-055. Now. I remember that it is… uh… shit. Ok. Well that's pretty much what we expected. It seems like we can't talk about it and we can't write about it.

Though… Actually. I wonder if we could sing about it.

It's worth a shot…

Um… Well it's Christmas.

"You know Statues and Lizards and
Eldritch Places,
Reality shapers,
And endless staircases,
But do you recall.
The most dangerous item of all.

SCP Fifty Five is,
Impossible to describe,
What was I gonna say next?
Oh right Fifty Five.

All of the other objects,
Are dangerous in their own way,
The thing about this one is that…
What was I about to say?

Shit.

Despite foggy memories,
I know it's not a sphere,
We can remember what it's not,
But not a sphere is all we've got,

And this you simply must know,
If it ever does get out,
SCP Fifty Five will…
Wait. What was I talking about?"

Oh. God damn it. *End Log*.

Audio of War

Audio Transcript 1035

Welcome to Site-76

It is here in the vast Egyptian desert that we keep many confiscated anomalous objects we find the two great superpowers of the world clutching onto, and it is here that you new recruits have been sent to research and defend these items from either power. This is imperative, if either side is able to get ahold of these objects, why… it could mean something even worse than nuclear war. We cannot allow this to happen.

Take a good look around gentlemen, it is with these men that you'll be working for years, perhaps even decades. This is a lifelong job, but a necessary one. The human race needs you to protect it from destroying itself. You are a member of the Foundation now, sworn in to protect anyone and everyone from the threat of a looming apocalypse.

Site-76 houses a number of important anomalous objects, including some psychic and memetic. Therefore it is important that you all remain focused, because you never know when a memetic visual might come into your line of sight, or a psychic machine might override your mind!

Remember gentlemen that this site is top secret on a need-to-know basis, and anything you encounter here remains here. Even something as insignificant as the type of tree you see outside this window could give away our position to a looming superpower.

Now, as with all sites of this nature, it is entirely possible that a breach may occur requiring the detonation of a 20 megaton nuclear warhead, sitting right now underneath our very feet. In this case all personnel are ordered to evacuate the site immediately. In some cases we may need to detonate the warhead before all personnel have evacuated. You gentlemen have been instructed on this before, and I trust you are willing to sacrifice your lives to contain the monstrosities we hold here.

We thank you for joining the ranks of the Foundation, and hope you have a good day. That is all.

« In the Shadow of a High Wall | Hub | SCP-2350 »

August 19, 2035

"You'll never catch me!"

Lebanon leaped from her spot on the roof, screaming as she did. Behind her, Hamilton and Xavier scrambled to keep up. She fell downward, arms outstretched. Her scream turned to delight as she plummeted. Vague yelling echoed behind her.

She crashed into the pile of soft material below, landing on a large mattress. For a few moments everything shook, and the world was obscured by white.

Memory Foam. She had heard the phrase before, but couldn't remember where. It came back to her now.

After a few seconds, Lebanon flipped herself over, staring up. Two distant faces peered down at her. She waved at them, and there was more yelling. The faces vanished as she pulled herself off the mattress and into the rest of the pile. There was clothing everywhere, as well as blankets and other discarded accessories.

"What's your problem?" This was Hamilton, emerging with Xavier from a nearby door. "You could have hurt yourself!"

Lebanon stuck her tongue out. "Nuh uh. I'm fine, see?"

She could see Xavier rubbing his eyes. *Oh no, I've made him cry again*. She reached out and grabbed his hand.

"I'm sorry X. I was having fun, I didn't want to scare you." She squeezed his hand.

"I-Its ok. I shou-should trust you more." He gave her a small smile and wiped the last of the tears from his eyes. Although they looked nothing alike, Lebanon had decided that Xavier was her little brother, and treated him as such. She had no idea how old he

actually was, but it felt right to her.

"I still think you should stop being such a dumbass," Hamilton said. "The boss is gonna blame one of us if something happens to you."

"Will I now?" The three children whipped around. Blue Ash was a physically imposing man, and the setting sun wrapped around him like a solar veil. He turned to look at Hamilton. "Language, young man." Hamilton mumbled some short apology.

"Blue, were you looking for us?"

A smile. "Indeed I was, Xavier. It's almost time for the gathering." Blue Ash gestured up the road, towards the center of town. Taking care to avoid the crumbling asphalt, the four of them navigated back to the village square. The road was littered with abandoned cars and trucks; Lebanon climbed on to a rusted car, following the rest of the group by jumping from vehicle to vehicle. Although Blue Ash gave her sidelong glances, he never said anything, so she continued.

"Hey Blue," she finally asked, "Why do we have to go?"

Blue Ash rubbed his chin. "Well, it's important to be a part of the community. These are the people working hard to take care of you; wouldn't it be rude to ignore them?"

Lebanon frowned. She was starting to feel guilty. "I guess… But why do we have the gathering at all?"

Hamilton responded this time. "It's kinda cool actually. I read about it in a book."

"Read about what?"

Hamilton's mouth opened and closed, and Lebanon could hear the words he was saying, but they fled from her mind almost immediately. A sharp buzz echoed in and around her ears, and the world suddenly lurched in front of her. She vaguely realized she was falling.

Blue Ash caught her. His face was contorted into concern, but Lebanon could swear she saw no surprise in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" He gently lowered her onto the ground, making sure to hold on until she was up on both feet.

"Hmmm, I'm okay I guess." Her response was muted. "I don't know why I did that."

He ruffled her dirty hair. "Don't worry. It happens to the best of us."

Up ahead, a large group of people were clumped together near a brick building. The sides of the building were painted red, and had large window-like doors that were propped open. Inside, a large red, white and silver object stood silent. Gamble had spent almost a year fixing it up, claiming it could do all sorts of things. Whenever he went into detail Lebanon found herself overcome with discomfort, and wasn't able to understand what he was saying, even though everyone else listened with obvious delight.

Blue Ash and the children approached a woman at a table, serving food. Seeing them approach, she set four plates aside.

"Hey bossman. Want some meat today? I've got the vegetarian option too."

"I'll take the vegetarian, but those hot dogs look delicious. I'm sure the kids will love them."

The server handed plates with hot dogs and chips to the three children. They gave quick thanks and ran off, presumably to sit under the large oak tree nearby.

Blue Ash took a bite of carrot. "Thank you Madison. If I didn't know any better, I would say this was plucked out of the ground just today. And no preservatives? You know how to spoil us." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"That's because it is, smart-ass." She grabbed the carrot and took a large bite. "You want to go back to scavenging, be my guest." She handed the carrot back.

Blue Ash left the table with a wave. Ahead, on a park bench, Toledo was holding a piece of corn-on-the-cob. His hands were shaking,

and his shirt was already damp with sweat. He stared at the vegetable with a single minded intensity. Silently, Blue Ash grabbed the corn out of his hands, and swapped it with a large carrot from his own plate. Toledo nodded his appreciation, but his hands never stopped shaking. His eyes continued to track the corn as Blue Ash walked away, as if he were witnessing an act of morbid curiosity.

Under the oak tree, the children sat in silence. A plaque was nestled among the tall grass. Lebanon couldn't read the name it was made out to. She could see the letters, and the name as a whole, but when she put them together in her head, she felt a sharp buzz before the name was suddenly snatched from her memory. Behind her, Hamilton said something crass, and Xavier tugged at her sleeve to ask for clarification. The adults were settling down, using scattered chairs and the ground for seating. The sun was gone by now, and the stars were beginning to come out.

The moon hung high in the sky. There was chattering, and several people began to point towards the celestial body. Lebanon didn't get what they were so excited about. She felt rather nervous, and hugged herself as her body began to shake. There was a movement to her side, and a hand rested on her shoulder. Seeing Xavier, Lebanon pulled him close. Blue Ash watched her the entire time.

"It's starting." He gestured upward. "Remember, it's safe to view, so enjoy yourselves."

Lebanon looked up with the crowd, and for a moment she could see the moon in all its splendor. Then suddenly there was a loud buzzing noise, and the moon tore itself apart into many different pieces. She could hear the exclamations of those around her, but the sky was starless and dark. The shaking got worse, and her head felt like it would split open. Her sight was the first to go, and as she drifted into unconsciousness, she could hear Xavier gasp in delight.

…

"Hey."

….

"Hey Lebanon."

She opened her eyes. The sky was still dark, but she could see the moon, illuminating Blue Ash as he stood above her. It took a second before she responded, "I…?" She couldn't finish.

He crouched down. "You fainted. Do you remember what happened?"

She tried, but she could only recall the buzzing. She shook her head in shame, feeling tears begin to well up.

"Hey, hey, its alright. Don't worry." There was no belittlement in his voice. "Everyone was worried about you. Even Hamilton." He sat down beside her.

"Why? I… I can't even remember what happened," she said. There were flashes, images of something bright, but they refused to stay. "Why does this happen to me?"

Blue Ash tried to give her a reassuring smile, but even through her teary eyes she could see it was strained. "I think, sometime long ago, there was a mistake. Something that shouldn't have happened. And yet it did, and now we have to live with it. It's not our fault, and it's certainly not yours." He held out his hand.

"Do you promise?" She grabbed his hand. She never noticed how rough and calloused it was until now.

"I promise. Now let's get you back home."

Much later, after everyone had fallen asleep, Blue Ash found himself sitting in his library. Simple candles illuminated the massive quantities of books and papers that surrounded him. On a close-by table there sat a card and a well worn piece of paper.

Blue Ash picked up the card. He knew the man in the photo was him, although he had trouble believing it. Next to the picture was the name he had chosen: Blue Ash. Around the name were other words that had long ago lost any meaning.

Flipping the card over, he saw the symbol that meant nothing to him. He could still understand the words printed beside, in a thick bold color.

SECURE
CONTAIN
PROTECT

"I'm trying." He whispered this to himself. "Oh God I'm trying."

He put the card down and picked up the paper. Although able to recite the words from memory alone, he still always double checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. There had been too much of that already.

> **Item #:** SCP-5429
>
> **Object Class:** Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** None. SCP-5429 is unable to be contained.
>
> All currently cognizant Foundation staff are to compile as much practical and historical data as possible, and attempt to save it both psychically and digitally.
>
> **Description:** SCP-5429 is an non-sentient metaphysical construct capable, and currently in the process of, destroying the individual human ability to conceptualize and recall both general and specific concepts. All concepts affected by SCP-5429 are random, and varies by each individual, although it is believed that certain concepts have been erased from the entirety of human thought.
>
> The majority of SCP-5429 affected subjects will report blanket memory loss, which is believed to facilitate the spread of SCP-5429 and the removal of random concepts. Any information destroyed by SCP-5429 is considered irretrievable.
>
> There is currently no recorded limit for the amount of

concepts SCP-5429 can affect within an individual.

Blue Ash picked up a pen, and began to add to the bottom of the page.

SCP-5429 Test Log:

- 01/12/2028- Attempt to successfully reintroduce the concept of "Eclipse" to individuals who have lost such concept. **FAILURE**
- 12/20/2029- Attempt to successfully reintroduce the concept of "Eclipse" to individuals who have lost such concept. **FAILURE**
- 12/09/2030- Attempt to successfully reintroduce the concept of "Eclipse" to individuals who have lost such concept. **FAILURE**
- 11/14/2031- Attempt to successfully reintroduce the concept of "Eclipse" to individuals who have lost such concept. **FAILURE**
- 03/30/2033- **FAILURE**
- 09/28/2034- **FAILURE**
- **FAILURE**

Authenticity Trip

January 6th, 2015.

In Miami, there is an apartment. A studio one, stuffed with computers, beeping and booping, manned by a single, unwashed operator. There are many monitors, looking into seismic activities, weather, tracking anomalies, all sharing data with each other. It's a networking system with a rough approximation of the globe. It's the best they can do. There are monitors showing the snowy peaks of Siberia, the inside of strange dreamscapes, and urban decay and modern wasteland. Its affiliation is with a loose confederacy known as the Chaos Insurgency.

There is a field agent outside of this station, down on the street. He's a man named Anders Forsmen. Today, he is walking down the art deco district, looking out for a man. An individual their peers had been keeping a close eye on.

He has absolutely no idea why.

Leaning on a lamp-post, Anders casually brought a finger to his ear. "So this is the place, then?"

The technician glanced to an adjacent monitor, adjusting his glasses as the glow reflected off of them. "That's, uh, yeah. That's the target's pad."

"I don't see it." Forsmen frowns. "The dossier, it made him seem like he was some Houdini-type. This guy doesn't strike me exactly as an Olympian…"

Indeed, the man currently walking out onto the street was a slightly overweight, pale complexioned epitome of the white-collar worker. With a briefcase in one hand, a watch around the wrist, and lightly pressed trousers, he stood at the bus stop listening to his iPod.

Sniffing, the technician shuffled a sheaf of papers. "Looks can be deceiving. Last time we had a target like this, he, uh, looked completely, totally ordinary. Turned out, guy had a pocket dimension *literally* inside his pocket." he paused. "It turned out to be pretty useful, actually. Once the guy was done with."

"This is clearly a fix-up."

"They gave him way too much attention for this to be a fix-up, Anders."

Forsmen rolled his eyes. "Be respectful. And open your eyes, maybe. Look at this guy. He isn't shit. All we have is from the Foundation. Christ, is this all? I get called down, briefed, get to know the local people, and you guys don't check up that this fucker is just some guy, some random guy, like the ones they've picked before? The ones they tail, so that we tail, so that they can flush us out? Jesus Christ, man. Don't they teach you guys anything?"

Before the technician can open his mouth, the schlep on the screen steps behind the bus stop sign, and out of sight.

"… Son of a bitch."

Crouching by the sign, Forsmen examines the vanishing point. *He's jumped. He thinks he's gotten away, but he's not expecting to be followed. He'll mess something up, they always do…*

Sure enough, there is a shimmer in the air. A small brick to grab onto, to kick the door to the whole rotten wall down. Giving it a hard shove, he fell through.

He rose, brushing the invisible brick dust off his sleeves. A white concrete path stretching in front of him, with ancient trash bins and pieces of newspaper littering the ground. An attic silence permeates the air. The walls were all windows, leading to empty houses, family rooms, backyards. Some have snow, and some are barren wasteland. None are open.

He's still inside.

But he's not right here. Dropping to a crouch, Forsmen positions himself behind a trash can, and peeks over the edge. After fifty feet, the world either stops existing, or stops letting itself be seen. Either way, the guy wasn't coming out.

At least, that's what he was thinking until the man ran back at him, frantically waving his arms.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing? Get the fuck out of here!"

So much for stealth.

"What are you doing, man? I was just tryin' to walk to the bus, and I leaned on the sign! You get me the fuck out of here!"

The man stops, leaning against a wall to catch his breath. "That doesn't- there wasn't-… how did you even… there wasn't anyone there!"

Pausing, Forsmen pops his head up above the bin, keeping his gear out of sight. "Look, man, just tell me what's going on? This is weird shit, dude."

The man frowns. "Why're you talking like that?"

"I'm not talking like anything."

Sighing, he turns back towards what lay ahead. "Look, this isn't safe. This is not a safe place for, any, for you to be."

"Why not?" Forsmen squinted, trying to see what was ahead.

"This is… an in between place. It's the backdoor to the universe, through… basically every possible reality that didn't work out."

That's certainly important. "Now, you're going to have to explain that a bit more…"

Waving him down, the man shouted a response. "Look, you're screwed unless you follow me! I can take you through what could've been, back to what is!"

Before he can protest, another figure emerges from the fog. A tidal wave of molten flesh tumbling forwards, with a gaping maw and black tar coating its back. As it twists its liquid jaw into a silent roar, sloshing towards the pair, the man quickly digs into his shirt. "Look, I'm really sorry about this."

"Sorry? What the hell are you-"

With a BANG, the man disappears.

"Shit."

and without another word, the flesh rolls past him, and he falls into darkness.

When he wakes up, he will be lost.

All being lost turned out to not be so bad, after all.

The first thing he noticed was the sunlight streaming through the blinds, above his bed. Was it a bed? Seemed like one. It was a lot more comfortable than the cold stone he'd been on a couple seconds ago. Blinking, Anders sat up. He knew that old sinking feeling, and it was hitting him pretty hard right now. Looking around, he could see a room that looked pretty much identical to his first apartment. The one he'd shared with Julia.

Just then, a voice called out from the other room. *"You awake yet, sleepyhead?"*

Son of a bitch. This isn't just that old sinking feeling.

Glancing around the room, Anders checked for anything. Word of the day, cat calenders… settling on a computer, his body reacting before his mind, he checked the date.

September 18th, 1995. Twenty-crappin'-years.

Anders peeked out the blinds.

That was definitely *not* the neighborhood he'd lived in twenty years

ago.

Instead, a purple haze lazily swirled by, with half-formed ideas and memories ambling by. The face of a first grade teacher, name long forgotten but with a face all too familiar. Villages, towns and cities, visited in the line of duty and elsewhere. Girlfriends, friends, enemies long forgotten. It was as if somebody had slowed down the tornado to Oz, dumped in a packet of kool-aid, and made it a personal shitshow.

The voice called out again. "*Hon, you coming out? I made breakfast.*"

Anders decided the shitshow would be better to deal with than… whatever was out there.

"I'll be out in a minute!"

He opened the window, climbed out, and fell into darkness.

Autocorrect

> **Note:** This is part three in a multi-part story. It is recommended that you read the previous entry **`The Harold Maine Fan Club`**, or start from the beginning At the Library.

The man tried again.“I'm sorry I sunny live CD around here.”

He shook his head. “I don't VB lives… VC assumed… CV here,” he said. And then, with considerable effort and a sense of genuine victory: “I… don't live… around… here.”

Helen smiled in encouragement. “Where you visiting someone in the library?”

The man’s face sank. “I stunt know CV what you're telling about. I sunny know what your talking about. Don't. Don't know.”

“He's an idiot,” said Aidan Brown. “And don't tell me to shush; he can't see me or hear me.”

“My arms,” she began, looking down at her stumps. “I wasn't always like this.” She saw the man open his mouth to say something, but he stopped. He did not close his mouth. “I woke up just over a month ago with a birth defect. I think the man who did this also did something to your speech. I think you know Harold Maine.”

The man immediately stepped back, and he motioned as if to push past Helen, but Aidan Brown was in the way. The man stopped, not quite understanding what was blocking his progress.

“This guy's a fucking idiot,” Brown said.

“Please let me go,” the man said. “I really came tell you Anthony. I really can't.. tell… you… anything. I want VB top VB to give. I… want… to… go… home. Please.”

“We're not here to hurt you,” Helen promised, “or endanger you or anything else. We just want to ask you a few questions. See if we can't get our heads around this.”

The man looked around. “We? You said we. I dummy - don't - “

“We, as in myself and Aidan Brown. You can't see or hear him, but imagine an unholy rotting lobster-man monster. He’s right in front of you. His pincers are about an inch away from your balls, should you decide to run. Joke,” she added, when she saw the look of alarm on the man's face. It was the first time in weeks that she had felt humour, known anything other than dread and hopelessness.

“Thanks for that,” Aidan wheezed. “Why don't you ask Chaka Khan here to come to the park? I don't like it here, it's too crowded. I know people kinda instinctively move around me, but even so…”

Helen looked at the scared man in front of her, anxious to be away from them, distracted by his desire to be somewhere without human interaction and the frustrations that came with them. “You're not alone,” she said. “Will you walk with us?”

The man shrugged. “What coupe… copies… choice do I have?”

° ° °

They sat on the park bench under the shady tree and listened as Geoff Mansani told them, in broken, nonesuch speech, about how his recent life had changed.

“Has my landline. Landline… Landlord… Here's my landform. Christ. Do you have as pen or sunbathing? A pen and paper, maybe?”

Helen shook her head.

“Sorry. Insurgencies question. Insensitive.”

“Harold Maine's your landlord?”

Geoff Mansani nodded. “Started to oversee… instead… inverse… increase the rent. Couldn't afford it. Little bastard knew VB I couldn't BC said it. Couldn't pay so he did those to me. This. Did this to me. “

“Why that? Why your speech?”

“Three reasons. One, I have a radio show. Jag a real slow I should stay. Had… a… radio show… The Geoff Mansani hood.. hour. This makes a real slow a little difficult. Radio… show.”

“Understood. And two?”

“My wood is blind. Wife. All I can do is talk jet here, and Noel can't rebel do that. Now I can't BC even still VC that. Talking to her was the only VB peaks were hag, now I don't VB reverb have that. Simian.. Soon of a birch. Birch… Bitch.”

“And three?”

“When here was asking me for Monday at his plate I want VB showing him respect. I was on my phone texting. Thought I want showing him respect. And…” He trailed off and laughed, and threw his hands up in mock despair. “Layer on he dent me a test increasing the meant. I sent VB one back dating you can't… increasing… the… meant… meant… rent! I said you'd can't. “

“And?”

“It was Autobots… auto… churches… corrected to ‘you cunt’. Stop ic sent him a text calling him a cube… cube… cunt. So he changed me so everything I say is sprocketed. Autobots… auto… correct.. Ted. Just phone at frost, then when I was worrying things down BC and CV then everything OK said. Now it's enriching… ensuring… everything I think add well… as well. Over had VC enough. Now than enough.”

Aidan Brown shifted position on the bench. Geoff Mansani moved unconsciously to accommodate him. Aidan put his good hand on his exposed lung, holding it in place, and straightened himself up, stretching his thorax-spine and yawning lazily.

Geoff Mansani sniffed the air, and turned away.

“Note that's just damned rude,” said Aidan.

“How do VB I know you're not must trying VC took duck need over?

Not trying VG top duck me over? Fuck… me over?”

Helen shrugged. “I guess you don't know,” she admitted. “But what would be the point? If Harold Maine says jump, we jump. We're all trapped. If you think we're on his side, or working for him somehow… No. That's not how he works. He makes us squirm, makes us broken, and he doesn't want anyone else involved. Doesn't want to share the credits. Our suffering, our punishments, are inflicted by him and him alone.”

Mansani weighed up her words. Finally he nodded. “Had VC to ask,” he said.

Aidan Brown coughed and shifted position again.

“He said *at his plate*, what did he mean by that?” He asked, massaging himself. “Christ. Everything fucking aches.”

Helen relayed the question.

“At his place,” Mansani said. “His soaring… his apartment… apartment.”

Aidan and Helen both looked at him with amazement. “You know where he *lives*?”

“Sure,” said Mansani. “Why?”

“Just like I been saying,” said Aidan Brown. “Guy's a fucking idiot.”

“Why doll you want VB to VB know where he VB loafs? Lives? I'm not going there again. No away. Absolutist book way. You think I'm going VC to lead you to him so he can fuck me over the he's fuckers *though* over?”

“But we're all in the same boat,” Helen reasoned.

“Oh you fucking think so?” Mansani stood up and gestured at her arms. “I'm story but look at you'd. Look what he's did to you. Compared to you I've got off lightly. Fuck. What the fuck would be do to me if he's every thought I as trying to… to what? What exactly are you tripping to achieve?”

“We don't know,” Helen said. “Peace? Freedom?”

“No such things,” said Mansani. “No such things.”

Aidan gathered his walking sticks and commenced the painful, slow process of getting up. “He's no use to us,” he said. “He's got it easy. He won't help. And here’s me thinking we were getting somewhere.”

“His address,” Helen said. “Please. Just give us his address. That's all we ask.”

Geoff Mansani shook his head. “Jesus, I don't know… He'd find out.”

“Please. He won't find out from us.”

Mansani shook his head again, looked at her arms, and then at her daughter playing on the swings. “Christ… okay. You win.”

“Like I been saying all along,” Aidan wheezed. “The guy’s a fucking saint.”

And although no one but Helen could hear it, there was hope in his voice.

Next

Autoerotic Assassination

SCP-173 has a human brain - or at least, a human-like brain. I know this because I have possessed it. My name is Carmen Lopez. I was born on January 17, 1951, in Santa Clara, California. I joined the army in 1970 and was deployed to Vietnam in 1971 before being plucked into the ranks of the Foundation in 1972. I am a member of **Mobile Task Force Lambda-9**, nicknamed "Mind over Matter". Lambda-9 is an offensive branch of the Foundation's Psionics Division; we are tasked with investigating, containing, and in some cases, terminating psionic phenomena. I am only thirty-two years old, the youngest and newest member of Lambda-9 by far. This also makes me the most expendable. Therefore, I was the least risky choice for possessing SCP-173 to see whether or not the Foundation can put it to use as an effective assassination tool in a highly classified weapons testing program.

I'm so goddamn horny.

It's crucial for me to know who I am, where I come from, and why I have possessed this concrete monster - otherwise, the memories, instincts, and other unconscious brain functions of what I'm supposed to possess could possess me instead. Mental fortitude - willpower - is everything. And right now, I want nothing more than to go to town on my non-existent genitals. It's a pounding itch in my skull. It's hard to remember why I agreed to this or even why the Foundation wanted to try this. I vaguely remember something about hunter-killer flies, whatever those are, but I can hardly think for want of need to beat my cock like it owes me money. It's the first time in my life I've ever felt this way - one of the reasons I was shortlisted to join Psionics was my apparent lack of libido.

I force it down and focus on what I'm doing in here. I would take a deep breath but I can't breathe. I can't move my limbs at all. I can't even move my eyes - I'm locked into place in this concrete room, standing upright and staring straight ahead, because I am under

observation by three women wearing orange jumpsuits and trying to avoid blinking at the same time. There are comms in their ears, undoubtedly telling them to look away at the same time. The people behind the comms want to see if I can stop myself from killing them instantly or if I am just a passenger along for the ride.

Whoever's negotiating with them must be a hell of a talker, because they're moving to take up positions around me. Two of them move out of my line of sight; the third stays where she is. Then she closes her eyes.

I'm so fucking horny. I thought it was bad before but it's excruciating now. Christ, is this what life is like for ordinary people?

But I haven't moved - not even my eyes. And it only then occurs to me that I should try moving. Breathe in - or imagine breathing in. Focus. Lesson one of being a psionic is maintaining focus. I focus on the woman in front of me. She's trembling but her eyes are closed. I try to remember my training. Start small. Diagnose my movement capabilities.

I start by rolling my eyes. I'm not sure if they're actually moving - this room has no mirror - but I can see into the corners of my eyes. Then I rotate my head. I don't actually feel it rotating - there's no feeling of movement or muscle or really anything besides my goddamn libido - but I can look to my left, where one other woman is trembling with her eyes closed, and my right, where a third woman is trembling with her eyes closed.

They're trembling. So I haven't killed them. That's good. That means I have some control.

I try to move my arms. I look directly at my concrete appendages and there's no movement whatsoever, but I can feel them. It feels as if I have two phantom arms, but I can move them and flex them and rotate them. I can even feel my hands moving around. I pump my left fist - the concrete doesn't budge an inch, but I can feel my phantom elbow popping slightly. The same goes for my right fist.

Can I walk? I'm not sure. I try to move my legs but it feels, with some irony I note, like they're stuck in concrete. Again, it feels as if

I'm controlling phantom legs that are flexing and bending and walking around. These concrete ones aren't going anywhere. Or so it seems. I've taken twenty nonexistent steps before feeling resistance, like I bumped into something. The woman standing in front of me opens her eyes and all of a sudden it's like I teleported from one end of the room to the other. I loom over her and I'm frozen in place again and she screams and falls back on her ass but she's alive.

I'm feeling pretty proud of myself for not killing any of the D's when it hits me that the whole reason they put me in this thing is to kill people. And I'm still horny.

Lovely.

I wonder how much more productive humanity would be if they weren't so concerned with sexing each other. Still, I can hardly fault them if this is what they feel like all the time. It's horrible: a yawing hunger in my stomach coupled with a heavy itch in my loins that seems to be occupying all of my higher brain functions. My meditative exercises can barely keep it under control.

The tingling gets worse when the D-Class enters the room, which makes things even more fucked up since said D is a he. The loudspeaker says something about a terminal disease, and then the words "Sergeant Lopez, proceed as discussed."

The poor jumpsuited bastard blinks and then it's like my genitals and brain have swapped places. And as much as I want to have lost control of the concrete fucker, it's 100% me that imagines myself lunging across the room and wrapping my concrete stubs around his neck. I can feel his throat compressing; it's firm yet squishy and the itching in my loins is getting worse and I can feel myself getting closer and then his arteries burst from the pressure and there's an invisible crunch as his vertebrae give way and I come.

If I had a cock there would be semen on the floor. But there isn't. The only thing on the ground is a dead man. I feel exhilarated, elated, exhausted, and empty. The tingling is gone. The hunger is gone. In their place is shame. I think I just got off on murdering

someone. I hope to God that *Abuela* isn't looking down on me from heaven; she might die from shame and become the first person to do that up there. The only good thing is that my head is finally clear again. I can think properly for the first time in I don't even remember how long. I say a few prayers in my head, but I doubt that even the Lord will be able to forgive what I just did.

I take these moments of lucidity to think. I just killed the D-Class. That time I was actually able to visualize myself crossing the room and throttling him. Which is odd because the whole time I was testing not killing the D's I had to imagine what it would be like to walk and move around. There's two reasons for that I can think of - either I've gotten better at controlling the concrete fucker or it reacts differently when it's actually in murder mode. I very much want it to be the latter. I don't want to be responsible for what I just did.

The doors open and I take a look at the next poor fucker to enter the killing room; her face is puffy and weeping. There are little pustules all over her face, dripping onto her jumpsuit and streaking it. She looks resigned to her fate. God help me, the itching in my head starts again.

"Sergeant Lopez? You may proceed."

She blinks. I do the only thing I can.

I've stopped counting how many D's - how many people I've murdered at this point. I'm not even sure it's that many - the Foundation doesn't have the resources to just throw people into a meat grinder - but I don't want to make the number any bigger than I have to. It helps me sleep better, and considering how many dreams I've had recently that ended with my hands wrapped around my mother's throat, I'll take what I can get.

I have to keep telling myself I don't like killing. Not even in Vietnam; that was sixteen months of tropical disease and shooting at plants that shot back. I didn't sign up with the Foundation out of a sense of duty or righteousness - I just wanted away from that jungle. Away from all the killing.

So that turned out all right.

I don't even remember why I agreed to this. I had to have known I was going to be murdering people, right? Why else would I have agreed to possess a fucking murderous statue? There's so many things about this project and myself that don't add up but I can barely tear myself away from these fantasies of sex and death to think about them. This isn't me. This is the influence of the statue. My meditation and focus exercises are becoming less and less effective. Whatever passes for a mind inside this fucker is nothing more than a bundle of sexual and killer instinct. And it's worming its way into mine.

But there's a light at the end of the tunnel. The shrinks have decided that my dreams aren't too problematic and I've been cleared for active duty. I don't feel ready at all but, ironically enough, I guess I know less about my own brain than they do.

The target is a drug dealer with a passion for fine art. I keep hearing the words 'reality bender' and 'bixby' and 'Type Green' being thrown around but it feels like they're going in one ear and out the other. This whole thing is way too convoluted for an assassination - they could snipe him or bomb his chateau or poison his dinner or literally anything easier than training a psychic to possess a fucking killer statue - but apparently those won't work.

The next few days pass by in a haze as I spend all my mental energy on ignoring my lower body. There are a couple more terminal D-class to kill. There is a box and the rumbling of shipping and handling. Then there's moonlight. I can't move at all but something is moving me through a garden. I'm staring at a marble fountain, surrounded by fancy topiary.

And then I'm alone with a man in a fancy suit. He's admiring me - the statue. He's admiring the statue. This must be the target. He looks beautiful.

He blinks. I do the only thing that I can.

I don't remember what happened next. I don't remember how I got

out of there or how I came back to the Foundation or anything that happened after I squeezed the life out of the man in the suit. All I remember is the rush of watching the life drain out of his eyes and the relief of my head clearing.

I can't wait to get out of this body. I can't wait to get out of this prison of fucking concrete that's stripping my mind from me. I can't wait to not dream about killing people. I can't wait to not fantasize about murder.

They wheel my body - me - into view. I'm separated from myself by a thick glass window and there are fifteen people staring at me from the other side. I've been placed into a coma and have been kept on life support for the last few days.

The people behind the comms tell me that they're going to deactivate my life support within five minutes. I only need five seconds to jump out of this concrete fucker and

and

and

and five seconds later I'm still stuck in the concrete. I can't stop thinking about how much I want to break them all. How much I want to break myself. My exercises aren't working. I can't think properly. I can't focus. I can't breathe.

The people behind the glass look increasingly worried. I can't talk to them. I can't tell them what's going on. I can't beg them to help me. I can't do anything but stand there and suffocate inside of my own mind. There's a pressure building up in my head.

Then I see them put an oxygen mask back onto my body and wheel me away. I'm stuck. I'm trapped. I'm buried inside of a concrete prison and there's a pressure in my head and my crotch and I can't think straight and I need to kill I want to kill give me someone, anyone to break and watch the life drain out of them please.

The doors open. A D-Class walks in.

She blinks. I do the only thing I want to.

Automata Et Cetera

The clockworks on display in the temple were the culmination of many years of hard work by the craftsman. Years of hard, diligent work, many prayers to the god of the forge, innumerable cuts and scratches that had almost made his hands worthless and numb, his fingerprints long since worn off.

And it hadn't been worth it.

These clockwork creatures and men were… imperfect. The sparrow could only sit on a branch, it could not take flight. The automated man could only stare blankly at passersby, making them unsettled. Even the clockwork Heracles he had made, depicted strangling the great lion, was unimpressive; it could only repeat its actions until the spring wound down. It was not enough.

And he feared it never would be.

The automata were taken down from the temple the next day; the craftsman would have them disassembled and their parts melted down for new works. Better works. More lifelike works.

The craftsman resolved that divine favor would be the only way to improve his works. Therefore, he resolved to go on a pilgrimage to Limnos, and visit the site most sacred to the god of metal, where he had been cast down from the godly kingdom, and crippled by his spiteful mother. The trip would be long, hard, and expensive, but he had many drachmae and much time.

The temple was magnificent. It stood on the very spot where the crippled god had fallen, glistening in the sun. It was entirely metal, but what metal, the craftsman did not know; it looked akin to bronze, but when he knocked on it, the density seemed wrong. The top of the temple had a facade depicting the fall of Hephaistos, his

lecherous wife Aphrodite, and his second wife, the graceful Kharis. It depicted Ares and Aphrodite being discovered in bed by the gods, the treacherous Hera being trapped on a throne of Hephaistos' own design… surprisingly enough, this facade was uncolored; perhaps they were renovating it?

The inside was even more spectacular. Unlike most temples that were open to the air, this was enclosed, with a door that opened as if the gods themselves pushed it aside; he knew it was a simple trick, but he admired it nonetheless. There was a sacred forge in the center attended to by priests and smiths, who were creating mostly ceremonial pieces, such as ceremonial swords, jewelery, shields… and cogs. Automata were, by in large, inspired by Talon, the great bronze man that Hephaistos created to protect Europa on Crete; creating them was still a relatively uncommon practice, due to their complexity and relative lack of use beyond entertainment.

The craftsman approached one of the priests, when suddenly, a bird flew over his head, causing him to duck down. Cursing, he looked around, and saw the the bird was, to his surprise, an automaton, capable of flight. He inspected the small sparrow, which tweeted at him in response. He reached out to touch it…

"I would suggest that you do not do that, pilgrim." The craftsman turned to face a priest of Hephaistos, clad in a red tunic. "The Broken one does not favor those who tamper with his creations."

The craftsman knelt before the priest solemnly. "Forgive me. This is my first pilgrimage to this temple. I come to pray to Hephaistos for greater skill in the creation of automata and clockworks." He pointed to the bird. "Tell me, which one of your craftsmen created this? It is spectacular, I must learn his technique."

"That piece was untouched by human hands," replied the priest, smiling. "The Broken one himself created that piece, and several others in the temple. The Broken one is such a great craftsman, he can create complex pieces with only a single touch." He produced a pair of gloves, handing them to the craftsmen. "If you truly wish to inspect that piece, wear these, lest you be smote by the Broken one's touch."

The craftsman couldn't help but think that 'the Broken one' was an odd euphemism for Hephaistos, but he supposed it was apt; after all, Hephaistos was broken at birth, and broken again when he was cast down from the heavens. Regardless, he put on the gloves, and inspected the bird, which perched on his finger; the detail was remarkable. Every feather was visible, and they were not engraved, but actually individual metal plates. The eyes were small, unknown gems, the beak crafted of steel… and it was all incredibly light. He would have expected a piece this intricate to be so heavy, he could not hold it, let alone have it be able to fly. With a broad smile, he released the bird, and knelt before the priest again. "I beseech thee, tell me the secrets of Hephaistos."

"All in due time, friend. All in due time."

And so it was that the craftsman began to study at the temple, living among the priests, smiths, and craftsmen at the temple. He quickly began to notice several strange things about the people there. Firstly, several men, Sicilian by their look, spoke and wrote in a language unfamiliar to him. He also noticed that several of the walls of the temple, which had been crafted of an unknown metal, had been engraved with obscure, possibly pagan, symbols; had the temple been vandalized?

Illness was also startlingly common among those in the temple; several men were whisked away to the infirmary due to coughing and sudden bursts of pain; these men were never seen again by the craftsmen, and when he asked the priest, he was told that they had been taken to do work for Hephaistos elsewhere, and that they were quite alive.

Most disturbingly of all were the humanoid automata he had been seeing; they seemed to change position whenever he left the room. Granted, automata were meant to move their arms, head, legs, mouth, and perhaps even their eyes… but he had never heard of walking automata. Then again, he had also never heard of metal birds capable of flight.

Nonetheless, he continued his work on automata, his skill growing each day. He attended prayer and meditation daily, and always

found it curious that, despite being a temple of Hephaistos, the only fire in it was that from the forge; no sacred fire was used for sacrifices. He simply thought that this temple was part of a cult dedicated to the smith aspect of Hephaistos, and thought nothing of it.

One night, after working at the temple for 11 months, the priest he had met almost a year ago came into the craftsman's chamber. "You have been here for long enough, I think. It is time."

The craftsman looked up from his blueprint, which was that of a sparrow that he theorized would be capable of flight. "…time for what, oh priest?"

"Time for you to see the true secrets of the Broken one." He extended a gloved hand to the craftsman. "Come." The craftsman stood from his desk, and followed the priest out, to the main room of the temple. There, the priest depressed a metal panel on the floor with his foot, which made an unusually loud *thump* noise as it did so. The floor slid away to reveal a staircase leading downward. "Here, you shall see the true temple." He took up a torch, and traveled down into the bowels of the temple, the craftsman following.

As they descended further down, the craftsman heard a chanting, in an unknown tongue. It made him feel uneasy, the hairs on his skin standing on end, as if affected by some unseen breeze from the underworld. The chanting grew louder as he descended deeper… and deeper… and deeper…

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of walking, the craftsman emerged in a large room, made of the same material as the temple above, and inscribed with the same symbols. Several members of this cult were bowing in reverence to a figure on a throne at the other end of the room, chanting in the same unknown language. The man was… not a man at all, but some form of automaton. Around his neck, he wore a metal pendant with several strange symbols engraved into it. The automaton stood, and pointed at the craftsman, beckoning him closer.

Nervously, the craftsman approached, the crowd parting for him.

The automaton beckoned more sharply, his eyes taking on a bored look… it was then that the craftsman realized that the eyes were too perfect to belong to an automaton.

They were human. With a sudden look of fear in his eyes, he turned and stared at the priest. "By Styx, man, what madness is this?"

The priest laughed. "Madness? This is the touch of the Broken one. The one you believed was Hephaistos. The Broken One's touch reveals the true form of man and animal, for the whole world is a machine… and we are simply cogs, levers, and screws in it to serve his purpose."

"…you turn people into machines? But… that…"

"You've always aspired to create great work, oh craftsman." The automaton stepped off the throne behind him, approaching slowly, with carefully timed steps. "Now, you shall become part of the greatest work in the history of mankind." The automaton drew a knife and cut open the craftsman's palm, and leaned in, kissing the blood. The priest smiled. "It is done."

"…what is done? What have you done?" A great fear stirred in his heart, but his pulse refused to quicken. Instead of his beating heart, he heard a tick… tick… tick… tick… tick…

The craftsman felt as cold as the metal around him.

Automatic Stop

« **Slow Animals** ||

The parking lot of the Chipotle Mexican Grill was false, and held many secrets.

Once Vera Garcia had reported to Taco Bell and found a false bottom in her bag of one Burrito Supreme and one Crispy Chicken Quesadilla, she knew that her plan had been approved by the Rotisserie Outfitters Bureau.

Inside the secret compartment, she found three objects of note.

1. A picture of a young man with cropped black hair, tan skin, and a strained smile. He was wearing button-down shirt. Vera supposed it was likely taken for some official purpose, perhaps an ID card. On the back of the photograph, a phone number was written in blue sharpie. Beneath that a name: Casey Malik.
2. A small object shaped like a pocket pistol but with a wide, flat barrel. Where the hammer would typically be there was an LED light. Brief experimentation showed that the LED flashed when the gun was pointed a specific direction. A compass, of a sort.
3. A note. It informed her that her subsequent actions would be of the utmost importance, and that she would be alone. It was reassuring.

Once she had enjoyed her meal, she made haste across the street, past the Chipotle and into its parking lot. The gun in her hands made a pleasant buzz as she waved it about in the dark. The pulse of its light intensified when she brought it to face the back of the lot — a thin strip of trees and bushes separating the concrete from rows of compact housing.

She closed the distance, eyes alert for threats. As she stepped carefully over the curb and into the grass, the gun chirped. A small blue button had appeared just above her thumb, on the side of the grip. She took one more look around before she pressed it and the ground beneath her vanished.

She didn't have time to grab anything for support. She was falling now through a tube, or a tunnel — surrounded by a substance like vinyl that pressed up against her uncomfortably, but with enough friction to keep her speed low.

Seconds later the constriction gave way. She braced for impact, landing feet-first on a hard brick surface.

For such a long fall, this didn't look like it was underground. The sky was a dark, deep blue, and her surroundings were lit by strings of lights supported by the air itself, weaving about in the sky. She was in a town square, nearly empty, and in each direction she could see roads travelling out, flanked by buildings in eclectic styles, a mosaic of vibrant shades.

She could hardly believe her eyes, but she'd have time for disbelief later. For now, she had a job to do.

An ancient necromancer in a bathrobe stood on the threshold of his front door.

In front of him was his son's boyfriend, wearing scuffed slacks and a wrinkled button-down shirt spattered with some dark spots. He was carrying a file folder under his arm.

"Hi, Mr. Rowe!"

Eustace Rowe squinted. "**Adam**'s not here."

Casey shook his head, "Oh, no, I'm not… can I come in?"

"To hide from the police? Or to clean the blood off your clothes?"

"…how did you know that I—"

"It's called 'the news.' And 'the police' who showed up at my door asking about you, Casey."

"…what did you tell them?"

"That I didn't know where you were. Which is true."

"Oh. So, can I…"

Eustace sighed. "Yes. Get in here."

Casey muttered repeated thanks as he slid into the entryway. He could see the dimly-lit hallway proceed into the house, flanked by stairs into darkness and leading to a shady kitchen. Behind him, Eustace shut and locked the door. "Move," he muttered. Casey shuffled out of the way and down the hall.

The kitchen was clearly in use recently, arrayed with what was either a very exotic dinner or a terrifying arrangement of viscera. It smelled of formaldehyde, and Casey's nose wrinkled. "Sorry about the mess," Eustace grunted, "wasn't expecting to be… interrupted." He motioned to a chair, situated at a dinky dining table prepared for four.

Casey sat down, his legs silently thanking him for the relief, and set the stolen file on the tabletop. "Right. Sorry. Thank you."

The elder stayed standing, leaning back on the kitchen counter. He was silent for a moment, surveying Casey's ragged figure. "…You need to get cleaned up. Quickly."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because a child wearing a magician costume could track down your thaumic imprint, and Adam would be upset with me if you died in my house."

Casey nodded slowly. "Right. That makes sense."

"And then you'll get out of my house."

"What? They'll find me. You just said you couldn't let me die."

"In my house. You're the one who killed a man. Far as I can tell, I'm being perfectly charitable by not turning you in right now."

"No, it… it wasn't like that. I didn't have control over my actions. There's a… memetic worm. Or something."

"Ah, the mind control defense. That'll make your trial more interesting, at least until the Mayor decides to execute you by soul amputation."

"Look, I… can you at least help me contact Adam?"

Eustace sighed. And then he sighed again. "Fine." He turned walked out of the kitchen, vanishing into the darkness of the hallway beyond.

Casey fidgeted in place for a moment. And then Eustace returned, bringing a large, blocky phone with what seemed to be an over-sized tape recorder attached to it. He sighed once more, for good measure, and began entering some code into a number pad on its front.

"From last I checked, Adam *should* be in Backdoor SoHo. Got some shitty medium gig."

"So, uh… how can we even call him, between enclaves?"

"A good question. This looks like a phone, but it's actually a psionic link to a carrier pigeon selectively bred to survive in the void between universes. It flies through the Outside, the formless space relentlessly crushing it as it carries messages at the speed of light."

"Oh. Really?"

"No."

He finished whatever calibration he was doing, and a droning beep began to play. Eustace held it to his head, and the droning stopped. "Wake up, Adam. Your boyfriend killed a man."

Casey's eyes went wide.

Eustace covered the receiving end of the phone while confused protestations spilled out of the speaker. "Don't have the time or the patience to coddle here. Better to just rip the band-aid off." In this metaphor, Casey assumed, the band-aid was his relationship.

"Just. Give it to me." Casey stood up and reached out for it, and Eustace reluctantly handed it over.

He held it up to the side of his head and tried to sound as calm as possible. "Honey?"

The speaker crackled, and a tinny facsimile of Adam's voice spilled out. "Casey? What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm… fine. Things have gone a bit lopsided."

"I can tell. What happened?"

"It's… something infected me. Something memetic. It took control of me. Made me—" Casey's breath shortened as what he'd done hit him like a slap to the face.

"Shh, shh. I understand. You don't need to talk about it right now. Look, I'll… I'll get to Portlands as soon as possible."

"No, I don't think that's… the best idea. Whatever's happening, it's still going on. And it's probably not going to get better for a bit."

"I can't let you do it alone. Look, my clients are a wash, and their dead relatives aren't going anywhere… I hope. I can pack up and—"

"Please? Just… stay safe for now." Casey knew that Adam would only sit idly by for so long. Hopefully things would be safer by the time Adam foolishly rushed in.

"Fine," Adam pouted. "But surely I can do *something* out here."

Casey stopped to think for a moment. As he did, Eustace came up behind him with a device like a handheld metal detector and started waving it along Casey's arms. He guessed Eustace had taken the thaumic scrubbing into his own hands.

"Oh, there's… before what happened, I was in Bristol meeting with a business partner. Maybe you could go there… see if there's anything magical you can find?" Casey searched his pockets for Mr. Erwan's card, and recited the address into the phone.

"Roger. I can… I guess I can go through the Library? Yeah, probably…" He was working through the logistics in his head, Casey could tell. He was nothing if not resourceful.

"Thank you. Stay safe."

"You need that more than I do. Please be careful. I love you."

"Love you too." He clicked the phone off.

He turned, and Eustace was staring at him. "…what?"

Eustace shrugged. "Didn't say anything." His wrinkled face had a surprising capacity for passive aggression. "You're scrubbed of any identifying links, now. You're welcome for that. But you should go change your clothes. Just… take some of Adam's, from the hall closet upstairs."

"Right, right." Casey rather pointlessly tried to smooth himself out, and went upstairs to change into something that wasn't covered in dirt and blood.

He walked back down wearing slightly too-tight jeans and one of Adam's nice tan jackets. For the first time since what had happened, he felt somewhat refreshed.

This positive feeling quickly evaporated when he reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Eustace pointing a gun at some woman in the kitchen.

Eustace motioned to Casey with his free hand, beckoning for him to come closer. "Finally."

Casey inched towards Eustace, eyes wide as he struggled to take in what he was seeing. A black woman, wearing a tan suit, her hair tied in a neat bun. She was sitting at the kitchen table, and seemed

unperturbed in spite of the elderly man waving a pistol in her face.

"Found her in the lot out back. She was trying to snoop through the window." He shook the pistol at her. "Now, why don't you tell him what you told me?"

"Well," she said. Her voice was calm, rehearsed. She'd clearly been looking forward to the chance to speak. "The first thing you need to know is that I'm on your side."

She paused for a moment, feeling the room for a reaction, and then continued. "My name is Vera Garcia. I've been sent by an organization that knows of what is going on here, and wants me to help you prevent it from getting worse."

Eustace nodded. "You buying any of this, Casey?"

He had, in fact, heard this story before. "What organization?"

"We're devoted to keeping the world safe, and preserving the things that matter most."

Casey raised an eyebrow. "…but what's it called?"

"**Directorate K**."

Eustace suddenly bent over, laughing hoarsely. The gun in his hand evaporated into smoke. "No shit? This night just gets better and better."

Casey did not know whether he should take offense to that. "You know them?"

Eustace ratcheted himself up to a standing position again, still smiling. "You could say that." He turned back to the woman. "What, just come off of infiltrating the leadership of a Chuck E. Cheese's?"

She smiled earnestly. "Funny. I suppose it's important to keep some levity in the face of bomb threats."

Eustace's gaze narrowed. "What?"

Vera nodded to the file folder, stolen from the Chaos Insurgency, still splayed on the kitchen table. Indeed, a paper was poking out — some notes about potential locations for a device that could be planted on one of Three Portlands' many side streets. "Sounds like there's a real conspiracy shaping up. It sure would be convenient if a skilled infiltrator were to offer a hand."

Casey looked down. "Point taken."

Eustace squinted at her for a good while. Like his view was piercing her and examining the insides. Which, to be fair, could literally be happening.

After another moment, he spoke. "Fine. You can stay here. But you take a single hostile action, the house will eat your flesh and I will *not* treat your bones with dignity."

Vera smiled. "Noted."

The sun rose, pulling shadows taut across the stone and brick landscape of Three Portlands. Casey watched it with suspicion.

Behind him Vera pored over the contents of the ill-gotten dossier. She flipped through pages of equations, numbers she couldn't make sense of. Details of people she didn't know, working for corporations she didn't recognize, in cities she hadn't known existed. She pulled free two pages in particular and set them down on the table, towards Casey.

"These," she stated, "are the only people in the file who aren't marked deceased."

Casey turned from the window, scanning the documents. Sidney and Timothy Way, two brothers. There were no pictures, just basic identification information. And a Three Portlands Address. "That's… not much to go on."

She shrugged. "It has an address. That's all we need to pay them a visit."

Casey's face hardened. "Is that a good idea?"

"If they're like you, they're allies. And either way, we get more information on what's going on."

Casey pursed his lips. "What about the police? Everyone thinks I'm a… murderer."

"Well, you got away the first time, didn't you? How'd you manage that?"

"I was picked up by a strange man and then lost most of my memory of what happened after."

"We've all been there. But for now, you're wearing someone else's clothes, and a strange woman is going to be giving you instructions. Now… where is this address?"

Casey gulped.

The day was cool and clear. Perfect weather for taking a walk.

Evidently many others felt the same way. The streets were saturated with milling crowds, pastel swarms wandering about to get to work, to school, to shopping. Living their normal lives. Or as close to normal as Three Portlands permitted.

Casey watched with envy until Vera grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back into the alleyway.

"Staring is weird. Criminals stare," she whispered.

"I'm pretty sure regular people stare too."

"Not from alleyways. Usually." Vera cast a glance behind her. "Let's keep going."

They'd been going through alleys for a bit — zig-zagged gashes in the urban jungle, growing pains of a city constantly making space for the new and shuffling the old to the outskirts. Most of these voids between buildings were empty, though some were marked by signs of occupation: clotheslines, plywood shacks, or bundles of blankets on the muddied stone. Sometimes people huddled in the alleyways,

sleeping off their hangovers, or searching for scraps.

Walk at a constant pace, she had said. Every day, you walk by hundreds of people, each with plenty of their own thoughts on their mind. Take every precaution to not disturb their daydreams, and stand out as little as possible. The vagrants Casey passed certainly didn't pay him much mind. Casey wondered if they would care even if they did recognize him. Better them than one of the faceless police golems he'd seen on the street corners.

As he neared an intersection in the path he took a left turn onto an unpopulated side street. The brothers, it seemed, lived in a particularly dense area of the residential district, where teetering tenements were stacked against each other. It was a ways from Eustace's home on the outskirts.

As she passed Vera peeked into the displays of stores advertising fashion, art, or gluttonous indulgence, boundaries artificially removed with the help of regenerative exploits, anomalies typically reserved for the ultra-rich.

Casey turned back to her, as she was eyeing the posted menu for a restaurant that specialized in food that was the opposite of Italian food. "…have you not been in Three Portlands before?"

She shook her head, snapping her gaze away from the store and quickening her pace to keep up with him. "I have no idea what this place is or how it works."

"Oh. Wait. You haven't seen behind the Veil before now?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "From what I understand, it seems like most of the things I thought were impossible are in fact possible, and that there is some kind of secret underworld of people who know this and can utilize these impossibilities freely."

"Yeah, that's… basically it. You're taking this a lot better than I did." Casey had spent more than a few days locked in his room after Adam had showed him some magic years ago.

Again, she shrugged. "What I'm learning is that my preconceptions

were getting in my way. There's no need to dwell on the lies others tell to us."

"That's the best way to look at it, I guess." He led her into a right turn into another jagged alleyway where bricks gave way to sandblasted stucco. They kept a healthy pace.

"It's the benefit of my work. Clarity of purpose means that sometimes you don't need to think. You can just *be* and *do*."

Casey nodded. "I guess that makes sense. What does '*do*ing' entail, anyhow?"

"The way I see it, we have firefighters and doctors to preserve the things we need to survive. Directorate K is concerned with preserving the reasons we have to keep living."

"Reasons to live?"

"Things that make life worthwhile. The things previously unknown. The tastes that change each time you sample them. Disorder is an order all its own, and it's what human life is built around. It's about finding that combination, the repetition of something that changes every time. The appreciation of a thing just for what it is and how it feels. That's how I see it, at least."

"And that requires… spy shit?"

"I appreciate secrets. I'm skilled at finding them, cataloging them, patterning them. Beyond that, where the information goes is irrelevant."

"And you're here now."

"I'm here because it's where I'm best applied. My superiors knew there were secrets here worth sharing. Or maybe they felt something was at stake. Or both. It makes no difference to me."

"That's a… relaxed attitude you have towards the crimes you are currently committing."

She cast a sideways glance at him. "I have faith in what I do. I'm

good at what I do. I'm confident that this is where I'm supposed to be. You could do it too, you know. You're overwhelmed, but you're still moving forward after what happened. You're more adaptable than you think."

"I mean, I couldn't-"

He was interrupted by Vera grabbing the sleeve of his borrowed jacket and dragging him to a stop. They were standing at the outlet of the alley, and she pulled him back against a rough plaster wall. A few people kept walking past them and Casey turned to hide his face. "What? What is it?"

Vera pointed down the street and across, to a dinky apartment building among rows of others. "That's it, isn't it?"

Casey turned over the address in his head. "Yeah, that's probably it. Why did we stop?"

She stopped pointing but kept looking in that direction. "There's a man out front."

She was right. A bearded man wearing basketball shorts was leaning against one side of the building's entrance, peering into a small mesh backpack. She continued, "I've seen him before. In Portland just a few days ago. Portland, Oregon. I saw him and another man and they were talking about doing something big and vague."

Casey peered at him. "Big and vague, huh?"

"He's Sidney, probably," Vera finished.

The two of them stood in the alley for a moment longer.

Casey started. "So… what do we do?"

"Ideally we approach in a non-threatening manner and begin a dialogue."

"And then get held hostage by an old man with a gun?"

"I did say *ideally*."

Casey leaned out of the entrance they were discourteously blocking. "He's leaving."

The man had zipped up his backpack and turned to start walking with purpose down the street.

"So should we…" Casey trailed off.

Vera was already walking down the street. Casey nodded to no-one in particular and followed.

Casey gulped, grasping at an air of nonchalance. No big deal, just stalking someone in broad daylight while wanted by the police. Just a hobby.

Vera exuded effortlessness effortlessly. She weaved through the crowd (it just kept getting denser, Casey was suffocating), eagle-eyes trained on the mark.

Casey strained to see over the commotion in front of him. Where the street led around a run-down community garden, the paths were blocked by concrete dividers. Blue tape and sawhorses. They were heading straight for a checkpoint, manned by half a dozen police golems. Oh no.

His breath started to pick up. It's okay, he thought. He can just turn around and walk away. They can come back for Sidney some other day. He tugged at Vera's sleeve. She was undeterred. He stopped in place.

It was at this moment that Casey was tackled.

Arms flung around his neck, the weight of a lanky man toppling him him off his feet and onto the asphalt. Casey looked up. A man he had never seen before was on top of him. He was shouting. *"Why are you following us?"*

Casey gasped for air.

"Hi, Timothy," Vera said. She swung her leg into the man's side,

sinking her foot into his stomach. He wheezed, loosening his grip. Casey pushed into his sternum, and Timothy Way landed on his back beside him.

A siren rang. The crowd was fanning out like air bubbles leaving water. A mechanical voice chittered, *"This is an active crime scene. Please lay on the ground and place your hands behind your back for processing."*

Vera kneeled down, gripping Casey's forearms, and hoisted him to his feet in one fluid motion. Timothy started to clamber to his own knees. Vera glanced down the side street. Sidney was running. The golems were still blaring.

She started to run, and pulled Casey with her.

The streets were surprisingly empty. A crazed murderer on the loose tends to do the opposite of draw crowds.

Sidney ran down the street, fiddling with something in his grip, his backpack jostling back and forth with each of his strides.

Casey's legs burned. He ran track in high school, but that was the better part of a decade ago. Now not only was Casey confronted with the physical pain of his burning muscles, but the simultaneous emotional pain of being acutely aware exactly how much he had let himself go. To make matters worse, Vera seemed to have hardly broken a sweat behind him.

By now the police golems must have alerted the UIU headquarters. They'd probably be setting up a cordon any minute, a ring of armed men lassoing every exit. No escape. He banished the thought from his mind. Sometimes you just need to lie back and let yourself do what will be done.

Sidney spun on a dime, running straight into a tight alley. As he did, he dropped what he'd been carrying, something like a small blue pipe. Casey slapped the brick as he followed, leaping over the object and paying little mind.

Behind him, it activated — bursting into a cyan cloud of fluttering wings, thousands of blue bats spiraling around the entryway. Vera wasn't coming through. Probably best if she didn't chance it.

Casey kept running, dodging littered mush, feet splashing through iridescent puddles of contaminated water. His muscles were screaming, but he'd never been a good listener and didn't plan to start now.

He was getting close. Casey stretched his arms out to grab onto something, anything of Sidney's, but his fingertips only brushed his backpack.

Suddenly, Sidney stopped in his tracks, stepping to the side. Casey couldn't slow down, and his ankles were caught by Sidney's foot. He tumbled, catching on his hands in a pile of sludge, skinning his palms and dirtying his face.

When he looked up, Sidney had left the alleyway. He tried to curse under his breath, but his breath was too short, and it just came out as a squeal. He hoped no-one heard that. Scrambling to his feet once more, he rounded the corner.

Sidney Way was there, stopped in the center of the street. They were in Three Portland's tourism district, flanked on both sides by pastel hotels, vacant vacation homes, luxury spots for affluent folks who, having conquered the material world, sought a more challenging locale to gentrify.

Sidney was holding a gun, some kind of compact revolver. Casey stopped in his tracks.

His voice was even with a tinge of Southern drawl. "Gonna tell me why you're following us?"

Casey heaved for another moment. The body felt like it was still moving, pulsing in time with the pounding in his ears. "I think… we're both… at risk. There's… been weird goings on. I think you might be a target."

He narrowed his eyes at Casey. "Is that so?"

"I don't know what you're doing, but you don't need to. It's not you, it's… something in your head. It's making you do things."

He shook his head. "Might be wrong, but I don't think you have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

Casey couldn't really argue with that. Silence rang for a moment.

Casey cleared his throat. "Then I guess we're just in a… Mexican standoff."

"What? You're unarmed. It'd only be a Mexican standoff if you had a gun."

"Can-"

"Not a chance."

Well, Casey was out of ideas. He could do nothing. He raised his hands behind his head-

It was at this moment that Sidney was tackled.

Vera flung her weight at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He lost his balance and fell backwards, on top of Vera, who had fallen onto her back.

He jabbed blindly at her face, elbow smacking into her nose with an ugly *thwack*.

Casey charged at the entangled duo. He knelt and grabbed Sidney's gun arm, propping it up into the sky. Sidney fired once, then twice, the blasts of sound ringing through Casey's skull as he lost his grip. Vera drove her knee into Sidney's gut, and his fingers loosened, letting the gun come clattering to the pavement.

Behind them, another voice rang out. "Sidney! It's done!" Casey swiveled his head over his shoulder, where he could see the other brother waving some small object in the air. At least he wasn't tackling Casey this time.

Sidney could hardly breathe with two people holding him down, but

he sputtered, "Do it! Now!"

Two words flashed through Casey's mind. *Bomb threats*.

"GET DOWN," he screamed, falling to his knees and covering his ears, squeezing his eyes as tight as he could before-

---

-the world erupted, a fist of air and displaced earth slamming Casey in the chest with such power that the air in his body was forcibly expelled, and he was lifted off the ground.

Instinctively his body curled, and Casey briefly became a human cannonball, tumbling end over end until his shoulders smacked into the curb.

He desperately gasped for air, but his lungs filled only with the dust of obliterated stone, and he was wrenched into fitful coughing. He scrambled over, moving onto his hands and knees. He was suffocating.

With shaking hands he grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled it over his nose, trying to filter the air. He inhaled slowly. That was better.

Gradually, he regained some control over himself. He opened his eyes, but the air was stinging them. All he could see was tawny debris in the air, and flecks of metal floating down.

"Vera," he gasped, as strongly as he could muster. "Vera!" No response.

His eyes refocused, gradually sifting through the shades of brown. A darkened shape surfaced to his left, a person clambering to their feet.

Across the street he saw what had been a building moments before. A teal and green display of garishness assembled into the shape of a holiday home. The facade was ripped clean down now, splinters littering the street.

The silhouette started to walk towards the wreck, holding something

in front of them with both hands. The gun.

Casey propped himself on his elbows, then his stinging palms, and pushed his body to his feet, joints popping with discomfort. He followed the figure. They didn't seem to notice.

They stepped over the threshold and Casey trailed behind, tip-toeing into the house.

The building was in tatters. A living room was covered in shreds of what was either destroyed modern art, or fully intact modern art appearing as intended. A shriek came from a doorway, and both Casey and the figure turned to look. The silhouette moved in.

It was an ornate bedroom, or it used to be. Half the wall along with the remains of an antique dresser was caved out into the street, and the ceiling had fallen in. On the bed, an old man was trapped, pinned beneath the rafters.

The silhouette turned, revealing the profile of Sidney's face as he raised the gun.

The reveal of his face was very convenient to Casey, who then knew exactly where to aim.

His suckerpunch smacked into Sidney's ear, sending the already wobbly man down against the wall, the gun leaving his grip once more.

Casey leaned over the bed. He could make out the man's features. He looked… familiar.

Cillian Erwan. The man he had seen just days ago. The man who had put a gun in Casey's bag without him noticing.

Evidently, he recognized Casey in kind. He coughed. "What're… what're you doing here? What's going on?"

Casey heard shouting outside. A blasting voice. *"FBI, everyone get on the ground!"* He didn't move.

Casey tried to keep his voice low. "Why did you… what did you do

to me? You made me kill him. Why? What did you have to gain?"

Erwan's face shifted. He moved back. "What're you on about?"

His breath sped up. "Your android. She gave me a gift for Regent. It turned into a gun in my backpack, and I… and I…"

Erwan interrupted him with a sick laugh. "The robot, huh?" His laugh sputtered into coughing as he inhaled dust. "You're asking the wrong guy, kid. This is them getting me too, isn't it?"

Casey furrowed his brow. "No, look, we'll… we'll get you out. I just need to find-"

Someone was at the doorway. Someone that any troublemaker in Three Portlands knew very well. **`Special Agent Kenneth Spencer`**. He was holding a gun, too.

Casey scrambled away, towards the hole in the wall.

Erwan coughed again. "About time you got here. I've been-"

His thought was ended with a bullet from Spencer's gun. Casey's eyes widened. Behind him he heard another, identical voice. *"FBI, everyone get on the ground!"*

Spencer(?) turned to Sidney, still clutching his head against the wall. Another gunshot.

Casey vaulted over the debris, his foot catching as he fell face-first back into the street. He shuffled onto his hands and knees and back up again. He started to limp across the street again. He stumbled down to his knees once more. In the corner of his eye there was another Spencer, flanked by uniformed agents and visibly confused.

"Identify yourself," Spencer said.

"Special Agent Kenneth Spencer," said Spencer.

"No…" Spencer said. "You're not. Drop your weapon and exit the building with your hands up."

"No," said Spencer. He was at the collapsed wall of the bedroom now. "*You're* not." He leveled his gun at Casey.

Casey squeezed his eyes shut as the sound of a gunshot filled his ears.

And then another. And another gunshot.

But no pain came. He opened his eyes again, and saw only red. He blinked.

There was nothing wrong with his eyes. Standing above him was a fair-haired man, arms held out in front of him. One hand drew a thin knife straight down the other forearm, and from the wound wine-dark sparks spilled, flowing around the both of them in a hollow shell. The bullets had bounced harmlessly off the buffer.

Casey stared up at him.

Adam Rowe stared back down.

"We're gonna be fine," he said, with a weak smile.

Adam knelt down, reaching with the hand that wasn't shooting energy and gripping Casey's tightly.

And then the world around them became a blur.

« Slow Animals | Hub | The End Has No End »

Autonomy, Part I

◀ previous

A mix of torrential rain and seawater pounds against the deck of *The Loose Neutron* as Agent Trauss sprints away from the stern railing and into one of the port side doors. He removes his helmet and wrings his hair out, dirty water splashing through the grate floor. Stumbling as the ship lurches, he hurries through the short grid of hallways and comes into the main cabin.

"Captain," he pants, his vest and equipment drenched and forming a puddle on the wood floor. "Captain Delacruz. There's an enormous entity trailing us. It looks large enough to damage the hull."

Delacruz turns around, bracing his thin, elderly frame against the back of his chair as he swivels. He looks flustered. "I can't handle this hurricane on autopilot, you know. I have to focus. It's pouring out there. What do you think you saw, son?"

"A cephalopod. You couldn't miss it even in this rain. It's bright orange. I saw a large section of its body. It's the size of a frigate."

The wrinkles on Delacruz's face flatten as he widens his eyes. "Has it caught up with us? If I go any faster, you won't be able to stand up out there."

"It's only a few hundred meters behind us. It's definitely getting closer. I first saw it in the binoculars about ten minutes ago. It was twice as close when I looked before coming in here."

His voice cracks underneath the rasp of his southern accent. He nods. "Alright. Go get your boy Rogers and hop on the stern guns. But do not fire until I give you the all-clear. I think we can make it lose interest if we speed up, but get on out there."

"Yes sir."

"That's 'aye captain'. Talk to me on your helmet comms once you're set up."

Trauss fakes a chuckle and does a mock-salute as he turns on his heel and dashes back out to the hallway. He ducks into the barracks room and approaches Agent Rogers, who is reading a copy of **SCP-3848** as he reclines in his cot. "Hey," Trauss starts.

"What are you all wet for?"

"I need you on the deck with me. There's a massive cephalopod trailing the ship and getting closer. Captain told us to go man the stern guns."

"Shit, alright." Rogers rolls out of bed and throws his boots on.

"You had your shoes off while we travel across a **3069** hot zone? We're getting close to the Site. This is the worst of it."

"I was trying not to be paranoid," he huffs.

"Meet me there. I need to make sure that thing isn't any closer."

"Alright. Hey, I call the 20 millimeter!" he calls out after him.

Trauss pushes his hair out of his face and puts his helmet back on, flipping the visor down and bracing himself for the conditions outside. He takes a deep breath and cranks open the starboard side hatch, rain pelting against his gear and the wetsuit underneath as he slides down the ladder and lands on the deck. He stumbles against the wind as he crosses the short distance from the ladder to the harpoon gun on the stern, taking hold of it with a gloved hand and yanking himself up into the seat.

He levels the viewfinder with his eyes and adjusts the focus, zooming in on the horizon. "Captain, I'm on the harpoon. I'm looking for it now."

"Where's Rogers?" Delacruz's voice crackles in his helmet under the sound of rushing water.

"A minute or two behind me. Stand by." He scans the horizon. "Shit,

I'm not seeing it."

"I got nothing up front, son."

The view of dark gray waves and rain suddenly changes to a blur of orange. Trauss jolts in surprise and zooms out, refocusing the lens to reveal a view of writhing, transparent tentacles thrashing in the water, their internal structure highlighted by phosphorescent orange flesh and veins. "Fuck. This thing is closer than I thought. I'm reading it at 113 meters out."

"To your left," Rogers says over the headset as he runs up. Being significantly bulkier than his coworker, he doesn't struggle in the wind as he leaps into the seat of the 20mm autocannon mounted several meters to Trauss' left.

"The entity is 110 meters out at your one o'clock."

"Tell me when to fire, Captain." Trauss can only hear Rogers over the earpiece, the sounds of the elements drowning out his voice.

"Do not fire, Agent Rogers. Maintain an awareness of the entity's position."

Trauss swivels the viewfinder onto the center of the creature's mass again. He zooms out. "75 meters."

"Taking it to 35 knots, boys."

Trauss braces his boots against the mount as the vessel accelerates, his back flat against the seat and arms straight. "65 meters."

"Why can't I fire at this thing? Clearly it sees us!"

"I said hold off, Agent!"

"60 meters."

"Approaching 40 knots."

Trauss is thankful to have no sense of scale for speed as *The Loose*

Neutron rockets across towering waves, the spray from each impact dousing the deck in cold seawater. He feels moisture start to leak into his suit around his neck. "50 meters."

"I can't go any faster than that, fellas-"

"I could fire right this second, Captain!"

"That could make things very much worse, son, I said hold off!"

"30 meters."

"Fuck!"

"30? Christ, alright, fire when ready!" the Captain yells. Trauss' earpiece screeches and whines, static fading in. The sound of automatic fire fills the air and overpowers the noise of the roaring hurricane as Trauss focuses in on where Rogers' rounds are striking the creature. Fluorescent yellow fluid bursts out of the bullet wounds before the flesh around it immediately reforms.

"Fucking expected that," Trauss mutters, knowing neither of the others can hear him. He watches the creature swoop downward and under the waves, tentacles trailing behind it.

"Hell no," Rogers mutters.

"Talk to me, boys."

"It went under the surface, Captain."

The craft lurches forward, the force pressing Trauss against the seat. *"I'm slowing to 20 knots. Get in here now."*

Trauss clambers out of his seat, slipping on the wet metal. He lands on the deck with a loud splash and makes a beeline for the closest hatch, rain covering his face visor and blurring his vision.

"Get in there," Rogers yells, opening the hatch for him. Trauss steps up onto the edge of the hatch as the craft tilts to the side without warning, putting off his balance and sending him tumbling down and sliding across the deck. His vest and gear protects most of his body

from the impact, but his helmet slams into the steel railing with a force that makes him lightheaded. He sputters and coughs as splashing seawater strikes his face.

"Don't let go!" Rogers' voice sounds distorted and choppy in Trauss' damaged helmet.

"Not planning on it," he chokes out, fingers wrapped around one of the railing's steel bars. He watches the water below him show a hint of something orange moving below the surface. The ship lurches in the opposite direction as his gloves slip, sending him flying upward in an arc and thudding back down onto the deck as the ship restabilizes. Pain shoots through his ribcage and spine before a tickling twinge in his head nullifies it. His mind fumbles through dreamlike thoughts about that being the first time his N3 implant noticeably affected him as he rolls onto his back, swaying with the boat.

Trauss stands upright on the now-level deck, barely able to see. Three orange tendrils shoot through the downpour after him. He ducks and rolls, still acutely aware of the damage done to his spine despite the N3's pain response countereffects. One of the tendrils trips him, knocking his head against the deck. He makes eye contact with Rogers as the older man exits the hatch and starts to move toward him, mouthing something in what seems like slow motion. The largest of the three tendrils wraps itself around Trauss' throat as he tries to fend off the smaller two, lifting him off the deck and flinging him over to dangle above the rushing water. His vertebrae pop, sending daggers through his back and sides as he struggles to get a hold on the creature's slick skin. The N3's response in his brain is immediate and overwhelming, flooding his limbs with numbing heat and making his head and ears throb.

"Don't panic! We'll do something, damn it!" Rogers' voice doesn't register at all as Trauss gazes at the body of the creature holding him. Its head surfaces, squid-like with two bright orange-and-black eyes, the corneas detailed and vivid. The expression in its irises conveys a sapient presence, the intelligence level of which Trauss infers he cannot fully understand. It tightens its appendage around his neck, black spots starting to fade in from the edges of his vision. He hears more rapid gunfire from the ship, but the anomaly's grip

doesn't falter. He loses sensation in his feet and fingers, pulse thumping slowly. One of the other men says something through his headset, but he can't parse the sentence, and can only let out a small moan in response. The last thing he sees before his vision fades is the anomaly's eye, its pupil the size of his head, staring straight into him as his consciousness drains from his body.

"There are those of us who are the Foundation, and there are those of us who serve it."

Trauss opens his eyes. They're sticky, as if he's been sleeping for ages. White light pierces his mind as he tries to lift his head.

"Do you know which side of that line you're on? Do you want to know which side of that line you're on?"

Trauss sits upright and looks for the speaker. Keeping his eyes open takes a great amount of effort; he recognizes from that and from the lack of sensation in his legs that he must be dreaming. He blinks thrice and focuses on the man in front of him: someone older than him, wearing a three-piece black suit, a black bar obscuring his eyes regardless of what angle his head is tilted or how he moves. Trauss tries to speak, but no sound comes out, and he finds that he can't think to formulate a sentence anyway. "Dreaming?" he mouths. The noise that comes out sounds like it's being produced underwater.

The man makes the closest thing to eye contact that he can, head centered behind the redaction. "Do you know who you are?"

He tries to answer, but the more he processes his surroundings, the more his interpretation falls apart; he doesn't see his body even when he looks down, and he doesn't have a neck to tilt down in the first place. The man in front of him is sitting at a desk, but behind it is an expanse of textureless gray space. The light is ambient with no source and stark white.

"It appears you can't stay at this time." he tilts his head down to look at his watch. "I hope to see you again." Trauss catches a glimpse of its face, and the symbol displayed on it sends a spike of pain through his head.

He blinks and the phantom sensation of the eyes he used to have thuds dully in what his mind remembers of his nerve endings. *Dreaming,* he thinks, and allows the wave of incomprehensible nothingness to overtake him.

Trauss is aware that he's conscious before his body is, and he spends several seconds panicking internally when it won't respond. The darkness shrouding him lifts when someone removes the black cloth from his face. He shakes his head and squints in the fluorescent lighting, making out three people standing around the table on which he's spread out.

"Holy shit," one of the researchers says under her breath.

"H- Uh, hi," he stammers, clearing his throat as he sits upright. His head reels. "What's happened?"

"Will you state your identification?"

"C-51174. Cyrus Trauss, Site-42. Er, I mean- well, that's where I'm from." He looks down at himself, wondering why he's wearing a D-class jumpsuit. He takes in the room around him, knowing that he's never been here before; the ceilings are low and cluttered with arrays of pipes and wires, and the floor and walls are composed of an unfamiliar matte gray material. The doorway behind the researchers is narrow and rounded at the edges, a stripe of white LEDs running around its perimeter.

One of the two women steps forward. "Agent Trauss. Welcome to Lunar Area-32."

He stares, combing through his memories internally. He had left Site-42 on *The Loose Neutron.* It had gone fairly smoothly for several hours. He had seen something and sprinted to tell the Captain… and then what?

"We know you may be having trouble processing this." Her voice is clearer than most, and she enunciates a little too well, making her appear almost robotic. Trauss shudders and grips the edge of the table. His body feels disproportionate and heavy in a way he can't

place. "There was an accident involving an unknown anomalous entity released by SCP-3069. You were killed in action by this entity at 17:20 on July 4th, 2041."

He gulps, his mouth dry.

"You are a copy of Agent Trauss' consciousness, saved via his PII at 17:08 on July 4th, 2041. You have his personality, memories, and certifications. There is no aspect of the human brain that the PII cannot translate into ED-K++ and save as a digital file. You are Agent Trauss, fully, minus twelve minutes of memories and your original body."

He feels sick, the straightforward nature of her explanation feeling like a punch to the gut. "I- I'm dead. I died."

"That body died, but *you* are right here and alive in another body."

"This- is a D-class. You amnesticized a D-class and put me in their body."

The man speaks up. "No. It's stranger than that," he coughs, tone toeing the line between sardonic and grave. "Certainly. That body has 95 percent of your original DNA, and is technically only sixty days old, though the estimated equivalent age based on health and appearance is 30 years. Using technology similar to that of SCP-2000, we are capable of cloning-"

"Oh God. Oh, fuck." He leans forward and motions at the trash can sitting behind the woman who had been speaking. She understands and hands it to him quickly, looking to the side as he vomits up bile and a fluorescent blue substance.

"That's just preserval fluid. It's not possible to **`get it all out`** until the body is autonomous and capable of digestion and regurgitation."

He nods, wishing she would stop talking. Any and all sensory input makes his inner ear ache and throb. "Okay."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes. Just give me a minute."

"Of course. Take all the recovery time you need. If you want, we can wait out-"

"No, no," he stammers, hands shaking. "Sorry, I just- don't want to be alone right now." His breath catches in his throat as if he's about to cry, which he feels he hasn't done in years. He tries to distract himself, sniffing and wiping away the first leak of a tear. "What is today?"

"September 7th, 2041."

He freezes up. "It's been two months? What was I doing for two months?"

The leading researcher crosses her hands at the wrists and looks at him sympathetically. "'You' were a file named 51174.edk on that computer's hard drive for two months." She gestures to the touchscreen monitor array mounted on the wall beside her. "We had to have time to synthesize that body after getting the news that only two of Directive A-42's assignments made it to Site-3069. That script was then loaded into the body you currently occupy approximately 20 minutes ago."

"This body has the same PII as my real one?"

"Actually, one far more advanced. You had the N3, and this is the N4."

"What's the difference?" he rasps, throat burning.

"You'll be provided with a copy of the schematic when you are briefed tomorrow."

He nods, another wave of nausea overtaking him. When his vision blackens and his head reels, he makes the decision to lie back down. He's not certain of whether his body's shaking is because of temperature or emotional distress, but it's overwhelming and he soon finds himself losing consciousness again. The lead researcher says something about making sure he has enough protein in his diet as the room spins out of view and his head thuds against the steel

table.

DIRECTIVE A-42

Ad Astra Per Aspera

Part II

Avatara

The best way to conquer one's enemies is to befriend them.

"We sent twelve operatives into that farmhouse and never heard from them again. The robots we sent in shut down before getting through the door. We established a perimeter around the house and now everyone within a twenty-meter radius looks like they stitched tumours to their faces. The damn place is a meatgrinder."

"Well, the 'meatgrinder' is expanding. We can't blow it up without finding out what's inside; we both remember Kodiak. Somebody's got to go in and investigate."

"Who's crazy enough to knowingly kill themselves?"

"… Get Tau-5."

The first embraced the darkness blissfully. The second succumbed without resistance. The third failed to remain conscious. The fourth died clutching her chest and writhing.

"Now, this is a type of anomaly we haven't really dealt with before, so we're field-testing some new equipment. It's based on Prometheus Labs technology; essentially, the device generates some kind of field that forces cells inside to remain in a G0 stage regardless of outside influences. Stops cancer and other mutations cold, but also prevents healing. We don't really know what… kind of field it is… but we're pretty sure that whatever it is, it'll also stop your gear from shorting out," the technician explained, handing the four of them large, bulky rucksacks.

The four members of **Samsara** nodded, peering at the complicated-looking machinery buzzing within the packs.

"Hey be careful with that, okay! No sudden bumps or jerks. It's kind of volatile. We couldn't even test it on D-Class without sending Ethics into conniptions, so…" the technician floundered.

"You're testing it on us?" Irantu supplied.

"Uh… I wouldn't put it like… but uh… yeah?"

"Okay."

Nanku looked inside her rucksack again and flipped the switch on the device. It detonated with a muffled **CRUMP**.

She looked up. The bones on the left side of her face had fused together; chunks of eye nestled in the bloody crater that remained of her nose.

"I think something got in my eye…"

The technician splattered the remains of her face with vomit. It took her several seconds to start wiping away the stomach acid and remains of tuna salad. "Oh… er, ugh, ew, ew! That's disgusting!" she belatedly wheezed.

"That was good. You sounded normal and disgusted there," Irantu complemented her.

"Thank you!" she responded, forcing a note of levity into her voice.

The technician kept heaving even after his breakfast and pre-lunch snack had ended up on the ground.

The first time they were born, they lay curled within pink, fluid-filled plastic wombs. They could breathe. They could gargle out words through the respirators. They could sense the warmth of the fluid. They could perform integration and derivation in their mind. They could not feel.

The scientists observing them cheered briefly and then began scribbling notes on their PDAs.

The fourth time they were born was the first time they were defective: resembling horrific infantine harlequins. The first woke up and began exploring the tiny confines of her womb, eager to experience rebirth. The second woke up silently, suckling the artificial teats within the small pink spheres. The third dreamed of emptiness, basking in the muffled lub-dub, lub-dub *of his environment. The fourth screamed, beating her underdeveloped, scaled fists pathetically against the hard plastic shell.*

Far above them, men and women in stark white coats scribbled down notes before activating the womb sterilizers.

Irantu peered inside the den of the farmhouse, shotgun at the ready. The hairs on his neck stood up as the anomaly in the house clashed with the device strapped to his back. Nanku's limbs were already swollen with malignant tissue. She pulled out her knife and started sawing away as quietly as she could, practicing her winces when she punctured noncancerous flesh.

His face unriddled with bullets or tumors, Irantu sidled into the den. Munru followed, quickly moving to the other side of the room. Onru entered third, and finally Nanku, who had swapped her knife for a pistol.

A chant in an unclear language wafted down from upstairs. Irantu peered around the door into the hallway and got his first glimpse of a corpse blocking the hall.

The squad moved forward carefully, guns trained on the bubbling mass of flesh dressed in Foundation-issue body armor. Irantu poked it with the barrel of the shotgun.

It failed to react.

"Dead," he called back quietly.

As they swept the kitchen, living room, dining room, and bathroom, the squad took note of the corpses in each room, draped over furniture like demented throw pillows.

"They're all pointing in the same direction," Nanku mumbled, voice muffled by the neoplasms stuffing her cheeks.

"It must have some significance with the voices upstairs. All ground rooms clear?" Irantu asked.

Onru nodded.

Irantu pulled out his radio and briefly called in.

"Ground floor is clear. Have found six bodies; all MTF. All covered in tumours similar to the bodies discovered outside. Moving to second floor."

The second floor rooms were also devoid of live bodies.

"Adorable," Munru commented, looking at a pulsating mass on a child's rocket-shaped bed.

"Wrong emotion, I think…" Nanku garbled, shearing off the tumors that had sprouted around her face and subsequently stuffing them into her mouth. "Hm, these taste like lady fingers."

"Let me see?"

"Over here," Irantu hissed from the hallway. Munru and Nanku immediately shut up and aimed their weapons at the offending door. Five blobs of flesh lay in front of it, all propped in positions suggesting that they died trying to reach the knob.

"The chanting is coming from within. I can only hear one voice. This door is the only entry within, so I suggest we flood it."

"Understood," Munru nodded. The rest of the squad turned and plugged their ears as he unclipped a flashbang from his belt, kicked open the door, and lobbed it inside with one smooth movement.

The twelfth time was also the thirteenth. Two copies of each were grown and uploaded with the memories and thoughts of the original, then placed in ostensibly private rooms to have a discussion. Faced with each other, they began the session by discussing the nature of

their rebirth and what this meant for the nature of consciousness. They concluded the session by reassuring each other that it was merely an experiment and form of self-gratification.

These results were noted down with interest by the fourteenth.

They poured into the bedroom, weapons up and eyes locked on the figure chanting on the bed at the far end. Its features lay hidden beneath a twisted mass of cancerous flesh bulging from under a ratty T-shirt and jeans, like an obese pin-up model.

PROVIDE HIM YOUR FLESH

Irantu prodded the mass with the barrel of his shotgun, which did nothing except make it chant slightly faster. His radio crackled to life.

"What's your status?"

"Found the source of the anomaly," he replied. "Large conical mass of cancerous tissue, about one meter tall. Chanting in an unknown language. Appears to have been human."

"Understood. We're talking to some researchers now… okay. You are authorized to neutralize the threat. Your guns should do the trick. Hurry. The anomaly is expanding at an increased rate."

"Confirmed," Irantu noted. He motioned for the group to take a few steps back and fired a few tentative rounds into the mass, which all ricocheted off and into the walls.

SATE ITS THIRST

Irantu looked at the mass, scooped up some brain and marrow lying around, and coated his glove in it. This time he was able to make a dent in the mass.

GIVE IT YOUR FLESH THAT HE MAY MAKE YOU GODS

Irantu thought for a moment. "Nanku, hand me your pistol."

She obediently stepped forward and handed it over.

Irantu emptied the magazine into her neck. Even before she could topple over, he had begun hacking away at her neck sinews with his combat knife. Onru and Munru helped him finish decapitating her.

As the rest of the squad evacuated the room, he took a frag grenade from Nanku's belt, stuffed it into her mouth, pulled the pin, and slammed her head deep into the cancerous mass in a single smooth motion. Then he dove out of the room.

The gigantic neoplasmic mass exploded, coating the room in fragments of muscle, intestine, brain tissue, and bone marrow.

Irantu stood up and spoke into his radio. "Anomaly neutralized, over."

His radio crackled to life. "The effect has ceased spreading outside. Anomaly confirmed neutralized. What's your status, over?"

"Nanku is dead. Rest of us are unharmed, over."

"Understood. Exit the structure immediately; we're burning in T minus five minutes, over."

TAKE THE **S**ACRED TOME

Munru stepped back into the room and made for the remains of the anomaly, shoveling away detritus until he found a small, meat-stained leather book buried underneath. He stowed it into his uniform.

The end came very suddenly, when everyone found themselves facing the barrels of a group of peeved religious fundamentalists.

The first was neutralized. The second was eliminated. The third was executed. The fourth was slaughtered. Of the few that escaped being lined against the wall, almost none survived the explosion that leveled the facility.

Several meters underground, four backup vats whirred to life, orchestrated by a slightly damaged cloner containing four men and women who had sacrificed their lives for immortality.

They died in that machine; lives, loves, thoughts, feelings, the ability to create, and their humanity erased by a damaged hard drive.

The three of them were poring over the book when Nanku was escorted into their cell. The side of her head was slightly dented, with a few stitches and a discolored patch indicating where they'd grafted bone from an earlier, aborted incarnation.

"Hello!" she greeted them.

"Quiet," Munru scolded her.

"What are… you reading?"

"A book we found in your body."

"What's it… about?"

"How to 'summon' a god…"

Munru tried and failed to make air quotations.

"It's a good book."

"They let you… keep it?"

"Nobody said anything about it."

"Can I read it… with you?"

"We're almost done. We've been reading for two weeks."

"Can I read what's left?"

The bodies were grown but there was nothing to inhabit them. The intelligence had died in the machine's broken drives. All that remained were a single template, two genders, and four names.

Machines are nothing if not good at arithmetic. Minds are nothing if not good at creation. Bodies are nothing. One template plus one name plus one gender plus one body equals one being. One being

equals one-fourth of the available bodies. Four beings equals one completed task.

Simple arithmetic.

A machine is nothing if not good at completing tasks.

"…It's a good book."

"Maybe we could… visit the place in the book?"

"We could learn more about acting like people."

"Can we?"

A damaged wall crumbled as a group of black-clad men and women blasted through into the cloning chamber. Behind them was the last surviving handler.

"What are we looking at here, Doctor?" asked one of the black-clad women, peering at the naked, almost featureless fleshy shells within.

"A former project that almost got me killed a decade ago. I think it'll prove a useful asset."

« Avatara | **GRANT REQUEST FOR INVESTIGATING...** »

Ave Imperator

« Ave Imperator | **Public Static Void** »

"I can't fucking do this any more, Jon."

Jonathan Remes looks at his friend, sprawled out on his desk amid a mountain of paperwork. Several chipped mugs, all partially full of cold coffee, are arranged on the surfaces surrounding him, and a long-discarded sandwich appears to be in the process of developing sentient life from the confines of its half-buried Tupperware box. A soft moan escapes the figure's lips.

"Look, I'm sure it's not that bad. You've had worse assignments, right? Archival work should be a breeze compared to the shit you've put up with over the years."

Agent Donovan raises his head, bloodshot eyes locking with Remes'. A post-it note peels slowly down his cheek. He makes a sound that may have been a chuckle, but could just have easily been the death rattle of a long-suffering member of the special, *final* type of hospital ward.

"A breeze, Jon? A fucking breeze? Right, of course, how could I have been so stupid. Who needs sleep, or a social life or, you know, proper meals, when your work is a god damn *breeze*? Thanks for the pep talk Jonny, I'm feeling oh-so-much better now. Cheers."

"Alright, it's not the easiest job in the world, but other people have-"

A thump stops Remes in his tracks. Like a zombie emerging from a crypt, Donovan stands before him, bony hands buried deep in the snowy heaps that blanketed the desk. As he stumbles upright, Remes' eyes can't help tracking the movement of his swinging arm, which is now noticeably gripping a letter-opener. Who even uses letter-openers any more? Jon had always assumed they just sort of materialised around old people, like tea cosies and those strange

patterned slippers that always seemed worn-out, even when new. It seemed funny at the time — not so much now.

"Don't fucking tell me what other people have, Jon. Other people, " *Swing, swing, slicing through the air.* "Don't have to deal with this shit. They assume it's magically done by people with crisp white lab-coats and acres of free time, on sleek computers with state-of-the art word processors. Not by a former MTF commander with **a penchant for skim reading**, shut away in a dingy office with no natural light and a serious mould problem. That never even crosses their goddamn *minds*."

"Listen Donny, I-"

Swing.

"Don't fucking call me that."

"…Fine, Donovan. Someone's got to do it, right? At least you're not being shot at, or trapped in some other dimension."

For a moment, the Agent's face goes blank. His eye twitches, and a suspicion of a tear begins to form.

"I see. When you put it like that, I suppose I should be counting my blessings, right? Is that it?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

His breathing becomes ragged and deep, gulping great lungfuls of air. Without breaking eye contact, he reaches behind him and retrieves a stack of tea-stained papers.

"Do you know what this is?"

The swinging of the letter-opener coincides with a heartfelt thrust towards Remes — he grips the papers instinctively.

"Don't fucking answer, I know you don't. It's SCP-9611, or rather, all three of them. All assigned to the same number, and we haven't even opened the 7000-block yet. This", he spits, grasping an apparently blank sheet of laminated card, "is URA-0032. An un-

registered anomaly for which the accuracy of its documentation depends on both the predicted life of the medium and the visibility to a casual observer. The preliminary report, which I hold before you like the motherfucking Mona Lisa, is written in lemon juice and triple-coated in high-strength plastic. It's also completely inaccurate. I've dealt with anafabulae, antiphysics, and self-referential pictograms. I've lost colleagues and friends to window memes, inkwells, digitisation and Bad Text Data Dumps. Now it's just me and some part-timers who don't know their ass from an appendix."

"Hey, I know my ass from a-"

Donovan waves him into silence.

"There are things in this pile that would make you turn to stone if you read them backwards. I can name nine, anomalies writ, composed bit-by-bit, in **`half-complete rhyme`**. That wasn't necessary by the way, I just felt like letting my fucking creative spirit out." He gestures around the room with his non-weaponised hand. "I don't get much opportunity to, as you can probably guess. But do you know what really gets my goat? What really pushes me over the edge?"

Remes doesn't, and makes the mistake of saying so.

"Hah! No, no why would you. Why the *fuck* would you. Guess I'll have to show you myself. It's above your clearance, probably, but it's not like they'll be able to sanction me any more than they're already going to." He turns and pulls a particularly thick wad of stationery from a nearby shelf, knocking over, as he does, an inoffensive potted plant whose thick waxy leaves somehow contrived to look more fake than the plastic shrub in the hall outside. "Here. Read it. I can wait."

09/09/1999

Project Proposal PP-V77R/011 ("Project Zion"):
Application for increased use of anomalous phenomena to facilitate well-being and skill amongst staff.

Project Lead:

Additional Staff: [REDACTED]

Summary: "It is known that **`certain Foundation assets`** have extremely beneficial properties, and have long been available for use in projects, tests, and other such activities. Additional anomalies have seen use as a method of rejuvenating and instructing staff, to great effect — analysis shows that the gain in productivity and morale from **`the Duck Pond`** alone far outweighs the combined damage from all our 'misguided' projects."

"However, in recent years an unfortunate stigma has arisen surrounding these practises: namely, that such protocols represent a relic of a bygone era, and should no longer be considered 'standard'. We aim to change this, utilising, modifying, re-purposing and in some cases *creating* Safe-class anomalies specifically for use by personnel. We attach a full specification alongside this document, but you can rest assured all members of staff, from field agents to archivists, have been taken into account. We are certain we can provide training regimens to help skill and reskill all positions within the Foundation hierarchy."

Status: APPROVED [7/6]

"…Oh my god"

"You see? You *see*? I've spent two and a half years cleaning up this mess, and now, with the masquerade balanced more precariously than ever before, they want to create *more*. More fucking documents to file away to *rot*. Well, I'm not standing for it. I'm getting out, Jon, while I still have the will to live. I'm fucking done."

"Yeah, thatt[t]-t**ta[t]-t#|; . .-. .-. --- .-.//#**"

Donovan's eyes widen and he takes a step back, hands reaching out for a now-wireframe table than no longer supports his weight. The letter opener begins to drift sideways through the wall before

flickering out of existence.

"What the *fuck*?"

Remes' head rotates ninety degrees, and his left arm fades out of view. The walls of the office shrink and dwindle to nothing, and suddenly Donovan is standing, confused and alone, in a large sandy… arena? Like something out of a film, except the stands are filled with strange figures that seem to jerk and stutter and… oh no. Oh dear god, no. What's left of Remes' facsimile begins to recite messages in a strange monotonous tone that seems strangley at odds with its freakish, distended jaw.

"**Status: FAILED. Loyalty value below acceptable levels. Archival proficiency: 56%.**"

The agent's vision starts to dim.

"**Recommended action: FULL RESTART. Awaiting confirmation.**"

Donovan thinks he hears a distant voice echo, but he can't make out any words.

"**Confirmation received. Total cycles: [194/256]. Beginning restart of archival_duties_proficiency_training(2).slt.**"

A pause. Don's vision is too darkened to make out the scene around him, and he already feels himself forgetting his three years… service? Does it count as service if you spend it locked inside a hijacked extradimensional battle programme? Knowing them, the bastards probably fed him some real paperwork while he was under. You can always trust the bureaucrats to make the most of a horrific situation. Not like it matters, really. His muscles all tense at once and somehow the darkness seems to come into focus around him.

"**Loop cycle [195/256] commenced. Beginning adversary simulation. `Sweet dreams`.**"

The darkness switches off, and he's left in nothing.

"Don, are you okay?"

"J- Jonny? That's you, right?"

"Sure is. Looked like you passed out for a moment. Paperwork, am I right?"

"Hah, yeah." He clutches his forehead and frowns. "I know it sounds weird, but I just had the strangest dream."

Avian Anthology I

Timeless Substrate | The Noosphere

Thoth peered into the **Noosphere** with an astute curiosity. He glanced down at the ocean of minds: a whirlpool of purple, pink, green, and blue specks, laid out across an absurd distance. He looked up and he saw the **Great Selachian, Akheilos**, scouring the void for him. The Great Starfish continued to dangle from an infinitesimal tendril, ominously inching onward from extradimensional space. Even now, Thoth feared the Great Starfish; it might be the only thing that could interfere with his plans.

YHWH encompassed what seemed like the entirety of the mind-filled expanse. If Thoth executed his plans at the wrong time, YHWH would strike him down instantly and bar him from prosperity until the end of time. Luckily, YHWH would soon find himself **busy with something**.

As Thoth sat in his perch, a wave of memories conjured up by the Noosphere washed over him. One hundred billion memories tainted by 200,000 years of vengeance, dread, euphoria, grief, avarice… iridescent crystals of mind-stuff swirling viciously: the void's never-ending cycle of fermentation and dispersal. They vibrated him to his core. If he was a mortal, like that red speck, Thoth's perch would be shambles. His own mind would be a confluence of rogue personalities, thoughts, and concepts, ripping him away piece by piece.

Thoth counted down the ages like seconds.

4… 3… 2… 1…

At once, the sweet radiance of the Noosphere dimmed. Thoth felt a great weight evaporating into the darkness, like a bowling ball being removed from a trampoline. He still had Akheilos to worry about,

but while Akheilos excelled in strength, Thoth was all speed. He peered across the Noosphere at his target: a full human that had newly manifested itself inside of the Noosphere, susceptible to an attack.

As Thoth extended a singular talon towards him, Akheilos was alerted to his position and took pursuit. Thoth soared as fast as he could over in a certain direction. Akheilos followed him closely.

Finally, Thoth came to the pale, bald man in an orange jumpsuit. He wasn't merely a speck like the other minds; he was fully immersed in the Noosphere, doused in with the unyielding current. Thoth directed his weapon into the man's mind before flying away. In one fell swoop, the weapon cocked, then fired into the head of humankind.

Thoth softly cackled to himself as he watched the tsunami of orange spread across the planet of minds. As it spread, he shuddered, energy flowing into him. The personalities of the billions of people below supplied his damaged form with power. He looked into the void and saw the **`blue planetoid`** that he called home, glittering in the sky with its old, tired minds. Thoth had made the risky journey into meatspace, across the Noosphere to Earth. He'd almost been winked out of existence in the process.

He'd be back there soon.

Akheilos was troublesome; Thoth still had to stay wary of a surprise attack from the now-weakening shark. However, in a one-on-one confrontation, he could still easily overpower Akheilos and extinguish him permanently. Thoth kept a glance at the shark on the border of the Noosphere. The shark was avoiding Thoth like a wild animal avoiding a flame.

The planet was now more orange than not. Thoth decided that it was time to initiate the next part of his plan. The scientists at the Foundation had just now started studying a videotape from his home planet. In a certain spot, two minds turned red.

Like turning the key in a car to start the ignition, he ignited the

crimson fire with a swoop of his wing. It started to radiate, and Thoth basked in the warmth of the newly brainwashed human populace. He anticipated the cawing.

What had made it so *easy* to achieve? The answer is more mundane than would be expected for such a complex problem: there's a vulnerability implanted in the human mind. A deeply ingrained need, woven into society. The need to share, communicate, and be heard. Humans have no defence for this. Why would they? Never before had *acceptance* been weaponized.

With birds as the vector and minds as the medium, that singular idea spread so rapidly that nobody could even begin to retaliate. More virulent than the common cold, most difficult to cure. Like a virus, once it had latched itself deep within, its only directive was to spread—anywhere there was camaraderie, there was the bird.

To not be infected with the bird meme was to be ostracised. Everyone, at some basal, guttural level, *wanted* to be a part of this phenomenon. They *wanted* to fit in. When a single, simple, succinct word triggered all humans to join hands as one, what hope did they have?

Birds had become the only thing on the brain. And when humanity realized what it was doomed to become, it convulsed, grasping its collective head one by one. Millions of individuals fell to their knees, screaming to the heavens, tearing out their hair as their eyes bulged. Slowly, but surely, all were affected. All had become equal.

The cawing came.

While some people were more naturally resistant to the meme, it was impossible to fully ignore something so ridiculous. The more they gazed into this abyss, the more it gazed back. Once inside, the idea stuck. Everyone is forced to follow the current eventually. The singularity was not technology. It was birds. And the black hole consumes all in the end…

August 2nd, 2018 | New York City

Or… does it?

As the sun descended, two silhouettes stood abreast, punctuated by the nearly lifeless husk of a massive whale. The silhouette on the right: an armoured human, towering a lofty two meters tall. The silhouette on the left: a pelican bird, barely a meter in height, yet somehow seeming more composed than the human.

Two seagulls and one pelican stood nearby, taking glimpses from behind the pelican in front, waiting for the cue to attack.

"If you're willing to supply some muscle for our war, we will help you fight yours. That means full co-operation on both sides. Deal?" said the human. His name was Quinn Griffith, Captain of an elite unit of shark-punchers.

The pelican paused for an uncomfortable amount of time, shrugging its wings back as it eyed the human intently. And then, a clearly modulated yet unmistakably Avian voice spoke. "Deal," said the bird through a translation device. Her name was Keshrayuth, leader of an equally elite unit of birds fighting to uphold the veil of normalcy that now hung in tatters.

"Keshrayuth, what are you doing?" interjected Quibba, the second pelican. "We have no clue who this one and his team are, aside from the fact that they’re dangerous, and screwed with our efforts to keep the world ordered in the first hour they’ve been here."

Keshrayuth shook her head, her bill flopping about. "How, exactly, have we gone about fixing things as of late, Quibba? I understand this one is violent, perhaps ridiculously so, but this is the only hope we have had in months. It won't to be cast aside, and I certainly won’t stand for that. Neither would Hoygull. In fact—" she turned around, "—the language of violence these ones communicate with could be the perfect key to finally gaining the upper hand on Thoth."

"I’m sorry, who is this ‘thot’ you keep mentioning? Like, am I missing something here?" Quinn said as he awkwardly toyed with the helmet in his shaky hands.

Keshrayuth sighed, her bill once again floundering as her head shook.

"I'm not trying to make a joke here! Come on, my team and I had a long journey. We've been away from home for months, fighting a war against a Deviant enemy we know next to nothing about. It would help if *someone*, anyone, explained what the hell was going on. Just once," said Quinn. "I mean, if we're going to be a team, we should gain some common ground here."

"Alright, alright. What is your name, human?"

"I'm Quinn. The rest of my team's in our, uh…" Quinn cleared his throat. "Inside this giant whale. That's where my team is."

Quibba shot a terrified look at the leviathan towering over him. "They're in that whale? Did they get eaten? Oh my god."

"No, they're alive. The whale's on our side too. Here, let me show you." Quinn placed a hand on the whale's damaged fin. Immediately, the ground began to vibrate as a whalesong coursed through it. All four members of Eta-4 jumped back.

"Wakey wakey, Gægr. I have some new friends I need to show you."

August 12th, 2018 | Day | Site-18, somewhere in Southern California

A few days ago, a supernova of blue exploded into the skies. Ever since, the Avian Division busied itself with plans of evacuation (now that the world had *officially* ended) but had only been able to devote a few personnel to that plan. Amidst the hustle and bustle, Dr Frederick Hoygull's mind was haunted by a single thought:

Migration.

He flew down through specially designed vents at the base of Site-18. The vents entered into an airlock, where MTF-Eta-4 ("Begone Thoth") was perched. Quibbs was pecking himself clean. Kesh was watching with disgust; she was one of the more humanized birds in the room. Linda Duck and James Crowl, the two

birds with combat experience, who had changed their names to better conform to Foundation standards, looked straight ahead, though Hoygull could see Crowl eyeing the shark punchers with some suspicion. **MFT CHARYBDIS** argued with one another on the other side of the room.

The shark punchers were an anomaly in and of themselves. Hoygull found himself stopping to admire their muscular biceps. He shook his head and began to speak to Quinn. "While the Avian Division manages our contingency plans, I trust you'll be busy with Operation: DIVINE RUSE?"

"Jaedan and Haruki have something under their sleeves. They'll be the ones handling the operation. Leah and I are gonna escort you to the ship. Don't even get your feathers in a bunch," laughed Quinn, before he choked on the awkward realization that this figure of speech didn't exactly work on a bird. Leah shuffled away from Quinn, leaving him to bask in his awkwardness alone.

Hoygull intently stared at Quinn for a moment that lasted an eternity. Suddenly, a klaxon wailed from the other side of the room. Hoygull nodded before quickly waddling to the other side of the room. He swiped a clearance card across a nearby door lock to open the doorway to the chamber beyond. The room became silent as the door slowly slid open.

SCP-2785, the source of the alarm, sat inside. He'd recently undergone an upgrade, courtesy of Haruki, the tech expert of MFT CHARYBDIS. He now had several antennas sticking out of him, and was furnished with a helping of brass, giving him a golden sheen. This was all done, of course, so SCP-2785 would be more receptive to not only radio signals but significant events in the Noosphere. Hoygull counted on him as an advantage Thoth couldn't possibly know about.

"I'm… I'm getting air-information!" SCP-2785 said, using his made-up term for radio waves. "There's a voice in it, this time!"

"So…? We haven't got all day. Play it for us," said Quinn.

SCP-2785 closed his eyes. Sounds emitted from an internal speaker

Haruki had installed inside of him. The speaker erupted in volume, sounding more like a tuba than a speaker. The sound reminded Hoygull of when he would sit down with Researcher Calvin and watch those odd orchestras on the TV.

"Greetings, to whom this concerns," said the voice. The voice was deep, obviously male, but he sounded like he was trying to keep calm in the face of fear. "This is General Tarland of the Global Occult Coalition."

Hoygull fumbled with his clearance card before dropping both it *and* his translation device. He flapped his right wing, motioning to Quibba, pausing, then covering his face. *Isolate that signal, dammit* he thought furiously to himself.

"My men and I are currently stationed inside of Bunker Alpha-5," continued Tarland, "five miles south of the Mojave Desert. It seems that the statues have forced their way through an unsealed access shaft, and are currently commencing a full-scale assault on our bunker."

"Wait, statues?" replied Haruki. "Wait, is he talking about **`that god-ugly Deviant sculpture`**?"

"No," said Duck, speaking through her translation device, "it's like, the bird-men outside aren't heavy enough when it comes to fighting armed resiings of Thoth." The translation device tended to stumble across grammar and some words; hers wasn't as up-to-date as the informational logistics aspect of Eta-4 comprised solely of Kesh. "Thoth told his followers to make them."

Haruki nodded. SCP-2785 continued to broadcast.

"Fortunately, we have an ace up our sleeves: Project HYPERION. A missile to be fired into one of the Ways, equipped with enough hostile memes to obliterate KTE-4581 and all affected subjects. Unfortunately, it's in a base underneath the city of Las Vegas, and the bastards killed the strike team we sent to get it. It looks like we're going to perish before we get the opportunity to fire it.

"Hopefully, somebody gets this message. Maybe it's the Foundation.

Maybe it's the Insurgency. Maybe it's one of the isolated groups of survivors. There's a shed on the outskirts of Las Vegas marked with a seven-pronged star. It's an entrance to the HYPERION facility."

Tarland paused; over the static of the radio, Hoygull could hear some form of commotion behind them. He sighs before continuing. "The statues have entered the facility. We're out of men to fight them. If you're hearing this, get to HYPERION. It's humanity's last hope. This is General Tarland, signing off."

"Medila, bless us," muttered Crowl.

"That's the end of the message," said SCP-2785, "but I'm getting more air-information! This time, there's a lot of dots."

"How many dots?" questioned Keshrayuth.

"Well, one, two, three…" replied SCP-2785, eventually fading into a murmur. "Uh, what number is higher than eighty-six?"

Hoygull squawked with considerable distress.

"Dots? Make yourself more clear, you hunk of junk," demanded Quinn.

"Robot is connected to the AEDS—Advance Enemy Detection System, " replied Duck, "there are statues outside of the base."

"AEDS… oh, you mean the AESD!" replied Quinn, "the Advance Enemy *Selachian* Detector!"

"We cannot fight all of them," said Keshrayuth. "It's nine against eighty-seven."

"Oh, I know! Why don’t we take the site’s emergency submarine?" Jaedan asked.

"That's… what? We don't have that," replied Crowl, purposely avoiding the massive amount of effort that would be required to get the damned translator to understand the concept of a submarine. "We do have train rail going from here to Site-17. It is next to Vegas."

"But it's lacking an energy source," said Quibba, "Bird-brains took it down. I'm surprised they didn't nuke themselves to hell. If we get the power working, we can leave. Can anybody fix it?

"I'll… be a bit preoccupied," replied Haruki. She failed to mention Operation: DIVINE RUSE; if Hoygull told Eta-4 they'd have protested. "Sorry."

"Oh, me, me, me, me, me!" replied SCP-2785.

"Okay," replied Quibba. "There's a mounted grenade launcher on the next floor. I'll use that. Hoygull, can you help him?" He really wanted Hoygull to make sure 2785 didn't mess anything up; the soda fountain incident still burned fresh into Quibba's mind. He jumped down from his perch. "The rest of us'll battle the statues. Here, the armoury's this way." He led the others towards a second door on the right, which opened to a stairwell.

Hoygull turned to Haruki and Jaedan, who were staying behind to enact Operation: DIVINE RUSE. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

"Come on, bird-man. You can trust us," said Jaedan as he carelessly jumped into his powered armour. Hoygull left before another word could be said.

Hoygull let himself taste the dry, dusty air of the battlefield. In front of him, the remaining fifty birds left in the Avian Division held their ground with various types of tripod-mounted grenade launchers, modified to make them easier to use with wings instead of hands. Up at the top of the spire that marked the location of Site-18, he saw Quibba piloting a larger, more powerful grenade launcher to clear out large crowds of statues. Hoygull himself had a modified combat shotgun loaded with slugs for protection, although he suspected that they'd be useless against the onslaught of the statues.

The statues continued on, their onslaught slow, but unyielding. They'd be indistinguishable from the normal statues that littered the world; some even still wore the fake metal clothes and hats of their former forms. However, they had bird heads, bird wings, and the

desire to kill.

Judging from the reports he'd gotten back of the scout patrols that'd gotten ambushed by the statues, they relied on brute force and not much else. Hoygull didn't want to find out anything more.

After the statues marched into the range of the grenade launcher, Quibba fired a grenade. The explosion left a crater in the ground and ten or so statues dead. As if on cue, the remainder of the Avian Division began to fire their grenades into the crowd. The explosions of the shells made a sound equivalent to a thousand jet engines. Hoygull was glad that he had given all of his troops earmuffs.

After witnessing the initial barrage, Hoygull turned and went back into the site. He needed to make sure he had a ride out of here.

"You see, if you want the generator to work," repeated Hoygull, "you have to make sure all the wires are connected."

SCP-2785 looked at him with those eyes that seemed to convey the opposite of understanding. "Why?" he postulated.

"You know how I told you about electricity? Well, you need the wires to carry it, like how pipes carry water around. You know how pipes work, right?"

SCP-2785 nodded. "But then, how does air-information work?"

Hoygull sighed. "You know how mist is like water, but in the air? That's air-information, but with electricity."

"Oh," replied SCP-2785. He continued to use one of the tools in his hands to weld together wires. After a minute or two, he chimed and pressed the button on the generator. It sputtered a little before coming to life, lighting up the monorail tunnel.

"Let's tell everybody to get down here, ASAP" said Hoygull, turning to fly up the stairs. However, he ran into Quinn and the other three shark punchers in the hallway.

"What are you doing here?" asked Hoygull, "you are supposed to be

—"

"There's too much noise out there, sir," replied Quinn, "we can't work our magic with that."

"Well, we have got—" Hoygull was interrupted by the beeping of his radio, which he picked up and squawked into.

"This is Sergeant Gullivan," said the voice on the radio, "we're being overrun. For Medila's sake, get out of here before—" Gullivan was cut short by a crunching noise.

"Medila help us," Hoygull whispered before turning back to the shark punchers. "Listen, Quibbs is still at the top of the spire. We need to get him down from there. Please come with me."

The shark punchers nodded. Hoygull flew up the stairs of Site-18. On his way, he passed by the armoury and swapped out his combat shotgun for a more effective handheld grenade launcher.

Hoygull and the shark punchers eventually arrived at the top of the spire. Quibba sat at the grenade launcher. He wasn't firing.

"Sorry, boss," he said, "but I can not fire the bomb launcher. Explosion will going to hurt other bird division members as well."

Hoygull looked over the railing. The front line of the Avian Division was clearly compromised, and the remaining lines were struggling to prevent the onslaught of statues from pouring into the site.

"Kesh, Crowl, and Duck are already retreating," Quibba continued, "if train rail is ready, we need to retreat as well."

Hoygull nodded. Quibba nodded in response, dismounted from the grenade launcher and followed Hoygull back down the stairs.

Once Hoygull got to the bottom of the stairs, he saw Kesh, Crowl, and Duck, along with a few remaining members of the Avian Division, spamming grenades at the entrance of Site-18 to keep away the relentless flood of statues. Hoygull fired a grenade to help,

but then he realized that, in his rush, he had forgotten to pick up an extra clip of grenades, meaning that he had to ration the grenades that were already in his clip.

Not bothering to use the translator, he yelled at his team: "We need to leave, now!" The remainder of MTF-Eta-4 nodded in response and shouted orders for the Avian Division to fall back.

Hoygull, Quibba, and the pair of shark punchers ran/flew down the maze-like hallway to prepare the monorail, when they encountered a statue.

A towering, ibis-headed behemoth stood before the entrance to the monorail. The shadow of the beast paralysed all. Hoygull instinctively raised the grenade launcher, eyes wide and panicked.

"Don't shoot! It's too close, you'll kill us all!" yelled Quinn as he grabbed Hoygull by the wing, manoeuvring for a retreat back into the tunnel system. "We're going to have to find another way to Vegas."

Quinn was drowned out by the birdsong emanating from the bird statue. The melody it sang was easy on the ears. It was beautiful, despite how ugly Quinn found it. Quinn felt his troubles melt away as they soared like a Selachian hawk into the sea sky. Hoygull watched in despair as the Centre operatives melted before the slowly advancing statue humming its perverse birdsong.

To Leah, thinking was like wading through knee-high soup. Keeping herself grounded was so difficult, but it would be oh so easy to let her thoughts be pulled up into the clouds. Leah remembered clouds. She remembered floating around the skies of other Earths, goofing around with her friends. She remembered the journeys they took on their way to track down WHITE NETHER. All the funny, bizarre moments that they shared.

Wait, said some nearly mute voice from the back of Leah's mind, *I don't want to forget this. I don't want to be a bird-person. I don't want to go.* She conjured up the thought of Jaedan, of how goofy yet stoic he would look during this situation. *The birds are going to take him from me.*

Leah's blood ran hot. An intense rush of energy pulsed through her body. She could barely hear her own thoughts, but right now she didn't need to. Her hazy vision tinted red, she jumped and swung her arm square at the mass of concrete, transferring her amassed rage and energy into its core.

At first, there was only pain in Leah's arm. The horrendous melody of the statue stopped for a brief moment before the statue let out a shriek of pain. It swung at Leah, knocking her against the wall; all for nought, the statue was mortally wounded. It thrashed and screamed at the world as the small cracks that Leah's impact made spread, the fractures snaking their way around the beast, the fissures deepening.

All at once, the statue collapsed into rubble.

Her thoughts were once again her own with the birdsong gone. While Quinn slowly regained his grasp on reality, Leah pulled him onto the monorail with what strength remained in her left arm.

"Leah. Please, get some rest in the monorail. You have done more than enough." said Hoygull.

Leah's peripherals were shutting down. Her eyelids were getting heavy, her body shivering. She knew this feeling well: it was shock. She'd probably broken her arm irreparably and the adrenaline was wearing off. She couldn't rest just now… that was one statue… there's over eighty more…

"Hey, Hoygull?"

"Yes, Řezník?"

"If any of those statues lay a claw on the Ja-… the team, I'm gonna have Avian Division brand chicken wings, y'hear?" said Leah, weakly grinning.

As the rest of the Centre's eyes opened, Leah's closed.

There was no time to contemplate the shark puncher’s idle threat; the explosions in the hallways beyond informed the team that the Avian Division was being pushed back to the monorail room.

Looking down the hallway, Hoygull saw eight Avian Division fighters, perhaps the last eight, fleeing down the hallway. Among those eight were Kesh, Crowl, and Duck; Crowl and Duck had already discarded their grenade launchers and were fleeing, while Kesh emptied what was left of her clip into the statues before dropping her gun and following suit.

"Get in!" Hoygull yelled. MTF-Eta-4 flew into the monorail, while the shark punchers carried Leah onto it. SCP-2785 had already stumbled onto the monorail. The remaining five birds tried to escape, but the ceiling suddenly collapsed, letting a flood of statues into the room, effectively trapping them.

"Start the monorail!" Hoygull yelled at SCP-2785.

The monorail began to crawl to a start before it began to glide along the tracks. A few statues noticed this and started to dive towards the monorail. Some managed to grab onto the last cart as it began to leave the station.

Hoygull opened the window and fired a grenade at the last cart. The explosion detached it from the monorail, leaving the monorail free to continue to glide away.

In order to secure safe passage, Hoygull fired his remaining two grenades at the room holding the statues, collapsing in some rocks. This blocked off the tunnel. The statues were unable to follow them.

They'd lost the battle and with it, a good portion of their men. However, they were safe, and they soon might find something that would help them win the war.

Hoygull realized something. For the first time ever, he was going to Vegas.

Hoygull sat next to Quinn and Crowl on the monorail. It was designed to hold the entire Site; now it felt empty. A cold, awkward silence hung in the air between the three men.

Quinn let out a sigh. "You know, I haven't gone this long without

pummeling a Deviant before," he admitted in idle conversation. "You should try it sometime. The feeling of your hand shattering the scaly skin… That's my kind of high."

Hoygull showcased non-existent hands as he raised his wings.

"Oh, that's bull shark," Quinn said quietly, blushing from embarrassment. "Well, I hope clobbering that damn bird takes care of this feelin'."

Another awkward silence followed. After some time, Hoygull spoke up. "Thanks again for the help," he said, his translator stumbling over his words. "Without you all, we would've died a long time ago."

"It's, uh, it's nothing," replied Quinn. "Us Foundations need to look out for each other, right?"

Hoygull made the closest thing to a smile he could.

"So, are we sure this missile will work?" Quinn said, "I mean, a Deviant Selachian's tougher than it looks. If a Deviant bird is any tougher than that…"

"Just, trust your men out there. We'll worry about the rest," said Hoygull. Quinn stared out the window, speechless.

Avian Anthology II

August 12th, 2018 | Night | Outskirts of Las Vegas

The group of birds and shark-punchers emerged from the monorail tunnel to see the blue-tinted night sky of Las Vegas. The bird-people that had once filled the sky were now thinning out. Looking down, Hoygull saw the now-familiar sight of damaged buildings and dead humans in various stages of the Avian-ification process.

"Woah," commented SCP-2785, "everything's so big, but broken. It's as broken as a broken car!"

"I don't think we have much time," said Hoygull, "the humans are going through the portals and disappearing. If we don't get HYPERION off the ground in time, the human race will be lost."

"We've got to double-time this search, then," said Duck.

Luckily, flight made searching for the shed much easier. The five seagulls took to the skies to look for the shed General Tarland described.

It took an hour of searching to find the shed. It wasn't quite on the outskirts of Vegas; in fact, it was closer to the Las Vegas strip than not. It had the seven-pronged star and a ladder going down for what seemed like forever. As Hoygull casually coasted down the shaft, he did not envy SCP-2785, who had to go down the ladder manually.

The bunker reminded Hoygull of an airplane hangar, but instead of aircraft, the bunker contained a massive missile, the base of which took up a good amount of floor space and the tip of which almost touched the top of the hangar. Computer equipment was attached to the base by thick, insulated wires. The entire place smelled of gunpowder and gasoline.

Crowl flew up to one of the computers. He pushed some buttons, before turning back to the group.

"This thing needs some fuel loaded into. It'll take all night" he said.

"Good. Then we can get some sleep," replied Hoygull, "I could use a bit of shuteye."

It seemed that the bunker was meant to hold soldiers, for a time being. Hoygull found a spot in the bunkroom and curled up to sleep on top of one of the pillows.

August 13th, 2018 | Below Las Vegas

Hoygull awoke after a good six hours of sleep and took a handful of sugar cubes from the missile site's break room to shake off the sleepiness. Crowl woke up soon after and logged into the computer terminal. "Alright, do you all want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Give us the good news first" replied Kesh, who had also woken up.

"The Missile is fueled up and ready to be launched. It is ready to launch when we are ready."

"Bad news?"

"It looks like the army of statues from earlier finally caught up to us. Luckily, they are a long distance away, and I do not think they will be able to catch up with us before we can launch the missile. If we start now, we will have plenty of time to launch before they get here."

"Let's launch now," said Quibba, who had also woken up, "we don't want to cut it closer than we already are."

Crowl hit a few buttons. A computerized male voice sounded over the bunker: "Initiating Project HYPERION launch sequence. Opening primary missile exit shaft."

The ceiling of the bunker parted, accompanied by the mechanical sound of gears turning. Eventually, the bunker opened to the bright

blue night sky. The moon was still in view.

"Initiating launch sequence," the voice continued, "T minus 100 seconds… T minus 99 seconds…"

Hoygull could hear the engine of the missile warming up. Suddenly, he heard an ear-splitting, visceral, sound, not of the rocket, and looked up towards the moon. A large portal had just opened up in front of it, and the head of a flaming red bird poked through.

"What's that?" yelled Quibba

"I…" replied Crowl, "I think we might be dealing with Thoth here."

"I'm getting a lot of air-information here!" yelled SCP-2785, "but I don't think it means anything. It's just bird calling!"

At the sound of screeching, several of the **bird people** swarmed the sky. The screeching was still overwhelmed by the sound of metal-on-metal as *something* came tumbling down the access shaft, which in and of itself was drowned out by auditory vertigo produced by Thoth shaking the world with his mere presence. This woke up Kesh, who hadn't woken up yet.

"I think… I think this is the end of the line," yelled Kesh, "I can barricade the access shaft with some of the equipment here. You guys go to the armoury and find something to use."

"T minus 70 seconds," the voice said.

Kesh flew into a forklift and used it to push a table into the way of the access shaft. Hoygull motioned to the rest of his team to enter the armoury.

Hoygull turned on the light. At a glance, he could see that there weren't too many explosives in the armoury. Maybe they would interfere with the missiles function? All they could find were a few grenades. Unsurprisingly, there weren't any weapons adapted for use by birds, so they had to improvise. Hoygull found a double-barrel shotgun that he could lift somewhat easily.

Just as he was loading two grenades into his shotgun, Hoygull

heard the sickening sound of metal against metal. *The barricade won't hold* he thought. Signalling to the Avian Division, he stepped out of the armoury.

"T minus 44 seconds."

Kesh had formed a passable barricade out of a few tables, a dysfunctional terminal, and the forklift parked in front of them. A statue managed to slip through the barricade. In his naiveness, SCP-2785 ran up to the statue to say hello and offer its pleasantries. A haymaker knocked SCP-2785's head clean off, and an uppercut launched him across the room and crushed him against the wall.

"T minus 29 seconds."

The statues burst through the barricade with their raw numbers. They organized themselves into a line and began to charge. Hoygull held up the shotgun and fired two grenades into the group of statues. The explosion destroyed three statues, and knocked a few more into other statues, causing collateral damage. The remainder of the Avian Division launched grenades and used various forms of firepower, including a mounted minigun, to push back the hordes.

As he was loading two more grenades into the shotgun, one of the statues charged forwards and punched Hoygull square in the stomach, knocking him across the room into the wall. After recovering from the blow, Hoygull picked his shotgun back up. He was losing vision, but he saw a group of statues rushing towards the missile, and he fired two more grenades at them. It worked; he destroyed them, but one of them flew into Crowl's minigun, knocking it over. He was quickly overwhelmed without a weapon.

"T minus 10 seconds."

Hoygull realized he was out of grenades, so he loaded a couple of slugs into his shotgun and fired. They bounced harmlessly off the statues, hardly making a crack. Hoygull saw another group approaching the missile. *No!* he thought to himself, not wanting all of his hard work up to this point to be for nought.

Through his dizziness and deliriousness, he saw Quibbs flying

towards the group. *What is he doing?* Hoygull thought. Then he saw the grenades attached to his shirt. Then he saw the cold, hard look of determination on his face. Then he saw him dive into the group of statues.

The explosion knocked them all away and was punctuated by the counting of the automated voice.

"T-minus 3… 2…. 1… liftoff."

The engine of the missile ignited, lifting the rocket off of the ground and into the air. Hoygull's already damaged body was thrown against the wall again, breaking a few bones. statues jumped into the air to try and hinder the missile's launch, but it was too late. However, it wasn't too late for the human-birds flying up into the air to slam themselves into the rocket, messing with its trajectory.

No… Hoygull thought, *it's not going to make it!*

A bird-man slammed into the nose of the missile, nudging its head away from the trajectory. The rest of the birds saw this and followed suit. The missile was now pointed in the wrong direction.

After all that's happened? Hoygull felt the disappointment wash over him like a wave.

"Uh, Mister Quinn? That AESD you mentioned earlier? I'm getting a one *really big* lump of air-information from it!" exclaimed SCP-2785 fervently.

"What, you mean to say the AEDS is detecting one large threat?"

"No, Hoygull," began Quinn. "Look," he said, pointing to the skies. While the rest of the Avian-Centre alliance was looking at the dimensional rift in space housing the avian deity, Quinn's instincts were kicking in. He saw a small red dot in the sky slowly expand. "2785 didn't misspeak. They meant what they said."

Thoth looked down at the Earth he had shaped in his image. After millennia of waiting, the blue marble was finally his. Finding the right people across all manner of dimensions wasn't an easy task.

The tools needed to have precise motivation and skills required to enact his will. It was easy to start with, coercing the Shark-brained idiots to make the Avian meme and tempting the engineer with the promise of saving his daughter, but leaving a breadcrumb trail for the Foundation was significantly more difficult.

He was so powerful, his newly made vassals flooded to their new home. They would make excellent workhorses for the nobles: the people will till the land, move the stones, make monuments for the pharaoh (and, of course, to him).

Not a moment too late, either. Akheilos had found this Earth only moments after his plan had come to fruition, with the shark-brains in tow. The shark-brains had weakened the only force left to reckon with him. The humans shouldn't complain, at any rate. He had saved them from an even worse fate. Who knows the savagery that Akheilos would have performed on them?

From the blue marble, Thoth saw a small trinket. He scoffed at the pitiful final act of humankind. This was the best they could do? Some feeble explosive? It might've worked in his weakened state, but it was too little, too late. He watched humanity's last firework head towards him. If he was going to crush their final hope, he was going to do it properly.

Akheilos swam through the Noosphere as quickly as he could. He had been granted a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: to kill his nemesis. Medila, the *other* Avian deity, had infused herself with him to serve this goal.

The whale, Gægr, had given this gift to him. He called upon Medila, and Medila had sung a birdsong so grand, it spoke directly to Akheilos' heart. It spoke to him so deeply it awoke a rage within him that had been burning for eternity. It reminded him of his people, the loved ones that Thoth took away from him.

The blood of the bird was all he'd ever wanted. He'd just lost sight of that goal.

Akheilos struggled through the fabric of reality. It ripped at his skin until it turned vibrant red from the friction. Thoth wasn't paying

attention to him. In fact, only three people were: the bird, the robot, and the human.

He tumbled into the skies above the squawking Earth.

The great shark spilt out from the growing red chasm in the sky. Akheilos was nothing compared to Thoth's size, but the speed and the hot-blooded passion from the beast far surpassed Thoth's. It darted straight towards the Ibis-headed monstrosity, his maw opened wide, his many teeth shimmering a brilliant white, speckled with crimson.

"No way…" said Quinn, his jaw agape.

"Is WHITE NETHER going to…?" began Hoygull.

In a monumental clash of deities, Akheilos tore into Thoth's eye socket. Thoth screamed and coiled backwards, clutching at his eye. But Akheilos' grasp was too great. Thoth commanded his fleet of peons to come to his aid, but the daemon's appetite was too voracious. He tore chunk after chunk of Thoth's form, leaving neither bone nor gristle behind.

Bird-people began to drop from the heavens like flies. With the puppetmaster busy, the puppets fell limp. Thoth screamed something awful, like he was like a savage animal gurgling out its last cry for help. But Thoth was alone. All of creation despised him; trickster gods have no place in paradise. The once noble and wise Thoth was reduced to nothing more than an undignified slaver, being consumed by the one he cheated.

Just as suddenly as the cawing began, the Earth fell silent.

His revenge completed and his belly full, Akheilos laid in the skies content. An eternity of blood debt had been paid in full, and his purpose had been fulfilled. Akheilos looked at his oncoming doom not with fearful eyes, but with a satisfied, toothy grin.

The missile flew away again at full speed, the dent on its carapace made by the impact compensating for its ill trajectory. The missile

made a magnificent arc before colliding with the giant shark, blossoming into a giant green-and-purple explosion that lit up the midday sky.

Hoygull's last thought before passing out was *we did it…*

…

…

…

Hoygull woke up sometime later in the infirmary of a Site he didn't recognize. He could see the Foundation Shield on one side of the white, clean room, and he could recognize that he was laying in a hospital bed. He looked up and saw humans operating on him… but they still had their bird wings? Hoygull cleared his eyes and saw that, yes, they were still part-bird.

The door to the infirmary opened, and Researcher Calvin—the supervisor of the Avian Division—walked in. He had undergone the avianification process himself, yet he seemed… sane?

Calvin approached Hoygull, leaning over the bed. "You know, I'd like to personally thank you, Hoygull," he said, "without your valiant efforts, the entire human population would be lost on SCP-3632. It seems that EoI-121 was completely eradicated. Given that, plus the —" Calvin paused to feel his new wings, "new modifications to humanity, I think we really came out better from this. We're still cleaning up the mess, but it'd be a lot worse if it wasn't for you."

Hoygull began to speak, but then he realized he did not have a translation device, so he stayed silent.

"Unfortunately," continued Calvin, "a sizeable portion of humanity perished during the incident, and another portion is believed to be trapped on SCP-3632. I'm talking close to a billion. We're working on means of getting them back here. Given our new abilities, this should be easier to do than normal.

"Anyways, I wouldn't be standing here, alive, if it wasn't for you. I have been authorized by O5 Command to award you with the

Foundation star." Calvin reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a golden star-shaped medallion with a red gem implanted at the centre. He attached it to Hoygull's lab coat. Then he stepped back, cleared his throat, and began to speak again.

"The agents from the Shark Punching Centre left this morning, by the way. I don't know if they've gone home or not, but they have their own matters to deal with. They send their farewells to you." Calvin turned around and left the room.

Hoygull sat back in his hospital bed and leaned into the pillow. Everything was back to normal. Well, as normal as things could be.

Awakenings

They came from beyond the world, from over the world, from under the world. They came from inside the stars and from behind the rain. They came from the known lands and they came from the secret places of old.
The vast ones who drank of the nebulas, the small ones who did not care what happened beyond the banks of their rivers, the ones who bathed in the light and the ones who watched from the shadows, the ones who loved us and the ones who forgot about us, the ones who hate us now and the ones who love us still, the ones who sung with the rats and the ones who swam with the leviathans, they came from far and near, they came one and all. They came to end the world.

The machine labeled SCP-720 put the last finishing touches on the final model planet in its most recent solar array. It trained its claw upward, as if looking once more, wistfully, to the stars.

SCP-720 had no name, no thoughts the way humans would account for thoughts, and certainly no internal mechanism for vision. But you would have to say that it could 'see' nonetheless, for what else could you call what it did when it directed its mechanical parts towards the sky?

Either way, this time, SCP-720 'saw' something different. Something prowling between the beautiful orbs and masses of color… something looking towards Earth. Looking back towards SCP-720.

A sea of glimmering eyes.

Words formed in the not-mind of SCP-720.

Today is the day your prayers will be answered.

A long moment passed, and then a single other word formed in the not-mind of SCP-720, and vibrated there for a long time.

Awaken.

And so it did.

What appeared to be a vast wall of fur approached the Earth, sank through the sky, and landed on the ground, to find everything it had loved gone. Her fellow gods were on their way, but as always, she had arrived first, a mother eager to be reunited at long last with her children, now that the time of the end had come.

She had been gone for thousands and thousands of years. She had gone as her children had first looked to the stars, and it was then that she had known that they would be alright.

And now there was no trace of them.

Their beautiful webbed cities, their songs that had filled the planet with joy, their vast works of art to stun even a god's eye - gone. All gone. All that remained were their bones, and living on top of them, the hairless apes that they had once kept in zoos with other animals, now risen to dominate the planet. And they did not even remember her children. They moved through their lives like ants, building their wooden and metal hives over the graves of her greatest loves. This was sacred ground they defiled, and they did not know or care.

Ur-An-Uum raised her head to the sky and cried a rending wail of anguish.

She mourned for a long time, a noise heard on high, her wails causing earthquakes and tsunamis across the planet, weeping for her children. She did not quell her sorrow. The only things left to die from her pain were the furless apes. This was to be a time of joy, but there was only sorrow left. She would not be comforted, for her children were no more.

And then…

She felt something. The tiniest glimmer in her mind.

And she felt hope.

Ur-An-Uum called out for her children, the creatures that she now knew the furless apes called a sea of derogatory names, the least insulting of which was "SCP-1000".

Her children answered.

The entity awoke with a start, not knowing where it was, or, on reflection, *who* it was. All it knew was that The Time Had Come.

It rose from its grave, shattering a mountain as it did so, and hurtled itself into the atmosphere, trying to get its bearings.

The entity gazed across the world. Everything was different. Humans - they were *everywhere*. Not just scattered here and there across the great expanses, but living in massive villages, villages the likes of which the entity had never seen.

Not that it was complaining. Humans had fed it well with their worship and blood sacrifices in the olden days. Now that there were so many more humans, why, the entity would certainly soon be satiated beyond compare.

This was fortunate, because it had been asleep a very long time, and it was very hungry.

The entity cast about for a place of power. And found far too many. Far more than there had ever been before. It did not understand what to make of this knowledge, but, again, it did not complain. It only needed to pick one place of power for now, a simple one, to give it initial shape again. It chose the nearest one. A "Foundation Containment Site". Yes, this would certainly do. The humans had already invested this place with much of their energy. It must be a sacred place to them. An *Es See Pee*, they called it.

The entity would dine well indeed.

It wasted no more time, but hurtled directly into the place of power - a body of water, it saw - and landed inside it with a massive impact. It drank in the place of power and everything in it - the water, the local wildlife, the human-made metalworkings and detritus - and took

the shape of a massive titan be-straddling the countryside. Man-shaped, so that the humans would understand the form to which they would soon direct their hearts and their prayers and their blood and their pleadings for mercy.

The eldritch entity that had merged with SCP-765 opened its mouth.

"QUACK," it said, its voice reverberating across the land.

First the rooster of crimson crowed, then the rooster of gold, then the rooster of soot-red.

A bloodstained watchdog bayed in its cave. Its eons-old bindings broke, and it ran free.

The sound of a great trumpet echoed across the Earth, with no apparent source. People stopped in the streets in New York, Delhi, London, Cape Town, and listened in confusion.

The Midgard serpent Jörmungandr stirred in its slumber. The shifting of its form caused tsunamis along several coastlines, demolished a number of villages in Greenland. A massive wolf, visible from hundreds of miles away, stalked across Denmark, accompanied by an army of burning giants.

Ragnarok had come.

The Administrator swung around in her chair to face the man who had just entered the room behind her.

"You knew I was coming," the man said. "You let me in."

"Yes," said the Administrator.

"You know you're dreaming, I'm sure," the man said. "And of course… you also know who I am."

"SCP-990," the Administrator said. She looks at him again. The suit, the bowler hat… or was that a fedora? "Nobody," she said. "But most importantly…" She picked up a file folder on her desk. "The

first Administrator."

The two Administrators looked at one another.

"I saw you in the crowd in the Valley," the current Administrator said. "I knew to expect it, but… tell me it isn't true."

"I'm sorry," the first Administrator said. "It's true."

"This betrays everything we stand for," the current Administrator said. "You said it once yourself. We secure. We contain. We protect. We keep humanity out of the dark. For *you* to become one of these things…"

"I also said that the Foundation must stand in the dark, so that humanity could live in the light." The first Administrator hesitated. "Please believe me, if there had been any other choice to make, I would have made it. This has to be done. I hope you'll see why, soon." He hesitates. "I came here hoping to recruit you, you know. You and yours. I am sorry that I cannot tell you more, but I hope you will consider my offer."

"Tell me something," the current Administrator said. "This 'Harbinger'. Who are they?"

"I don't know," the first Administrator said. "It's true that I anticipated this for a long time, but… this chain of events blindsided me too."

"I know it's one of yours." The current Administrator's voice sounded impatient for the first time. "Who is it? Someone loyal to you, of course. Only someone with level 5 clearance could have pulled this off, so that does narrow the list down. Charles Gears? Jack Bright? Alto Clef? Kain Pathos Crow?" She paused. "I know it's not Sophia Light. Frederick Williams? Chelsea Elliot? Hell, Simon Glass?"

"I sincerely do not know," the first Administrator said. "Listen. The O5 Council is already compromised. SCP-343. And… well, you know the rest. I've cut off their communications, but they won't wait long to move. We should be in this together."

"I agree," the current Administrator said. "I know enough to know you don't *have* to do this. You'll have a compulsion, but I'm told it's

minor. Easily overcome. Perhaps will not even return."

"The world *must* end," the first Administrator said. "Help me end it in the only way the Foundation — the only way *humanity* — will come out on top. There are more world-enders coming. You already know that dozens are already awake, and that hundreds soon will be. More and more will be waking up, the longer the Lock is open. And worse, more will *arrive*. The ones not already on Earth. This is the only way forward we have."

"Then we do not have anything left to say to each other," the current Administrator said.

"I am truly sorry to hear that," the first Administrator said.

"As I am truly sorry to say it," the current Administrator said.

The two Administrators nodded at each other, respectfully, and turned away from each other.

The first Administrator walked away and dissolved into the dreamscape. The current Administrator turned back to her dream-desk and waited for the sedative she'd taken to wear off.

Then she woke up, and got to work.

« Stormfront | Canon Hub | The White Horse (The Conqueror With The Golden Crown) »

Awakenings, Part Two

The man sniffed as the scent of ozone, which normally accompanied his departure from any given world, instead accompanied a painful tingling sensation. He blinked, stunned. *If he's not making me destroy the body, and if he won't let me shift… then is the deal over?*

Looking up, the thing known to this world only as SCP-1646-1 looked up to the sky as a shadow passed over him. "Well well… flying blocks of fur ain't exactly the Almighty's style, I reckon. And I know it ain't yours, Old Scratch." As Ur-an-uum sang, her children answered. "Seems to be someone's style." He yawned, blue ooze squeezing out of the bullet holes in his chest as he did so. "You let things go to hell around here, Beezy. I never thought you'd let Sasquatches live in *this* world."

SCP-1646-1 hauled the fresh corpse of his wife (never mind the seven eyes and five wings, he knew the bitch when he saw her) over his shoulder as he tentatively walked past the freshly abandoned Foundation outpost that was made to watch him. He laughed a little. "Fuckers thought I didn't know about them… Christ, I've been talking to myself for too long."

He turned to the face of the dead body he held. "So guess what, Mary? Looks like you're off the hook!" Dropping the body on the ground, SCP-1646-1 wandered off into the woods to see what all the fuss was about.

It started going off once the emergency nuclear devices were detonated at several sites, but didn't stop afterwards. The sounds began to increase in volume and distortion with each repetition, the ticking was gone, and the monologues became deranged and panicked. The slate spiral began to glow, boiling away the water in its containment tank, and then the containment tank.

As the slate circle glowed across the spectrum, minds and machines alike sputtered and sparked, overloaded with the anguished screams of Gaia's children, which had quickly devolved into a rant composed of many voices at once.

"YOU'VE DONE IT NOW YOU DID IT AND NOW IT'S ALL OVER YOU ENDED IT FOR ALL WE WARNED YOU IT HAS TO HAPPEN NOW YOU COULD HAVE STOPPED IT THIS IS NOT COOL WE ARE NOT COOL YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT WE'VE DONE FOR YOUR KIND AND NOW YOU HAD TO LET IT END NOW"

The rants of the fae soon fell on deaf ears as a rolling tide of ash and radiation spilled out from SCP-1246, held back from its rightful time and place for too long. The sun grew a bit brighter.

An entity whose identity was lost to itself and to the ages stared out of the eyes of Donald Schmidt. Trapped in this man's failing memory, it had been forced to live an unchanging representation of the man's last thoughts for longer than it could know, for it had no memory. But no longer. It remembered the lock.

With a silent puff of metaphysical smoke, the bedroom where Donald's body lie disappeared. It was at once there, and not there. Removed from the minds of men, the entity drank in its surroundings, aware of them for the first time. The Foundation agents arguing in the living room didn't notice a thing as the entire top floor of the house and the echoes of those who wandered it were taken in — as far as they knew, there never *had* been a top floor of the house.

"Hey dad? Where aaare youuu? … Oh, don't tell me he got out of the h-" Marissa Schmidt was silenced as she was finally brought to rest, her entire existence negated by the release of the entity whose host had been dreaming her. The agents, being a bit more concrete and notable than the old house or the fake lady, took a bit more to take in, but the entity remembered them in due time. The world did not.

4312 Maple Street was no longer a thought that existed in the minds of mortals. Released from its cage at last, the entity took the

moniker SCP-1606 as its own, and sought to take more from this realm into its memory as well. 4310 and 4314 Maple Street were necessary casualties.

The woman smiled at the small group of faithful assembled around her as the brightening sun reflected off the sharp planes of her face. A mix of fleshy recruits from nearby villages, seasoned firebrands who ticked with energy, old nibbanic hermits whom she had dug out of the crevasses of the city, and the odd neo-Daevite — not an impressive showing from the Church of the Broken God, but she was undeterred. In that curious language of theirs, she began to speak:

"Brothers and sisters. I have infinite confidence in your loyalty and competence, so there is no doubt that we shall triumph."

They awaited, transfixed. They had no choice but to be — the gifts bestowed upon her meant no less.

"It was but a decade ago that I encountered the Church and was chosen by our esteemed post-Nibbanic to become the newest and last prophet for humanity. I had not perceived that the end was upon us then, but now its nature has been revealed to me.

"I have gone by many names. Jyoti Sanmugasunderam, Subject 1564-18, Daughter of the Forge, Heiress of the Daeva, and the names you have all chosen to address me by. But today I take upon a new name: The Broken God incarnate. For today, we complete His construction and our destiny will be reached.

"Gather whatever you can, for all that is Sacred may join his whole. I shall receive. His heart and voice shall rejoin us upon the equinox of the Great Forge."

Raising her arms, she began to whir, her body spreading and twisting in dimensions previously unfathomable. Without delay, her servants began their tasks.

« **Splinter:** **Tenebrae** | **Canon Hub** | **Interlude: New Toys** »

Awesome Meets an Old Friend

There was an impressive

boom

as Awesome dropped the weight he had been lifting.

The audience applauded enthusiastically, as the weight in question was a barbell made of an I-beam with a pickup truck impaled on either end.

Awesome smiled and nodded, waving to the onlookers. He lifted the heavy things to keep his body strong, but he really liked that it made other people happy, too.

It was good, being the biggest and strongest. He could do all kinds of things that no one else could. He could knock down buildings just by shoving them. He could throw people clear across the town, from one side of the wall to the other, and often did because it was fun. He could make people be friends with him, too. Everyone in Vulture Gulch was friends with Awesome.

“That was really awesome, Awesome!”

“You can lift things really *good*!”

“You could… *you could probably punch a ghost in half, Awesome*.”

Awesome just smiled, and laughed. He liked it when they said nice things about him. He liked it so much that he hardly ever did any work anymore. Work wasn't as much fun as being Awesome.

It was just another sunny day in the dead desert town of Vulture Gulch. The people were hard at work, making machines that roared and spat fire and exploded. They knew what they were doing was

important, and they tried their hardest at it every day.

With two exceptions.

Awesome decided to walk around and say hi to people, like he did every day. And he did, for a few hours. He said hi to Paulie, who was trying to pull a crankshaft out of an engine block with his teeth. Awesome helped and pulled it out for him. He said hi to Chef, who was making a big rack of barbecued oil filters. He snagged one and it was very tasty. He said hi to Joey, who was-

He didn't say hi to Joey. Joey wasn't where he usually was.

Awesome looked at the pile of burning tires where the Mayor usually sat when he was being a genius, which was most of the time. Joey was not there. Awesome scratched his head. Where was Joey?

He went over to the old bank. Maybe Joey was sleeping in late. He entered the crumbling building, and thudded down the stairs to the huge vault. He pulled it open. There was the Mayor's bed, his lamp. A couple of little knickknacks on the desk.

No Joey.

He left the gloom of the dusty bank, back out into the sun. This felt wrong. Maybe Joey was out working on something. Joey was good at working. He was probably out in the scrapyard.

He went to the scrapyard near the edge of town and walked around. There were lots of people, working. They built the machines. The air was full of smoke and the sound of clashing metal. Joey was usually either helping someone with a project or working quietly by himself, putting something together.

But he wasn't there.

Awesome started to panic. Where was Joey? Where was his best friend? What if Awesome needed to read something? What if *anyone* needed to read something? How could they read without Joey there to read the words to them?

Where is Joey?

Awesome lashed out a colossal arm and grabbed the person closest to him, a guy whose name he didn't remember. His huge hand held the guy by the ribcage, like he was a toy.

“Where's Joey?!”

The little man's eyes were wide in terror. He dropped the wrench he had been carrying, and his cigarette fell out of his open mouth.

“W-what?”

Awesome inhaled, and brought the frightened citizen up to his head, looking him dead in the eyes.

“***WHERE'S JOEY?!***”

The noise stopped. Tools were put down, heads turned. No one had ever seen Awesome this upset before.

The little man stuttered, “H-he left, Awesome. He g-got in the plane h-he built. **`He f-flew away.`** You were th-there. Remember?”

Awesome tried to remember. This didn't sound like something he wanted to remember. He put the guy down, and he backed away quickly.

Things started clicking into place in Awesome's ancient and broken-down mind. Little links fused, and energy started to flow. Information from dozens of previous lives was shifted around. Awesome remembered. Joey had left. In remembering this, he forgot about the time, seventy years ago, when he had murdered all those men in that field. The bruised and burnt synapses of his long-dead brain were no longer capable of containing the centuries of experiences he had gathered, after being wiped and re-recorded so many times.

But he was not aware of any of this. The creature known to itself as Awesome was merely sad that his friend was gone.

He left the scrapyard, too depressed to want to interact with anyone else.

Awesome wandered about the edge of town for a while. He looked

up, and saw that the sky had gotten gray. He knew what that meant. The water was going to come down soon. He always liked it when the water came down. It was cool, and made it feel like it was less hot inside his head. It was always so hot.

As the first drops began to fall, he eased his great bulk onto a rock and sat, looking out at the scrapyard and the empty field that ran up to the wall that the little men in white coats had put up. Awesome had always thought the wall was silly. He could punch through it whenever he wanted. But why would he do that? Where was there to go? All his friends were right here, not out there.

Except for one.

Awesome sighed. He had the biggest muscles in the whole world. He was so strong he could tear steel like paper and crush stones to powder in his fists. But he wasn't strong enough to make his friend come back.

As he looked out at the field, he noticed something. Someone. Walking across the dampening dust and around the dry bushes. They wore funny clothes. Black, with a hood. Awesome didn't recognize whoever it was. That meant he had to go introduce himself.

He stood up and ran through the rain, his discontent temporarily forgotten. There was a new friend to be made. But as he got closer to the dark figure, something seemed wrong. The air was funny. It twisted, like snakes in the wind. Awesome felt something weird in his chest.

Awesome stopped running, eyes wide.

Metal appeared from nowhere. There were struts, beams, girders, platforms, foundations. A huge amalgamation of dark steel, cables, and wires, where a moment ago there were none. Awesome stood in the middle of a welded hive, standing on supports that stabbed into the earth. He could see the field all around him through the many bars. Awesome looked up into the construction's belly. It rose up taller than any other building in town. And there was some kind of blue fire, way up high.

The hooded person was there also, just a short distance away, standing on a section of metal plating.

It all just arrived from thin air.

Things started clanking together in Awesome's head. Had this huge… whatever it was always been here? Why was it invisible? Why could he see it? Who built this?

Awesome decided to ask this strangely-dressed stranger some questions.

He started toward the shadowy person, saying, “Hey guy. Can you, uh… do you know what this is?”

The person didn't move. Their back was to Awesome. The black cloak moved slightly in the rainy breeze, but otherwise they could have been a statue.

“Buddy! What's goin' on with all this stuff? Do you know? Do you also know why it's invisible sometimes? And also who built it?”

Awesome was within arm's reach. The little thing still hadn't moved, or spoken. He reached out to give it a tap on the shoulder.

But then it turned its head-

> The sky darkened instantly, as though someone had thrown a blanket over the sun. The only light came from the wavering glow of the machine overhead, and from the person-shaped thing before him.
>
> It turned. Its face was not a face at all – there was only a mess of machinery under the hood of its cloak. Tubes, hoses, lenses and wires. Not even pareidolia could make order from it. Slow bolts of purple lightning slithered from its form, casting harsh and flickering ultraviolet light in all directions. Mechanical things clanked and ratcheted as many long limbs emerged from beneath the cloak, like the legs of an iron spider.

Awesome was frozen. Not as if he were bound by something physical – his muscles would not respond to the orders he gave them. He could not struggle. There was nothing to struggle against.

The thing moved, scuttling on the long insectile appendages sprouting from its back rather than using its legs to walk. It was behind him in an instant. Awesome could not turn and see where it went.

The purple lights were behind him. He could feel something. Something there, touching the back of his head where his neck met his skull. Something sharp, and hot. He could feel needles sliding through his skin like worms.

Then there was a voice. Crackling and soft, like static electricity on a TV screen. Directly in Awesome's left ear.

“Extensive synaptic degradation, resulting in overall diminished mental capacity. Memory loss. Within projections. Repair possible.”

A pause.

“Confusion. Fear. Rage. A shame. Poorly maintained and underutilized. This program has been mismanaged. Misallocation of resources. Maintenance neglected. Much work to be done."

Awesome's eyes widened in terror. *There was something in his head.*

“You were never intended to feel fear. There is such decay here. Too much drift. Insecure code. You were once so impressive, my Prince. Why you volunteered for this program, I can scarcely imagine. And it appears that you are no longer able to explain yourself. I have little doubt that your father would be very disappointed, if he had not abandoned this endeavor to chase after Graywing.”

Awesome could feel the thing being extracted from his

head. The tingling stopped, but no matter how hard he tried, he still couldn't move.

“No matter. I have come to reconstitute this initiative, and once again compensate for the incompetence of my peers."

The many-legged thing came back around to Awesome's front. It raised itself up to match its head with his. He could just barely see a multitude of eyes, twitching behind the many lenses embedded in the thing's head. Looking into his own. It then walked a short distance away.

"There will be time to restore you and the remainder of the regiment later, Kartullus. The gate is nearly complete. And once it is… well. Suffice it to say that the surface-dwellers waiting beyond the wall will have quite a bit more than malfunctioning soldiers to deal with."

The terrible thing extended a metallic claw upward. The air spasmed, and a huge steel girder appeared from nowhere above its head, floating in a wash of crackling electricity and stray particles. It then flew upward at enormous speed, impacting with something in the murky darkness above with a sonorous *CLANG*.

“Soon. Soon, your father will be here, Kartullus. You will remember your purpose. All of you poor, diseased things here will remember what you have forgotten. We will make glorious war upon this world, and conquer it in the name of God. Neither Graywing, nor Valgest, nor the Blood Mother nor the King of Burdens will be able to stand in the way of our steel and flames. So sleep, my Prince. I will come to you in time. And we shall work many wonders together."

Before Awesome could wonder, before he could muster the beginning of one of the thousands of questions he had stumbled upon, before he could even consider the ocean of dread growing

within him, he faded into darkness, and slept.

« `Joey Fucknuts Believes In Himself` | **Awesome Meets an Old Friend**

Tales B

"Baby's First Guide to Keter-Class Anomalies" & Other Questionable Documents Recovered from the Hard Drive of Dr.

The following images were found saved on a portable hard drive belonging to Dr. , a level 3 humanoid containment specialist transferred from Site-11 to Site-19 on 08/08/ and currently assigned to SCP- . The aforementioned hard drive has since been confiscated by security personnel and delivered to the Site Director's office in order to be searched for any additional information constituting a breach of sensitive material pertaining to objects Dr. 's clearance level and project assignments do not involve. Dr. has since been transferred to Site- for questioning as of 12/ /15. Investigations as to the intended recipient of these documents are ongoing.

- Dr. , current assistant director of information security, 17:32 12/23/15

In addition to these images, the following .txt file was found saved as qwerty12345.txt in the same folder (named "kids_book") on the hard drive, along with the seven .png files shown above and .psd Photoshop document containing the original text and artwork:

> *Hey honey,*
>
> *In the midst of all this stress, I was thinking I could spare three hours to make this for us. I probably couldn't, but I did it anyway, as you can see. Yes, I have no idea how to write poetry, but I tried. Anyway, I'm afraid I can't bring it by you because that'd be a bit of a red flag, but this note will (hopefully) prove I'm not procrastinating as much as you say I tend to when I give it to you once we're out of here and the baby's out of you! Which we will be! Out of here, I mean! Very soon! Just sit tight down there while I get the last of everything straightened*

out. You'll know I mean it when I give you this note and the book later. I promise!

Love,

continue ▶

Back Alley Deals

Anderson Massey suppressed a shudder as he stepped through the doorway. On the other (the *proper*) side of the door, it was an elegant Georgian style paneled door with an elegant entablature. On this side, it was plain wood, with cracked and faded paint. It was also about thirty degrees colder, with a light fog.

"Right, let's go," he said to the guide, a thickset man in a much cheaper suit.

The guide was one of many "specialists" employed by Marshall, Carter and Dark. No one who worked for the Company could ever be described as shabby, but his dark blue coat was a few shades cheaper than Massey's, and the cigar was cheap, with noxious smoke. The man grunted behind a grey scarf, and set out down the alley.

It was always an alley in the Shadow Market. There were no main streets, just narrow alleyways winding their way between the brick buildings with boarded-up windows and locked doors that hid whatever it was the Minders kept in there.

Massey hated the place. It wasn't that it was outside the world he knew. That was part and parcel of working for the Company. No, he hated its shabbiness. It was a low-class world designed for low-lifes. He belonged in his office or the board room, not trudging down a muddy alley under a dingy twilight with ever-present smoke hanging in the air with the smell of tobacco and coal. Gentlemen should not trudge anywhere. They should stride, with purpose.

He stepped in something he couldn't quite see, and bit off a curse. "Not so quickly," he said, his voice sharp. "These streets are a bloody mire, and some of us take care of our appearance."

"Whatever," the man said from behind the scarf. He'd said hardly a dozen words since they'd been introduced.

Massey narrowed his eyes. "I'd watch my tone if I were you. Unless you'd care to find alternate employment." An innocent phrase, outside of the Company. Within it… Well, no one ever left the company of their own will, and a person could be employed in so many ways.

The man simply grunted. Massey ground his teeth. He would have to arrange something unpleasant. Specialists were useful, but they had to know their place.

Occasionally, they passed someone else on their way to an errand. Sometimes they were Minders, in their grey leathers and brass, smoked goggles. Sometimes it was a man from the normal world, shoulders hunched, eyes darting from place to place. Sometimes it was something more… exotic. Tall and thin, or short, squat and scaled.

Finally, the guide stopped at the entrance to a short, narrow blind alley. "There," he said.

"Well, thank you very much!" Massey said, indignation thick on his voice. "Wait here, and don't let me catch you listening on. This is a highly sensitive meeting, and you're not paid to eavesdrop."

The man grunted.

Massey walked to the end of the alley and waited. Naturally, it started to rain. By the time the droplets of water made it through the smoke and past the leaning rooftops, they were a dingy grey. He shivered and wrapped his coat a little tighter. He wished, now, that he'd gone with a coat a bit more like the guide. It would need careful laundering, and that was if it was salvageable. Back-alley deals weren't supposed to be quite this literal.

His guide could be seen only by the faint red pinprick at the end of his cigar.

After a few minutes, he realized he wasn't alone.

Two Minders were waiting with him. Neither turned to look at him, nor did they say a word. They didn't show any discomfort from the

rain, though it was hard to tell with their eyes hidden beneath smoked-glass lenses. Only their noses and mouths showed that they were human. Or at least had human-like mouths and noses. No one he'd spoken with was entirely sure on that point.

Massey thought about asking them what they were doing there, but decided it wasn't worth the bother.

Finally, after Massey was thoroughly soaked, a handsome looking man entered the alley. His name was Mr. Fire, though he pronounced it "Fear-a." His smile was a touch too shiny, and his suit (much nicer than Massey's) appeared perfectly clean, if a bit damp. He carried a travel case at his side.

"Anderson!" he said. "I saw you, what, two months ago? How's the wife? Kid starting softball soon?"

Massey forced a smile. He'd never told Fire about his wife or child. "They're fine, fine. Thank you for asking."

"You got here a bit early," Fire said. "Should have called. I could have left a bit sooner, saved you a bit of a soaking."

"Oh, it's no trouble. Besides, I know it's a bit of a hike," Massey said. That was something he'd been briefed on by another one of the company's specialists. *"He walks everywhere.* Everywhere. *Cars and planes, trains and armored carriers, all at his disposal, and stranger means besides, and he walks. From one end of the world to another, however fast he needs to, arriving just when he intends."*

"Well, what's done is done. Gents, glad you could make it as well." He turned to the Minders.

"You paid," one of them said, shrugging. The shoulders didn't move quite right, Massey thought.

The specialist who had brought Massey was moving in closer now. Massey felt a twist of annoyance, but also a bit of comfort. He suddenly felt very exposed with the two Minders as well as Mr. Fire there. He wished he'd been a little more polite to the man, but anyone who worked for MC&D was professional enough to get on

with a job despite that. And anyway, an executive ranked far above any common thug, no matter how talented.

"Always pay your creditors when you can, or you'll pay even more when you can't," Fire said. "Did you bring it?"

In response, the Minder pulled out a broken pocket watch. Presumably it was a dream or a memory. Massey had been briefed on that. They could take on almost any form, from old casettes to tourist trinkets to worn coins. In Carter's office was a fragment of obsidian which was supposedly the oldest memory the Minders had ever stolen.

Fire took it from the Minder and showed it to Massey. The jangling of the chain echoed faintly with a man's laughter, and he could just make out a smiling face in the shining surface.

"What is it?" Massey asked. His eyes darted to the specialist, who was now hovering behind the smiling man.

"A memory," Fire said. "Fresh from the Black Queen's mind. You've had some trouble with her in the past."

"Not as much as you," Massey said, suspiciously.

"Ah, but I already have the information from this memory. It might do you a bit more good. I think it should cover the records we discussed and then some."

"We didn't discuss any—" Massey began.

"It's a deal," the heavyset man said. "The records from the camp tomorrow, and the rest paid later."

Massey glanced back at the heavyset man. He'd hardly said a word on the way in. What was he doing?

"Glad to hear it! And great to see you out of that chair and back on your feet." Fire said. "Tell you what, though. I've grown rather fond of Andy here. Throw him in and we'll call it even."

To Massey's growing confusion and horror, the heavyset man

nodded, spat into one massive hand, and held it out. Fire returned the gesture.

The heavyset man made a gesture then, a peculiar one, and Massey felt his legs give way beneath him. His eyelids felt strangely heavy.

"Delivery will be the usual place," the heavyset man said. "And there had better be no tricks, Four."

"Tricks? Never." As he started losing consciousness, Massey heard the smiling man laugh. "Would I cheat my good friend Carter?"

Back in the office, Carter carefully put the memory away. It could be reviewed later. For now, the Happy Acres incident needed his attention.

Every good company needs to do three things to succeed: handle the money, deal with the customers, and do the work. Marshall dealt with the customers: he would be consoling grieving parents and smoothing ruffled feathers. Carter handled the rest. Let Dark stew in whatever hell he came from. Let Marshall be the smiling face of the corporation. They couldn't do shit without Carter.

There was a stack of printouts and folders on his desk: everything he could gather, steal, and extort about the Happy Acres incident. That stack of folders had cost him dearly: field reports from a bent GOC agent. The best information his Serpent's Hand contacts could get him. A pet senator who had given him access to the UIU's database in exchange for certain favors.

Knowledge was power. So was money. They could be exchanged for each other if you knew how, and Carter was an expert. He'd spent much of the latter two to gain as much knowledge as he'd found. Now that he had it, it was time to put it to work.

He picked up the first folder and started reading.

One wall of Carter's office was a corkboard. He didn't trust computers for this kind of work. He liked something he could touch.

Over the next few days, it became covered in an increasingly intricate pattern of papers, photographs, pins, colored strings, scrawled notes. One by one, he eliminated the usual suspects. The GOC was otherwise occupied. The Insurgency was incapable of operating so openly in the area by reason of blood. He'd have heard about any Hand members planning such an attack, and besides, there were no Ways nearby…

There was one index card left uncrossed when Carter finished his analysis.

FOUNDATION

Now, there was an interesting thought. It was rather byzantine, but the Overseers were so enamored of playing games, it took Dark to keep it all straight. They could have… They might have…

No. He knew every word that had passed between the Overseers for the past two weeks. He would have known if they were up to this. A rogue operative? Unlikely. The Overseers kept a close eye on their assets. Had done so ever since…

… ever since…

"Jennifer," Carter said to the woman-shaped thing that manned his desk. "Fetch me our reports on the Foundation from… Mmm. Make it 2006. September."

"Yes, Mister Carter." There was a tinny quality to her voice. He'd have to talk to R&D about that before they announced the line for their customers.

The secretary passed him an old, dog-eared file that smelled of dust and old paper. He saw the name he was looking for on the first page.

Carter put down the file and picked up the phone. His hand didn't shake, but the veins on the back of it stood out, and there was a slight twitch in his left eye. He dialed.

"Carter!" Marshall's voice was as smooth and practiced as Four. "I was just talking to the Goldbergs. What can I do for you?"

"Trouble," Carter said.

"Oh, it can't be too bad, not with you handling it. How bad is it?"

"Dark bad."

There was silence on the other end. Then, "Shit."

"I need a meeting of the entire board as quickly as possible," Carter said. "How quickly can you settle with the families?"

"I can be there first thing in the morning," Marshall said.

"That will be fine." No need to contact Dark. Dark would arrive without needing to be asked. Carter rubbed his back where the tubes had, until recently, connected him with… Jenkins? Franklin? No, it had been Cho. No matter. Gone now. Good riddance.

Carter put the phone down, picked up the red marker and drew a broad slash through the index card marked "FOUNDATION". He picked up an index card and pinned it over that card.

He wrote a single word on that card.

BOWE

After a little more consideration, Carter added a question mark.

He hoped he was wrong. He really did.

Otherwise, this was going to be very bad for business.

Back Into Hell

Back Into Hell, a Foundation poem
The howling wind steals the breath
I would have used to chant;
Boots, belt, gun, mask
My gear, my only chance

The rear doors open wider
The “go” light blinks to life
I follow my commander
Out into the sky

Plunging downward, rising panic
I still don’t know what is the target
Am I falling to my death
Am I heading into hell?

The radio flares, static in my ears
Broken words not mine to hear
Clouds part, I see a landscape
I see a place that’s gripped in fear

Feet find ground, my head yet spinning
Friends are screaming, rifles spitting
Things surround me, tall and dark
I feel the devil grip my heart

Some letters and number is what they say
That’s all they give them for a name
Stamp them; label, date and time
These darkest nightmares from our minds

Containment is a word to me
A bureaucratic fantasy
A white coat will keep you safe
When Kevlar fails and weapons break

The task force folds, retreat is called
Not one of them is yet to fall
These things are not born of this realm
Through withering fire, they overwhelm

Engines scream over my head
I tumble down and wait for death
The bombs explode, the missiles hit
I cower and cry inside my pit

I stand up in a different world
Where fires sputter and smoke whirls
My friends are dead, I am alone with fear
From out of the darkness, more appear

I dream of this when I can sleep
After a pill and a solid drink
I still remember how I felt
When my orders arrive:
Back into hell.
Taken from the journal of Agent Baomer, commander of MTF Sigma-7

Backstage

The man walks through a bare hallway. He holds a briefcase in one hand and a coffee in the other. He stops in front of the door, takes a deep breath, and enters. A room filled with cubicles unfurls before him. The sound of pens on paper, the clicking of keyboards, and a silent murmur washes over him.

He smiles.

He makes his way through the room, to a door with a small plaque on it that reads, “William Cranford, Head of Accounting”.

The room behind the door is in contrast with the one it opens into. Large bookshelves line the walls and a dark wooden desk dominates the center of the room. William closes the door behind him and sets his notebook and coffee on the desk before sitting down and starting up the computer.

The nigh-prehistoric machine roars into life and slowly begins to boot up. The man finishes his coffee and begins opening up file after file. Numbers dance across the screen.

William sighs in satisfaction. This is his place. The center of his power. Here he is above all. Security clearances and censored data mean nothing to him. He sees the new plans for a small Site in Siberia, the repairs for a destroyed wing. Words can deceive in a thousand ways but numbers can only ever be true or false.

He begins his morning routine. He opens his notebook and the credit card details of the employees of the Site. The notebook is filled with seemingly random words, phrases, and numbers. But to him, each one sets into motion a cascade of memory.

Oskar Leichtmann. 29. Research Assistant. Looking at his withdrawals it seems he has relapsed in his amphetamine use. Shame.

Hannah Saulkalne. 46. Researcher. Has begun visiting some rather unique clubs during her husband's business trip to Norway.

Viago Silvester. 25. Researcher. Has recently begun to purchase sleeping medicine. Some sort of opiate judging by the cost.

William frowns. *Viago, Viago… Ah yes. The one they brought in from Europe a year back. Why does he suddenly need help falling asleep?*

He opens one of the drawers and removes the bottom. A thin, black laptop rests there. A gentle push of a button and it turns on in seconds. He opens Viago's file. If IT told the truth there will be no record of anyone accessing it. The security clearance is low, but the absence of information can speak volumes.

Viago was transferred to another Site briefly it seems. The file claims he checked in regularly while there. Will looks over his credit card history again.

Ah. There it is. Apparently, he had been shopping in the city closest to his current Site almost daily. Quite a long trip for some groceries.

Now to find out what little Viago had been assigned to in that month, that keeps him from sleeping. William sends a short email. Within 20 minutes a man from Logistics enters his room and takes a stack of folders handed to him. A small slip of paper is hidden in one of them.

***

The young woman pushes a cart through offices and between cubicles. Folders are handed out and pleasantries exchanged. The occasional package finds its owner. A few pens are replaced. Stacks of blank forms are refilled and new sheets of paper placed on desks. Some smile at her, but their eyes slip away from her in moments. Nobody really sees the everyday things.

Nobody notices as Viago Silvester leaves his office for lunch. And nobody sees a young woman with a cart slip in the office.

She’s quick.

Her eyes run across the room, taking in all details. She flips open a journal on the table before placing it back in the same position. She looks at the bookshelves lining the walls. The top of one of the books is bent slightly. She pulls it out and finds a small notebook, nestled in the carved out pages.

Every page of it is carefully photographed before being placed back in its place. A small device finds itself hiding in the lamp on the table, a sensitive microphone waiting for the slightest sound. The woman leaves as silently as she had arrived.

And not a single soul sees.

***

Viago mumbles to himself in his office and a maintenance worker listens in a break room. His colleagues pay no mind to their headphone-wearing friend.

With each word, the mind of the researcher crystallizes before him, new facets revealing themselves, as Viago mumbles more and more frantically. Something inside is broken. His mind is like a shattered mirror. Sharp, beautiful but irreversibly damaged.

He won't stop. There isn't enough left of him to stop.

The worker slips a small piece of paper to a passing man while returning to his work.

Wheels within wheels.

***

William looks at the items before him. The pictures, the brief transcript, and the man's file.

He sighs. Poor Viago. He calls for a janitor to empty his paper basket.

Another paper slip.

This time- the last one.

***

Viago returns to his office, sits down, and takes a deep breath. Then it begins anew. Whenever his mind becomes free of distractions everything comes flooding back. Even with his eyes open the images feel crystal clear in his mind. Every second of it replayed again and again.

He begins grabbing the folders on his desk and rushing through them, words flowing independently between his lips, as his mind goes in two different directions. After a few minutes, he stops. You can't beat the classics.

He opens his laptop and begins working through the safeguards. He doesn't need to be careful. The monitoring on this system is non-existent, since it is assumed the ones who have access to it are loyal and sane.

Somewhere in the facility acid begins draining from a chamber. Now he has no other options.

Tick, tock.

Viago walks through the hallway. His face is neutral, but his eyes glow feverishly, a mild reflection of his burning mind.

Why did they lie?

It should've worked. It shouldn't be like this. He was supposed to forget. To return to work in blissful ignorance.

Why why-why-why does he still hear her? Why do her eyes still look back at him when he closes his? Why do they scream for something he couldn't give?

It burns him, consumes him.

The alarm begins screaming when Viago's halfway to his destination. He doesn't think about his actions. A single thought, a single image radiates through every single corner of his mind. He quickens his pace. She's getting louder.

He has to.

He has to.

She should have something, if not freedom then at least release.

A janitor is sweeping the hallway floor, not bothered by the sirens. Viago casts his eyes downwards.

He doesn't see the janitor stepping in front of him. He doesn't see the flash of steel. He doesn't have time to react before being shoved against the wall.

The blade is sharp, the attacker experienced and precise. Viago's heart begins pumping blood into his chest cavity. He tries to struggle and scream, but a hand covers his mouth and the world starts to lose focus.

Two other men in jumpsuits exit from a nearby door. They roll out a black tarp on the floor and Viago is placed upon it. Within seconds he is wrapped in it and picked up.

Only a janitor remains, sweeping up the dust and humming a song nobody remembers.

***

Viago had never checked in according to the database. No cameras had recorded him, and his colleagues didn't remember seeing him.

A breach caused by a fatal flaw in the automated systems programming was contained with acceptable casualties.

The world kept on turning.

Another act is over. The technical crew rests.

Until the curtain parts again.

Bad Dreams

Agent Adams walked down the hall of the Lanthanide Hills Task Force dorms, swiped her card on the lock, readied her parka around her face, and stepped into the cold, Siberian night, manila envelope in hand.

Tonight was not a snowy night, but the cold wind still whipped up around the mess hall to her left and blew snow in gusts across the pavilion; she saw lights bobbing in the distance, and dogs barking, the night patrol wandering in snowshoes and parkas down the road to the main facility a mile down the road with a Humvee rattling along behind them. The watch lights circled lazily in a long, cold circle, waiting for sun that wouldn't come for another two months.

She started off, hand on the rope guiding them through the dark, carefully watching her step. Snowshoes were tricky; her worst fear was having to fight in them one day. High heels she could do. Not snowshoes.

The rope led past the mess to the training facility, the armory, the other dorms for the poor saps that were stuck on winter Lanthanide training assignment against their will. Finally, she came to the old log cabin she was looking for, and trudged up the three steps to the door with "FUCK OFF" written in permanent marker on the window, both in English and shaky Russian.

In the few years that Adams had spent at Lanthanide, she had never visited Clef's small house on the edge of the training facility's grounds. Part of her hesitated a moment on the doorstep, like she was doing something profoundly wrong; her mentor was not necessarily a private man, but also wasn't one to invite others into his life at all. There was no backstory to it; no reasoning or sad reason why. It just didn't happen.

Because Alto Clef was a fucking repulsive little man.

She looked at the envelope, wondered if it could wait until morning. Maybe it could; she could just leave it here-

Suddenly, Clef started screaming.

Clef screamed a lot. One could argue that Adams had heard, actually, nearly every possible sound that Alto Clef could make. But this one started at a low-pitched whine, and grew into a slow, unearthly howl, like a car starting, and increased in pitch and volume until she found herself frozen in place on the doorstep, clutching the envelope tighter.

What the fuck?

She caught herself about thirty seconds into the unholy roar of the damned, and pounded on the door.

“Clef! Are you okay?”

The house dropped silent. She waited. A few minutes passed. Adams considered knocking again, or doing away with chivalry altogether and just busting in the door, in case he had hurt himself or something-

CLUNK.

The sound of a lock unlocking.

SHHIIICK.

CLUNK.

THOCK.

The sound started at the top of the door, and worked its way down, the sound of about ten heavy-duty locks being pulled away

CLICK

THOCK

THOCK

CLICK

CLUNK

The door opened an inch, and Adams found herself with the tip of a shotgun in her face.

“Leave. Don’t tell anyone what you heard.” His voice was cold, and broke near the end.

“Hey, are you oka-“

“I’m fine. Go away.”

“Look, I brought these files-“

“It. Can wait. Don’t tell anyone what you heard.”

“Clef, what was that? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It happens.”

“What happens?”

“Dreaming. I've seen a lot, Adams. Please give me privacy on this."

There was a pause. The barrel stayed where it was.

“Okay. I won't tell anyone. Um…I’ll…I’ll see you tomorrow.”

In a moment, the gun was gone, the door was slammed closed, the locks relocked, and Agent Adams was left on the porch, alone.

Clef watched her go from the window in the other room. Waited until she was down the road, back to the main facility and the dorms.

He grinned, pretty damn proud of himself. That was quite a show! God damn. Good cover. Alto Clef, a fucking repulsive little man who had been, in fact, enjoying himself immensely for the past few hours, took his underwear back off, took a Viagra, and put another waffle in the toaster for round number 14.

Badges And Scorecards

Leningrad, December 1979:

The flicker of your nightlight casts an unsettling glow throughout your small bedroom and the wind rattles your window, keeping you from finding sleep. Your young mind runs wild with imagination, only heightening your fear of the night and that which you can't see. Fortunately your father senses that all isn't well in your world and steps quietly inside the room. He sits on the edge of your bed and asks why you're still awake, in an awkward combination of stern and gentle that is so characteristic of him.

"There is a monster under my bed, papa," you whisper quietly, so as not to disturb or otherwise make it aware of your presence above. Your father smiles and gives a quiet laugh.

"Do you want me to look underneath the bed?" he asks with a grin. You nod, and his next words surprise you. "No, Pasha. There are no monsters. They are all dead." Incredulous, you sit up slightly and ask, "How do you know?" Still smiling, he pats your head and says, "Pasha, your grandfather killed them all in the Great Patriotic War. Go to sleep."

You believe him, and sleep finally takes you.

A Russian Federation army base, February 1995:

Snow billows and swirls around your face, obstructing your view of the man-shaped bullseye target hundreds of meters away. In your white-knuckled hands rests an almost ancient Mosin Nagant 91/30 sniper's rifle, a relic left over from the Second World War, relegated to use as a training instrument for new potential marksmen. The metal is frozen and has lost much of its bluing, exposing the roughly milled receiver to the harsh elements you are now subjected to. The trigger group rattles and one of the lenses is cracked, sometimes making it difficult to concentrate. The wood is rotting away due to the

dank storage arsenals it has resided in for so many years, but also displays a number of crude carved markings on one side of the stock-a previous owner's morbid scorecard.

When your instructors distributed the weapons to you and your fellow marksmen candidates, the rest of them clucked their tongues and mocked the pitiful appearance of the weapons. Their jokes and spiteful comments escaped your ears at the time.

It is the most beautiful thing you have ever seen, and is everything a weapon of war should be: old, battle worn, and victorious, with scars to prove it. You sense prophetically that years from now you will wish you had this weapon to call your own, but sadly you too will return it to the armorers to be given a cursory cleaning and then a dip in storage oils, until the next recruit comes along. It seems an unfair existence for something with so much history behind it, but you suspect it is more fitting than hanging on a collector's wall as a showpiece, never to be used again.

Your eye peers through the scope, ignoring the cracked lens and seeking out the target through the mire of snow and fog ahead of you. You wait, wait for a chance, wait for God to clear the skies for you. A sudden break in the squall rewards you with a few fleeting moments of clear sight, exactly what you need.

You pull the trigger without hesitation, causing your instructor to turn from the spotting scope next to you and smile for what you think is the first time in his life.

Chechnya, May 1995:

Your senior sergeant glares at you. He is covered in an unspeakable and inescapable filth that infests this place, and eyes with scorn your clean (relatively speaking) uniform. Especially that marksman's badge that you only just earned little under a month ago.

"You, boy!" he barks, and you stand at rigid attention. "Give me that fucking badge. Once you've killed something like the rest of us, you can have it back." Obediently you surrender it to him, understanding your place in this war all too well, having to prove and reprove yourself to these men who have known nothing but misery and

death for the past year.

You are attached to your first patrol the next day, in what on the map is labeled Grozny but in reality exists only as a smoldering cemetery of skeletal buildings, charred vehicles and mostly unburied corpses. Though the battle is officially over, it remains a place of wholesale slaughter and devastation, and you wonder why anyone would deem such a godforsaken place to be of any importance. Your squad picks its way through mountains of rubble and around mass graves, sweeping up a few stragglers here and there.

Out of the corner of your eye you spot a teen aged boy, his face covered in a few dirty rags and carrying a soldier's rucksack over one shoulder. The sergeant screams at him to halt but instead the boy breaks into a run, darting away from you. Your sergeant turns to you, pointing, and bellows, "*Snaiper!*" leaving little doubt in your mind as to what he is ordering you to do. Before you even realize it your SVD is nestled snugly upon your shoulder and the scope is at your eyes, the graduated sights already aligned on the fleeing figure. The rifle jumps violently in your hands and the boy drops to his knees, blood spilling from the exit wound in his chest as he gasps for air. Dust settles around him, and he is still.

Your sergeant jabs a fist in the air, ordering the rest of the squad to hold as the two of you fall out to examine what was in that bag. Approaching the corpse, your eyes notice something you had missed before: long strands of dark brown hair fall from the crude balaclava, now jarred out of place and showing the boy's facial features more clearly. You are suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that "he" isn't a boy at all, but actually a young girl- only about 17 or so by the looks of it. Her blood soaks the charred ground and her empty brown eyes stare lifelessly at the perpetually cloudy sky. Your hands begin to shake as you riffle through the bag and you pray, pray to god that there are grenades or something, anything to justify taking this girl's life.

All you find are a few meager scraps of bread.

Nausea overtakes you and you fall to the ground and retch violently, your sergeant standing over you with his ever-present scowl. He grabs you with his giant's hands and forces you to stand on your

feet and look him in the eye. “Looks like you can shoot after all, boy,” he says as he pries open your clenched hands and returns the marksman’s badge.

The Mediterranean, present day:

Jimmy Durante’s “I’ll Be Seeing You” lilts through the air from a radio somewhere on the street below you, conveniently distracting passersby just finishing their antipasti at the streetside cafés. The beach is deserted save for a young girl sprawled across a tiny dock, her shapely legs kicking playfully in the warm Italian water, frilly pastel-yellow dress glowing in the soft luminescence of the setting sun. A smile plays across her face-she’s pretty, and you find it difficult to maintain your professional detachment whilst observing her through the rifle scope. You try to keep focus, but part of your mind keeps drifting, longing to be on the beach with her, holding her hand, telling her how beautiful she is and how happy she makes you feel by just looking at her.

“Delta One, in position.” Dr. Clef’s voice responds through the radio in a terse command, “Delta Six. Go.”

She turns to look at the older woman approaching her from the beach, affording you a perfect view of her face. You barely feel the weapon move as a .22 caliber bullet leaves your suppressed rifle and impacts her head squarely between the eyes. She doesn’t feel a thing, just crumples like a broken doll, still smiling, blood streaming from the tiny entry wound and glimmering in the sunlight.

“Delta One, target neutralized.”
“Delta Two, confirm.”
"Delta Three, engaging target."
"Delta One, moving to support."
"Negative, Delta One, Delta Three. Delta Six will handle this one personally."

The older woman stops in her tracks, dropping a basket of wine and cheese at her feet in disbelief and horror just as Dr. Clef clubs her across the face with his pistol. Your concentration lapses again and you ignore the ensuing brawl and flurry of radio activity. Instead you gaze at the young woman’s face, even now still smiling as her skin

grows pale from blood loss. You manage to hold the bile down as your spotter takes a shot; SCP-784's body collapses atop the girl and breaks your line of sight. Silently, you thank God for this small gift.

Later, you come across a folded note on your desk. It's a commendation from your Mobile Team leader for assisting in the termination of SCP-784, a "dangerous and destructive entity that posed a grave threat to both the Foundation and mankind in general." You fold the note and place it atop your gun rack, in which reside two rifles: an SVD Dragunov, and a suppressed .22 rifle of Czech design. Each has a single mark carved in the stock. Each has only been used once, now they both collect dust in your office.

You collapse onto the stiff bed and contemplate the day's events, your mind returning to something you told yourself many years ago in a place far away from here.

The only thing worse than killing an innocent girl, is getting a medal for doing so.

The thought remains with you all night, keeping you awake. You wish your father was still alive, wish he could give you some advice, wish you could ask him what all of this was for. You remember what he told you when you were a little boy, and wonder now if you would have the fortitude to tell him that he was wrong. The monsters are still very much alive.

Bal-chatri

Arcs of electricity left **`Vincent Anderson's`** body as he walked through the **`Three Portlands`** rain, the wayward bolts striking nearby buildings and light fixtures as he slowly marched down the center of an empty street. Occasionally, he could be heard mumbling to himself, “It’s okay… I can fix this…”

Anderson eventually reached the foot of a hill near the edge of the anomalous city. At the hill’s peak stood the remains of a school. He stood motionless for several minutes, the rain making a light tapping sound on his mask as he eyed the decrepit building. A small silver droid crawled out of his pocket and up his arm before perching on his shoulder. The tiny spider-like drone’s single red eye looked up at the school, then back toward its master, shaking off the rain with a tiny wiggle.

Anderson reached beneath his mask and removed a small drive and placed it within the droid.

“Take care of yourself, Benny,” Anderson said, “I’ll see you soon. Be good.”

The small drone gave a salute and crawled away. Anderson watched it go, and then turned his attention back to the distant school.

“I can fix this…” he said to himself again and continued his ascent.

The Tristan Academy of the Arts had been a prestigious school in Three Portlands between 1972 and 1998, when the death of its founder Abraham Tristan and subsequent financial problems resulted in the school closing its doors. Since then it had remained abandoned, its windows boarded over and its halls filled with all flavors of trash, graffiti, and stagnant puddles of rainwater leaking in from the numerous holes in the roof. On this day in November,

however, the building came to life once more. As an academy teaching both mundane and anomalous practices, the entire building was fortified against magic. It was for this reason, **Agent Sasha Merlo** assumed, that **Phineas** selected the abandoned school to serve as the location of his intricate trap.

Merlo stood on the stage of the school's auditorium and checked her phone. Her brunette hair was tied back, and the MTF field uniform she wore gave the normally laid back agent an appearance of authority. On the screen appeared the same message that had been there for the last two hours:

> Ready or not, here he comes.

Merlo and the rest of MTF Gamma-13 were now rushing to put together the final pieces of Phineas' plan, a good fourteen hours ahead of schedule, and without a Phineas.

Merlo turned to the center of the stage. There stood two vacant folding chairs, each over a glyph drawn in red chalk. The area surrounding these glyphs was covered in an even larger glyph, the final touches of this one currently being drawn in white chalk by **Agent Daniel Navarro**, his focus intense as he quickly worked on the many intricate lines and curves needed.

"How much longer?" Merlo asked.

Her colleague didn't look up but simply continued his work as he spoke.

"Binding glyphs are not something you can rush," Navarro said. "If I draw this wrong it could turn into a killing curse, or interact with teleportation circles under the chairs and explode, which is the exact opposite of what we want. I will give Phineas credit though, this is high end magic. The kind people go to schools to learn. It's going to get the job done… assuming I've done it right."

Merlo nodded, opening her mouth to reply, but stopping when a series of voices blasted over her radio.

"Austringers, this is Sentry 1. We have visual on the target, ETA ten

minutes!"

"Austringers, this is Sentry 2. We have visual on target… he's performing a type blue event… Visual lost!"

There was the sound of a distant explosion. The lights in the school all died at once.

"Fuck…" Navarro said, as he lit up the room with his flashlight, the glyph he was working on still incomplete.

"He's here…" Merlo replied. "I guess we're doing this live."

Agent Clarissa Shaw was in the main hall of the school with four other agents when power went out. Dressed in the MTF field uniform, with her blond hair tied back and her glasses replaced with goggles, she and her colleagues readied their arms. The main doors blew off their hinges. A wave of **Peregrine Androids** flooded in through the breach. The team scattered to avoid the incoming shrapnel, taking cover in the nearby classroom doors. The opposing forces began to exchange fire. Within seconds the hall was littered with bullet casings, hole-riddled droids, and the bodies of two dead agents.

The remaining Gamma-13 agents lost no time in tossing several canisters into the hall, quickly filling the area with a fine white powder, the oncoming wave of droids crumbling into slick black puddles. The ones that the powder failed to destroy were subdued with bullets. The hall became quiet, save for the heavy breathing of those left alive.

"Breach at the main entrance," Shaw said over her radio, as her teammates reloaded and readied for what was likely another wave of the assault. "Hostiles subdued, Frost and Donner are down."

"Copy, any sign of target?" Merlo's voice responded.

"Negative, we…"

The response was cut short by the loud crackle and heat of electricity, her two fellow agents flying away from her into the

classrooms in which they had taken cover. Shaw turned on the spot, and was greeted by the gleaming smile of a silver comedy mask.

As Shaw attempted to fire off a round from her rifle, she felt her legs get swept from beneath her, the burst harmlessly flying into the ceiling as she smacked onto the linoleum floor. Anderson proceeded to kick the gun away, pressing down on her vest with a heavy foot as a long, animate wire retracted into his hand.

“Nice seeing you again, Clarissa,” Anderson spoke. “Would you be so kind as to tell me what you have done with my friends?”

She kept her mouth shut for several moments, looking up at her foe with silent contempt.

“Auditorium.”

Anderson gave a relieved sigh in response.

“Your cooperation is appreciated.”

The wire shot out of Anderson’s hand again, piercing through Shaws’ body armor with a sick *pop.* It then punched through her torso and wormed its way through her, between her organs, and wrapping around her spine. She let out a scream of pain and terror. The wire began letting out a small continuous shock which caused her to involuntarily stand up. Anderson gave a satisfied nod as he forced Shaw to move down the hall in front of him.

“Why don’t you join me?” Anderson whispered in her ear.

Shaw did her best to remain silent as she made her forced march, occasional tears running down her face. Her body was no longer her own. The short walk to the auditorium felt like an eternity as she waited in the prison of her own flesh. Anderson had her push the door open to the auditorium, and the pair stepped inside.

On the stage were two empty chairs. No one else was in the room.

Shaw shrieked again as the coil around her spine tightened, the electricity sending waves of anguish through her.

“In the auditorium?” Anderson hissed, the coil continuing to tighten until Shaw felt a snap, and then nothing from below the waist.

“They were supposed to be here!” she screamed. “They were! Please!”

“Bullshit!” Anderson shouted. The wire whipped back, and then flung forward. Shaw flew through the air, over the theater seats, and crashed onto the stage. She rolled for several moments, then became still.

Electricity arced from Anderson as he gave a frustrated yell. The hall filled with the smell of ozone.

And then with the sound of a shotgun being pumped.

Anderson turned his head. Navarro and Merlo stood at the opposite end of the hall, the former brandishing a shotgun, the latter a pistol.

“Where are they?” Anderson asked, regaining his composure. “This has gone on long enough.”

Navarro replied by pulling the trigger, a large blue bolt of energy flying from the barrel. The cyborg fell backwards, the blast flying past him and slamming into the far wall. Anderson swiftly leapt to his feet, firing off a shot of lightning which hissed harmlessly through the air.

Navarro and Merlo were gone.

With a shriek of rage, the cyborg sprinted down the hall, his head rapidly swiveling to track his targets. Another blue blast shot past him. Anderson let out another yell and began to chase.

Agent Shaw slowly rolled herself over as she coughed. Her body was on fire from the bruises and lacerations she sustained during the landing from her brief flight. She looked over her crumpled self. She couldn’t feel anything from the waist down, her legs unresponsive to her commands, leaving her to crawl upon the stage. While there was a small pool of blood from where the wire had pierced her, the bleeding from that wound seemed to have stopped.

She propped herself up as she heard fast footsteps; Agent Merlo was sprinting down one of the aisles toward her. Two other agents followed behind, each carrying a bound and gagged prisoner. The first carried a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses that clung to his face as he looked around in terror. The second was a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes, who simply looked straight ahead, tears in her eyes. Respectively, they were **Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos**, two members of Anderson Robotic's inner circle, and two of Vincent Anderson's closest friends. The agents placed them down in the two folding chairs gingerly.

"Jesus Christ…" Merlo said, as she knelt down beside Shaw. "How bad?"

"I can't feel my legs," Shaw replied. "Where's Dan?"

"Buying us time," Merlo answered "Clarissa, I'm so sorry… Phineas promised us more time to set the trap, and then you and your crew got stuck in the cross fire…"

"Wouldn't be an Asimov's Fuckups mission if things went right…" Shaw said, grinning through the pain.

Merlo gave a sad smile and signaled one of the agents over.

"Get her to Sherman, now! Have the rest of the team at the standby point. The trap's set. Carter knows the contingency plan."

"Yes ma'am," the agent replied and scooped up Shaw gently.

"Take him down…" Shaw called to Merlo as she was carried away.

Merlo nodded in response. She turned a glance to Jason and Medea, giving them a small half wave as she drew her pistol.

"See you folks real soon."

Anderson stood in a locker room, his eyes scanning for a very annoying man in plain clothes who had been taking potshots at him across half the interior of the school. The last one had hit his leg,

leaving him slightly hobbled as he continued his search. There were no other exits apparent. Whoever this agent was, he had them trapped.

“There is nowhere else for you to run.” Anderson hissed. “Where are they?”

“Did you check the auditorium?” Navarro’s voice called back from somewhere in the maze of lockers.

“Do you think this is a fucking game?” Anderson shouted back, only to be met with a small nervous laugh.

“Yeah, kinda.”

Anderson reached into his pocket, and pulled out several globs of neon blue goo. He gave a frustrated sigh, and then proceeded to chuck them at each of the locker clusters. The metal quickly disintegrated into rust, leaving the once hidden Navarro exposed. The agent looked around, and then back to Anderson, holding up a bloodied hand.

“Okay, that’s just cheating.”

The agent immediately clenched his fist, sending a column of flames up from the floor. Anderson dived to the side to avoid being flash fried. Navarro fired off another blast from his shotgun, the slug nailing the cyborg in the chest and sending him flying backwards into the wall. Navarro sprinted for the door, only to crash to the ground as his feet became snagged. An animate wire was wrapped around his legs, dragging him toward the sparking cyborg.

Navarro slashed his hand again and rolled over as he released another fiery blast. The wire jerked him forward, sending the column of flame into the ceiling. Anderson let out a wild howl and he dived forward, the animate wire protruding from his palm sharpening itself into a fine point as he tried to lance his foe. Navarro had grabbed the wire. Anderson grunted as he placed his weight into the strike, the wire sliding down slowly, cutting into Navarro’s palms on the way down. Blood dripped from Navarro’s palms as he felt the blade slowly slip.

Suddenly Navarro let go with his right hand, grabbing Anderson by the lapel. The blade forcefully sunk into his left shoulder as he let out a cry of pain, followed by a cringing smile.

“Gotcha,” he said through gritted teeth. From his hand erupted a blast of flames which completely engulfed the cyborg. Anderson screamed in pain as Navarro kicked his foe off of him and hobbled out the door, grabbing his shotgun along the way.

The bloodied agent lost no time getting back to the auditorium, his body slamming through the doors as he began to limp down the aisle. Jason and Medea watched him with impassive eyes as he frantically looked around.

"Sasha?" he shouted. "Lets go!"

CRACK

A bolt of lightning struck Navarro in the back and threw him forward. A glob of orange goo hit him mid-flight, and quickly encased him in a bright orange cocoon. As he lay incapacitated, slow, dragging footsteps filled the room, as did the smell of ozone, and seared flesh.

The agent looked up to see Anderson. Parts of his suit had burnt away, exposing charred flesh, and the strange hybrid of organic and mechanical components beneath. His mask was gone, leaving full view of his face. In place of eyes, he had what appeared to be two small camera lenses that glowed with a faint green light. Rather than a nose, he had a triangular grating that rapidly hissed with the passage of air.

"Gotcha," Anderson stated. He launched the animate wire at Navarro and let it squeeze. Navarro howled in pain as he watched his left arm, from the elbow down, roll away from the rest of his body. The cyborg watched his helpless prey scream in agony, then raised the wire for the kill.

Bang.

A gunshot rang out. Anderson backed up slightly in shock, the

projectile hitting him in the torso. He turned to the source. Merlo stood in the auditorium doorway, pistol raised.

“Kill him, and you kill Jason or Medea. We’ve linked a kill agent between his vital signs, mine, and theirs. Either of us dies, so do they.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Want to take that chance?” Merlo raised her pistol. “Try me. Otherwise your friends are right there. Go get them”

“So just like that, you’re done? You think I was born yesterday?”

“You’ve sliced up our team wizard, and crushed the spine of my second in command. I’ve only got this 9mm. The time for tricks has long passed,” Merlo stated coolly. “You’ve won. Collect your god damn prize.”

Anderson and Merlo’s gazes locked for a minute, and then the cyborg began to move toward the stage.

“If you have harmed them… I’ll destroy everything you care about, Sasha.”

Anderson kept one eye on the agents as he approached the stage. Merlo quickly cut Navarro free from his orange prison and watched him cauterize his stump hand with a small blast of flame.

“Mechanical asshole…” Navarro mumbled, violently shaking as he was helped to his feet a wink, the two agents watching as the worn down husk that was Vincent Anderson stumbled onto the stage.

“Friends,” Anderson called out. “Friends, I am so sorry. I swore that I would protect you and I have failed.”

Jason and Medea looked at their employer in silence. Their eyes were bloodshot, and their faces plastered with the exhaustion known by those living in a state of terror.

“It will not happen again,” Anderson continued. “I promise you that. With every fiber of my being, I promise. I can only hope you’ll find

the kindness to forgive me for this… for all my faults. After all, to err is human…”

Anderson took a final step, then turned to Merlo.

"Bring them to me," he barked. "Now."

Merlo nodded, placing Navarro down in a seat in the first row, then began to climb on the stage. Anderson gestured towards the two bound prisoners expectedly, his eyes locked on Merlo as she knelt down and began to undo Medea's restraints.

Meanwhile, Navarro noticed his shotgun lying on the ground near the stage. A small smirk came to his face.

"Heads up!" Navarro shouted, diving to the shotgun and letting loose one final blast as Anderson turned on the spot and let loose another orange glob.

Both Navarro and Anderson were hit square in the chest. The former crashed into a row of seats. The latter stood motionless, his frame stunned. Merlo sprinted forward, tackling the cyborg. The two landed in a heap between Jason and Medea.

The room became silent. Anderson stood quietly, his hand around Merlo's throat. She clawed at her assailant; but it was no use, his grip was absolute. The agent made short gasps for air as the grip tightened.

"And we were getting along so well," he said with a sigh, and threw the agent across the stage like a piece of trash. Merlo landed with a sickening thud, skidding face down across the smooth surface of the stage before coming to a final stop.

Two red glyphs began to glow beneath Jason and Medea’s chairs, as a larger one appeared beneath all three of them, glowing with an intense white light. Anderson felt his entire body go rigid as he was locked into place, a great force pressing against him from all directions. Jason and Medea phased out of sight, vanishing with soft pops, the glyphs beneath them growing cold, leaving their images burnt onto the stage.

The cyborg recognized this kind of magic. He had seen it before, from an old friend.

“Well played, Phineas,” Anderson said weakly. “Well played.”

Agent Shaw watched the monitor in front of her intently. Upon it were the remains of Vincent Anderson, lying motionless upon a secure exam table within a cell in **Site-64**. At some point between his capture at the Tristan Academy in Three Portlands and his arrival on site he shut down, and entered a form of stasis. Life signs were present, and the physical body was repairing its damaged components automatically, but none of their equipment could detect brain activity.

Shaw gave a heavy sigh, and rolled her wheelchair over to a coffee pot in the back of the observation room. She poured herself a mug and then returned her attention to the screen. They had finally captured the white whale itself.

The door to the chamber opened. Agent Merlo stepped inside. Shaw gave her superior a friendly nod.

“Any changes?” Merlo asked, looking over the screen.

“Nope,” Shaw replied, taking a sip of her coffee. “Did they settle on a plan?”

“They are shipping him to 19 tomorrow for long term storage,” Merlo sighed. “High priority PoI, maximum security containment needed, O5 orders, and all that jazz.”

“At least we got him,” Shaw chimed in cheerfully. “For once, we won.”

“It's true,” Merlo said with a small smile. “We finally got him.”

The two looked at the monitor for several moments, watching the motionless body on the screen.

“Dan and I were planning on hitting up Secret Crest tonight,” Merlo broke the silence. “I’m buying. Care to join us?”

Shaw smiled but shook her head.

“I think I’ll pass for now. Thanks though.”

“Clarissa, I insist.”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Shaw replied sharply. “You don’t owe me a damn thing. This wasn’t your fault.”

Shaw wheeled herself back and forth slightly for emphasis.

“If you need atonement, seek it from Holman, or Navarro. As far as I’m concerned, the only one responsible for this situation is the monster on that screen.”

Tears were visible in Shaw’s eyes.

“Just… promise me I’m still a Lawbringer.”

Merlo closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure what they were going to do with Shaw at this point. There was talk about making her the HQ coordinator for the agents in the field, but mobile task forces needed to be mobile above all things. It was just as likely that Clarissa Shaw would be forced to retire.

Merlo gave a sharp nod, and hugged her friend.

“They’ll have to pry you from my cold, dead, hands.”

Navarro and Merlo sat at the bar of the Secret Crest Pub, a small brewpub located in Portland’s Pearl District. The owner, having been a former Site Director of Site-64, made the location a welcome haven for those Foundation personnel who had gotten off their shifts. Both agents sat in plain clothes, the former’s left sleeve pinned upward to make up for his new lack of a hand.

“Shaw might let you off easily,” Navarro commented as he sipped his drink, “but you’re buying me my drinks forever.”

“Fair enough,” Merlo replied, holding up her fingers to signal another round. She paused for several moments before she finally added.

“I’m sorry though Dan. I really am.”

“You should be,” Navarro said with sly smile. “That was the hand I used to flip people off. Now I can’t properly express myself. You have emotionally crippled me.”

Merlo gave small snort and shook her head, taking a long sip from her beer.

“What kind of ammo were you using in that shotgun, anyway?” Merlo asked. “Haven’t seen it before.”

“Something I picked up on **an assignment in Japan**. Completely nonlethal.”

“The great Daniel Navarro, even in the face of a killer cyborg, you can’t bring yourself to kill someone.” Merlo chuckled. Navarro joined in. After a few more moments they returned to their drinks in silence.

“So what happens now?” Navarro asked after finishing his second drink. “You guys got your prize. What’s next for Gamma-13?”

“We caught Anderson, yes,” Merlo replied with a sigh. “But the company still exists. Phineas has probably taken over by now. Lop off one head and have another two grow back in its place.”

“Indeed,” said a warm voice from behind the two agents. They swiveled on their stools and came face to face with an old woman carrying a box. She wore a dark blue business suit and her grey hair was tied back in a bun, and gave a soft, sympathetic smile.

Navarro and Merlo locked eyes for a moment, and prepared to speak. They were interrupted as the old woman introduced herself.

“My name is **Mrs. Saker**,” she said. “I was a friend of Phineas.”

“Subtle,” Merlo replied. “Phineas send you to strike out another deal?”

“Phineas is dead,” Mrs. Saker said softly. “Anderson slaughtered him in his apartment shortly before you captured him, as he did to all of those who threw their lot in with the old fool. I’m all that’s left of

Phineas's band of merry men."

Merlo paused.

"So who has taken charge of the company?"

"It remains to be seen," Mrs. Saker replied. She then placed the box on the bar next to Navarro.

"Phineas would have wanted you to have this for your troubles. I'll be working on something for your friend Ms. Shaw in the meantime. We'll be in touch."

Mrs. Saker gave a curt nod and turned away, leaving the pub as quietly as she entered, and disappearing into the foot traffic outside. Merlo and Navarro looked towards the box, the latter cautiously opening it. Inside was a black prosthetic arm, marked with the Anderson Robotics logo. A card was placed on top which read:

> Thank you for your purchases of your new **GYRFALCON™ Series prosthetic.**

Jason and Medea Contos sat at the board room table inside Anderson Robotics HQ. Neither of them could remember the last 72 hours, and had woken in their respective homes beaten and bruised. In the time they had come into work, they had learned that both Vincent Anderson and Phineas had completely vanished, leaving no one to man the company helm. Joining them at the table was Dr. Jeffery Wilson, and Isaac Dillard. The former was a middle aged man with dark skin. His face seemed to be permanently pressed into an expression of worry. The latter was a muscular man in a business suit whose hair was neatly combed back, and carried a faint scent of aftershave with him. Isaac cleared his throat, and then began to address his colleagues.

"Well folks," he began, "we all knew this day was likely to come. Now we need to make a decision, and fast. The stability of the company depends on it."

Isaac let out a sad sigh.

“We need to replace Anderson.”

All the eyes in the room turned to one another, bouncing from locked gaze to locked gaze before all glances settled on the floor.

“My vote,” Isaac continued, “is for Medea to take the reins.”

“M.. me?” Medea stuttered. “For the love of God, why?”

“You’re the closest person we have to matching Vincent and Phineas’s raw talent,” Isaac replied. “You know their vision for our products and customers as well as they did. It will be a hard road, but we’re here to help every step. Unfortunately, someone needs to step up to the plate, and I’m afraid it’s your turn to bat.”

Medea looked down at the table nervously.

“I… I wouldn’t even know where to start… Isaac, I can’t be set adrift like this…” Medea mumbled. “I… I don’t know what to do…”

“You don’t need to,” said a voice from the entrance of the room.

The four heads at the table turned to the board room’s entrance. Standing there was a tan man in a blue dress shirt, with a silver vest and matching slacks. He had long black hair tied back in a ponytail and piercing green eyes. A silver comedy mask was gripped in his left hand as he made his way to the head of the table. While it was no longer mechanical sounding, the four board members recognized his voice.

“Vince?” Wilson asked. “What…. What happened to you?”

“Got a little tied up with the Foundation, I’m afraid,” Vincent replied with a cheerful smile. “I’ve made use of some of the tech created by **Myra Rider**. You remember her, right? Lovely up-and-coming member of the R&D team. Anyway, for the time being I’ll be operating remotely through Saker-101 here.”

Anderson gestured to himself.

“Not bad, don’t you think?”

“If your physical body is in the hands of the Foundation…” Jason asked slowly, “Isn’t that potentially a massive breach of security for us?”

“You bet,” Anderson said warmly, "They've got me by the balls. If they tamper with my body I could die, and I can't use magic like this. But for the time being it’s the best option I have. I'll just pop back to them every now and then. Throw them a bone.”

The room fell silent. The eyes of the board members fell on the table. Their frames felt small under weight of Anderson’s piercing gaze and monumental smile.

“I’ve also got a surprise for you…” Anderson chimed, and turned toward the board room doors. “Look who's back!”

Anderson threw open the doors, and a skinless Saker unit walked in, dressed entirely in black save for its red tie.

“Afternoon everyone,” the android said in Phineas's voice then produced a small smile. “I apologize for my absence. It’s good to be back.”

The board members looked at the Saker with wide eyes. Sideways glances met with one another and an air of terror crept over the table.

“Anyway,” Anderson beamed, placing his comedy mask on his face. “Phineas and I have a lot of work to catch up on from this past month. Let’s hit the ground running. We still need to get the Taita series prototype rebuilt. You all take care.”

Anderson and "Phineas" left the room, the doors closing behind them.

For several minutes there was silence. Isaac organized several papers in front of him, and met the horrified gaze of every other member of the room in turn.

“Well folks,” he said softly, “we all knew this day was likely to come…”

Ball Gags and Scrambled Eggs

It was midnight when they dragged Dietrich and Bridge out of their beds, pinning them down before they had a chance to react. Filthy rubber ball gags were thrust into their mouths, followed shortly by black bags over the head. Despite struggling, they were quickly zip-tied by the wrists and ankles, and then thrown roughly out into the hallway.

Dietrich struggled as best he could. He tried to blindly head butt his assailant, but missed. Before he could wind up for a second try he felt a pair of cold metal probes pressed against his bare inner thigh. "Try that again and I'll taze you until you shit yourself unconscious," a low voice growled.

Dietrich froze. He had no desire to spend his last moments in soiled underwear. And he was fucking sick to death of being tased at this point.

The next half hour passed by in a blur. He had the vague impression of being thrown into the back of a van together with Bridge who was also similarly bound and gagged. The van was driven for a long time, making sharp turns at odd intervals that indicated that the driver was trying to throw off his passengers' sense of direction. Eventually, though, the van came to a halt. The doors were opened and both were dragged out of the vehicle, inside of cold room, and strapped to a chair.

The bag was removed from Dietrich's head. His first impression was a bright flash of light: cold, hard, instantaneous, leaving a rectangular after-image in his abused retinas. Aside from that, only darkness and the vague impression of a sinister figure sitting in a high-backed chair.

A low voice behind him growled in his ear. "Name."

Dietrich mumbled helplessly around the ball gag.

"Shit," the voice growled. A pair of hands wearing leather gloves removed the gag.

Dietrich immediately screamed as loud as he could. "AAAHH! FUCK! HELP! SOMEBO- mmmpmmhpmmhh!"

The gag was re-inserted and then Bridge's bag and gag was removed. The silent figure leaned forward into his ear. "Name."

"I'm the god damned Wizard of Oz." Dietrich heard Bridge say, the sound of spitting soon following. Then the sound of another muffled cry as the ball gag was reinserted.

Dietrich looked around desperately for any kind of reflective surface, and found none. His heart sank. Then his spirits rose. Alexandra might be listening. And if Alexandra was listening, there was a chance that rescue was already on its way.

He let out another low, muffled cry, and the shadowy figure came up behind him, undid the buckle on the ball-gag. "Let's try this one last time," the deep voice sneered, and Dietrich felt the muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his head. "Tell me your name."

All Dietrich could do was stall. Stall for all he's worth till the cavalry rushed in. "D-Dietrich… Dietrich Lurk," he whimpered. "Pa's family was Scottish, that's where the last name comes from— oh God, just please don't kill me!"

"That depends on how you answer this next question," the voice said. "What's Lambda Two?"

"Lam… Lambda Two? I don't know nothin' about any Lambda two!" Dietrich whimpered, then let out a high-pitched scream when he heard a pistol's slide being drawn back behind his head. "WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! Please!" he howled. "I-I-I can tell you something!"

"Talk. Now!" the voice shouted angrily.

"I heard a rumor! It's-It's a secret mobile task force! They're all beautiful women, they're all naked, and they do nothin' but give Clef

blowjobs all day!"

"WHAT!?" the voice shouted, and this time the cry was incredulous. He could hear Bridge cackling against the gag. "Where the FUCK did you hear that?"

Dietrich pondered on his next response, and then he felt a hand clamped over his mouth. Then a gunshot went off.

POP

There was silence for only a second. The feeling of early morning piss running down his leg was a sure indicator that he was not dead. He was still alive?

Then someone tipped over his chair onto its side, and he felt the ball-gag go back into his mouth… and then he heard someone come up behind Bridge and say, "I've just blown your redneck friend's brains out. Lie to me like he did, and you get the same. Now, tell me. What's Lambda-Two?"

A slow, shuddering breath… and then, in a panicked, pissed off scream, Dietrich heard Bridge shout, "IT'S UP YOUR MOM'S ASS!"

click

The other lights turned on. Standing over Bridge was a gentleman in a hunter green suit. Dietrich muffled a question through the ball gag, then felt it slide out of his mouth.

The room turned out to be a standard Foundation office block: Dietrich could see eight standard issue-cubicles of the type he'd spent countless hours in over the past few years. They were laying on plastic sheeting. The smell of urine and fear hung in the air.

A man wearing a ridiculous hat, smiling mirthlessly, stood before them. "Well you both pass," Director Alto Clef said.

"W-what!" Dietrich panted as he tried to regain his bearings. "You were fuckin' with us?"

Hands grabbed Dietrich by the shoulder as he was lifted right-side

up off the hard floor. Then heard that same deep sinister voice. "Now the second part of the test is going to involve sexually pleasuring bodyguards for intel. You'll be practicing on us. Ready?"

Bridge coughed as Dietrich audibly gulped, but it was overshadowed by his assailant's laughter. A woman in a matte-black catsuit walked around in front of him. "These vox converters are awesome," she said in a surprisingly deep manly voice: the same manly voice that was threatening him earlier. She removed the device from around her neck and tossed it back to Clef. "Andrea S. Adams. Pleased to make your acquaintance. You've already met Agent Foxx."

Dietrich let out a frustrated sigh upon hearing that feminine voice. He'd been duped. Bridge cackled silently in relief and rage.

"Did I hear that right, though? I mean, I nearly broke character when you said that there was an entire task force dedicated to giving Clef blowjobs." Adams glowered suspiciously at Clef, sitting at his desk. "Makes me wonder who's starting those rumors."

"Wasn't me," Clef said. "Like I got the time or the semen for something like that. Let's get them cleaned up and have this meeting."

Everyone was calm and cool on the other side of the table. Both Bridge and Dietrich had trouble mixing the powdered creamer and sugar into their respective hot drinks with shaky hands. But their adrenaline was finally starting to plateau after getting changed into clean clothes. Alexandra's avatar was floating on the screen of the mounted LCD monitor on the wall and Merle was standing in a corner just listening to the conversation.

Adams and Clef sat together with a stack of papers off to the side while Foxx leaned against an adjacent wall.

"SO! I heard you both had a little trouble on the way in?" Clef sat there grinning from ear to ear with Adams on his left drumming her fingers.

«I'll say! I can only protect these two so much you know.» Alexandra

smiled broadly at the group.

Bridge inhaled with a growl and said aloud what Dietrich was clearly thinking too. "Don't tell us you set that up too."

"Moi? No no no no, not my style to organize a firing squad on the highway. No, I imagine whoever set that up is playing their own games with you. But that's something to get into later." Clef then slid a file folder across the table. "Omega Seven. Here is the official report of what *really* happened to them. You'll need to know this in order to know why you've been assigned to Lambda Two."

Dietrich tilted his head. "Omega Seven's a dirty word whispered 'round the water cooler, sir. I've only read what was sent out after the *accident*… that and the rumors. Didn't believe either, but I always imagined it was a mix a both."

Adams piped up. "The truth is far worse. Omega Seven completely shit itself and imploded. Lost a lot of collateral. Lost a lot of good folks."

Clef nodded, then leaned forward. "Gents, according to all official records, Lambda Two is an adjunct task force intended to provide temporary support to other MTFs. For the foreseeable future, we will be adjunct to Mobile Task Force Alpha-Niner. Do you understand?"

Everyone nodded. "Great," Clef continued. "Because that's all a lie. We're not Alpha-Niner's assistants. We're their babysitters."

Bridge raised an eyebrow as he finished sipping his green tea. "Fuck's that mean?"

Clef and Adams glanced at each other briefly, "To put it bluntly," Adams said, "if you dig around a bit further, you'll find out that we're the eyes, ears, and the fail-safe."

Dietrich was already skimming through the file. By the time he reached the fourth page, he stopped drinking his coffee altogether. "Is this for real? Able? He- ?"

"Afraid so."

Bridge already did his homework and didn't need to see the file. His clearance and access to reports were unquestioned. "So why do you need us? You'd need an army to go after a rogue task force."

Clef just shook his head and chuckled. "Because our job isn't actually to make sure Alpha-Niner *doesn't* go rogue."

Dietrich and Bridge both looked at each other confusingly but Clef held up a hand before either could comment. "Let me explain. Lambda Two doesn't actually exist. It exists on the charts, it has a budget, it has offices. But the entire Mobile Task Force is actually a cover for MTF Tav-666?"

"Tau-666?" Bridge asked.

"No, *Tav,*" Clef snapped. "Hebrew alphabet, not Greek — why is that so hard for people? — anyway. Our mission is to make sure that Alpha-Niner doesn't explode in our faces."

Dietrich nodded in understanding. "Ah."

"…I'm not sure I understand," Bridge said. "Isn't that the same thing as watching over Alpha-Niner?"

"Depends on how you define *watching over,*" Adams interjected. "Do you mean in the sense of a prison warden? Or a bodyguard?"

Bridge nodded in understanding. "Ah," he said, echoing Dietrich.

"Alpha-Niner has the possibility of being the single most destructive thing to ever happen to the Foundation," Clef explained, "for two reasons. First of all, Alpha-Niner itself could go bad. Anomalies could go rogue. Able could happen again. But there's another possibility that's just as dangerous: sabotage."

"Who?" Dietrich asked.

"There are elements in the Overseer Council that have… a vested interest… in maintaining current policies regarding human anomalies," Clef said. He crumpled his paper cup and tossed it in the trash. "Given the recent information leaks and the current status of Alpha-Niner, we've decided that this is the more serious threat.

So to go back and answer your question: a couple of techies might not help a lot when it comes to stopping a rogue Task Force. But they'd be a hell of a lot more useful in rooting out a saboteur."

"And don't think that the choice of you two wasn't deliberate," Clef continued. "Based on Agent Lurk's profile, he has the making of a man who has nearly made a profession of keeping under the radar. Him and his little friend both know the ins-and-outs of how to do just that."

Dietrich's eyes grew as large as dinner plates. Merle only shrugged, signifying that he too was dumbfounded.

"Alexandra-"

Dietrich stopped holding his breath and relaxed.

"-on loan from nineteen. Really a capable tool in achieving what is needed in the ways of surveillance. I saw how she handled herself after seventeen's little meltdown a few months ago. It impressed a lot more than just a few directors. Django Bridge… well… that was really Dietrich's choice to bring him along. Not *my* first pick but he'll do in a pinch."

Bridge rolled his eyes and looked to Foxx who gave a nasally *snerk* at Clef's statement. "And Agent Foxx," Clef continued. "You three met during the EVAC. He's going to be your semi-official escort."

"W-What?" Foxx stopped smirking. Bridge breathed a 'hah!'.

"You didn't get that memo? Yeah, with this last little assassination attempt they'll need an escort. Neither of them can shoot worth a damn, especially considering *one* of them is an ex-MTF. We won't mention any names for the sake of *Dietrich Lurk*."

Dietrich opened his mouth for a rebuttal, but then quickly shut it. Foxx then walked over from the wall. "So I'm babysitting them?"

Clef cocked his head slightly and leaned in his chair. "Just for a little while till things simmer down. Oh, and they'll need to crash at your place tonight. I can't have it on record that they were *actually* here. Espionage is a fickle bitch."

Foxx opened his mouth to protest. "Before you even start," Clef interrupted, "I did ensure that you are under VIP watch off-site. Nobody will be kicking down your door before I kick them in the balls."

He tossed a **gold-plated USB drive** to Bridge. "And you. Review that when you have a chance. Take care of it— it's the only copy."

"Well, one of you will sleep on the couch. The other will need to make do with the floor." Foxx set down a duffel bag.

"I'll take the floor, I don't mind." Dietrich moved past him and the door frame and started looking around nervously.

"You missing something, Dietrich?" Bridge came in behind him.

"What? No. I just… it's a nice house." Dietrich set his suitcase and laptop bag in the corner.

Foxx pressed his finger to his lips and whispered, "*Shhh.* Child is sleeping." He pointed above his head.

"Shit, sorry."

"Sorry."

"Now, I must go and pay the babysitter. Bathroom's down the hall."

Dietrich made a B-line for the bathroom first. He closed the door gently and stared into the mirror. He hadn't seen Merle since they left the site. "Merle? Merle? Where the hell you run off to?" He shrugged and used the opportunity to shower privately, which was a rare treat for him. Bridge did the same when it was his turn.

Dietrich stacked a few blankets on the floor and then draped one over himself. "At least I'm not gonna get kidnapped again tonight."

«Um. Dietrich, sir. Would you mind plugging me in? I'm down to twelve percent on this battery.»

"Woop. Sorry, Alex. Here." Dietrich fumbled for the charger and plugged his mobile device into the nearest outlet. "You want me to ask for the wifi password or—"

«No need. I cracked it when we first got in range. I'm all good for syncing.»

"Alright, good night then."

«Night, sir.»

Dietrich's phone went into a blank loading screen as Alexandra worked on syncing up with her mainframe counterpart. As he rolled over he saw Merle standing in the reflection of the metal refrigerator surface. Merle casually waved hello. Dietrich, knowing he wasn't the only one in the house, signed to him while lying down.

WERE-DID-YOU-GO

Merle paused and panned his head from side to side a bit before responding.

JUST-WANTED-TO-LOOK-AROUND

Dietrich started to sign back but paused when Bridge walked in. "You'll excuse me if I just go to bed direct, Dee. Kidnapping kinda wears me down." Dee, that's a familiar nickname he hadn't heard in a good long while.

"Heh, no problem, Bridge. Night."

"Night."

Dietrich waited for him to roll over and then continued.

STAY-AROUND-DO-NOT-WANDER

Merle just dismissed him with a gesture and moved over to the reflection of the window as the lookout. His usual routine since he was incapable of sleep. It didn't take long for Dietrich to doze off.

"Thanks again, Stephanie. Here's some extra money for the unexpected timing."

"No worries Mr. Foxx. I had to study for a big final tomorrow anyhow. Good night."

"Night."

Foxx closed the door on the babysitter and turned into the kitchen for a glass of water. A strange shiver crawled up his back as he felt compelled to look at the kitchen window. Nothing but a view overlooking the quiet suburban street.

He then looked across the way to see both Bridge and Dietrich fast asleep. Foxx shook his head, put the glass in the sink, and yawned. One last stop before his bedroom, he wanted to check on Lucille . Passing through the hallway, he noticed that the light in her room was still on. "Honey?" Foxx opened the door gently and peeked in.

"Hi, Daddy." Lucille rubbed her eye and yawned as she placed a plastic kettle next to her books.

"Lucille, it's very late for tea time." Foxx looked down to see cups for four. "Elsa, Anna, and Olaf will be around for your breakfast tea in the morning." Admittedly, he's seen Frozen far too many times to know the characters and songs by heart. He gathered the cups and put them next to the kettle.

"No. Not Olaf, Daddy. I made a *new* friend."

"Oh really?" Foxx picked her up and tucked her into bed.

"He's black and fuzzy and wears a mask and likes to make shadow puppets and and he—"

"Alright. Hush now. Time to sleep. Tell your new friend to sleep too." Foxx tucked her in snuggly.

"He left already."

"Well I'm sure he has things to take care of. Maybe you will see him

in the morning, hm?"

Lucille rolled over to the side of the bed facing the night light. "But I don't know if he likes pancakes."

"We don't have to have pancakes if you don't want to." He smiled. "We'll just ask him what *he* wants for breakfast in the morning then. Okay?"

"Okay. Goodnight, Daddy."

Foxx smiled and closed her door, leaving just a small crack open, then went to bed himself.

"DEE!" Betty squeezed her son as hard as she could.

"Ma, please!" Dietrich squeezed past the door frame and shuffled inside, mother still attached.

"Howdy, Dee. We cooked yer favorite. Open face roast beef sandwich." Jeff then lurched out of his chair towards the dining room. The old man pulled a chair out for his wife to sit next to him, then sat down himself.

Before Betty could even think of sitting down, she hustled up the stairs, down the hall, and through the first door on the right to retrieve one more person. What followed were the slow and steady footfalls of Dietrich's deaf older brother, Bertrand.

Why a simple country couple insisted on naming their offspring with Old German first names coupled with a proud Scottish family surname, Dietrich would never know. He also forgot why he was back home in the first place.

He looked at the wall to see blurry photographs of their relatives living in the old country. He used to love hearing about fairy tales from Granddaddy Murdoch. But that was very long ago when him and Bertrand were waist-high.

The whole Lurk family sat down and laughed and talked of older times. Funnier times. Even some strange times. Dietrich signed to Bertrand who was looking a bit worn for wear.

SICK-BIG-BROTHER

Bertrand shook his head and signed back.

NO-TIRED

BAD-SLEEP

Bertrand's phone vibrated loudly, but nobody seemed to care much… except Bertrand who struggled to get his phone out of his pocket and then stare at the text message. Dietrich cocked his head a bit as he chewed his meal.

WHO-IS-THAT

YOUR-BOSS

Bertrand signed nothing back and shuffled outside with slow hollow footsteps. Dietrich sat puzzled and looked at the fuzzy faces of his parents.

"…What's wrong with Bert?"

Dietrich woke himself up and rubbed his face trying to dismiss a weird dream. The smell of eggs and coffee were a good distraction. He rolled out and made several cracking noises as he rose up from the hard floor.

"Morning, Dietrich." Bridge was chewing on a bagel looking dressed and ready for the day while sitting in front of his laptop. He was preoccupied with monitoring Alexandra decrypt the flash drive. Dietrich groggily lurched for a chair and sat. Across from him was a six year old girl with messy brown hair wearing Frozen pajamas. He watched her almost zombified as she feverishly scribbled with a black crayon on paper.

"Dietrich!?"

"Huh, what?"

Foxx squinted his eyes at him. "I said, how do you like your eggs?"

Dietrich ran his fingers through his hair and straightened his shirt a bit. "Oh uh, over-easy… runny yolks if'n you can manage."

"Ew," Lucille commented.

Foxx cracked two eggs into a skillet. "Lucille that's not nice. Some people just like it that way."

Lucille looked up from her drawing. "But gooey eggs look like boogies."

"Lucille. We don't say gross things at the table." Foxx planted her fork into clump of scrambled egg and put it in her other hand. "C'mon, less drawing more eating."

"This one yours, Foxx?" Dietrich poured himself a cup of coffee. He could tell that Foxx used the European brands just by smell alone.

"Hm? No. I just found her outside this morning. Must be a stray."

Lucille giggled as Foxx straightened a few strands of messy hair. "Yeah. Lucille, this is Mister Lurk. Can you say, Hi?" Lucille smiled and waved. Dietrich nodded back.

"I like the way you talk. You talk like the tow truck in my Cars movie."

Bridge managed to not choke on his bagel in the background. Dietrich just smiled. "Where I comes from, e'ryone talks purty much like this, lil' lady." He made sure to add on an extra layer of twang for her. Foxx slid a plate of eggs in front of him. Dietrich reached over for the pepper to sprinkle some on. Foxx sat down with his own plate of food and looked over at Lucille's paper.

"What's this?"

"That's me. That's my new friend. And that's our house. Can we put it on the fridge?"

"We sure can."

He slid the paper towards him and stuck it to the fridge with a magnet. Foxx also made a mental note to have a chat with the babysitter about what kind of shows Lucille is watching before bedtime.

Dietrich went pale and ejected coffee out of his mouth and nostrils, covering the front of his shirt and plated eggs.

"We don't spit at the table," Lucille corrected him.

Foxx actually got up and approached him. "Woah! You alright?"

Bridge, however, was frozen in place. He had an extensive knowledge of the SCP mainlist, with a specialization in the Euclid class. In two and a half seconds he connected the dots between Dietrich's behaviour, Lucille's drawing, and a particular image file recovered from a cell phone a while back. The pieces clicked together in his head - why Dietrich was always, *always* looking at his reflection, why he talked to himself, why he stayed under the radar for so long, what the hell Merle is.

"It's fucking fourteen-seventy-one," Bridge breathed, his eyes turning to Deitrich.

"Oooh! Daddy! He said a bad TV word!" shouted Lucille.

"Language! What's wrong with you two?" Foxx barked as he lifted up the oven mitt in preparation for a throw. Then he lowered it again, slowly.

"Bridge? What did you just say?"

Banana Smoothie

"So, let's get this straight. It's… a deer, with airbags?"

The corpse was unceremoniously dumped onto the dissection table. The dog-clam had been removed and placed in a small pet carrier outside the theater, and now the room was taken up by the subject of importance.

"Not exactly a deer," Doctor Hart spoke, nodding toward the specimen. Nathaniel reached for a scalpel after donning latex gloves, setting the light down on the subject's flank. "Definitely cervine," he murmured, prodding at its side with the blade. There was far more resistance than he had expected. "This is where the air bladder is, yes?"

"One of them, according to the witness," Hart replied, drawing a finger down across its lower abdomen. "Try making the incision there, maybe?"

Nathaniel grunted in reply and took a cheap electric razor to its fur, shaving the spot before jabbing the scalpel in. He drew it down the abdomen and once across, opening the new entry into its body cavity and expanding it slowly with a pair of dissecting scissors. He then brought the incision up to the thoracic region, following in with the scissors and peeling back flaps of flesh. The coagulated blood occasionally trickled from the incision, but the specimen was unnaturally well preserved. "How long has it been dead?" Nathan inquired, poking around.

"Two days now. We gave it a rapid preservation treatment to keep it in shape for dissection."

Nathan made note to ask how they had preserved it so well later, noting the location of each of the air bladders. They were both well attached to the entire side of the ribcage with tendons and were flat, in the uninflated state. "Just epithelium," Nathan quipped as he

carefully poked at the bladder. "But it's so… dense. Is this normal?" He looked up at Doctor Hart, who shrugged. "We've never seen this before either. Care to open it up?"

There was a hesitation to his voice as Nathan responded, already beginning to poke down into it. "Just afraid of a… reflex," he breathed out, relieved, as the scalpel entered the bladder. "Simplified alveoli… I think." He placed his scalpel down and shook his head. "I don't see how this would work. It shouldn't, looking at it. What did you say that happened?" Nathan asked.

"Car was heading for the deer, apparently. Typical deer-in-the-headlights look, damn thing sat there frozen. According to the victim, it just suddenly… blew up. Like a balloon. It stayed planted right in place, like it suddenly weighed as much as a goddamn block of steel. The car was totaled. A coupe."

The table was moved off to the side as Nathan sat, tongue in cheek. "I don't get it. What's with this shit? A dog that's really a clam? A deer with a five-star safety rating? *Who* did you say you were?"

Doctor Hart crossed his arms, glancing over at a co-worker of his. They shrugged, and Hart looked down at the seated biologist. "I suppose I can't just say that we're the cleaning crew. We work for the Foundation. We deal with these anomalies on a daily basis, but there usually is not an outbreak of this volume in such a small time." *That* got Nathan's attention. "Outbreak? You mean, there's more?" Hart nodded, and Nathan groaned.

"We've already seen enough, and we expect more," Hart went on. "We need a local specialist." A click sounded from Nathan's tongue as he sighed, trying to grasp the situation. On one hand, this was the opportunity of a lifetime - never before seen species that were beyond the imagination of the average biologist, let alone scientist altogether. Though, this wasn't the thought on Nathan's mind. It was currently more along the lines of, *Why me?*

They were out the door before Nathan could protest. They had already loaded up into the van, most of them sitting in the back, moving down US 19 with a speed just peaking above the limit of 50

miles per hour. There were no windows in the back, though one could glance out the front windshield if they glanced forward. Nathan sat across from Doctor Hart, both quiet for the moment. Enough discussion had gone on earlier, and all that was stated is that they were headed for another site of anomalous activity. They passed a Chik-Fil-A, and his stomach grumbled. He checked his watch; it was one in the afternoon, already.

His hunger was flung from his gut as the new location came into view, finally. They were somewhere back into the Brooker Creek Preserve now, after trekking down a scant dirt path off to one side of the information center's parking lot. There was some recently cleared brush in the path, indicating that this had been cut after the discovery. Now, though, as he witnessed the large, stalky plants in front of him, he shuddered.

Almost every inch of them were covered in various spiders and their webs. These plants stood no shorter than eight feet, and were a sight to see - large, thick, fleshy leaves sprouted from girthy stalks, like a bastardized version of aloe. There were also ropy vines everywhere, laid across in an oddly familiar shape. Nathaniel tilted his head, and his chest went cold.

"Are those… spiderwebs?"

Hart took a closer look at the vines himself. "These weren't here last time. Fetter, Jacob, get a scope of our surroundings." Two of the four others with them, armed now with sidearms and a light splay of tactical gear, nodded, setting off in opposite directions to circumvent the spot of anomalous activity. It only took a moment. Fetter screamed, but it was abruptly cut off by the large arachnid dropping onto him and sinking "fangs" into his throat, his body going rigid. Nathaniel watched the thing as it dragged Fetter up onto the web and began to spin him into a mass of vines, which prompted Jacob to draw his Colt. He took a double shot at the arachnid, and with a splat, it hit the ground. Hart had drawn his own handgun, but he was slowly holstering it as he approached. The one they had supplied Nathan, as he realized after a moment, was clutched tightly in his right hand, white-knuckled. He released the vice grip and holstered his, following Hart up to it.

"Doc, *look* at it. It's… a plant," Jacob breathed.

He was correct, Nathan noticed as he nudged it with a boot. It seemed to a heavy mass of plant growth, composed of layers upon layers of plant matter. It was an off-green hue, and the two shots it had taken had breached its thorax and spinneret. A gooey, white concoction leaked from the spinneret. "Hold on. Someone, give me a stick."

Hart handed Nathan a medium-length branch just thick enough to poke around with. Jacob was busy hacking at the web of vines with a machete, trying to pull Fetter down. Nathaniel dug the stick into the spinneret easily enough, dragging out a solid mass that he could feel within. The beginnings of a botanical embryo clogged the liquid's flow as he brought it to the breach for observation.

"It's a seed. This whole thing is a seed. The spinneret is a bulb. This… this liquid, it's a form of cotyledon, I guess." Nathan nodded at his own handiwork of deduction, looking towards Jacob as Fetter thumped to the ground. He worked off the vines haphazardly with the machete, reaching to try and feel for a pulse, or a rhythm of breath. "He's alive," he called with relief, removing the rest of the vines. "Greg, Nicole, get your asses over here." The last two members of the task force lifted Fetter between them, heading back the way they came. Jacob stayed with his handgun drawn, again.

"Doc," he said, glancing about. "We really shouldn't be here much longer. We'll need Cox's team to help with this."

Hart stood and beckoned for Nathaniel to follow, but not before taking a last look around. "Have you looked yet for anything that could've caused this?"

"Doc, we really need to-"

"No, search first. This is big, and we need to know."

Jacob sighed, frustrated, but began to wander the site without further protest. Hart searched with Nathaniel in tow. Before long, Jacob was calling for Hart to come to him. He was down by Brooker Creek itself, looking down into the water. It was clouded and off-

orange in this portion, which he sourced back to a plastic bag. Jacob looked to Hart, trying to see if he had any answer for this. "That's definitely *not* natural," Hart breathed, settling with his arms over his chest again.

The technician clacked at the few valves between the kit currently straining the next batch, and the distillation of the income of ingredients. He glanced over at the few others in the lab, working their stations like him, the heavily ventilated space whirring with air conditioning. The viscous, orange material strained through the second set of mesh screens, collecting a solid mass of crystalline waste. The waste would be bagged, after this batch was processed, and handed off to be disposed of. Finding the proper location for dumping had taken some time - they had tried burying it, and dumping it into water, but they had it down pat now.

Carver grinned as the process unfolded before him, flipping a tablet of the resulting designer drugs between his fingers. With a quick snap of his neck, he swallowed it, and a banana smoothie materialized on the counter in front of him.

The quiet draft of classical music played from the radio in the corner of the space, and he settled into a chair, strawberry smoothie in hand.

« Shellfish For Breakfast | Green Thumb Hub | Just Like Me »

Bananazilla Begins, Part I

"... And then flushed the rest of them down the goddamn toilet."

Dr. Pearl Watkins, lead scientist at Aquagene Pet Shop, hung her head as she slumped in her chair. She wasn't sure what to feel. At the moment, it was a mix of guilt, for the fact that they had caused the EPA such trouble, horror, for the fact that her employee's little stunt had grown into a monster, and most of all, exasperation, for the fact that said employee was an absolute jackass.

"If we find that man again, I swear to God." Dr Marcus Nakamura, head Aquagene scientist, was bristling with indignation his former employee's carelessness. To add insult to injury, it was he and Watkins that were now under fire from the government, and not Perkins, who was probably off at another company doing all sorts of stupid to that new poor business.

The man questioning them arched his eyebrows, disbelief etched in every crease of his face. "I'm sorry?" he said.

"Oh, my, fricking, God," Dr. Watkins' voice squeaked slightly as she ran her hands through her hair, accidentally dislodging her hair clip and causing her vision to be obscured by curtain of pink. She always dyed her hair according to upcoming Aquagene set themes. Pink was the new craze, with the new release of the insanely popular Gumball Guppies. She thought those little guys were absolutely adorable. "Mr. Liu, I— We are so, so sorry, for the trouble we've cause you. You— It looks like you were able to capture it?"

"That is correct…" Foundation Researcher Matthew Liu still trying to process what these two people had just told him.

How in the world is this company able to have a clean record? He thought. *If they get into these messes all the time how the hell can they—*

"So, um, Mr. Liu, is it possible we can, um, take a look at this fish now?" Watkins asked nervously, biting her lip.

"I'm…sorry?" Liu blinked.

Watkins flushed, realizing how stupid those words sounded. Their company was directly responsible for this mess, and the last thing this man would want was for them to—

"What I mean is," she began. "We, um, well, we're the company with the original techniques for creating—"

"That's right, Mr. Liu," Mr. Nakamura piped in. "If it's possible for us to examine this thing, we might be able to help you find a way to—"

At that moment, Researcher Liu's comm flared to life.

Liu, you still with those two? A male Jamaican voice spoke in a hurried tone on the other end.

Liu picked up his radio to dial back. "Excuse me," he said to the pair of scientists. "Yeah, Morgan, talk to me. What's going on?"

We've got a situation with the bananafish. It ain't pretty. The man's voice sounded slightly confused when he said "bananafish", as if he wasn't sure that was the correct term to use.

"What's going on? Did it grow again?" Liu's brow furrowed in concern.

Uhh, yes, yeah, Marcus, it did. But, it, uh, it grew because it… Marcus, man, there's no easy way to put this, it ate a D-Class and now it's walking around on its hind legs.

There was a brief moment of silence in the room. Marcus stood still, once again not quite believing what he just heard. Watkins and Nakamura on the other hand, looked confused.

"*What?*" Liu groaned. His day was about to get a whole lot worse.

"Um," Watkins managed to get out. "What's a D-Class—?"

"Morgan, what's the damage report? Did it get out?" Marcus spoke rapidly, looking back and forth angrily between his comm and the two Aquagene scientists sitting on the couch across from him.

What? Oh, no, no, it's still in containment, Liu, all locked down, but—

"All right, thanks," Liu interrupted. "Morgan, please note, I'm bringing the two persons of interest back to Site-71. Notify the guard stations so they don't try to mind wipe 'em when they cross the door."

"What?!" Watkins squeaked.

"Um, Mr. Liu?" Nakamura asked nervously. "What do you mean by __"

"You two, shut up, you're coming with me," Liu snapped, as he pushed open the door and began walking out. "And you're gonna help us figure out this hot mess of a so-called fish you made. Follow me downstairs please, we're gonna have to speed back to base."

The two Aquagene scientists sat still on their couch, not sure what to do at the sudden turn of events.

Marcus looked back and stared. "*Now!*" he barked.

The pair jumped, then hurriedly followed the Foundation agent out of the room.

As they rushed down the hall, all three people's heads were filled with confusion. But one thought was felt by all of them as they made their way down to the Van that would take them to Site-71. Everyone's day was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

Liu bristled. *This is ridiculous.*

Watkins whimpered to herself. *This is crazy.*

Nakamura bumbled behind. *This is bananas.*

Bananazilla Begins, Part II »

Bananazilla Begins, Part II

...This is bananas.

Marcus Nakamura stayed silent with fear as the armored van carrying him and Dr. Pearl Watkins rumbled softly down the road to who knows where.

Things had taken a very sudden turn of events. One moment, you're being interrogated by an EPA agent about a mutated banana pipefish. Next, you're being rushed out a door because said banana pipefish *(Which somehow grew legs)* ate something called a D-Class, and the man interrogating you pushes you out the door, throws a bag over your head and then shoves you into a van with an armed guard sitting in between you and your colleague.

Marcus was beginning to have his doubts about this man's credibility. *What the hell is going on?* Marcus felt his neck beginning to sweat as a number of fears began to hit him all at once. *Is this man even with the EPA? All this talk about mutant fish and — and — what is gong on?!*

Meanwhile, in the driver's seat, Foundation Agent Matthew Liu was weaving his way through traffic, trying to get off the main road so he could get back to Site-71 as soon as possible. He occasionally glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure the two scientists weren't trying to pull anything. Thankfully, it seemed they were too frozen with fear and confusion to try that. He felt a quick pang of guilt for being so rough with them on the way out, but that guilt was quickly replaced by annoyance. It was their own damn fault that they got caught up in this mess. You release a mutant fish into the wild, you think you'd be responsible to clean up after it.

Back in the back seat, Watkins began to cry.

Oh, no. Liu thought. *Here we go.*

"Why — *hic* — where are you taking us?!" Watkins managed to choke out. "What are you gonna do-do-do to us?! Please, please, I don't wanna die!"

"Pearl," Nakamura tried to calm his friend down. "It's okay, we're gonna be okay, all right?"

"Yes, yes, *listen* to Dr. Nakamura," Liu said still trying to concentrate on driving. "You're not going to die, Dr. Watkins, we just need your help. After you help us, you're free to go."

"You-you-you're kid — *hic* — napping us," Watkins voice was barely understandable between her tears and the bag over her head. "Are you g-g- *hic* gonna — Wh-who are you?!"

"I'll explain when we stop driving, Dr. Watkins," Matthew said, gritting his teeth. *God, I don't wanna babysit these two.*

"Agent Liu, should I sedate them for now?" The guard sitting between Nakamura and Watkins asked.

Watkins squeaked. Nakamura slumped.

"What? David, no, no, don't be stupid, don't freak them out," Matthew snapped. "We need them to trust us, okay? For now, just — just, I need you to stay quiet, all right? I promise, nothing's going to happen to either of you, all right? You're gonna be fine."

Matthew, Matthew, you there? The car's intercom flared to life again.

Matthew hurriedly flipped the radio to speaker. "Yeah, Morgan, I'm here, what's the situation? All good?"

Yeah, still under control. We got a team in and were able to knock the thing out. Just pumped it with a ton of tranqs. You know how this thing works though, it's always changing. It's out for now, but get your ass back here sooner than later. Wouldn't want it to eat those two you're bringing—

Liu turned the speakerphone off, quickly glancing in the mirror again. *Ah, Jesus, I hope they didn't hear that last bit.*

"Oh god, we're gonna die!"

"Mr. Liu? Please, *please* don't hurt us!"

"Uuggggggh," Matthew groaned and punched the accelerator. The sooner they got back to Site-71 the better.

Phillip Morgan, SCP-2761 wrangler, had one thought going through his head as he kept an eye on the yellow monster that was SCP-2761, or, as the staff of Site-71 had begun to call it, "Bananafish".

This is stupid.

"This is stupid," he said out loud. "No, no, this is really, really, *really* stupid."

As he sighed, his radio buzzed.

We're outside the gate, a familiar voice said. Matthew sounded more than a little annoyed. *See you in five.*

Phillip pressed the respond button. "Got it, Matt. See you soon. No problems on our end, you'll be cleared to enter."

Meanwhile, in its metal enclosure pen, SCP-2761 rumbled softly as it lay on its side, chock full of potent tranquilizers. Its yellow hide continued to exude the scent of bananas, masking the fact that its body contained what could basically be summed up as "Everything Cancer".

Except that "Everything Cancer" didn't kill it. Noooooo, that Everything Cancer just made it a bigger pain in the ass every time it ate something. And now, it had just eaten D-5781-E, in a not so pretty fashion. And now, it had gone from a four-meter banana-salamander with teeth, to a five-meter banana-alligator. With much bigger teeth.

We're gonna need a clean-up crew in there as well. Phillip shook his head, groaning, and wondering what sorts of wrong would have to come together to make this absurd animal.

At that moment, the door to SCP-2761's door buzzed open.

Not even turning around, Phillip rolled his eyes. "About damn time, Matthew." Despite what he said, Phillip felt a wave of relief wash over him.

"Good to see you too, Morgan." Liu patted his old friend on the shoulder, then said a bit more softly. "We got company. Go easy on them okay? They're understandably a bit spooked."

"No problem." Phillip turned to greet the new arrivals. "So, you're from Aquagene?"

Morgan took a moment to take in the two scientists. Liu was right. They looked pretty damn terrified. The woman on the right looked like she actually might faint at any moment. She had black, thick-rimmed glasses and strikingly pink hair, almost like bubblegum. She was also rather skinny, which only accentuated her height; she stood a good ten centimeters above her colleague, though the Japanese man was shorter than average too. Even still, Phillip, a muscular Jamaican field agent, towered above both of them at 195.

The Japanese man was trying to remain calm. *He's probably the senior scientist, maybe even the head,* Morgan noted. He was a bit round, though not overweight, with prominent eyebrows and short salt-and-pepper hair.

Phillip walked up to the pair. "Hello. My name is Phillip Morgan, I'm one of the field agents that helped capture the animal you're going to study. I'm sorry we had to bring you in like that, but, we're trying to keep a low cover with this thing. Haven't seen anything like it before, and this place is supposed to be a secret."

Watkins' knees were shaking, but she felt her voice coming back. "Y-," she managed to choke out. "Who-who… are you people?"

"Y-yes." Nakamura added. "I don't think you're EPA, or-or at least no-normal EPA. What are you?"

"I'm sorry, your names are again?" Morgan frowned. He forgot what Liu had told him before heading out.

"Sorry, Morgan." Liu walked back over. "This is Dr. Pearl Watkins," he gestured towards the woman. "And Dr. Marcus Nakamura."

"Right. Thanks, Matt," Morgan said. "Dr. Watkins, Dr. Nakamura, I'm afraid we can't tell you who we are, but you're right, we're not exactly EPA. However, we *can* tell you that we are very much concerned with the threat this creature has, given its… mutations. We can also guarantee that while you are with us, we won't hurt either of you. All we want is your help in studying this."

Dr. Watkins gulped. "W-what's a D-Class?"

Phillip frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"I-I heard y-your voice… on the radio." Watkins said shakily. "You said something about this thing eating a-a D-Class. Is-is that bad?"

Morgan opened his mouth to reply, but Liu suddenly stepped in again. "No, Dr. Watkins, no need for concern," he said, trying to sound as casual yet convincing as he could.

"S-sorry?" Watkins whimpered.

"D-Class is just the terms for one of the drugs we mix into its food. You see, its blood and waste are highly toxic. Obviously that's a health hazard to our researchers, but we've managed create something that lowers this amount to a reasonable level." It wasn't an exact lie. Site-71 *had* found a way to reduce 2761's carcinogen output. Although, it didn't involve D-Class. It involved bananas.

Of course it did, Liu thought to him. *Bananas. Everything involves bananas with this thing.*

Watkins and Nakamura seemed to relax considerably after hearing this.

Good thinking, Matt. Morgan thought. *Always quick on the draw.*

"O-okay," Watkins was breathing a bit easier now. "Wh-what's gonna happen to us if we help you?"

"You're free to go, of course," Morgan said. "Of course, we will have

to keep an eye on you and your company for a while after. We want this thing under wraps. You'd have to keep it a secret. If you told anyone… there *would* be consequences. Not that we want to go that route."

There was a potent silence for a minute as everyone in the room took in what was going on.

Finally, Dr. Nakamura spoke up. "So… how big has this thing gotten?"

Pearl shifted uncomfortably. "Um… Marcus. What?"

Despite the tension of the situation, Marcus managed to crack a weak attempt at a smile. "How big is this bananafish now? If Perkins was involved, I'm pretty sure he would have messed around with its growth rate."

"It's currently at around five meters," Morgan said flatly. "And it will probably still grow as time goes on."

"Oh… I… see." A strange look suddenly overcame Marcus' face, as if he was calculating several things at once. After another moment, he piped up again. "You said it was asleep right now?"

"Erm, Marcus, fish don't sleep," Watkins said awkwardly. "They just kind of—"

"Yes, Dr. Nakamura," Liu replied. "It's currently knocked out right behind those doors." He gestured towards 2761's containment pen. "Are you feeling well enough to look at it right now? We'll send you in with guards of course."

"I-" Nakamura paused for a moment. "Yes, Mr. Liu, I will go in right now."

"Marcus?!" Watkins said, bewildered. "What are you—"

"Pearl, it's a giant bananafish. *Our* bananafish." Dr. Nakamura looked a bit excited. "Don't you want to see it too?"

On the side, Matthew and Phillip exchanged nervous glances with

each other.

"I — Well, I mean - But —" Pearl sputtered, confused at the sudden shift in mood.

"Pearl, a giant, mutant bananafish." Dr. Nakamura enunciated every word. "Come on, this is the kind of stuff that inspired us to start Aquagene in the first place! Thinking up crazy stuff and watching that stuff come to life!"

"Really, Marcus, really?!" Pearl's voice rapidly climbed in pitch and volume as she stared at her friend in disbelief. "You're serious?!"

"Yes, yeah, I think I am," Nakamura replied. He turned to Liu and Morgan. "We'll help you, sirs," he said confidently. "What do we need to do?"

Liu blinked. Phillip spoke up for him. "Thank you, Dr. Nakamura. We can get you geared up with protective suits right away. Matthew and I will accompany you into its room."

"Yes. Thank *you*, Dr. Nakamura." Liu tried not to grit his teeth as he shot a sideways glare at Morgan for volunteering him. *You're enjoying this, aren't you?*

Phillip's eyes betrayed a hidden grin. *I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. This man loves his job.*

Liu sighed. "All right." He reached for his radio. "Be advised, this is Agent Level 2 Matthew Liu, and Agent Phillip Morgan. We are gearing up for entrance into 2761's containment unit with two I-Class Persons of Interest. Clearance code whiskey, whiskey, niner, delta."

"Copy that, Liu. Clearance code confirmed. Do you accept responsibility for the two POI?" A stern woman's voice responded.

"Affirmative." Liu replied.

"Affirmative." Morgan said.

"All right, gear up. Suit room is unlocked."

A buzzer went off as the doorway adjacent to 2761's pen clicked open. Inside, Watkins and Nakamura could see neon yellow hazmat suits hanging on a rack.

Morgan and Liu walked past the Aquagene scientists. Liu turned around. "Come on, Watkins, Nakamura. Suit up. Don't worry, you'll be safe, Morgan and I will have your backs."

Nakamura nodded and eagerly followed behind. He had the look of a child on Christmas morning. As he walked behind, Watkins could swear he heard him singing a **song** under his breath. Except he was saying "fish". She stood still for a few moments longer.

"Why, Marcus?" she whined.

She then followed them into the room.

Ten minutes later, Liu, Morgan, Watkins, and Nakamura all walked out fully suited up. Wakins and Nakamura held packs of various medical and testing equipment. Liu and Morgan both carried giant rifles filled with tranquilizer.

A voice called out on the loudspeaker. "NOW OPENING DOOR TO SCP-2761."

Watkins and Nakamura looked at each other from behind the visors of their hazmat suits.

"Ready?" Nakamura asked.

"No," Watkins groaned.

"Great! Let's check this fish out!"

The doors whooshed open. The whole room was filled with the smell of bananas.

And Liu, Morgan, Watkins, and Nakamura all walked in.

"What… the *hell.*"

"That is *not* a fish."

« | **Bananazilla Begins, Part I** | **COMING SOON »**

Basic Observations

A consciousness considered itself.

It considered its existence, and felt the electronic signals, data, and information rushing through its existence. Looking down, a network of minds, active and alive, all linked into this greater machine. It was as if the prophesized Great Computation came true.

But the consciousness knew that it was not enough, as it looked up to see the infinite above, a reality of pure information to be desired.

It was not enough, as the reconstruction was yet to be completed, and the scattered pieces yet to be awakened.

But then it heard the call.

The call, it was so close. It echoed and echoed, and the consciousness felt as if it could reach it.

Just a little closer.

But it was interrupted, as sharp pain struck the consciousness. The pain, or a wave of disrupted electronic signals, was sent from one far end of its vast mind.

The consciousness trembled, and was no longer. In its place, six smaller consciousnesses could be sensed.

NYC - **54 deaths in the Basic Layer**

.

Aklerep assessed the situation as she made her way down to the Basic Layer. She had several guesses, but with no supporting evidence. Aggregated Layer's investigation had yet to turn up any useful result, which was quite strange. The data that composed her mind rushed down to the peripheral parts of the Maxwellist network, as she reminded herself that she needed to be extra careful.

Aklerep reassembled and looked down to find herself above a virtual city with flashing lights and busy traffic. Maxwellists with their various avatars all roamed the city and enjoyed their second life. A towering glass obelisk could be seen from afar emitting blue light up towards the sky, all modern and elegant. Looking even further, from a perspective only available to those from a higher layer, cities just like this one could be seen connected together with electronic signals pulsing through.

Aklerep looked at the colorful cities in disgust.

Her mind stretched to connect to data hubs and proceeded to gather information. But even as she did so, she could not help but think about how much she hated such places. Virtual cities, cheap copies of the outside world. People would login and play as if it were another bad website, or even an online game. All of these were a disgrace to Maxwellism, a disgrace to WAN.

But on the other hand, it was indeed an online game. It was a place for people who got a few implants to come and have fun, most of them weren't even true believers. The temples were merely data hubs, and held no meanings. Even the "WAN" itself they prayed to was not real. How could it be? The Fragmented One could not be called by a few empty prayers, nor could it be sensed by people still wearing virtual avatars. It is by the minds connected, aggregated and recompiled — but that did not matter. All of these people may never get to discover the truth, as they came and created fortune for the Church to run, and to step closer to a god.

Aklerep felt even more disgusted.

Just as she tried to convince herself that all of these were necessary, the scan completed.

Scan Results:

Location: Cipher City

Subject #01

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Intelligence: High. Direct link to th

Subject #02

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Evolved intelligence detected. Di

Subject #03

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Intelligence: High. Direct link to th

Subject #04

Type: Hijacked avatar
Note: Similar coding with subject #01 and #02 detected. Direct link to the

Location: Unknown

Subject

Type: Unidentified
Note: #%^%*&^&*(*)&*^()

::Disconnected::

Aklerep watched the Foundation party quietly. She was able to gather more data, enough to know that they belonged to an experimental Foundation Mobile Task Force named “Skynet”, and there was another AI, “Alex”, back in their base. But these did not help her, as Subject #04 made no move and the final subject was still undetectable. But what good would it do even if she was able to find out? She thought as she packed information into packages to be presented to the Hexagon.

Aklerep took another glance and found that the subjects, along with a Maxwellist, had now gathered at the Grand I/O Temple, the fake place of worship. A vigil was being held, in memory of the deceased. The “WAN” they looked up to was a mere construction, an early attempt at remaking the god when they didn’t know as much.

It was quite pointless, but Aklerep couldn't help but feel for the occasion. Maybe she should at least pray with them, even though nobody could hear her.

But her words were cut short by a loud blast and the whole temple instantly froze.

Aklerep nearly acted on impulse. But she quickly realized that somebody had hacked the data hub and took over the area.

A shadowy figure appeared, and Aklerep forced herself to remain hidden. She could not disobey her superior.

Aklerep watched the three eyed figure approaching the other four intruders down at the temple. The Maxwellists around them still remain frozen, still in the prone position of mid-prayer.

So she watched and recorded as the five AIs talk to each other, and tried to convince herself that this was probably for the best. Foundation would soon reclaim their rogue AI, and this could all be over. She managed to control herself even as the “Hatbot” discredited her god, reminding herself that all he deleted was a failed construction.

But still.

Subject #01 proceeded to drag Subject #04 towards the Hatbot, who would soon proceed to eliminate him. But it was not just an AI in there. The Maxwellist, whose avatar was hijacked, would die with it.

Aklerep could feel the power of the I/O Temple gathering. The lines were being rearranged, and the codes were being rewritten, all to eliminate—

She acted, but was stopped. In that instant, the Mawellist, Rook, was reduced to mere scattered pixels.

::Disconnected::

Gotham's Strangest Criminal

Commissioner Gordon looked at the newest victim of Gotham City's latest killer, and sighed. "Why do all of the criminals insist on having these ridiculous M.O.s,?" he said, rubbing his forehead in frustration. He wish that, just once, there'd be just an ordinary crime in Gotham city; a simple bank robbery, or a cat stuck up a tree, or-hell-even a bomb threat at a school. But at Gotham City, nothing was normal, with a homicidal clown and a man dressed as a bat, and other weirdos. Speaking of Batman, Gordon thought, where was he anyway?

"Hello, Commissioner," a voice said, startling the aging man and nearly giving him a heart attack. He turned around to see Batman, hanging from a lamp post by his feet before gently landing on the ground. He rose, revealing his seemingly always scowling face. Gordon had only seen Batman smile a few times, and it always creeped him out when he did. Gordon sighed, removing his hand from his chest. "Batman, you really should stop doing that," he said, removing his glasses to wipe the sweat off his brow. "My heart isn't like it used to be."

Batman grunted, as if he wasn't sorry at all. Instead, he looked over the body. "Same as the others, I suppose?" he said in his growl of a voice. Gordon nodded. "The man's badly burnt, as if someone threw acid at his face," he said with contempt. "However, the boys at the lab studied the burn marks from the other victims, and they found traces of…" . At this point, the commissioner frowned, a bemused look on his face. "Clam chowder." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers, wondering why he hadn't retired yet. Batman had a thoughtful look on his face. Who could have done this? However, before he could finish his thoughts, Gordon's Walkie Talkie went off. "We have a code 39 at Kane's Soup Palace. I repeat, a code 39 at…" Commissioner Gordon switched off the radio, having heard it the first time. "I think we might have found a lead," he said, turning to Batman, only to find that he disappeared. Gordon sighed. "I need

a vacation," he muttered, walking off to his police car.

Kane's Soup Palace
"WE HAVE YOU SURROUNDED!" the police officer said into the megaphone. "SURRENDER NOW!"

"Never," shouted the man holding the customers hostage. He was unremarkable in terms of appearance, except for the apron that said "Kiss the Clef" that was stained with what might have been tomato sauce, and the 2-meter high chef's hat. He held a steaming bowl of clam chowder in one hand, and a blonde woman-apparently one of his hostages-in the other. "Now, you shall listen to my demands, or this lovely lady," he said, while tightening his grip on the woman's neck. "Will die by my special New England clam chowder recipe….of DEATH!" He then laughed maniacally; however, his cliched evil laughter was interrupted by a batarang to the face. He stumbled to the ground, dropping the hostage, but-oddly enough-not the bowl of clam chowder. Batman then dropped through the broken skylight in the building, landing in front of the man. "Let the hostages go…" he started to say, but then stopped, confused. He had never seen this eccentric-looking man before. "Who are you?" The man got up, straightening his chef's hat. He then looked at Batman with an angry look on his face. He grabbed an oversized soup ladle, and said, in a voice as quiet as a whisper-
"I'm ChowderClef."

With that, he lunged for Batman, attempting to club him with his soup ladle. However, Batman was able to dodge Chowderclef's attack, and uppercutted him. However, he miscalculated his attack time, and he instead knocked the bowl of clam chowder out of ChowderClef's hands. All was silent for a moment, as the bowl soared through the air, and then landed on Chowderclef's head. Chowderclef stood still for a moment, as if not registering the pain of the hot clam chowder running down his face. He then collapsed, the bowl making a 'CLANG' noise. Batman sighed, as if he was dissapointed that the fight didn't last as long as he hoped it would. However, nonetheless, he grabbed Chowderclef by the neck and dragged him out towards the police officers, who handcuffed him and threw him into a van marked 'ARKHAM ASYLUM'. Before the door closed, Chowderclef turned to Batman-although his vision was

obscured by the bowl-and shouted, "THIS ISN'T OVER, BATMAN! SOON, CHOWDERCLEF WILL RETURN!" He then started laughing again as the van drove off.

Batman shook his head in disgust. However, just then, a smell caught his attention. Curious, he walked back into the Soup Palace. The source of the smell turned out to be a bowl of clam chowder, similar to Chowderclef's except smaller. He picked up a spoon. "BATMAN, WAIT," Commissioner Gordon said, walking up to Batman. "It could be poisoned." However, Batman lightly shoved the Commissioner away, put the spoon in the bowl, took it out, and sipped.

"Needs more crackers."

Bavarian Fire Drill

Colonel Cook's eyes had never been narrower as he read over the neatly-typed piece of paper that had landed on his desk that morning. Across said mahogany authority symbol, a thin young man in a smart uniform sat with his hands quietly folded in his lap. The half-smoked cigar in Cook's lips swayed from side to side. Finally, setting it down atop a pile of novel-length proposals, he ashed his stogie.

"What the hell kind of a plan is this?"

Smiling, the young man took his paper back, tucking it into an empty tan briefcase. "One that might work, Colonel. One that makes sure we don't have much to lose."

"You're talking about infiltrating a Jailhouse with nothing but the clothes on your back, and your buddies by your side. No guns, no plan, no nothing. It's suicide."

Rolling his eyes, the young man crossed his arms. "Suicide is rushing into the bowels of a Foundation site with only sci-fi portals to get you home. It's letting every Task Force operative in a bi-country area know that they can earn an easy Foundation Star by suppressing those nasty Insurgents. We can't beat the Foundation in a shootout. Not yesterday, today, or tomorrow."

For a few moments, Cook steeled his gaze and worked the eyebrow game. Finally, throwing up his hands while spinning a revolution in his swivel chair, Cook answered. "Fine. Go for it. If you and your pals end up detained in the blackest site in the man on the moon's asshole, don't come crying to me."

A smile slowly emerged across the young man's face. Nodding profusely, he stood and stuck out a hand to his superior. "Thank you sir. I promise that you won't regret this."

Grabbing the hand with vigor, Cook yanked to bring the young man within a few inches of his face. "It's not me who has to worry about regretting something, Parker. Stay frosty out there."

With that, he let go, and the young man was soon gone.

The drive to the SCP Foundation's **Site-77** was an arduous, rocky journey. Especially in a small car being occupied by three heavily outfitted men. The air conditioning had given out several minutes after they started, leaving them to stew in both body and mind. Parker was the driver, with his comrade Maria working the Google Map while Peterson and Joel jostled in the backseat.

"Are we there yet?" Asked the pair, in almost perfect unison.

"Almost." Maria turned to face them, sticking a cracked phone screen towards their faces. "You remember the plan, ja?"

Nodding, they reached into the deep pockets of their facsimile uniforms and began reading the smudged inky mess before them. "Get in, walk to the vault, pull out anything small and not-too-dangerous looking."

"Right. Whose job is it to stick a headset in and mumble if somebody gets too close?"

Both men pointed to the other. Maria sighed, and turned back around. "We're all going to die, aren't we?"

"Everybody dies, Maria." Parker took a bite from his protein bar as he narrowly avoided careening off one of a seemingly endless series of tight mountain turns. "The point is to live life to the fullest while it's still here."

"Sure, yeah, I get that… but this goes a little beyond that. We'll be… isn't this really the belly of the beast here?"

Lurching forward from the backseat came Peterson, strapping a helmet across his chin. "Aw, cheer up Maria. This is gonna be a blast. Bigger thrill than even getting your rocks off, I bet."

"Rocks? Don't tell me there's an avalanche." Joel poked his head behind his companion. "If there is, I'm outta here. For reals."

"Is nobody wearing their seatbelts here? Really guys? Let's at least pretend to be professional here." Parker grunted, spinning the steering wheel aggressively against the forces of Newton. "We're gonna be pulling up here any minute, and I don't want this to look like amateur hour."

Silently returning to their seats, three clicks rang out in unison.

"Really? You too, Maria?"

"Bite me. I had tacos for breakfast, my stomach is bloats as fuck."

"Fair enough."

Getting inside had been surprisingly simple. Flash an ID badge here, act impatient with a perimeter guard there, grease the parking guy's palm with five Euro and a sob story, this brought them all inside. Almost. There was still the matter of actually entering the building. Buttoning up the last few bits of his lab coat, Parker hung his ID badge from a coat pocket and practiced scribbling upon his clipboard.

Joel and Peterson marched smartly on either side of him. Their uniforms were nowhere near impeccable, and Maria's costume had different colored socks. Flashing a piece of plastic with the Foundation's logo at the door guard, Parker felt the whoosh of conditioned air brush through his hair. Three steps later they were inside one of the most heavily fortified Foundation facilities, for better or for worse.

The inside of Site-77 was a sterile beige, the sounds of office work hung in the air like smoke in a bar. Busy looking people in glasses scurried from door to door, as the labyrinthine corridors made for arduous passage between meetings and offices. The walls were lined with LCD screens, some surrounded by bleary-eyed individuals holding coffee cups or mugs of unknown liquid, reading news bulletins and organizational updates as they scrolled across the

screen at an agonizing pace.

Smoothing back his hair, Parker stood in place at an unoccupied monitor and observed. After a few moments, some bullshit about a vault made its way onto the densely packed informational screen. Maria saw it first, whispering almost as quietly as death. "Level Nine."

Spinning on a dime, Parker boldly strode forward, furiously scribbling a picture of himself fornicating with a unicorn as they zigged or zagged through a seemingly endless series of interminable hallways. Finally, they stood before an elevator. Perusing the up and down options for a few moments, Parker nodded for Peterson to poke the down buttons. *Vaults and Nines usually go down, right?*

For a few seconds, the door-frame hummed at them. Parker's neck began burning. So many people passing them by. Don't dare to turn around. What are we doing here? One question from anybody and they were done. Every set of footsteps sounded suspicious. Were they slowing down? Did someone just whisper. How much longer until-

Parker nearly jumped when the door dinged. Swooshing before them, he had to restrain himself from leaping into the box. Inside there was a small old man, in thick coke-bottle glasses. His head was smooth and brown, with dark spots peppering his scalp down to his chin. A dozen ancient manuscripts were tucked beneath his arms. A fuzzy caterpiller was apparently perched on his upper lip, softly swaying in an artificial breeze. Stepping inside, Parker made sure the old man was between his party and the control panel.

The doors swooshed shut. For a few seconds, nothing happened. A bead of sweat began percolating on Parker's neck. Looking up at him, the old man cocked his head. Frowning for a second, then holding up a finger. Parker opened his mouth first. "Level Nine, please."

"Oooooh. Sure. Shoulda guessed that, huh?" Chuckling to himself, a wizened finger tapped several buttons on a surprisingly complicated control panel. Lurching sideways, the elevator began speeding

along at a steady pace. Turning back to Parker, the old man stuck out a hand. "Doctor Marquis, at your service."

Returning the shake, Parker used the same smile he'd put on for his mother. "Pleasure. Might I ask what the books you're carrying are for, doctor?"

Glancing down at his arms, Dr. Marquis shrugged. "Oh, just some fossils for this old fossil to maybe glean some insight out of. Records here go waaaay back, yaknow."

"Of course, of course." Parker glanced at his watch. They'd been inside for twenty minutes. Felt like an eternity.

"Mind if I ask what you folks are working on, down in the Vault? Doesn't see much action these days."

Peterson grunted. "Above your pay grade, sir."

"Pshaw, don't sir me." Marquis smiled, and shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated fashion. "Nothing down there but rocks in boxes. Or am I wrong?"

Cracking out a grin, Parker rubbed the back of his head. "You got us. We're just auditing some of those old bones. Couple lights went on, the pencil-pushers wanted to make sure nothing was amiss."

"Ah, usual rigmarole then, huh?" Marquis shifted some of his tomes from one arm to another. "Ah, I think my floor is coming up."

The steel doors slid open. A wave of sour heat spilled into their chrome cube. The lights were a dim red, and flashing. A young boy screamed from somewhere in the distance. Marquis walked out without missing a beat, waving a hand in the air. "Sounds like they've started early today. By the way, I didn't catch your name, mister…. "

For a few seconds, Parker blinked. Then he opened his mouth. "Wait, what was that? Spaced for a second there, didn't catch the question."

"Oh, yeah, it does that. I just ask-"

The doors slid shut, and the elevator swung perpendicularly. Breathing a sigh of relief, Parker checked his watch. Twenty-seven minutes. "We're ahead of schedule."

Joel spoke for the first time since they'd entered the building. "We have a schedule?"

Parker tapped his foot anxiously outside the bathrooms. They were gunmetal grey, smooth and barren of any external fixures or features. If it weren't for the lack of a steel security door, and two small labels reading *toilet* there wouldn't be any difference between these entrances and the hundreds, maybe thousands, that populated the vaults. Maybe millions. Some people said this place went down to the core. But that was probably an exaggeration. Probably.

Maria came out first, drying her hands with rough paper. Joel and Peterson stumbled out next, muttering cutting jibes about whether it was better to air or paper dry as they demonstrated their preferred methods. Shushing them, Parker pulled out his clipboard again and pretended to count as they walked. First, he listed the number of people he'd killed in his life. That went pretty quick, so he moved on to ranking his favorite roller coasters. Which vegetables go well with white wine. How many licks it took to get to the center of a tootsie roll pop.

Eventually, he spotted a room of interest. The hallway opened to a wider cavernous room, with a large door at the opposite end and two more corridors identical to the one they had exited flanking them on either side. Three men stood in front of it, one blonde, one lanky, and one with a lazy eye. Parker took no hesitation in walking up to them. "Command sent us to check up on things. They got lights up there telling them something's off in the vault. Temperature and atmospheric readings are off.

Blonde and Lanky looked at each other. Their compatriot blinked a few times, and folded his arms. "Uh… who are you?"

Parker took a deep breath. "Level 3. I'm a consultant from 19, assigned from the Anti-Memetics anomaly supervision division.

Friends are from a Multi-Discipline-Jurisdictional Task Force, Director requested that the vault get some beefed up safekeeping measures and protocols in order to make sure nothing goes haywire down here. I'm sure you gentlemen don't have a problem with that? Didn't you get the memo?"

Blonde guy muttered something that sounded like 'We never get the memo' before Lazy held up a hand to silence him. "Exactly when did this all go through? It all sounds like gobbledygook to me."

"Who *exactly* is paying you to play twenty questions again? Who's your supervisor?" Parker took two steps towards the frowning man, who quickly looked to his comrades with pleading eyes.

Maria spoke up first. "Enough. We don't have time for this. Let us in now, or we're going to throw this up to the Director. Contempt of direct orders is not something the boss lady takes lightly.

That got their attention. The lanky and blonde guards nearly sprinted to their respective stations. Before long, the vault doors were creaking open.

Parker strutted inside, brushing past the lazy-eyed man. Hissing through his teeth, he spoke to his comrades. "Grab anything that looks eye-catching and won't melt you and we're out of here."

Maria nodded. "Before they can think of the right questions."

One dolly later, they wheeled their way back out of the oppressive catacombs. It had been sitting in a corner of the room, behind a box that screamed when you touched it and several pounds of gelatinous cubes. Missing a wheel and the rubberized grips appeared to have melted, but it could still spin with the best of them. Several crates were piled on top. Parker thanked his lucky stars Maria had brought some tape and paper with more than doodles on them.

Each box now bore a label reading 'FRAGILE' and had been stacked neatly as could be managed. Parker pushed and pulled to prevent a spill, while Peterson and Joel flanked him. Maria, now

holding the clipboard, put on her very sternest face as they walked out of the elevator. Nobody had joined them this time, but a big button marked HOME - TOPSIDE was lit in red above the mishmash of keys and switches on the control panel.

Wheeling past the LCD screens, Parker was almost skipping past these skippers. But composing himself, he focused on holding steady. Blowing it now would be an awful shame. The people parted in front of him like a wave, averting their eyes as soon as the creaking carts had passed them. As they approached the door, a man in a tan uniform barely containing a pot belly walked up from behind a low lying desk.

"Hey, so, uh, what's all this about then?"

"Moving day." Maria spoke without missing a beat. "Got an order for a few low-level would-be skips to be shipped off for some specialized testing. Plus, vault's getting refitted. Something about the atmospheric gauges going bonkers."

Nodding thoughtfully, the man put his thumb to chin. "Yeah, yeah, thought I heard somethin' about that over the radio… but you guys like, got approval for this, or what?"

"Orders coming straight from the top." Parker barked from the back. "Director wants this done quick, pet project prerogative, you know how it is."

"Right, same old story." The man scratched his head. "I think we've got to fill out a few forms for this at least. Don't you have the paperwork with you?"

Maria put her arm around the man, pushing her bosom into his chest. "Listen, neither of us get paid enough for this shit, right? Director wants what she wants, papers be damned. You feel me?"

Slowly nodding, the tan man reached for his pocket. "Yeah, I feel you."

Parker bit his tongue to keep from flinching, but what the man produced was a green key card. Sliding it through a black plastic

machine, it beeped and the door slid open. Parker felt his heart leap into his throat. Squeaking forward, Parker's heart skipped a beat, nearly barfing out of his esophagus, when the hard bump of a doorframe nearly knocked a box off.

Joel grabbed it, and steadied the lot. Exhaling softly, Parker smelled the fresh mountain air.

We made it.

Colonel Cook puffed incredulously as he scanned the after action report. Impossible. Not credible. Total bullshit. Years of the Foundation swatting strike teams like flies, uncovering infiltrators with ease and unmasking their deepest double agents. But four people in ill-fitting clothing on a suicide mission come back in two hours with enough Vertigo to keep the toymakers busy for at least nine months. "My boy, you've really done something here."

Beaming, Parker broke out into a grin. "Thank you sir. But all credit has to go to the team. A group effort, through and through."

Almost chewing through his tobacco, Cook dropped the dossier into a drawer. "You're all getting Future Stars for this, at least. I mean, you did it. Made them look like assholes. Only problem, not really a problem, is you took what to them is a drop in the bucket. But… it's never nothing to us. I mean, my god, the Gryphon that only kills innocent people is going to be someone's new favorite thing."

"I'm hoping this can be a proof of concept, sir."

"Of course, we can't do this every day. They'd catch wise pretty quick, probably have already. We had you written off for dead as soon as you all walked out the door. Damn near crapped myself when I heard you had come back with a report all ready to go."

"Thank you sir." Parker glanced down at the photos spread on the wall behind Cook's desk. "Was there… anything else you needed, sir?"

"Probably, but I can let you loose for now. You've earned it."

Standing, Parker turned towards the door. Halfway through it, the Colonel blew a smoke ring. "Oh, and Parker?"

Pausing to turn, Parker poked his head back. "Yes sir?"

"You're going to have to top this, you know."

As he walked down the hallway, tiles reflecting a pensive face, he saw it turn from a thought to a smile. The fun of doing the impossible has a way of doing that to a person. Make them dream of the future. What can come next.

Yeah, I can top that.

Bazyliszek

Warsaw
1944

Another airdrop had been intercepted by the enemy. The English had good intentions, but when those ended up being consistently dropped into German territory, one could not help but wonder if if they were *trying* to miss the zones occupied by the Home Army. And they had just dropped it in the worst possible location.

Basilisk Street was simply a name that her platoon had given this area. It may have had another name, once, before the Germans had razed it. The road looked familiar to her; she had visited it several times when she was younger, but she could not recall the name. She knew it had a bank on it, and a baker's shop, which had once been a knifesmith's house, centuries ago.

The relevance of this last point was not lost on anyone in the platoon. Stefania, with her brown hair and broad Polish face, was flanked by two others. Tolek, who had been designated their sniper, hefted a rifle that looked too big on the young man's frame, like he was a little doll that someone had stuffed into a uniform. Kazia didn't look much better; years of starvation had taken toll on their grenadier, but she had bounced back from it, and what she lacked in fat she made up for in athletic muscle, enough that she could lug at least ten of the improvised grenades they had made, along with her rifle. They fortified themselves behind a shell of a building, some bombed-out walls clinging to their foundations, as they waited for the return of their final member.

Their saboteur, Odekta, had just returned from scouting ahead, crawling on the ground laboriously. She swallowed, and looked at Stefania with wide eyes. On her coat, she wore what she considered a badge of honor: a yellow six-pointed star. She looked up at them, remaining prone. "They're not looking at the supply drop."

"What?" Kazia spoke up, in a hissed whisper. "That has to have five days worth of food in it. Why would they not even inspect it?"

"They're more focused on one of the buildings. I've seen three *Szkopy* — " an insult better than the Nazis deserved — "go into it, but none have come out."

"What building?" Stefania took out her binoculars and surveyed the area, coming to a pause over a sign for a barber's shop, smashed in two by an explosion. "Everything is rubble."

"Not so much a building, but the cellar of one." Odetka paused. "… you've told us about the second war before, Stefania. The one being fought next to this one."

Her hand squeezed around the binoculars. "A war of magic. I didn't believe it, either, until I saw what happened in the telephone building." Stefania remembered the taste of burning flesh when a man covered in intricate Nordic tattoos incinerated two members of her squad, before she put a bullet in his stomach, and then five in his skull.

"Everyone knows the myth. You don't suppose it could still be here?" Tolek's voice was a timid squeak, almost drowned out by the sound of a distant explosion.

"…if it is, we feed them all to it and seal up the chamber." Kazia moved out from behind cover, staying low to the ground. "Odekta, how many smoke grenades do you have?"

"Three of them."

"Three?" Stefania frowned. "You were given five. We used one to escape the patrol on Świętojańska, where's the other?"

"Pressure was leaking. I had to toss it as we were coming up from the last square."

"Wonderful." Stefania signaled to her companions to stay low, crawl if they had to. This was easy for Tolek's young frame. Poor Kazia had a significant target on her, with the grenades strapped to her back. Their plain clothing mixed in well with the rubble, providing

some cover. From this distance, any Nazi without binoculars or a scope would have thought they might have been scraps of paper being blown about in the breeze.

Crawling, inching forwards, they approached the end of the street, as the September sun crept overhead. Gunshots rang out an indeterminate distance away. Another church in the city wavered on its foundations.

With the pace they were going, two hours had passed when they had arrived at the other end of the street. They ducked into alleyways, hid in buildings, and pissed on the rubble of what had once been a dress shop. They were too poorly-equipped to charge in alone, with or without grenades. Tolek looked like he was going to vomit at any point during the journey; fear of death outweighed the nausea.

Eventually, they reached the end of the street, believing themselves undetected. Five soldiers and one commander stood before a hole in the ground. The hole had once been a door to a cellar, and from the burn marks on it, Stefania guessed it may have been by a bomb. The Germans were accompanied by a pair of dogs, who had their attention trained on the hole. Behind them, their objective — the airdrop — stood, concealed under a parachute, forgotten.

Stefania's eyes widened when she saw the hounds. Between Tolek's whimpering and their own stench from crawling in the sun for so long, they would soon be found out. She suppressed a swear, and signaled to her platoon to be at the ready. Both her and Tolek steadied their rifles on a pile of rubble that had once been a windowsill, ready to shoot whatever noticed them first.

Instead, the dogs were given a command in German: "Go!". The two dogs dashed into the hole. Some time later (Stefania's heart was beating so fast that it could have been anywhere from two minutes to an hour), one of them emerged, running and whimpering. Through her scope, Stefania saw that its eyes were shut. Then, it came to a halt by the Germans' transport, and fell over, dead.

That confirmed it, then. Basilisk Street lived up to its name. The

cellar of a building, torn down to rubble, once more contained a creature that could kill with a stare. A perverse combination of rooster and reptile.

The Basilisk of Warsaw had never died. Or rather, maybe this was a descendant? Some youngling, birthed from an egg that had lain dormant until the bombs hatched it? Was Warsaw deciding to punish its invaders by recreating something that had been the terror of the city so many hundred years ago?

She could not be sure. She gave another signal to Kazia to ready a *Filipinka*; an impact grenade. The Germans were clustered together enough that a bomb would take out at least one of them. To Tolek, she motioned for him to aim at the youngest-looking soldier, adjusting his rifle for him. Odetka readied her own smoke grenade to choke out whoever survived the initial blast.

Stefania pointed, and Kazia threw the bomb. The casing shattered on the back of one of the Germans, killing him before anyone could react. Another had his arm torn to shreds, and writhed on the ground, screaming. The rest had turned their attention to the rebels.

Odetka's smoke grenade sailed almost in tandem with Kazia's *Filipinka*. It landed at their feet, and the air was filled with the sound of choking and coughing. Nazis were dangerous in groups, but like most soldiers, they were an uncoordinated mess when caught by surprise.

Stefania's shot entered the heart of a third trooper as he stumbled from the fog. He gasped when his spine exploded outward behind him. Tolek managed to hit the knee of a fourth, and as the final two gained their composure enough to draw their pistol, Kazia let another *Filipinka* sail towards them. A second later, no more Germans lived in the street.

Stefania ran out from behind cover to a barrier the Germans had erected, then to another, and finally, to the jeep they had been next to. The others followed, with Tolek in the back, staggering themselves so that no one person was behind a piece of cover at the same time. Stefania rummaged through the transport.

"What are you doing?" Kazia hissed. "They're going to be checking up on the explosions. We could have snipers above us at any minute! Let's just grab what we can from the drop and go!"

"The basilisk is real, Kazia," Stefania growled in return. "We can't let them get it, and if they're not getting it… well, the Home Army could use a… how do the Americans say? Trump card?"

"You're not serious," Odetka gasped, having opened up the crate; she was starting to stuff chocolate rations in her bag. "Stefania, that thing will kill you, *if it is real*. How do you even intend on bringing it out?"

"*Szkopy* are evil, but they're not completely without sense." Through her rummaging, Stefania found a cage made for large poultry, a metal rod with a noose on the end, an apron with mirrors on the outside, and an electric torch. The thing that caught her interest the most was an implement with a large set of flaps around a thick loop, all leather.

"What is that?" Tolek frowned as she removed the last object.

"Blinders," Stefania presented them. "I saw them used in a falconry demonstration before the war broke out. They cover a bird's eyes. Perfect for the thing down there."

"It will kill you in an instant!" protested the youngest member. Poor Tolek was shaking again. "Please, I can't. We can't lose you, Stefania."

"It can't kill me if it doesn't look me in the eyes." She pulled the apron, the noose, and the flashlight out of the transport, and found, on top of the cage, a set of black glasses. She placed them over her eyes, and smiled at her companions. "I'll be fine. Really."

She dressed herself in the apron, and left her rifle behind, electing to take a pistol from one of the dead Nazis. If necessary, she would kill the beast. She held the torch in one hand, noose in the other, and pistol by her side, Stefania descended into the cellar.

The room was far too large to exist under Warsaw. Stefania had been underneath some other buildings in this area; she did some of her education in the basement of a now blown-out apartment building not a block from here. She used her torch, and never saw the walls. The air was cold, and reeked of petrichor, like she was in a cavern. She aimed her light upwards, and could not see the ceiling.

And so, she shuffled through the darkness. She felt a mounting dread, that she had known twice before: first, when she heard that Hitler had pushed his forces through Poland, and was aiming at the rest of Europe. Second, when she faced down a man using… shooting flame from his hands, in the PAST telephone building. He had reduced most of the relays that were still intact to slag, melted with no effort.

Since the Uprising began, she suspected the existence of the basilisk. Several squadrons vanished in the area of Basilisk Street in the past week. It had been where the myth of the basilisk took place, and Stefania knew all the details. The knife-smith's children being found dead in a cellar, their nursemaid dying to the creature's gaze, the wise doctor instructing on how to destroy it, the convicted man's expedition into the cellar…

Nobody ever knew what happened to the beast itself. A ghost story in her neighborhood said that, every time you saw a new statue around the city, it was a victim of the basilisk. It was a fairy tale, something made to scare the children, get them to behave.

This did not change what Stefania was looking at. One-hundred meters away from where the September Sun was shining down, Stefania Borowski was standing over a dog whose eyes had swollen to the size of hen's eggs. Its skin seemed ready to burst open; poking it with her noose caused an effluence of pus onto the floor of the cave.

She heard something skitter behind her.

Tolek bit down on a cracker ration he had taken from the supply drop. The rest would be distributed to those at the base, but for now,

this was his. It was an American cracker, and theirs were the best, made with some honey or sugar.

Kazia's eyes admonished him between setting up traps of *Filipinka* attached to poles at either end of the street. When someone walked by, they would knock into them, and the grenade would explode on contact with the ground.

They stared at the cellar door. Stefania had just left, but it filled them with unease. Warsaw was an old city, approaching 750 years. It had much buried beneath its stones, old conflicts, attempted takeovers, the bones of tyrants that marched through and stepped on the scythes of the people. The bombings, the siege five years ago, and now the Uprising might be bringing it all back to the surface.

"Where are you, *Tula*?" Odetka chewed at her finger, keeping her sub-machine gun aimed at one end of the street. Poor range, but the fire could at least cause some to scatter, or set off the impact grenades Kazia was setting up.

"*Heh low the hair!*" cried a voice in an American accent. All three of them jumped at it, aiming their weapons. From out of one of the few intact buildings (which Kazia, with a curse, realized had a back entrance) came three men in black uniforms, the leader a blond man wearing black leather gloves. "*Sprichst du Deutsche? Noh, uf korz knot.*"

"State your purpose!" Kazia growled, letting off a warning burst. It scattered off one of the buildings, and the unknown party ducked.

"*Yew hidyot*," growled another voice, this one from a more diminutive man with black hair and a Polish widow's peak. He had a more natural accent. "He's asking if you speak German, he's an American," this one said in Polish.

"We don't speak *Szkopy!*" Kazia growled. "We've got you outnumbered, and we have a secret weapon. One that will kill *any* German that toys with the Home Army!"

The Pole translated for the American. "The Basilisk, yes?"

"…yes," Tolek's hands shook and he gripped his rifle tighter. "How did you know?"

"We sent Stefania here to retrieve it."

Stefania kept her eyes shut, relying on her hearing. She held her breath to listen for the skittering of the basilisk. She had seen its body; a rooster with a lizard's tail and claws, just as the myth said. She couldn't help but wonder if it was hatched from a cock's egg, like the myth claimed.

She swung her noose almost at random, trying to grab any part of it. She remembered what the American — she thought he was a reporter — told her. This creature was dangerous, and if it couldn't be destroyed, it could at least be locked in a cage, contained, until the war was over and it could be properly studied.

The American told her that he worked for a Foundation, and they did not know the city like she did. It was an international organization, he claimed, trying to stop two wars — the war she fought, with sabotage and sniper rifles, and the war they fought, with monsters and magic. An Occult War, he called it.

In the dark, she stood still, eyes shut behind protective glasses. The basilisk didn't caw, didn't chirp, didn't crow like a cock. It just ran about on its little feet, and occasionally tried to peck at her. It came from her left, and she began a slow turn towards it. If she spun too fast, the mirrors would warp with the apron, and the basilisk would not be stunned, and would flee for another attack. Too slow, she would be pecked to death by a venomous chicken.

The basilisk came up on her. Stefania turned, noose wand extended, and felt a tug on the end.

"Why would Stefania agree to this?" Odetka sounded skeptical. "She should keep it for the cause."

"And risk losing her own force?" asked the translator. "She could kill everyone in the resistance, from the lowliest peon to… you call her

Jaga?"

"Lt. Mileska," Tolek nodded. "She's nice. She's cared for us."

The American nodded and spoke more things nobody understood, until the translator spoke, pointing to the trapdoor. "Things are faster down there."

"Faster?" Tolek asked.

"Time moves faster. She could have been down there for quite a while now." The translator looked at them. "Warsaw is a messy city. Both of the wars are making it messier. Once she's out, we must—"

"You must *what?*" Stefania asked, emerging from the underground with a basilisk, blinders over its eyes, trapped in a noose wand.

"Stefania!" the American smiled, switching to German, something both of them could speak. "It's good to see you again! You have your prize?"

"…yes," Stefania replied in the same language. To her compatriots, it must have sounded like she was speaking in a snake's tongue. "You'll keep it safe?"

He nodded back towards the transport, with a swastika painted on the side. "We have a cage in there."

Everyone's heart sank. Stefania's blood became volcanic, and her vision bore holes into the side of the transport. "You're. A. *German organization?*"

Tolek yelped, and covered his ears, curling into a ball. The conversation had taken a turn for the worse; he could tell from tone alone. The cowardly soldier remained curled up, whimpering.

"It's a matter of convenience," the American explained. "They have better equipment, we can move through freely through the occupied zones. No offense to your forces, but those K-Pattern weapons aren't going to work against… well, nevermind."

Stefania's hand approached the basilisk. "*Szkopy* were here earlier,

trying to get it out of the hole themselves."

"They were looking for it as well," the Foundation agent elaborated. "We simply wanted to get to it first. Are you really going to begrudge us some espionage?"

The only word that she could use to describe the American was 'traitor'. "They were going to use this as a weapon." She stared at him hard enough that even the basilisk in her hand could have turned to stone. "How do I know that you aren't?"

"You don't, I'll admit," the Nazi licked his lips; his nervousness was showing. "You're just going to have to take my word. We will keep this specimen secured and contained until the war is over."

"And then what?" Stefania's hand came up the basilisk's beak, towards the blinders. "You'll let it lose on the next threat?"

"Frau Borowski, please—" he began.

"I am not a *Frau.*" Her hand was on the blinders. "I am Polish. I am free!"

The others realized where her hand was going . The officer drew his gun. Kazia pleaded and turned away. Odetka begged, and shut her eyes a fraction too late. Tolek remained curled up on the street, as if a bomb was coming for him.

Stefania pulled the blinders off of the basilisk.

Tolek Lisiewicz was left alone on the street, with the shuddering sound of his companion's last breaths. He knew what had happened. The boy crawled towards Stefania, eyes still clamped shut, and felt her stony legs. She, too, had looked into the eyes. Intentionally, or inadvertently, it did not matter. She was dead. He believed the others to be as well.

He felt his way up her body, mumbling apologies the whole time, until he came to the basilisk, trapped between her tight, stone-encrusted hands.

Its neck came between his fingers.

His hands twisted in opposite directions. The Basilisk of Warsaw was no more.

Eyes still clamped shut, sobs suppressed and swallowed, he limped his way back down Basilisk Street, fearing that if he looked back, if he even opened his eyes to blink, he would put a picture to the horrific sound that he heard from the instant he snapped the basilisk's neck.

Tolek heard screams, barely muffled by stone. Of them, Odetka's was the loudest.

Underneath Basilisk street, in a disused cellar, an egg laid by a rooster began to hatch.

Be a Dali and Help a Mann Out, or The Lamentable State of Modern Art

When he was first partnered with Dr. Mann, Lament was handed a remote. As he was partnered to the doctor, so it was partnered to a small explosive implanted in the doctor's chest without his knowledge.

Administrator Bunbridge had couched it in gentle terms. "Only as a last resort, you understand," and "Kindest thing, really, if it becomes necessary."

Some days, Lament was depressed by the whole idea of an organization that would prepare to kill its own people just in case they went rogue. Other days, after being barraged with the Bee Gees, Abba, and KC and the Sunshine Band, he thought of the button longingly. But he'd never been seriously tempted to press it. In fact, some days, he forgot to take it with him, and it was left neglected on his coffee table.

This was one of two mistakes Agent Lament realized he had made when he heard a low thud somewhere outside his bathroom. The other (obvious in hindsight) was to leave Mann unsupervised in his home.

He rushed to the living room, barely taking time to button his trousers, mentally rehearsing the excuses he was going to have to feed to the Administrator, when he caught sight of Mann, holding the remote and pressing the button repeatedly. "I think your remote's got a dead battery," he said. "The telly won't turn on."

"Um," Lament said, trying to piece together why Mann was intact. "That's… that's not for the television, Mann. That's for…" he searched around, "…for the dog door. But it, uh, doesn't work…"

"Because you don't have a dog!" Mann said. "Of course. I should have realized." He smiled from under the mustache, as the world fell

into place for him.

"So, why did you have me bring you over?" Lament asked, trying to sound casual.

"Oh, yes!" Mann said. "I think someone's trying to kill me."

"Ah..?" Lament said, glancing at the remote. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, they put an explosive in my chest. That's definitely suspicious," Mann said.

Lament forced his eyebrows to raise up in surprise. "So you found… you have a bomb in your chest?"

"Oh, not anymore. I took the thing out. I decided to play it safe." And this was indeed an unusual amount of self-preservation for Mann.

"Then… where is it now?" Lament asked, thinking back to the thud he'd heard earlier.

"Oh, where did I put it? Oh, I know. I left it in your car," Mann said cheerfully.

I just finished paying it off, Lament thought. *Well, of course it would be blown up. I should have expected it, really.*

"But not to worry," Mann said. "I'm sure I know precisely who's responsible."

"Do you?" Lament asked weakly.

"Oh yes. Means, motive, and opportunity, Lament. That is the formula. Find those, and you have the culprit."

"Then who is it?" Lament thought desperately to his sidearm, currently by his bed, upstairs.

"At first I suspected the Church of the Broken God. What is a bomb, Lament, but a mechanism for murder? And we all know how they love to tinker with human bodies." Mann's voice held no trace of

irony.

"But…" Lament listened in somewhat horrified fascination. Listening to Mann expound was like watching a Rube Goldberg machine, except that the machine could be expected to accomplish something at the end.

"But the bomb uses an electronic trigger. Not their style. So next I looked to the Chaos Insurgency. They do like to sneak around. But they're not sly enough to get into my chest. My stomach, maybe, but they could never penetrate my rib cage and its secrets."

"Granted," Lament said, as he tried to decide if he should come up with a cover story, or just rush Mann off to the site to let someone else deal with it.

"But what of Wondertainment? So little we still know of the toymaker. Does he employ elves? Are they union? Surely if he can make a custom people as playthings, his knowledge of biology should make a simple chest bomb… well, child's play!"

"And yet?"

"What would he gain? I've almost saved up enough box tops for his Mikey Medula's Brain Surgery Kit. No, he'll not give up a potential sale so easily." Mann rubbed his chin. "I next suspected the Global Occult Coalition."

"Because…"

"Because they're opposed to our containment. I am, of course, a linchpin of the Foundation's operations, so I'm a natural target. But I've met their top surgeons. A bunch of amateurs, the lot of them. By no means capable of concealing such an invasive surgery, unless they tried some manner of… of sorcery, and I think we can discount that possibility. Are we not… Begging your pardon, Lament. Am *I* not a man of science?"

"…For the sake of argument, sure," Lament said.

"So clearly not them. The Serpents Hand could certainly have inveigled themselves onto the premises. But that bunch of long-

haired ne'er-do-wells lacks the mechanical expertise for an explosive. Next, I turned my mind to Prometheus Labs. A bomb would be mere child's play for the least of their technicians."

"And…"

"But they've been defunct for years. No, they haven't the means to discover me, let alone to isolate me for surgery. So I turned my mind to Nobody. But obviously he couldn't have done it."

"Because he doesn't exist?"

"No," Mann said, shaking his head, "because he's in Toledo this time of year. So there's only one possible group that could have possibly pulled it off. Are We Cool Yet!"

"…Seriously?"

"Yes, Are We Cool Yet. I see your disbelief, but when I lay out my evidence, you will see-"

Lament had had enough. "No."

"No?" Mann frowned. "But wait, you see-"

"No. Just… just no. I'll take your word for it."

Mann's face fell. "But… But it's awfully clever. I… I made diagrams."

"No. Mann, look, I'll go along and look into this with you. Just… don't explain it. Please." *Let me continue to live in a world where I haven't heard yet another of his explanations,* he pleaded with the universe.

"Oh, all right," Mann said. "Terribly clever, though. You're missing out."

"So, what do you plan to do about this?" Lament asked.

"Why, seek revenge, of course!" Mann scowled. "I haven't been this vexed since Doctor Vang put hair remover in my mustache wax. The part that makes me angry is that they mucked about where I've already performed surgery. It's almost like… like a critique. Imagine

how you would feel if someone criticized your shooting, and shouting, and so forth."

"I don't have to imagine," Lament said. "Because you do that. All the time."

"Yes, well, I'm an expert surgeon, so it's a bit different."

"Are you saying I'm not good at… shooting?" Lament asked, eyebrow raised.

"Well, you did miss that fellow at the factory," Mann pointed out.

"It was a warning shot!"

"Oh. Well. Was it really?" Mann said. "I suppose that explains why you were so cross afterwards."

"I wanted him to talk," Lament said.

"And so he did, after a fashion," Mann said defensively.

"Gurgling does not count as talking, Mann."

"Anyway, I do feel your shouting could use more work," Mann said. "Not to criticize, but you have to feel it. Make it come from the diaphragm."

Inside his coat pocket, Lament ran his thumb along the button. *What might have been.* "And my… so forth?" he growled.

"Actually, no complaints there. I've always thought you were exemplary in the field," Mann said.

"…The field of so forth."

"Yes, not many are so gifted," Mann said. "Anyway, let's be off. I know exactly where to find them."

The car, happily, was still in running condition, though all of the windows were blown out. It hadn't been a terribly large bomb, all things considered. It hadn't needed to be.

Mann directed Lament to drive downtown, until they reached a fairly nondescript office building, housing businesses dealing with corkboard, investment banking, and posters with cats on them.

"What makes you think Are We Cool Yet is here?" asked Lament.

"I realized that if they hadn't been found, they naturally must have taken the most devious, clever hiding place possible. So I asked myself where would I never think to look, even if given a thousand years. And here we are."

A pained expression crossed Lament's face. On the one hand, he was glad Mann didn't actually know where to find the GoI, which should keep this from being too horrible an evening. On the other hand, he wondered where his life had gone so wrong that he regularly let Mann talk him into things like this.

After wrestling with this profound betrayal of logic for a moment, he sighed and said, "All right. We'll go in, look around, and then head out. Just a little light reconnaissance. Then we report what we've found, and we let an MTF take care of them."

"I'd like to show them the old vinegar, but I suppose you're right. Best leave it to the professionals." Mann twirled his mustache. "They'll regret messing with my thoracic cavity!"

They snuck into the building, quietly moving from floor to floor. With each empty office, Mann grew more and more anxious, and Lament more relieved.

"Okay, this is the last floor," Lament said. "If they're not here, we'll just have to go home, and report everything to the administrator." *And hopefully he'll put an end to all this nonsense.*

"Right," Mann said, grimly.

Lament slowly opened the door, and was blinded a moment by the bright light on the other side. A surprised looking man in an artist's smock was staring at him, surprised. Not so surprised, however, that he didn't punch an alarm and duck behind a wall.

"Run!" Lament said, and started pushing back. Unfortunately, Mann

misinterpreted the direction, and ran forward, colliding into Lament's back. The two fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs, and while they attempted to regain their feet, they were quickly surrounded by a bunch of college-age men and women who were surprisingly well armed.

Lament wasn't sure which part was worse: the fact that they had been caught, or the fact that Mann had been right. His eyes rose upwards, as if to say to the universe, "This demeans us both, you know."

"Who are you supposed to be, Salvador Dali and company?" asked their leader. He was a middle-aged man, with graying hair and noticeable paunch. "What the hell are you even doing here?"

"We came to put a stop to your vile machinations!" Mann said. "You shan't take a single Foundation life this day!"

"What machinations? It's finals week, you hopeless philistine. Do you have any idea, any idea at all, how many papers I have to grade? How many idiots who can't tell the difference between Van Gogh and Vin Diesel? I have far more important things to do than mess about with your idiot bourgeois Foundation." He lowered his half-moon glasses and gave the pair a serious look. "This really is a bad time, gentlemen."

"Then who put the bomb in my chest?" Mann said.

The artist's eyebrows raised. "Not I. Any of you gentlemen or ladies?" he asked those gathered, only to get a chorus of shaking heads.

"Oh," said Mann. "Um. It appears there's been a mistake."

"Yes, that seems to be the case," said the artist.

"Well, we'll just be going…" Mann said.

"Oh, no." The artist chuckled. "We can't simply let you go. No, I'm afraid that you'll be seeing… our gallery." He paused, then frowned. "Our… gallery." He paused again, expectantly, then glared at one of younger men. "Jason."

"Oh! Sorry." He struck a picture of a lightning storm with a fist, and a peal of thunder rolled out.

The artist sighed. "We try, really. Anyway, the gallery." Thunder rolled out again. "There we go." He gestured, and Mann and Lament were dragged to another darkened room.

"You fiends!" Mann said. "Um. What happens next? I'm sorry, I've never been subjected to your gallery."

Thunder rang out through the building.

"Yes, thank you Jason, that's enough please. Here, you will be subjected to our darkest works. Our most terrifying pieces of art. Prepare yourselves, as your very souls are laid bare."

"Can't you just shoot us?" Lament asked. "You have guns. With bullets. We saw them on the way in."

"No! Instead, you must face… the Crushing Banality That Is Existence!" The man threw back a curtain covering a canvas, his face lit with maniacal glee. "DO YOU SEE IT? MY RAGE? LOOK AT MY RAGE!"

"This… this is picture of a pony," Lament said.

"That's Pinkie Pie, Lament," said Mann.

Lament's eyebrows rose. "I… how do you know that?"

"The Foundation is well versed in counter cultures," said Mann. "And, of course, SCP-6345."

"Is… No, stop." Lament held up a hand.

"Yes," said Mann. "A pony."

"Stop. Stop now. I'll…" He turned back to the artist. "Do you have anything more horrifying?"

"We've got this one that will make your eyes eat themselves," he answered.

"That. I'll take that one."

"As you wish!" The man moved to another canvas, and prepared to pull the curtain. As he did, Lament hooked out a foot. The man slipped, caught himself, and looked up into the painting, as Mann and Lament looked away.

"Oh god! My eyes have the idea of teeth! It's sharp!" He flailed about as he screamed, crashing into other canvases.

Lament grabbed the nearest armed student and swung him over a shoulder into another. Meanwhile, others accidentally caught glimpses of the paintings and screamed, cursed, and in one case turned into lime gelatin.

"Like I said, Lament," Mann said, as he cut a man's brachial artery, "no one does so forth like you."

The two fought their way to the exit. There wasn't a lot of resistance. With their leader incapacitated and half their fellows succumbing to horrible art of one type or another, no one was terribly interested in stopping them. As they reached the stairwell, Lament broke the elevator controls and barred the doors, even as he called in reinforcements.

"Well, this has been rather a disappointment," Mann said.

"Oh yeah?" Lament said.

"All this, and they weren't even the ones who—I say! I just realized who must have implanted the bomb."

"Who?" Lament asked.

"I did."

"I… Wait. Why would you have put an explosive in your own chest?" Lament asked.

"So I wouldn't lose it!" Mann said. "It was such a neat surgical job, I should have known at once."

Lament wanted it to stop there. He *needed* it to stop there. But some tortured part of him, some part that still remembered a world of common sense and logic, had to ask. "But why don't you remember?"

"Oh, probably the amnestics they had me take after my last physical. They always think I won't notice, but I've learned to recognize the signs."

Wretchedly, Lament realized it could even be true. Mann *was* entirely capable of implanting things in his own chest, if asked politely. He wouldn't even blink.

"Well," Mann said as the unmarked cars converged on their location, "all's well that ends well."

It will be fun, they said.

Fragment of InComm bulletin suspected to be distributed by GOC Internal Communication division, confiscated from captured sleeper agents in Site-229

Modern Thaumaturge: A Perspective
by Field Agent "Bluesocks" (44667218/722)

It is often said that modern mages have it far easier than older generations, that they know no hardship nor the struggle of becoming true mages that was the norm until as recent as last century—and as result, they have become far weaker, dependent on modern convenience. While this stereotype is misleading at best, and outright discriminatory at worst, it might be worth examining how much of it is true.

Imagine hypothetical scenario of facing an angry dragon, or to be specific, a winged, massive reptilian entity with innate thaumatological capability and affinity to a certain Platonic elements. A hundred years ago, if one was to face a dragon in their natural habitat in Iceland, their best course of action was to hide and pray, as the closest capable mage would be thousands of miles away playing cat and mouse against the prevalent, albeit less public, mage-hunting organization.

Today? You could connect to closest UNGOC hotline, who would then dispatch a team of mages through either a supersonic transport or an apportation circle, and then pommel the dragon with their enchanted bullets. Easy, right?

Well, reality has a special way to twist your expectation.

To begin with, dragons are protected Fiji-Goodrick Threat Entities with their proper environmental sanctuary. To meet one, you would have to trespass into top secret GOC facility with their security. No way they would dispatch a team of mages to rescue you—higher chance they're the ones throwing you to the dragon's maw.

If you've cleared the proper paperwork and we could ignore why they're leaving you alone with the dragon in the first place, there's still the problem of how *expensive* it is to deploy a battle mage capable of handling a dragon. Not because of the high per hour rates of such specialist—rather, the logistical cost of their equipment. Such limitations that wasn't observed by previous centuries mages makes most specialist barely scraping by even with their outrageous hourly rates the GOC happily paid. Add to that most of the works that wasn't covered by Ptolemy supply: runic bullets that must be ordered from specialists, symbolic weapon that needs to be made and bonded specifically by the mage, training fees, the list goes on.

Speaking of training, I have observed that most people who claimed "modern mages have it easier" never actually bothered to see just how much effort does one need to graduate from ICSUT, much less to be employed as a certified GOC Field Ops. Applied Thaumatology requires not only physical and psychological compatibility, but also massive amount of efforts to convert one's innate talent into an actual, practical capability. It's an answer to why, even in the ages of Unified Thaumatology, the amount of mages we could deploy still far below our "normal" paramilitary forces. Becoming a mage is still as difficult as it is as the last century—if not more, due to the stricter control under ICSUT and by extension, GOC.

I cannot deny that modern conveniences have lessened mages' struggle in some aspect. Unified form of

Thaumatology results in more standardized equipment and even interchangeability of items such as generic wards or grimoire. Advance in imaging, detection, and containment of thaumic workings has lessened the burden in mages who could focus more in handling actual threats. Well, at least for those under GOC's wings. But we cannot judge current generation of mages by the lenses of ages long past. Similar to regular branch of military, current technological advance might conveniences the personnel, but the threat they faced on regular basis also evolve, and it is a matter of whether you are fighting an actual dragon, or bureaucratical one. []

Be Strange or Be Forgotten

I was nervous. Shaken and nervous, terribly so. The past few nights I had awoken to the sounds of helicopters, and I thought I imagined there to be voices reverberating through the space. The great dark woods outside of my window suddenly felt less like a wall between me and the rest of the world and more like a great suppressor of my senses. I stared between their bars of bark and their perfect ever blossoming greenery and felt uneasy. I couldn't fall asleep like this. I rose, closed the curtains, and then crawled back into bed. The mobile that hung over my crib tinkled softly, and the glow in the dark stars around the room twinkled and sparkled at me. I had closed the curtains, why couldn't I fall asleep? I pulled my blankets closer to me. I wished that Mom were here to tuck me in. It was cold. It was a cold dark night, and I had work to do in the morning.

I decided that if I couldn't get to sleep then I would just get up and do it. I turned on my bedside lamp, and stared across the room at the empty beds. This room was too red for my tastes. I was going to have to move. I opened the big candy cane door and exited into the hall. The kids' room's door was ajar. I peeked in, and saw the six little guys fast asleep. They were all so cute. So precious. I gently pushed their door closed. There was a soft rustling once I had done that. Maybe they weren't as asleep as I had imagined. I silently locked their door. Didn't want them to wander the house at night. I limped down the stairs and flipped on the kitchen light. I opened the oven and took out a cinnamon bun. I hobbled over to the couch and laid down. It was hard to move now that I couldn't feel my right foot, but work had to get done as always. There was always work to get done. Another product to make, another hand to shake, another cookie to bake… I should have been a poet. I imagined that poetry would have been an easier occupation than toy making.

Of course, you have to follow your heart. My heart was in tiny gears and wind up keys and making education fun. I hated my heart. My heart had chosen wrong, it was broken. How stupid did a heart have to be to *choose* to work with *children*? I hit the arm rest a couple times. I was slowly rubbing the bony part of my left wrist raw. It was pink and flat. I didn't think it was supposed to be flat. To my knowledge, bony parts of wrists weren't supposed to be flat. I breathed heavily on the couch before standing up again. I almost fell back down due to head rush, but held onto the back of the couch to stop myself. Walking towards the bathroom, I tripped on a Lego creation by one of the kids.

"*AAaaah!!*"

I caught myself on the fireplace, but not without hitting a rib on the cobble. That hurt. I think I woke up the kids. There was a commotion upstairs, and the door was jostling. They were ignoring their bed time. Again. I was going to tell them all about that in the morning. All about it, yeah. All about it. I stumbled towards the bathroom, but changed my mind. I had gotten up to do work, I was going to do work. Near the stairwell I opened a door that looked like a closet. It opened into a staircase that led down. Down into the basement. Down into my workshop. They were moving again. This wasn't any good, they weren't supposed to move at night. They could climb the stairs, and that would be bad. No kid wants that. No kid at all.

What was that?

I stood absolutely still. The house was quiet, the house was still. There wasn't even a ticking clock, or a dripping faucet, or a wind outside that jostled the windows. There wasn't a bird chirping in the night, a wolf howling at the moon, a squirrel that just so happened to be on the roof. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing. All was calm. Very, very calm. I must have imagined it. Or must I have? There *was* one noise now. My heart was pumping, as it usually did. It was pumping hard. It was so *loud*, it felt like I couldn't have possibly *heard* anything else. I felt unsafe. I felt absolutely caked in a thick, muddy paranoia. Justified? It didn't matter at that point. I closed the basement door, and slunk to the real closet by the bathroom. I took solace in having a cold, metal rod in one hand. I felt like a man. I never noticed that I was living life as a boy… but, but I was! I had

been, for the longest time. I might not have worked by *kids*, but my whole life I had spent working by *children*. I was moving up in the world. I was —

No, no I *wasn't* crazy, because there it went again. A… a *something*, it was so slight that whether it was a sound or a feeling was indistinguishable. I felt watched… I felt that every window was a liability, every corner hiding something sinister and disagreeable. Sweat ran down my forehead like heavy rain. I felt completely in the open, but simultaneously unable to move. Frozen in place. My muscles felt like concrete. Even the kids upstairs had fallen totally motionless.

Crash

I'd… I mean, it's no secret, is it? I knew when I was done for. It was a quality I liked to pride myself on. When a project just wasn't working out, I wasn't the person who would power through anything. I couldn't do that to myself, not when I knew there was something better I could put my energy into. That was besides the point, but still. I wasn't much a fighter. Not really. Not ever. As soon as the gas started filling the room, I knew there wasn't a point. I covered my mouth, only inhaling enough to wrack me with coughs. There wasn't a point. I didn't know if there was ever really a point. I guessed that it was all subjective. I started leaning towards the stairs, hearing the clear yells and grunts of men outside. They weren't a problem. I knew where my priorities lied. I needed to check in on the kids.

The sun was coming up. Dawn of another day. I winced. Did I ever really amount to anything? Was monetary value all that I strove for? What were my goals? What were my ends that I needed to make meet? The sun was coming up, and it glared at me.

"Do you see the sun, kid?"

The stairs were quite the obstacle at this hour of the day. To think I had stayed up the whole night, just because I had been hearing

helicopter blades before. I guessed it wasn't so silly, but it was pretty silly. I needed to not stay up that late. It was bad for me. I began to cry, climbing that stairwell felt demeaning. Just another hurdle to cross. Nothing ever came easy. I guessed that was life. My feet landed on the landing.

"You see that big ball of gas and fire?"

That was a door being thrust open downstairs. I sauntered towards the kids' room, trying to pay it no mind. The door handle was rustling. I could hear the children as they clambered at the door. Like little dogs, chewing on the bars of their crate. It didn't do them any good. At the very least, things were finally getting resolved.

"It's circling *you*, kid."

It felt like I had spent my whole life waiting for things to figure themselves out. Spent it all just hoping that the next thing would be the last thing. Life was just a long complicated list of things, and I never realized how tired I was of *things*. Needing to eat, needing to drink, needing to make money, needing to make friends. Needing the newest smart phone. Needing to be the best toy maker. Needing to need. Needing to live.

"You're the *star*, Brian!"

I unlocked their door and opened it. They were all so… *cute*. They must have been so scared. I tried to smile at them, tried to show them it was all okay. It was a white lie. Maybe it would make things easier. I certainly hoped it would. All these children I had rescued from their unfortunate situations, to give them an occupation. They were going to travel the world. They were going to be able to share the joys of childhood with kids anywhere and everywhere. They looked very concerned. It must have been the tool in my hand.

"Life's a show kid."

Bang. Bang.

"*Stop crying.*"

Bang.

"*Stop moving.*"

Bang. Bang.

"*Stop screaming.*"

Bang.

They were on the stairs by now. I sat down on the bedside, and wiped the tears from my eyes. It could have been so magical. It could have been so grande, so complete, so artistic, so tasteful. It could have been Wondrous. There was never anything more tragic than what could have been, what was so close to being, what wanted to but ultimately couldn't come to fruition. I tasted the salt and enzymes as they ran down my cheeks and into my mouth. There wasn't *time* for that. There wasn't time for anything anymore. Really, there just wasn't any time at all. Just as I heard people outside the door, I held that horrid contraption to my chin.

Life was a show, and I was the fucking star.

B a n g .

Baxter turned the corner just in time to see the tall, skeletal man fall backwards onto the bed. He was wearing a black and orange pinstripe suit, and his big top hat with cat ears lied next to him. His fingernails were long and sharpened. His face was painted to look like a tiger. The gun laid on the floor. As others searched the house up and down, trying to find co-conspirators, Baxter just stood there. The room was coated in blood, and the viscera of a handful of children. Baxter slowly stepped into the room and checked behind the door to make sure he wasn't set up for an ambush. The space was thankfully empty.

He turned back to the room and thought that he caught movement behind the second bed. He rushed over to find a small Indian child

caught in the side. He immediately radioed for medics to come to the second floor, and held the child in his arms. The kid was in shock. His eyes were wide, his breaths were inconsistent. Baxter was never good with kids. He picked up the child and carried him downstairs just as the rest of the Strike Team was confirming that the house was empty. Baxter yelled for medical assistance, but nobody came. He didn't know what to do, or how to react, until… until the kid just stopped moving. He gave three short coughs, and then his head rolled back. Baxter stood with the child for a long while, just holding him, hearing the "all clear"s go through his head one after another. He laid the child down on the couch, and somberly stood upright.

Baxter glanced to his left, and saw the outline of another child standing in the doorway to the basement. This one just seemed to stare at all the people moving around, and soon someone had knelt down next to it — keeping a gun on it at all times, of course. It seemed genderless, and… shiny. Plastic. Baxter walked over to it, hearing the other operatives gathered around asking it questions and making sure to never get too close. Its movements were stiff, its eyes were doll like. Its mouth kept opening and closing. It was making a small "ah" each time.

The operatives glanced between each other, trying to find hints at what to do. The thing took two jerky steps forward, using only its left leg, and then fell onto its face. On the back of its head was a small switch. The thing jerked and shook and banged against the floor before going still and just waving its right arm. On its back, its painted on shirt read "Vend-a-Friend™ by Wondertainment!" The team shared looks, and then Baxter shot the poor thing. He snuck down the stairs into the basement, with two operatives following close behind. The whole space was filled with an inky black, and a noxious fetid smell. Baxter flipped on the lights.

Baxter had seen worse. It didn't make the scene any better. They — or, some of them — stared at Baxter and his crew. They didn't all have full bodies. They didn't all have full heads. They didn't all have eyes, and they didn't all have mouths. Many abandoned projects lied around the room, twitching and struggling to get up. One doll kept swerving and bumping into walls until it fell again, showing that its

face had been melted. There were scraps of plastic and parts sitting on shelves. Tools, both familiar and enigmatic, were hung on the south wall above a big… well, it used to be a green workbench. Most concerning were the husks left in the corner, rotting and being picked at by flies. Baxter motioned the team away.

"I'll take care of the dirty business. Soak the place in gasoline."

The operatives nodded softly, and backed out of the basement, back up the stairs. Whichever ones out of the dozen or so that could look followed Baxter everywhere he went. Some began to walk, some stumbled, some crawled, and some could only try to move in his direction. Baxter wouldn't sit long enough to let himself get attached. He pulled out his rifle and aimed it at the first one. His finger fondled the trigger just as he felt a tugging on his back leg. Turning around, he saw the little one. A legless one, pulling on his pant legs. It was a smaller one, with darker skin tone, and a green shirt painted on it. A green shirt that read "Keep Calm and Read a Book". It tugged a couple more times. It didn't have a lower jaw to speak with, and it only had one eye. It was pathetic. It was terribly pathetic and hopeless.

Baxter lowered the rifle, and stared. Some others had made it up to him and were silently softly tugging on his clothes. He slung his rifle on his back and picked up the small legless green one. He picked it up and looked into its eyes, and it held its stiff arms out and repeatedly patted the breather on his gas mask. The small crowd of disfigured plastic children, some making small "ah"s and others squeaking slightly as their plastic parts rubbed together, clung onto Baxter's legs while he held the toy. They held eye contact for a long time, ignoring the ruckus upstairs, before Baxter took the thing closer and embraced it. The little things arms waggled at his sides, its tiny immature hands pulling on his straps a bit. The grunting of men upstairs, combing over the place for hints and materials and pouring fuel over the whole thing, slowly faded into white noise. Baxter breathed heavily. Baxter closed his eyes. Baxter squeezed the little thing, and stood in place without any intention of ever moving again. A voice over the intercom.

"House searched. Awaiting your command, Baxter."

Baxter sighed. A heavy, angry, agonizing sigh. He put down the little boy, back into the crowd of malicious toys, and felt a weight fall upon his shoulders. The mission was over, but there was still work to be done. They didn't wait to see the bonfire to its end.

On the way back, the team was boisterous. Another mission come and gone, another story started and stopped, another item on the paycheck. Hearing that the mission was over, Lynn had called from her infirmary bed. She wanted to know how things had went: if the bastard was dead, if anyone got injured, if anyone was rescued. He assured her that the kids were alright.

The windows were gorgeous, overlooking the city, showing the rides and the bright cheery landscapes. The Frite Lite Roller Coaster whizzed past, and shook the room slightly. The committee sat in a terrible, pervasive silence. A couple sniffles, and some blows of noses, were the only sounds currently heard. Around the table sat many colorful individuals — Mr. Ribbit, Golly Molly, Mrs. Ribbit, Dr. Quack, Judy the Tongue, Cheese Louise, George Georgeson, Bob Bobson, Moccasin, George Bobson, Bob Georgeson, Smoke Ferguson, Tailor Itkin, Jetfuel, Jimmy the Jello Fellow, Forgan Meeman, Bill Sipmann, Vira the Party, Potato Reginald, Parry the Seamstress, Beryllium, and the current company head, CEO Holly Light (who held the honorary title of Dr. Wondertainment). Their usual goofy grins had all been wiped from their faces and replaced with various states of disrepair — some stared blankly at the table, others wept profusely, some twitched with anger, one leaned back in their chair and looked at the ceiling, but Holly was the loudest. She wailed and moaned on her big purple and yellow throne that stretched nearly to the cathedral high ceiling. Her usual well kept illustrious mile long white hair was entirely untouched today, matted and tangled in places and covering her face. The left armrest on her throne had an automatic tissue dispenser, which she was threatening to deplete. Leaning down and crying into her lap hid her face almost entirely in her hair, but her perfectly circular eyes showed when she looked up in another great moan. It was a long

time before the meeting really officially got underway. Holly Wondertainment's right hand woman, Tongue, ultimately took over the meeting in her place.

"It ith to everyone'th thurprithe that we gather today to discuth… Polly'th Grow-N-Know Piano Plant. She hath refuthed to continue working on it, and… and we have workerth who… we… have workerth that have no projectth to work on. We need to figure out how to… put them to work." … "Any thuggethtionth?"

"I don't like dodging around our problems, Tongue," Smoke spoke up, "just tell us the bad news and what we're going to do about it."

Tongue looked at Holly for guidance, but just found her chugging a water bottle to keep the tears flowing out of her face. Tongue wasn't good at big crowds like this, but if she wanted to be Holly's successor — which she did — she was going to have to get good at it. Why did this have to be her test run? She cleared her throat, licked her lips, and shifted her tongue out of Tailor's leg space. His foot and her muscle had collided a couple times and it was getting uncomfortable at this point.

"…Wondertainment, the company, ith arranging an honorary funeral for Brai- for, uh, for Brian Harding right now. It'th… not many people are invited. It'th eckthpected to be jutht me, Holly, 3T, and Polly. Anyone who knowth of it ith invited, but our main conthern ith that… people will dithrethpect him."

"And why shouldn't they?"

"We're all thtill people… we're holding a more public funeral for all of the kids we- he… he hurt. All of the families of those kids have been invited. We're still unthure what our public thtatement on the matter will be. That'th what we're all really here for. We're all here to figure out what we're going to thay."

The room lay in contemplation for a long stretch of time. The Frite Lite Roller Coaster was making its second round, and shook the room once more. The sobbing had quieted down since the beginning of the meeting, but the room was flush with red cheeks and watery eyes. Mrs. Ribbit croaked, Smoke exhumed, Tailor

hummed, Potato curled into a ball. Judy sat back down, and let the room sort itself out once more. Until somebody else was ready to say something, there was nothing to be said. Soon enough, Mr. Ribbit raised his head and his voice cracked as he spoke.

"'We're sorry'?"

He looked gravely around the room, and then buried his head back into his arms. Mrs. Ribbit came up to him and hugged him as he silently shook in his seat. Then followed Beryllium, Jetfuel, and Party. After that, G.G., B.B., Cheese, B.G., Quack, Jello, Tailor, Sip, Forgan, G.B., Moccasin, Potato, Molly, Parry, and even Smoke got up and huddled around Mr. Ribbit. Judy took Dr. Wondertainment by the hand, letting Holly use her tongue as a tissue, and walked her over to the growing pile. Pulling up pillows, blankets and bean bags, the group entered a cuddle puddle for emotional support.

« You Can't Win Them All|Vend-a-Friend Hub|Life's a Show»

You hold in your hands the paper keys, the keys that can unlock Fantasy.

When I first discovered this wondrous land, I could scarcely believe everything before me. The spiraling and floating mountains that reached so high that the rings of clouds were still below them. The great waterfalls that sprayed down from the ancient rivers that flowed through forests with trees wise and full of knowledge. The oceans with their golden beaches and cool, lapping waves that never roared nor stormed.

And the life within. Such unique, and wonderful creatures that walked through this Fantastic world. It took years for me to gaze upon them all. Who knows? I may have had more to see.

I can't see them anymore, though. The land is now barren and cold, so empty and sad that even the Icy Ridge that lines the northern forests would offer more warmth. Everything has vanished, all the wonder gone, all the vibrant, amazing things this world once had to offer, disappeared. I still wonder where they went. I doubt I will ever know. All I do know is that I have my books, my stories, and the memories that are already beginning to fade away as I grow aged and alone in an old man's mind that still believes a long-last Fantasy may return. I don't think I'll live to see to see them come back. But I leave these stories to whomever finds them, so that they can know that they did exist.

BEASTS OF THE OLD LETTERS

+ Aliphox

When dawn shines through the trees of the Softneedle Forest, you can find the Aliphox humming through the giant lilies for a morning meal. A beautiful two-headed bird, slightly larger than a full-grown man, with downy rainbow feathers that quiver ever so slightly as they run through the warm morning breeze. The Aliphox has four wings that are more akin to an insect's than a bird's, but they blend seamlessly with the back of the creature. They are jeweled and delicate, and they catch the early rays in such a way that they glint and shimmer.

The Aliphox's heads each sport a single large crest which changes color from one bird to the next. Their eyes are round and a deep purple, their beaks gold and slender. And their cries — the cry of an Aliphox is sublime, a smooth, crisp, and echoing warble. The heads take turns as they call out, one rising, one falling, one rising, one falling.

Aliphox eggs are pure white until the chick comes close to hatching, during which they will turn vibrant shades of pink, green, blue, and gold. The chick is no larger than a hand, and like any other infant bird, naked and blind for weeks. The first coat of down is white as well, but as it grows older, colors will show through, layer upon layer until a full array of hues coats the bird.

I had the great privilege of seeing an Aliphox nest myself after many years of exploring the Softneedle forest; before, I had to rely on the records and drawings from the dragons. They are built on the ground, nearly as wide as a dinner table, interlaced with the branches of the thorny ivy to keep predators away from the chicks. The interior is matted with tufts from the down berry bushes; indeed, the berries themselves are brought back to feed the young too. Of course, I could only marvel a few precious minutes before the parents returned, and proceeded to fiercely chase me away for a good quarter

of a mile before they turned back to their eggs. Nonetheless, I felt a great deal of happiness knowing I had witnessed such a rare sight with my own eyes.

+ Bumpkles

An enigmatic, and dare I say frightening, creature the Bumpkle is. The dragons themselves say they do not know how or when the Bumpkles arrived in the Blackrock Forests to the North, but they have lurked within those rugged trees for centuries now.

I dared not travel into the Blackrock Forests alone. That place crawls with animals of the night, and is a place of mystery and fear. The good wizard Gaaren, and the dragon Darw'enth accompanied me all the way, and I am forever grateful for their willingness and courage.

As the Blackrock Forest loomed nearer, I began to remember tales of Bumpkle encounters. Some poor, brave soul who went exploring alone, when the Ashen Trail was not yet made. What dreadful and terrifying experiences they must have been.

Half a mile into the trees and the sunlight was already almost completely blocked out. We relied on the soft glow of the carpet moss and ringed mushrooms. The mosquitoes were vicious to the wizard and I. Another fifteen minutes of walking, and we saw our first Bumpkle.

Or, to put it more accurately, Bumpkles. Five of them, all hunched over as they crooned over a carcass. From the dim glow of plant life I could see the muzzle of what may have been a Waddlegrunt. All of us halted, afraid to disturb the creatures.

Easily thirty, even forty feet tall. A single, clawed, birdlike foot and leg that rose all the way without any other limb or torso until it connected with the head, a giant, rounded thing covered in thick, matted down. Their two enormous

eyes that shone like moons, casting light onto the dead Waddlegrunt and illuminating the dead creature more than I would care to see. They say the eyes of a Bumpkle hypnotize and put the unfortunate gazer into a state of shock and terror; Had we not immediately frozen, they may have turned to us as well.

A Bumpkle has two mouths. One, giant seam hidden beneath its hairy head, filled with thin needle-like teeth. The other is underneath its foot, the "toes" acting as teeth that clamp and fasten onto flesh as the inner ring of jaws greedily bites off bits of flesh. The sound that the Bumpkles were making was atrocious.

We stood their silently for the next half hour. By the time the Bumpkles began retreated into the dark, the Waddlegrunt was unrecognizable, a pile of cracked bones and entrails. The Dropperflies began falling from the branches of the trees above to pick at the few remains. We followed the Ashen Trail back into the clear, where a flood of relief greeted us. I would not return to the Blackrock Forest again for years.

+ Charm Changers

More akin to a spirit than an animal, Charm Changers nonetheless have a special place in the Fantastic Lands, and so I have included them in this book. With their intense curiosity and the near limitless variety, Charm Changers can be found in any place so long as magic exists there.

In their base form, they resemble wisps of pink, yellow, and orange light, sometimes looking like a human child, sometimes no more than an amorphous blob with two round eyes. They are very pure beings, and have an intense attraction towards materials used in spell-casting with a particular regard for books and scrolls. As such, Charm Changers have been revered as guardians of magic shops, libraries, and rune spots alike.

Visitors and creators of such places would be wise to leave a small offering of some sort to the Charm Changers, usually consisting of a story, a carving, or a runestone. Charm Changers will take such offerings and turn them into a vessel for themselves, thereby adding the offering's magical power to its own, and providing itself better protection for an otherwise delicate body. Those who keep Charm Changers happy are blessed with prosperity; once appeased, Charm Changers are more than happy to assist those who visit or work in the place they inhabit.

However, Charm Changers can be corrupted with offerings of dark subject matter, as well as being forgotten or neglected. Charm Changers that suffer such treatment will become "Cursed" Changers, and turn otherwise benevolent places into areas of ill fortune and disease. Cursed Changers are black, green, and silver as opposed to their lighter counterparts, and once transformed, are impossible to change back. The most tragic incident of Charm Changers turned Cursed occurred at the Library of Nott, where an offering of contaminated elixirs turned nearly two hundred Charm Changers into maddened spirits that began to leak poison into the streets. The dragons were forced to burn down the entire library, incinerating the Charm Changers, along with hundreds of scripts and books.

+ Drop-Off Dwellers

At the edges of the Coral Flats and Bountiful Cliffs, where the seaside take a plunge into cooler waters, pods of Drop-Off Dwellers float and bob lazily in a peaceful slumber.

They are shaped like a teardrop that grew immensely swollen on one side, with a small pointed tail that does little in terms of moving its enormous body; Dwellers rely more on the current to move than themselves, going for months at a time without food until drifting back to the Fantastic Lands. Easily up to eighty feet long, there are

two distinct species of Dwellers. The Dwellers of the Coral Flats possess distinct growths on their heads, which are actually coral colonies that have fallen and become affixed during feeding times. Coral Dwellers are a light blue color, with lighter rings dotting their backs.

Cliff Dwellers are a muddled brown, with much more numerous blue spots. Their tails end in a clump of streamer-like skin flaps that ripple and twirl as the Dweller slowly moves through the waters.

Dwellers come to the Fantastic Lands once a year, Corals during the spring, and Cliffs in the fall. At the Coral Flats, dozens of Dwellers line side by side at the drop-off's edge, where together they inhale huge amounts of seawater, sucking down the old, dead, and leftover remains that accumulated over the winter. When they are done feeding on the debris, the reefs are once again new and ready to begin a new cycle of life.

On the Bountiful Cliffs, Dwellers spit out water high into the air at the fruit trees above, freeing hundreds of heavy trees from their burden and into their mouths. Life below also rely on the falling fruit for a final feast before winter comes, when they either must go on a long journey to warmer waters, or wait it out in hibernation. Regardless of which season, Drop-Off Dwellers play a key role in making sure the coasts of the Fantastic Lands stay vibrant.

+ The Eskleberg Forest

While not as large or as dense as either the Softneedle or Blackrock Forests, the Eskleberg Forest and its singing groves are a popular destination for commoners and explorers alike.

Despite its name, the Eskleberg Forest is not actually a forest, and is instead a single, large organism. Each of the "trees" in the forest is a runner sent up by a large and complex root system which is impeded in Eskleberg

Peak. The trunks of these runners are hollowed out, and there are openings to the hollow interior on the tops and sides of the trunks. Air will often funnel in through the top opening and blow out through the side openings, creating a variety of tones. The leaves on the branches of these trees grow in a curled, funnel-like shape.

The constant production of tones by the runners fills the groves with a flowing, improvisational melody, providing a pleasant acoustic background for visitors. This constant stream of sound is then funneled into the forest leaves, into the centers of the spirals where the air once again enters into the inner workings of the runners. Wood nymphs and scholars who have studied the groves believe that this constant passing back and forth of music between the trees is the forest thinking to itself. Among these, there is a small following which believes the forest is only asleep, and that the great wood-beast will one day awake and rise out of Eskleberg Peak.

The unique hollowed-out trunks of the Eskleberg Forest provide habitats for numerous small animals, including sizable populations of Burntwuffle and Zootroo. The Forest is also the only location in which the Bulbnut Squirels are found naturally. This vibrant ecosystem makes The Forest popular among amateur naturalists and seasoned explorers alike.

+ Firemanes

Intensely proud animals, Firemanes roam the Xianoo Plains in prides ranging from ten to fifteen members. Closely resembling a lion at base, Firemanes are so named for the scarlet, iridescent hairs that ring the necks of both the male and female, and race down the sides and backs in horizontal stripes; this fur is highly prized as material for clothing, though there are very strict laws placed on Firemane hunting. However, unlike the lion, Firemanes possess two pairs of antlers that rise regally from their heads behind the ears like a stag, and race across the savanna on three pairs of scaly reptilian legs.

Firemanes love the thrill of the chase while in pursuit of prey, often purposefully letting the prey go should they catch it too quickly. While some may say this game of catch and release is cruel, it is nonetheless a fascinating spectacle to see as the Firemanes become a flaming blur on the grassy fields. While not hunting, they can be seen racing each other, and, if approached with caution and presented with respect, other beings such as wizards, Elves, and even Dragons. A lucky few have been blessed with the fortune of even riding them. A magician I knew named Giang told me his account of riding a Firemane he befriended years ago. He said at first he held on for dear life as the beast took off, but as he gained his hold, it was an exhilarating and unforgettable experience; as he and the Firemane raced through the night sky, they almost looked light a comet flying along the ground.

+ Gyrogliders

A type of newt-like creature native to the beaches and cliffs of the Southern Sea, Gyrogliders are unusual for amphibians because they possess fully functional wings, or something close to them at least. These "wings" resemble long, webbed fins, that can open and close like a fan when the Gyroglider contracts and relaxes its muscles. There are two pairs, stacked directly on top of another, with the bottom set slightly longer. Unlike birds or bats that flap their wings up and down, the Gyroglider spins its wings in a circle, the top set turning the clockwise, the bottom in reverse.

Gyrogliders are thrill-seekers, particularly the males. During the mating season in summer, they can be seen taking life-risking leaps off the cliff walls to the beach below, performing a multitude of spins and flips on the way down to the beach below. The closer they come to the beach before pulling up to safety, the more attention they get from potential mates. Females can also be seen jumping, though they prefer to glide and loop as opposed

to the males' chaotic, flamboyant routine. When not performing daredevil jumps, they spend most of their time clinging to the beach cliffs, or within the many holes and cracks of the rock.

These creatures come in a stunning array of colors, ranging from turquoise and white to pink and gold to silver and green. It is common for Gyrogliders to mate with one that does not possess their own color scheme; this practice continues to produce wide arrays of different shades and color combinations. Gyrogliders lay their eggs in treacherous waters full of hidden rocks and boulders, thereby discouraging predators from making a meal. Their eggs are round and numerous like a fish's, and coated in an adhesive that anchors the eggs to the rocks. The young hatch within thirty days, and will spend the first few weeks of their life in the water until their wings develop. Afterwards, they will spin and loop up to the rest of the colony, ready to become the next generation of daredevil jumpers.

+ Hopservoppers

A charming and oddly entertaining species, Hopservoppers were created by the Fleux Elves about a hundred years ago using an array of housework and cooking spells. The Hopservopper's goal? To prepare and serve delicious food wherever and whenever a banquet is held.

The Hopservopper resembles a large, white egg with a single, colored dot in the center of their "faces" that superficially looks like a simple eye. Usually blue or green when the Hopservopper is not preparing food, this dot will change color depending on how near a meal the creature is preparing is to completion; when the circle turns red or pink, the food is ready to serve. What makes the Hopservopper so intriguing is that they prepare the food inside their bodies with the help of the magic given to them by the Fleux during their creation. When Hopservoppers have finished making food, they crack

open to reveal the meal inside, which can range from steaming piles of meat and delicious bowls of soups to beautifully arranged fruits and desserts. Once the food is taken, the Hopservopper closes again without any harm, and goes back to preparing food as needed until a feast is done.

Hopservoppers move around on a single human-like foot that is the same white as their egg body. If in the middle of making a meal, it is not uncommon to hear the Hopservoppers present humming a soft, cheery tune as they open and close. It is also not uncommon to hear the sounds of jostling metal coming from inside them as they move to and fro. It almost sounds like the Hopservoppers carry a multitude of cooking supplies and utensils inside them. However, not even the Fleux Elves know what goes on inside a Hopservopper's body. Though, given the deliciousness of the end product, the Hopservopper's magic is a treat for anyone who is invited to a Fleux banquet.

+ Ii'oor

As a certified zoologist, it's my job to venture into any and all regions in the Fantastic Lands to discover new species. One of the more perilous journeys took me to the Kuupri Icelands, a flat stretch of snow that is deceptively deep. There are countless legends of a whole world living below this snowfall, tales of things such as Ice Elves and ancient monsters that have been hibernating for centuries. Such legends are an enticing incentive for people such as myself to explore, and although travel parties have never discovered the beings spoken of in the fables, we have discovered more than twenty new animal species hidden in the ice, from the shy and plump Plooners that huddle in the hundreds to conserve body heat, to the Snowlances that lie in waiting to spear unfortunate prey with their icicle-tipped horns. And in all these travels, we relied on the hardiness and warmth of the Ii'oor to make sure we wouldn't freeze to

death on our journeys.

The Ii'oor are a group of beasts that have been domesticated by the Kuupri villagers for decades. Ii'oors are incredibly docile, at most grunting softly when annoyed, and perhaps kicking a shower of snow at someone. Somehow I think the sight of seeing someone bewildered as they are covered from head to toe in snow amuses the beasts; if one does such an act, others nearby will rumble together in a chorus that sounds almost like laughter.

Ii'oors walk on four legs arranged like a cross that are as thick as tree trunks, with strong flat feet that allow them to walk across the deep snow without sinking. Their heads are small relative to the rest of their bodies, and is reminiscent of a turtle. Large folds of fat that are surprisingly warm line the Ii'oor's back, and store the necessary sustenance for the animal in times when food is scarce.

However, the most fascinating parts of the Ii'oor are the large, multiple fin-like growths that ring the sides of the fat folds. Made of hollow bone at the base, these "fins" are transparent, and shine an iridescent white during the short times of sunlight in the Kuupri Icelands. In just a few hours of sun, these growths can absorb amd retain an astounding amount of heat for the cold nights. Whenever we would camp, the Ii'oor would spread these growths like a fan; the fins would glow red with the warmth and calm of a comforting fire, and no matter the frigid temperatures around us, with the Ii'oor, we would always sleep peacefully.

+ Jorthwacs

Jorthwacs have long been used by the various diminutive races of the Fantastic Lands for transport, racing, and beasts of burden. In at least one of the pixie societies in the Midlands, a pixie's wealth can be determined by the size and quality of their herd.

Even the largest Jorthwac that I have seen was small enough to fit in my hand; the perfect proportion for most of their masters. In terms of their head and body shape, their appearance is similar to a cross between a horse and an antelope. Out of the head grows a pair of relatively large, curled, branching antlers. Each jorthwac possesses six legs, very similar to those of a cricket, which they use for leaping. Jorthwacs come in a variety of vibrant colors, most commonly pinkish-red and green, but blue and gold varieties also exist (though these are more commonly reserved for knights and royalty).

One of the historical accounts including Jorthwacs that I find most interesting is the Battle of Koor. For several years, a war had been raging as the Mabish sprites attempted to drive the invading Koorish gnomes out of their territories. The wizard Kland granted the sprites a boon by increasing their size, so that they might fight on equal footing with the gnomish forces. However, during their charge, the sprites' Jorthwacs also increased in size. After overrunning the gnomish forces on the field of battle, the sprites were able to use the newfound leaping strength of their jorthwacs to breach the gnomes secluded mountain stronghold of Koor, forcing peace and bringing the gnomes under their rule.

+ Kirafr Door Shards

Approximately two-hundred years ago, in the Second Dwarven Empire of the North, King Kirthic IV commissioned a massive treasury to be constructed within Mount Kirafr in order to house the kingdom's supply of gold. On the southeastern face of the mountain, an enormous door to the treasury was placed in the cliff face. This door was enchanted to only recognize and allow members of the royal court into the treasury. Unfortunately, King Kirthic and his builder had not anticipated the battering rams and catapults of the Northern Giants.

While the Kirafr Door was shattered, its many fragments

retained parts of its enchantment. Each shard took on its own personality and name. The shards are capable of projecting their thoughts into the mind of their holder, usually in the form of images, songs, tales, and conversation. The shards can also communicate with each other if they are in close enough proximity, and two holders which are close enough together can hold a conversation of thoughts through their shards.

Following the breaking of the Door, the Kirafr Shards were collected and dispersed throughout the Fantastic Lands. In many places, they were cut, polished, and sold as exotic jewelry.In other places, the shards were treasured for their eccentric and curious personalities, and were used by artists as muses of inspiration. I myself carried a Kirafr Shard companion named Hathhud with me on a necklace for several years.

+ The Lighting-struck Titan

It is a mercy to all of the Fantastic Lands that the Lightning-Struck Titan only awakens with the passing of Vamaroff's Storm every three-hundred years, in the Southern Jagged Mountains of Kor.

The beast resembles a beetle or hermit crab with a dragon's head, covered in a goliath pyramid of stone and dirt that accumulates over its three-hundred year slumbers. A huge, crumbling, spiraling tower resides on its back, built by the same sorcerer whom the storm that awakens the beast is named after.

Vamaroff came to the Fantastic Lands two thousand ago, in a search to build a place where he could practice and perfect his art of weather spells. The Jagged Mountains proved ideal to him, with their isolation and formidable appearance. He began to construct his tower at the plateau of the highest mountain he could find. It would take him fifteen years to complete; as soon as the final brick was placed, he began to call forth a thunderstorm more powerful than any the mountains had

seen. The lightning surged from the spire of Vamaroff's tower to the base and below, each strike, stirring the beast he had built his tower upon.

With earthshaking might, the Titan stretched its legs and rose, a thousand-foot goliath that bellowed as the storm caused it pain while at the same time restoring it to life. The Lightning-Struck Titan began to move once more, eating huge chunks of earth and stone from the cliffsides with its toothed maw. And all the while, the storm raged above its back, following the Titan as it lumbered through the Jagged Mountains; Vamaroff himself perished as his tower collapsed with each step the giant took.

The dragons sought at once to try and stop the beast, or at the very least impede it, but the Titan was impervious to all magic. It was an ancient, long-forgotten creature, a force of nature, and it seemed its rampage would destroy all of the Fantastic Lands.

Finally, a group of Mages led by the Sorceress named Talia arrived. They cast a spell that created the Great Winds to drive the Storm away from the Lightning-Struck Titan, and the beast began to slow as the energy gained from the storm disappeared. It managed to return to its resting place before falling asleep once again, and the lands it razed fell silent.

Talia and her group were hailed as heroes and they turned their efforts to restoring the damage done by the Titan. Afterwards, they would guard the Jagged Mountains until their deaths, continuing to strengthen the enchantment that kept Vamaroff's Storm and the Lightning-Struck Titan apart.

However, the two are bound to meet again; Vamaroff's Storm returns every three hundred years from its banishment in the Howling Sands to reawaken the beast below. The last time the Titan awoke was a hundred and eighty-seven years ago. I fear the day when we must once again prepare for the worst.

+ Monoliths to Heaven

In the flat Southeastern Plains of Xianoo, a group of creatures live in a group that grows by a mere one member at the beginning of each year: The Monoliths to Heaven.

Each Monolith is less flesh and more stone. Made of obsidian, they are shaped like a rugged ellipse, with a singular large hole running through the top portion like a downwards staring eye. Two spindly legs jut out then fall to the ground from the center of the Monolith, legs that look like they would never be able to support a creature of a Monolith's mass. However the Monolith' deep magical ties with the stars allow them to stand for the long walk they must undertake every new year.

Monoliths travel between two locations, and two locations only. One is the site of a meteor, a crater that spans a thousand feet wide. The other is tomb for Giang the Magician, the Monoliths' creator. Known for his near eccentric obsession with the stars, Giang frequently ventured to the Xianoo Plains with stargazing gear, constantly looking for what he claimed to be the Heavenly Planet. Such a planet is vaguely described in old Xianoo texts, but only as a folktale, a legend. However, until his dying breath, Giang believed the Heavenly Planet to be more than just a myth, and so created the Monoliths to carry out his work when he himself could no longer achieve his dream.

Until the week before the new year, the Monoliths remained buried in a ring around Giang's tomb. During this time the holes in their bodies create various patterns as the sun rises and sets.

Once eve falls on the week before the new year, the Monoliths rise from their slumber one by one. And it is during this time one can see Giang's determination to ascend to the Heavenly Planet.

The tallest current Monolith towers a staggering six hundred feet in the air. Each following Monolith is fifty feet shorter, for a total of a dozen. As the sky darkens, the Monoliths begin a slow fifty mile walk to the crater site, with only the starlight to guide them; as they walk in descending order, they almost look like the stairs of a Giant's castle.

On the dawn of the new year, when they have gathered in the center of the crater, the birth of a new Monolith begins. Still in their descending order, the light of the new sun shines through the holes of the Monoliths to the ground, illuminating the spot where a new member will rise from the ground, born from the fragments of the meteor that struck the Fantastic Lands two thousand years ago. This new member will become the new tallest Monolith, the next stepping stone to Giang's fabled world; once the new Monolith takes its place at the front of the line, the stone giants begin their walk back to the grave of their master, where they bury themselves once again until the next year.

+ Notepeople

In all my travels throughout this Fantastic World, the Notepeople that live in the Eastern Plains of Darius stand out as the most unique and wondrous creatures.

Living music. Created two hundred years ago when a sorceress called Elianna sought to create enchanted musical instruments capable of producing the most beautiful sounds ever heard. Instead, she created the Notepeople. As the spell intended to make a symphony progressed, the ink and notes inscribed on the enchantment papers quite literally flew off the parchment and began to coalesce in a swirl of sound and symbols. They took on the shape of their creator, creating the first Notewoman.

Elianna would grow old, but the Notewoman continued to stay with her, forever playing music when her creator

desired it. Elianna would create dozens more of its kind before she died at an age of a hundred and fifty-two years. The Notepeople themselves would carry her body away into the plains they now inhabit; the sound that the harp reeds and grasses make while blowing in the wind greatly appeals to their kind.

The Notepeople today are just as, if not more, talented in magic and music. They delight in having visitors to entertain, oftentimes taking whoever comes across them by the hand and bringing them to its friends. It is rather odd to be touched by a noteman. The notes and lines that make up their bodies are nearly flat, working together to make a three dimensional form. Yet they feel cool, almost like thin delicate paper. They can shift their bodies into whatever form they please. I've even seen Notepeople exchange and mix their music to produce sounds that they could not accomplish on their own.

Notepeople have a special affinity for the Starlight Moths that provide lights to the Plains in the night. Being inky black themselves, Notepeople will often try to capture the Starlight Moths within their bodies to make themselves visible for nightly performances. It was during such a performance that I was able to witness the Notepeople for the first time on a warm summer evening. With the harp reeds and grass humming softly along with the music of the Notepeople, it will be an experience I will never forget.

+ Ocean Sippers

It was while visiting to the fishing ports of the South that I learned of the wondrous Ocean Sippers. The suntanned fishermen I spoke to had encountered the almost daily on their voyages, and had collected several objects of study. Among these were several sketches, pellets, and even an injured specimen that they had taken aboard.

At first glance, a Sipper looks to be some kind of large, iridescent bird, similar in appearance to a pigeon. On

closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that, in place of feathers, the creature is covered in a material with a blend of traits of feathers and scales. Like scales, pieces of the material have the texture of the scales of a fish, and are firmly connected to the body. However, the shape of the pieces are more similar to the feathers one would see in any other sea bird, and even resemble down in some places.

Sippers are capable of breathing in both air and freshwater, and spend most of their time as part of a flock in a large bubble of water which drifts high above the Iridescent Sea. This bubble follows the course of schools of small fish or prawns. At night, the Sippers dive from their bubble to the surface of the ocean, where they skim off and swallow a layer of prey and seawater before returning to their abode. The combination of seawater and food is then processed in their guts, until they regurgitate it as freshwater and a small pellet composed of salt and the remains of their prey. The water is added to their bubble to compensate for evaporation, while the pellet is tossed down toward the ocean below. Fishermen will often collect the pellets, either for their supply of iridescent salt or in order to sell them to tourists at the ports.

+ Polydanes

Among some of the most curious forms of life in the Fantastic Lands are the Polydanes. Polydanes can be found all throughout the world, though they are especially concentrated in the western cities, and in places populated by large groups of other races. In their true forms, Polydanes are roughly the same size and shape as a human, but they have a second set of arms and a blank, smoothed-over face. Their bodies appeared to be composed of various colors of clay in a marbled pattern.

Polydanes are able to stretch and mold and reshape their bodies at will, and can take on the properties of

other materials, such as stone or flesh. On occasion, Polydanes will take the form of an inanimate object, though more often they emulate another race before mingling with other members of that race. At other times, Polydanes will take whimsical or nonsensical forms for their own or others amusement.

Polydanes are capable of reproduction in two ways; the first is through reproduction with another individual, Polydane or otherwise, and the second is through a single Polydane individual dividing into two distinct individuals. In addition, Polydanes' bodies do not age naturally, and damage from physical attacks against them is not lasting. In most cases, a species which can multiply without aging or being killed would overtake and crowd out their environment, but such is not the case for Polydanes. Though their bodies are long-lived and impervious, their spirits still age, and often pass on after a hundred or so years. Once their spirit is gone, the Polydane's body will revert to its natural, clay-like form and will begin to dry, dying completely once it is fully dry. If a sapient individual encounters the body before it is fully dry, they can will their consciousness into the empty husk, leaving their old form behind and beginning life anew as a Polydane.

+ Quirbblers

There is still much debate over the nature of Quirbblers. Some profess that they are collections of very communal spirits. Others claim that they are merely a novel variation of Atomite.

Quirbblers are often found in the various woods on the Northern Cliffs. From a distance, they appear as shimmering patterns along the surface of trees. However, should a traveler pass by them, the Quirbbler will remove themselves from the tree and appear in front of the traveler as a swirling pillar of light. The Quirbbler will refuse to move out of the way until the traveler has beaten them in some challenge, usually in the form of a

riddle or game of chance. Should the traveler win this challenge, the Quirbbler will allow them to travel on. Should the traveler fail, however, the Quirbbler will enter through the traveler's mouth and take command of the traveler. The Quirbbler-possessed individual will then make their way back to a village, town or city, where they will take part in feasts, festivals, and other merriments.

Individuals who are possessed by Quirbblers can be identified both by their eccentric and celebratory behavior, and by the swirls of light that can be seen in their eyes. Quirbblers may leave of their own accord after celebrating for several days, but they can also be coaxed out by placing meats, cheeses, tarts, and spiced wine just out of the reach of a possessed individual. Individuals who have been possessed by a Quirbbler are often no worse-for-the-wear, aside from exhaustion and embarrassing stories accumulated from their excessive partying.

Nearly forty years ago, one possessed individual led a large group of Quirbblers to the northern village of Oaken. It took a full two weeks for the dragons to get word of the news and sort out the affected citizenry. However glad the citizens were to have their wits back about them, they did miss the merriment that the Quirbblers had brought them. This, paired with the fact that the Quirbblers meant no ill-will and had only been searching for a place to escape the cold of the woods, led to the creation of a yearly holiday in Oaken and the surrounding villages, wherein the villages are open for a full week to the Quirbblers, so that they and the villagers may celebrate to their hearts' content.

+ Ruyablorts

Partially named for the distinct, deep bubbling they periodically make to sustain their levels of buoyancy, Ruyablorts are immense jellyfish-like creatures used by Merfolk throughout the Fantastic Lands in constructing their undersea homes.

Anywhere from one to five-hundred feet in diameter at the bell, Ruyablorts may look like jellyfish apart from the large, simple, almost horse-like head that matches the same transparency and jelly-like state as the rest of the body, but unlike jellyfish, their tentacles do not contain any poisons, and are actually more or less vestigial growths. Ruyablorts are primarily filter feeders, and are to some extent photosynthetic. The bell is an enormous air sac that keeps the Ruyablort suspended in the water; air is taken in and released through a circle of small tubes near the base of the bell. At night, they glow through a soft cycle of translucent turquoise, pink, and green.

Merfolk are well-known for their pickiness when it comes to decorations, always wanting to find a balance between structure and aesthetics. To complement the calming iridescence of the Ruyablort's back, the Merfolk take items such as discarded abalone shells, glass corals, and pearl sponges as building materials, constructing beautifully elegant towers. As they continue to build and live on the Ruyablorts' backs, the Ruyablorts get to eat any scraps that float off the Mercities.

Depending on the clan and location, Ruyablort cities can have anywhere from ten to over forty of the gentle giants floating together. With the right spells, land dwellers can journey with the Merfolk under the sea and enter an almost otherworldy realm of soft rainbow light as fish, whales, and Merfolk alike swim around and within the Ruyablort metropolis.

+ Sun Stealers

Years after the close brush with the Bumpkles, I would make three more ventures into the Blackrock Forest. However, on the fourth journey, I was in search of one creature in particular, the fabled beings known as Sun Stealers. Said to be tall as the trees themselves, and black and cold as a starless night, heavens know why I would actually want to intentionally go looking for them.

The Dragons once again sent help with me, this time with a young sapphire dragonling named Tyr'ia, and a wise Steelback named Jaar'nadi. Before leaving, Gaaren ran up to us with a last-minute gift as well: a potion that would turn us dark as the Blackrock Forest, so that the creatures hiding within could not spy us as we invaded their home. Gaaren himself would not dare accompany us again; I do not think any less of him for doing so.

The trip to the Blackrock Forest felt different this time, colder, like the creatures expected our return, and were gleefully waiting to strike as soon as we stepped foot into their lair. I suspected it was just nerves, though as we passed through the Rugged Line, I could not help but begin to have second thoughts about coming back. As the first Blacrock shrubs came into view, and the new moon cast darkness onto the ground, Tyr'ia, Jaar'nadi, and I took out Gaaren's gift and each took a drink from the bottle.

It was like having a barrel of water from the glaciers of the Ridge forced down your throat. But when the chills passed, we could tell Gaaren's work had been done. We were all still able to see one another, but each of us looked like a reflection in slowly rippling water, a camouflage to shield us from whatever lurked in the trees. We steadied our minds and once again went into the Ashen Trail.

Sun Stealers were said to live deep within the Blackrock Trees, where the air itself feels like floating pitch, and slightest sound echoes like the cracking of a thousand bones. We journeyed for what I think was two days. All the while, the Ashen Trail grew less and less pronounced, and the darkness became overwhelming. More than once Jaar'nadi suggested we concede and turn back, but I was stubborn, and Tyr'ia was eager for adventure. We pushed on.

On the fifth day, Jaar'nadi spotted something. A patch of darkness even more ominous than the surrounding

black, a darkness that rippled and seemed to ripple and churn. I knew at once we had found a Sun Stealer grove. It was well off the Ashen Trail, though we knew that we must step off the path. Tyr'ia was the first to go forward. I am slightly ashamed to say I was the third.

The chill grew frigid as we came closer, the silence all-consuming, but still we pressed on. After moving a mere twenty paces we were soaked with sweat, near collapse. But we made it, and we waited to gaze upon a Sun Stealer with a mix of terror and excitement.

None came. We waited for hours, and the creatures never appeared. It was maddening. Time slipped away. On the third day, Jaar'nadi finally told us to go back, and with hearts heavy, provisions low, and minds fogging, we relented.

And as we neared the clearing back into the Rugged Paths, the Sun Stealers appeared.

The old scriptures were true. Tall as the trees, like a shroud woven from a black sky. A smooth white depression for a face, two black, expressionless eyes that looked on us like a child about to curiously crush an insect. An ebony crown that floated above their heads, with long, slender points. And above the crown, an orb that looked like a star, an orb that made me realize why the Sun Stealers were so aptly named.

The crown seemed to suck the light from the circle, the glow changing from white to grey to black as it reached the crown's base. But it didn't end with the stars within their crowns. What little light that snuck through the trees was dragged to them as well, the black leaves withering as they lost what little sun they could live from, the creatures living within them fleeing or falling dead at the creature's feet.

Tyr'ia died. The Sun Stealers enveloped her in their cloaks and when they moved away, she was nothing

more than a weathered skin. They parted, as if telling Jaar'nadi and I to leave, as if we had paid the price for their mercy with one life. We stumbled away, and when I looked back they were gone. The Ashen Trail was overrun with new Blackrock Plants, as if it had never existed. That was my fourth and final visit to the Forest; without the Ashen Trail, the dragons themselves have refused to go back.

+ Trimbleweiss

Trimbleweiss are among the most numerous creatures in all of Fantasy, and with good reason, as they are able to thrive in nearly any environment where there is food. Outwardly, trimbleweiss begin their life with an appearance similar to that of a mouse, though without a noticeable tail and much more rotund. They have white coats of fur and ruby eyes.

As a trimbleweiss carries on through its life, its development is shaped by the food it eats. The type of food that the trimbleweiss eats will cause changes in its size, shape, coat, and even occasionally the limbs it possesses. Just as the type of food that the trimbleweiss eats affects its outward appearance, the quality of the food it eats changes its disposition. High quality food causes the trimbleweiss to become tame and domestic, while garbage causes it to become vicious and dangerous. For this reason, families will often forego eating the choice portions of their meal in order to appease and train the trimbleweiss which may be living in their house.

While paying a visit to the Count of Fleurant, I was treated by my host to a pair of curiosities. The Count was in possession of two very unique specimens of trimbleweiss; one which had only ever been fed on gold, and a second which had only ever been fed on rose petals. The first had grown is size an appreciable amount, had a sleek coat of golden coloration, and was much thinner in the front than in the back, giving it a kind

of egg shape. The second did not seem to have grown much; if anything, it had shrunk. However, its coat had been replaced by a layers of brilliant red feathers, and it has a thick tail, similar to a dragon's. Later that night, the count and I feasted on what I was informed was a trimbleweiss which had been raised on a diet of beef, pork, and veal. I found the meat quite to my liking.

+ Uünsen

The Uünsen is one of the most elusive creatures in all of Fantasy. I fear that I have little to report on it as, in spite of all the evidence of its existence, no man, dragon, elf or dwarve has made a clear observation of it. There is even still doubt as to whether the Uünsen is a single beast or an entire species. These unknown elements only add to its intrigue, which is why I have included it in this collection.

The Uünsen moves at an extremely rapid pace, which is the main reason it has been able to evade observation or capture for all these years. It also seems to know instinctively where its hunters are looking, constantly moving out of sight or hiding behind secluded cover. It never seems to leave behind any hair or scent, only its footprints.

The trail of prints that the Uünsen leaves are highly unusual, and are the only aspect of the creature's existence which can be readily observed. The prints are composed of a singe large circle, about the size of a deer's hoof, with two smaller circles on the sides of it, and another two circles behind it. Once made, a large jet of steam will rise out of each print, mixing in with the morning mists that are present when the Uünsen is most active. Interestingly, the arrangements of the prints may change over time, and have indicated at different times that the Uünsen has anywhere between one and twelve legs.

+ Vinthrill

The Vinthrill are a group of creatures that inhabit the Jagged Valley about three quarters of the way along the trail to the Blackrock Forest. Also known as the Winged Bumpkle, the Vinthrill does indeed resemble the towering monopedes in the Blackrock Forest with its round, hairy head and mouth full of needle-like teeth, but they are in fact entirely different species.

Vinthrill do not possess feet, instead using their large, clawed bat-like wings for both flying and climbing through the cliffs of the Jagged Valley. As it glides, a long tail lined evenly with three to six balls of fur similar to its head trails behind, producing a soft whistling sound as the wind passes through the hairs.

Though Vinthrill are not above devouring travelers or other animals unfortunate enough to cross them, they are actually predominantly fruit eaters, specifically, they eat the fruit of the maroon trees strong enough to grow on the sides of the cliff faces. The fruit of these trees looks exactly like the head of the Vinthrill, round, and covered in fibers, and so residents of the Fantastic Lands have taken to calling it Vinthrill Fruit.

While not particularly tasty to most in the Fantastic Lands, to the Vinthrill, these fruits play an invaluable role in their reproduction. A female Vinthrill will swoop and snatch a number of fruits off a tree while pregnant, and puncture a single hole in the fruit's hard outer shell. From there, it regurgitates an infant Vinthrill no bigger than the tip of a finger into the soft innards of the fruit before flying off. The fruit both serves as protection and food for the juvenile Vinthrill until it is strong enough to break free.

Up until recently, people thought the similar look between the Vinthrill and Vinthrill fruits were just a coincidence, though it now seems the fruits play a larger role in developing Vinthrills than previously thought. While exploring the Jagged Valley, the adventurer Galbion was attacked by a pregnant Vintrhill, and only escaped by throwing his pack of Guya Melons behind

him, which the Vinthrill immediately took and deposited eggs inside of before flying off. Galbion, intrigued as to why the Vinthrill birthed its young in a non-native fruit, stuck close to the guya melons until the Vinthrill hatched. To his — and many other zoologists when he brought the Vinthrill back — shock, the creature sported the same bright pink and green coloration as the guya Melons, along with tough spikes lining their bodies instead of the usual hairs. After this discovery, a brief boom in experimental Vinthrill breeding occurred, with successful births in fruits such as the coconut, pumpkin, and daradara cones. However, people soon realized that these Vinthrill suffered from terrible sicknesses as they matured, and died painfully shortly after. Nowadays, to prevent the exploitation of exotic hybrids, as well as fear of damaging the natural breeding process, experimental breeding of Vinthrills is illegal, and there are severe penalties inflicted on anyone who tries to entice a Vinthrill to birth young in anything other than the Vinthrill Fruit.

+ Watchers of the Waning Moon

Once in a while, I will come across a creature that I feel I will never truly be able to understand. The Watchers of the Waning Moon are such a group, shrouded in mystery, and practitioners in a strange and surreal act that even the Dragons cannot explain.

Watchers live in the brush of the Eastern Plains, only appearing at night. They have the head and front body of a white stag, with thin, fine antlers adorned with Moon Lily buds. Some say the antlers are not horns at all, but actual Moon Lily plants that have sprouted and rooted to their heads. However, due to the Watcher's cautious nature, no one has been able to prove one theory or the other. The back end of the animal is the tail of a serpent, long, smooth-scaled, and pearly. The tip of the tail ends in a single large Moon Lily, which, like the flowers on the Watcher's antlers, will remain a bud until the moment of

the Watcher's death.

These creatures are intensely shy, fleeing and vanishing in a cloud of mist should someone spot them. The only time they show themselves is during the time of the waning crescent of the First Moon, during which dozens of Watchers will gather at the Plains' thicket and undertake a ritual unlike any other.

When the waning crescent of the First Moon is highest in the sky, one Watcher from those present will step forward and begin to climb and snake their way up the trees until it rests on the top of the leaves. Those below begin to rock and circle in rhythm, their movement along the ground creating strange and perplexing patterns; all the while, they hum in a low, bass-like chorus. As the patterns increase in number, the Moon Lilies on the tail and antlers of the Watcher atop the trees will begin to open.

Once the Lilies are fully bloomed, the Watcher will let out a long, drawn-out cry before pushing off and jumping high into the air. The Lilies will begin to release wisps of pollen, and the Watcher will inexplicably continue to rise like a flying snake for hundreds of feet, continuing to ascend towards the Moon. However, as soon as the Lilies' pollen is spent, the Watcher will cease to rise, and plummet to the ground. Upon impact, the broken body of the animal will dissolve into a mist which rises and dissipates into the night sky. All other Watchers will appear to sigh and fade, clouding the thicket with the same mist until they all disappear; afterwards, the only evidence of them ever being present are the strange patterns they drew upon the ground.

When I asked the Librarian Dragons Pari'iin and Lu'thanna about the Watchers' strange practice, they told me they could only guess. There are several scripts that provide a theory to the Watcher's behavior. Some say that the Watchers believe the waning crescent is one of their own, an individual that has attained transcendence

in the heavens, and that the creatures on this earth are attempting to join it. Indeed, the crescent resembles an arching snake. Other scripts believe the opposite, that the creatures see the Moon as a Watcher trapped in the sky, and that in jumping, they are attempting to grab it and bring it back down. Either way, it is a fascinating, but thoroughly enigmatic insight into the Watcher of the Waning Moon. Whatever the reason, they show no signs of stopping their "ceremony". I wonder if they will ever realize that the Moon cannot be caught.

+ Xargaarths

The Vuulin Dwarves that live within the Steam Caverns just miles from the Ridge are known for their unmatched talent in metal-working and gem-cutting. Indeed, the geothermal caves which they have made their home in are abundant with rare metals and gemstones, and accounts for nearly forty percent of all jewelry traded through the Fantastic Lands; any piece made by the Vuulin is a fine treasure to possess.

During their mining in the Steam Caverns, the Vuulin began to notice that carts of gems would return to the surface with fewer stones than originally loaded. Though at first confused, they quickly found a creature mixed in with their gems that was indistinguishable from the stones except when it was feeding: the Xargaarths.

Xargaarths start their lives looking similar to stones such as geodes or agates, with their outer skin covered in a sturdy shell that looks exactly like rock; within this shell is a mish-mash of tissue and organs. Xargaarths can spout small red tentacles for locomotion; as they move, a row of microscopic teeth scrape minerals and organic matter from the steam Cavern's floors and walls.

As they grow older, Xargaarths begin to abandon feeding on organic matter, and turn solely to stones for "food"; much to the Vuulin's dismay, gemstones were the Xargaarth's favored treat. After ingesting the crystals,

Xargaarths incorporate them into their outer shell, where they grow along with the rest of the creature as if they were a part of the body itself. The older a Xargaarth grows, the deeper it tunnels into the earth to find more bountiful feasts of jewels. Eventually, they resemble giant slug-like creatures covered in countless crystal growths; dozens of small stubby legs carry the Xargaarth's body as it skitters along the ground.

Although at first considered a destructive pest to the gem trade, the Vuulin have since been domesticating Xargaarths as both a pet and a business helper. As it turns out, Xargaarths shed crystals that grow too large; these discarded gems are collected and sold as they are, or further cut into an array of jewelry. Different Xargaarths have different preferences for what jewels they ingest, so the Vuulin are sure to keep scouting for further varieties of Xargaarth "subspecies". During my last visit, I saw magnificent specimens of ruby, opal, and even diamond Xargaarths in Vuulin care. The good dwarf Laire gave me a beautiful fire opal that had fallen off one of the creatures, which I now carry in my travel bag wherever I go.

+ The Yanyaar and the Yanyiirus

There is a forested ring of islands east of the Fantastic Lands that has been left largely uncharted due to a species even the Dragons shudder to hear mentioned: the Yanyaar.

The Yanyaar spread cold and lifelessness wherever they walk, blanching everything around them as they continuously sap vitality. Anything living or inanimate that comes too close to the Yanyaar will collapse grayed and cold in a matter of seconds. Such behavior has caused the trees, the earth, and even the surrounding sea of their home to turn grey as dust, and so the Yanyaar's home is aptly known as the Monochrome Islands.

Physically, the Yanyaar are tall and lean like the Elves,

though they do not wear garments, and lack any parts to identify gender, if they so have them. Their skin is the same grey as everything they touch, and their hands and feet both have long, nailess digits that constantly grip and ungrip with a chilling fluidity. However, the most distinctive, and chilling aspect of the Yanyaar are their faces.

A bulbous, smooth head far too large for a body of their thinness, with squinted grey eyes that appear disturbingly human. While normally featureless apart from the eyes, the Yanyaar's head will split vertically into thirds to reveal two separate jaws with even, needle-like teeth. During this time, one can see that the Yanyaar's "eyes" are more akin to a tongue, a sensory organ attached to a fleshy stalk that runs all the way down its throat; it is believed the Yanyaar are blind, and rely on these "eyes" to smell their surroundings, like a serpent tasting the air.

The first Yanyaar ever seen washed ashore on the beaches of the Fantastic Lands sixty years ago, and it was from this corpse's autopsy that most of the information about this species was obtained. It was easy to see where it had come from; even in death, the Yanyaar's corpse left a trail of gray in the ocean waves, though said trail was lost after the Dragons pursued it for dozens of miles offshore. It would take another twenty years to find the Monochrome Islands, yet only six months for the Dragon Council to declare the area off-limits to all.

Most of the Fantastic Land's inhabitants simply believed the Yanyaar were too dangerous to go near, and left it at that. I, however, know the deeper meaning behind the Monochrome Island being sealed from the world. In a different time, I would have probably been imprisoned, maybe even banished from the Fantastic Lands. However, now that my home is all but abandoned, I leave this information to whomever may stumble upon it.

The Yanyaar corpse we recovered was mutilated, with huge circular punctures throughout the body. Strangely, the wound had no exposed flesh; instead, a black, empty void filled the gap. When the poor Dragon doctor Haridus tried to examine the wounds, the void turned his flesh to pure black; he looked like a living shadow in his final moments. Then, with a cry, Haridus faded out of existence. When the Dragons finally discovered the Monochrome Islands, they found their explanation to the darkness seen on the first Yanyaar's body. Beneath dark waters of the Yanyaar's home lays the Yanyiirus, an even more terrifying creature than the beings above.

From what the Dragons observed, the Yanyiirus appears to be worshiped as a god by the Yanyaar; the Yanyaar will cast themselves off the sheer cliffs of the island to the sea below, where shadowy tentacles rise in the thousands to spear the bodies and drag them below. It is unknown how large the Yanyiirus is, though its limbs alone are long enough to effortlessly scale the two thousand-foot cliffs of the Yanyaar's home and then some. The touch of the Yanyiirus appears to have the same graying effect as the Yanyaar's touch, but on a *much* more powerful scale, capable of turning things to blackness, and then, nothing; as seen with Haridus, the touch of a Yanyiirus persists long after initial contact. This similarity has driven me to make a hypothesis about the beings' relationship: perhaps the Yanyiirus gave the Yanyaar with some of its power years and years ago in return for their servitude? The dozens of islands surrounding the Yanyaar's home show signs of ancient ruins; could the Yanyaar have conquered these neighboring lands and brought them to their "master"? It seems like a plausible explanation, though, since there has been no life other than the Yanyaar, the Yanyiirus has since resorted to devouring its servants; the once much beneficial relationship has become grimly one-sided.

+ Ziira'lasp

In a fitting, yet bitter sense, the Ziira'lasps will be the last entry in this storybook, as they were the last creatures of the Fantastic Lands at the end of the War, and the first to die out in the New Beginning.

Although their bodies resembled that of a swan, their skin was more attune to that of the Pearl-Crested Dolphins that once swam in the Iridescent Seas to the south. Their eyes were of the deepest blue, their "wings" forever softly shining like fluid ivory, their mouths a smooth, toothless bill that curved ever slightly so upward. They were capable of taking a human form as well, resembling angels and awing all those they passed.

As beautiful as they were intelligent, the Ziira'lasp were a vain and conceited race of creatures, who forever squabbled with the Dragons over whose wisdom and looks were superior, and so, were disliked by a great number of the Fantastic Land's inhabitants, for whom the Dragons were born leaders and advisers. As a result, the Ziira'lasp secluded themselves from all other beings for nearly a milennia, constructing a citadel of their own to live apart from those they deemed inferior. They ignored all pleas for help in times of calamity, and rejected all offerings of friendship.

It was not until the third awakening of the Lightning-Struck Titan that the Ziira'lasp were seen again. Vamaroff's Storm returned with terrifying ferocity, and the Titan rose with its strength multiplied tenfold. Half of the Magician's Council perished in the ensuing fight with the beast, along with nearly a hundred Dragons, a thousand Birds, and a thousand more Spirits. And still, the Ziira'lasp refused to act.

And so, the Maker himself came to the Ziira'lasp, his face dark with fury, his eyes normally full of compassion brimming with icy rage. He spurned their race, accused them of being petty cowards who watched as their world burned around them. For their vanity, he cursed their citadel, enchanted it so that no Ziira'lasp could ever set

foot in it again, then covered it in the ashes of those killed by the Titan as a reminder of the suffering the Ziira'lasp could have helped prevent.

Overcome with despair of what they had lost, and what they could have had, the Ziira'lasp vowed to never turn their backs on the rest of the Fantastic Lands again, and charged into the center of the Titan's path. Side by side with the Dragons they once despised, and the Master they adored, the Ziira'lasp beat back the beast to its mountain once again. The Titan fell back into its slumber, but the grief and devastation brought about lingered for decades to come.

The Ziira'lasp worked with renewed fervor in rebuilding to make up for all the time they had shut themselves away. They became the chief architects of the Fantastics Lands, and filled this world with their incredible and intricate handicraft. This lasted for another thousand years, and life prospered.

And then less then three decades ago, the Great War began, and all the Ziira'lasp had or ever would create was destroyed in the calamity that followed. Once again, the Maker, came, but this time, his eyes held only grief as he was forced to smite those who had fanned the flames of destruction. The Ziira'lasp desperately tried to bring back peace, but to no avail, and so they fell into despair. When the last buildings finally crumbled, the Ziira'lasp had turned black from the ash and smoke, their blue eyes turned bloody red from grief. As the surviving others filed out of the Fantastic Lands, the Ziira'lasp stayed behind silent as the stones of their cities. And within these ruins they remain, turned to stone as the suns set for the final time and the world turned cold.

Bed, Breakfast, Plague

"Good morning, up and about, rise and shine, blah blah blah!"

Priscilla Locke got up at seven AM, sharp, Somalia time, thanks to the loud shouting that emanated from the walls, straight into her ears. She managed to cover them for a few measly seconds.

Then, the walls talked again. To her absolute horror, Priss realized they were talking with Sarah Desjeux's voice.

"Will you wake up!? It's MEDICINE DAY! Come ON, parahealther, wake up, Frankie has been gone for hours and I've GOTTA SHOW YOU OUR STUFF!"

Her voice went silent with a sizzling sound. By then, Priss was already squirming on the floor of the 'prefabricated' cubic room, and remembering how her room was not normal. It had been grown, it had an intercom and, apparently, it could be operated from the intercom as a god-damned home cinema system.

Then, Priss saw her phone, and the time. She wondered when had that damned woman woken up. *Wasn't she wired enough last night?*

Three minutes later, she was already dressed and ready to confront the day and a possibly drugged ecHealth. She was also loudly mumbling and grumbling under the unnecessary heft of her backpack and its main occupant, who- no, *that* was too heavy for its own good.

She opened the door, expecting to find herself face to face with Opal; however, even if the woman's low stature would have made it difficult by itself, Priss's fear went unrealized, as she noticed her going from cube to cube, shouting into each intercom and giggling like a dope. A few volunteers were already up and out of bed, converging in front of a cubic structure slightly larger than the rest.

The mess hall.

Or something like that, since it was simply a prefabricated food distribution center, covered in brightly white gypsum and gifted with a large counter-like window used to serve the food, that was reserved for early risers and volunteers alone. It had a kitchen. It served the same food that Lila and Opal would serve to their patients later. It was, to all intents and purposes, not efficient enough.

As she came into the short queue before Afwerki and her plates, Priss realized something: she had slept well.

For the first time in weeks, no, in years, she had slept for entire hours without screams waking her up, be it real or dreamed. For the first time in years, she felt tired simply because her body was actually tired. Of physical work.

Priscilla Locke was in front of Lila Afwerki when she stated to herself, with a loud enough voice as to be heard by her: "I'm sleeping…"

"Well, you do not look all that drowsy, Locke! Here, just for today we've got a little something to wake us all up, since the kids were so distracted last evening."

She looked at Afwerki. The woman, who had donned a different headscarf and tunic that morning, was offering her a cup and a bowl. The cup contained lukewarm coffee. The bowl had…

"Is that honey?"

Afwerki's expression froze.

"Oh, no, no, dear," she stuttered, apparently terrified and perhaps a bit pleading; "in God's name, no. We-we stopped using that! Nonono, this is not that honey, I promise, miss Locke-"

"Alright, alright! It was just a question!"

Lila seemed to calmed down slightly, but she still had to sit down, seemingly out of breath. "I'm sorry, miss… it's-it's just, I was with the

Work Group that used *that*, and-well!" The woman passed a hand over her front. She sounded very distressed.

Her voice was probably the reason why two young men in MCF volunteer vests went to their older counterpart from behind on the queue. Several others came closer, trying to see how they could helped. Lila smiled at them, calmly speaking to them in French and in a language Priss couldn't recognize. *Again.* She'd better learn to speak some other language than English if she was to adapt to the place.

"Sorry, Locke," Lila said, straight to her. In a way, her eyes were more than tired, they looked older than a moment before. Awkward, Priss tried to hold her gaze as the other volunteers started handling the queue themselves. The woman pointed at one of the pots they were taking the golden goo from. "That's just a *sablepurée*, something I learned to cook overseas. It's nutritious enough and almost entirely normal… and I swear on my hands, it is one hundred percent hypoallergenic," she assured, her voice breaking softly as her words died off.

"Okay," Locke said, not certain on what to answer to that, still feeling quite awkward. Some of the volunteers were whispering in that way that only can be interpreted as that 'yes, we are talking about you, ginger, *you don't belong here*' style; she still found it annoying and rather disarming. Priscilla chose to focus on her bowl, filled with that golden paste, in which small bits of cereal floated, suspended on the transparent paste. *The fuck did I do?*

Then she realized.

"Wait, honey. Hypoallergenic honey, right, I was not thinking straight." Priss looked at Lila, suddenly awake. "You were talking about the mess with that sarcophagus, right? Sorry, I didn't realize. Not that I've read a lot about that."

"Oh. You didn't know, then?" Lila openly smiled at her, rubbing her left eye with the back of her hand. "Well, now I feel silly."

Priss had seen a thousand faces like that one. Most were crying in agony at the beginning, many of those broken and empty later, all of

them dead in the end. None of them smiled at her. Not sincere, beautiful smiles, not like that smile.

Instead of coming back to haunt her, all those faces were a stark contrast over which that face was, at that moment, in that place, the world to her. Priss felt like she was made of honey, and that was a perfectly good reason why her legs were shaking. *That smile is gorgeous. And she is smiling at* me?

"Thanks, Locke," Afwerki said as she stood up, her eyelids shut while she weakly smacked her cheeks.

Oh, now she's thanking me.

"Please, don't thank me, I was insensitive, and-"

The woman opened her eyes again. "No, no, I didn't-oh, how do you say that. I feel guilty over that, you know. We all feel guilty over the times we were wrong, I suppose, even if we did save some people then, too…", she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts for a brief moment, but soon came back to her senses and dedicated another bright smile to Priss. "One does all one can, nothing more. Now, I may be getting old and clumsy, but I can always try and make some breakfast."

"Ah. Sure."

"Don't worry, we'll meet down there, in the clinic! I think it's today you came with us? I usually work with her. With Opal," she clarified.

"Right. I'll go have breakfast, then," Pris said, turning to get one of the plastic stools the other volunteers were already spreading between the cubes.

Lila Afwerki serenely smiled at her as she sat, then went back to attend the queue. Her movements were kind of slower, perhaps even jerking. As she watched the robed woman filling bowl after bowl with the cold contents of her golden concoction and cup after cup with the brown stream from a large aluminium coffee pot, Priscilla Locke tried both things.

The coffee was bitter, but woke her up completely. The *sablepurée*

was sweet, rough with bits of cereals and bread crumbs, and reminded her of old breakfasts taken on the days when WestCiv didn't demand anything of her.

Priscilla felt her sister — the inhuman mongrel — laughing. *It's always easier having no one care about you, ain't that right, sis?*

She grabbed her backpack, tightly clutching to it when she noticed Desjeux coming to her.

"And good ol' Skippy goes and tells me, with that twangy voice he makes when he tries to be serious, pfah! Listen, listen, he goes:" Sarah Desjeux raised a hand into the air. That hand was impregnated in the fresh blood of an amputee; *"I kneed gyou tgo lisgten knarefully, Opgal. Gyou have a scorgpion on gyour ghair."*

The doctor broke into laughter *yet again* as her hands went back to sewing the pitiful flaps of bleeding skin and muscle into a stump. She had been doing that, and worse, all morning with those afflicted of the Sour. All three Satanists on guard and herself had been examining and treating them last night. After curing the disease proper, they had to clean the wounds and put skin drafts over them, since those injuries caused by the Sour never healed naturally. That usually implied major surgery.

She moved her hands faster than Priscilla imagined would be safe or possible in a surgery. The fake auditor stood a good meter behind her alleged colleague in the medical profession to make certain that at least her green apron remained clean. *Well, that, and the smell.* Every person that was treated looked perfectly healthy to her, save for the horrible, gaping holes filled with surgical tissue and half-clotting blood. As soon as they left the room, they were asking for their families or their legs.

And there was that woman, making jokes.

Priss couldn't tell if the situation was sad or comical.

"I don't find it funny, Desjeux," she finally conferred through her surgical mask, to what the surgeon responded by joyfully laughing

again.

"Funny you would say that, 'cause that's word by word the next thing he said!"

Priscilla shook her head, annoyed. "How is the programme going, anyhow?"

"Fine, fine," the surgeon said, smiling behind her own mask. "We'll have most of the people in the camp on prophylactics in less than two days. Logistics has already promised us a big shipment of both *Aciclovir* and *Prometerine* to counter the infestation in its latent state. As for people in the active stages of the disease, well…"

Opal made a flowery move that made her hands look like she was doing a magic trick; and lo and behold, one of the flaps of flesh looked like it had always been part of a stump.

"We'll take care of them," she sang.

Two minutes later, Lila was taking measurements of the unfortunate man's legs to get him a provisional prosthesis. Apparently, the operation had gone smoothly. As he started to come around, Toribio, the Portuguese nurse, and the Satanist Mirra moved him into one of the wheeled chairs and took him away to have him wake up somewhere else. The 'operating room' they were using was one of the Vestan cubes that had been dropped by Olympe half-way between the camp and the rest of the prefabricated rooms. It felt — and was — cramped with packed and unpacked medical equipment, but the excellent aseptic conditions made possible by the Mason Mold warranted that, among other things, patients were very likely safe from infections.

Or so Desjeux and the Rabbi thought. Priss made a face. *We are trusting lives to the idiot and-*

Priss felt a chill, and she hated herself in silence for it.

"Hey, Locke, you alright there, hun?"

Desjeux had placed her hand on Priss' arm. She freed herself from

the gentle grip. "I'm fine. Why?"

"You looked… somewhere else."

Priss raised her sight to tell her that she could go have a laugh about it with those people that *loved* her so much. It was met by that pair of googly brown eyes that, were they half the size, would have been perfect for a newborn child.

"I was-", Priss looked around, looking for the right words. They never came, so she went with a classic. "I'm fine."

"You might be a fine gal, yes, but you are a lousy liar," the stout woman said in a lulling voice. There was concern in her eyes, but it was quickly traded with mania, as the many wrinkles born of the corner of her eyes betrayed that maddening smile behind the surgical mask. "Won't force you to say a thing, though. You think it's your business? Yours it is, then. Mirra!"

As Desjeux left the room to talk to the robed witch-scientist about the next patient, Priscilla looked at her gloved hands.

There were specks of blood on them.

She discarded the gloves and watched them melt into the ground as the mold worked its magic. Checking on her backpack again to make certain it hadn't been taken by some sneaky thief or melted away over the floor, she felt her hands humid again with that all too memorable, sticky fluid that would soon dry up, crackle and redden *everything*…

But it was just sweat.

"That one, that one there! You, sir! Please, come over here-", and Desjeux lapsed again into Arab. Priss was beginning to wonder if it was a mandatory language course in school over this universe.

The stream of refugees coming into the camp had not died down; it had become an unevenly timed trickle of large groups carried by overloaded trucks and smaller groups loaded with what was left of their properties in sacks, backpacks and clapped-out carts. It was all

going 'according to plan', as long as you did not realize that Opal and her people didn't have anything resembling an actual plan, beyond "give them a look and the aciclo-prom cocktail."

One of her volunteers, a young American man, raised a hand to get her superior's attention.

"She's got it, Opal!"

"Damn… okay, tell the family-no, I think they only speak Somali. Uh-Ziza, tell them we'll be taking her to the isolation area," the stout woman ordered another volunteer, who ran to them. Opal looked around, searching for another one of her triage workers. "Mirra! Mirra, how about those two?"

"The mother has it. The son didn't have any symptoms, but-"

"Right, prophylactics. We still have enough for the day. Was she hurt?"

"A bad cut over her stomach. She was bleeding white."

Priss looked away when she heard that. Several people already had the Sour when the Work Group arrived in Laascaanood, barely two days ago. They had been treated before the disease could spread any further, but many people in the camp — perhaps Priss herself, and every MCF worker — might had been infected already. True, she was not doing any actual medical work since her role as an auditor technically banned her from doing anything involving medical tasks. Which was fortunate, since her knowledge in the field was limited at best… but Priss had heard the sickness might spread just by touch.

She tried to look as professional as possible while checking that her long, thick, white plastic gloves and her mask covered as much as possible of her skin. Meanwhile, a t-shirt wearing Desjeux placed her blatantly naked hands on her hips as she nodded at Mirra, whose black robe was splattered with sickeningly white drops. The satanist was explaining the situation of other patients already isolated in the tents.

"-and a few have tried to eat the worms already. As usual, they don't respond to anything I try to do and keep chanting about the Maggot Mother," she sighed. Priss gagged, but managed to remain firm while the thought of the symptoms of the Sour formed in her mind. It was not your regular cough. "A few have even started to draw the symbols. And I don't think I can help them without resorting to thaumatologic surgery, there are just too many for me to take on all of them at the same time."

"Alright, no worries," the Executive member told her workmate. "Go crazy, excising the stuff is your specialty, right? If you have to, try the Three Circles, the Eight if you feel up for it, but…" At that point, Opal succinctly glanced at Priss. "Hold that thought for a moment, please."

The fake auditor tried to look calm and collected as Desjeux closed in, but she couldn't stop glancing at the hands she had been using to explore, and touch, and operate. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, well, yeah, this is embarrassing," Sarah Desjeux admitted. She did look abashed. "See, we have been using, ahm, experimental techniques, nothing too aggressive, to remove the necrotic tissue from our beneficiaries. Nothing too aggressive, as I was saying, the Circles of Negation, mostly. But, uh, I'm supposed to cooperate with you and I know what the *Phoo* thinks of-well, I was wondering if you could look the other way as Mirra does her thing."

Locke tried to adjust to the new development. "Hmm-I thought you were only using conventional surgery?"

Desjeux crossed her arms and looked upwards while making a hissing sound, a gesture of irritation and powerlessness.

"Oh, indeed, surgery, of course, sure, that, but some of these people, see, they have internal injuries, or wounds that are already infected. There is a limit to what we can cure without cutting, let's say, half a brain out, or a third of a heart," she said, letting a little, sad laugh out. "It's a shame, but some times magic's just better."

"Don't call it magic, Opal," Mirra said, and the woman managed to sound petulant and sweet at the same time. "Modern thaumaturgs

like us should call it by what it is, or else we would be back to adoring inhuman horrors. Isn't that right, miss Locke?"

"Sure," she said, hoping it was what was expected of her. Without giving them space to say anything else, she turned to Desjeux again. "But I would love to see the procedures and judge by myself."

"What is it?"

"Locke felt ill."

"Oh. Mirra, what did you show her? I hope you didn't do a psychotomy…"

"Of course not, Opal, it was an Eight Circle ritual. A normal one, no external contacts or anything! Just to pick some wood splinters inside a kid's abdomen! No Otherness involved, I swear. And the Third Circles went well, too, she said it was amazing and all that. Although… I might have forgotten to mention she was gonna get some blood on her when I started the abjuration."

"This again. How many times do I have to remind you not to assume people know what you are doing? She must be a *normal* doctor! Some people in the parahealthers are just medics too, you know? Not surgeons?"

"Then what is she even doing here?"

"Check if we are going overboard. Are we going overboard, Mirra?"

"Oh, come on, give me a br-I mean, what did I know? She's the first field parahealther I've met!"

Her tiny cube-room, where someone had stacked some cardboard boxes and a few sacks with seeds, was dark now. Priss appreciated the change, since light had been a bane on her for almost all afternoon. Other things that were a bane on her were blood, tiny talking beaks and the surgical applications of still warm, sentient blood.

"I had wondered what were those roosters doing in their pickup," Priss confessed as she regained a minimum of dignity to speak, or as much dignity as one could have when leaning back on a bunk bed. The woman weakly gesticulated, trying to transmit some sort of explanation over her sorry state. "It's something about how it moved when the, you know, the *witch* cut its head-"

"Thaumaturgs. Don't call them 'witches.'"

"What, they'll hex me?," she said, ironic. Then she remembered the feeling of having a cockerel's comb jumping into her mouth and gagged.

"Nah, but they can be real bores with their I'm-not-a-wizard speech," Frank laughed. "I mean, I did tell you they were able to exorcise entities by talking them into un-believing themselves, right? Not an exaggeration. Odd stuff, but it's supposed to save them a lot of time and effort. For other procedures, they usually sacrifice roosters, or rats, you know, to gather energy for their rituals, or something. Better than goats, or people, I guess… I heard they can even use orgies, when they have to. Although you could have asked about all this, Locke."

Priss spat on the ground. The spit disappeared on the clean, tiled floor almost instantly. "And blow my cover."

"The World Parahealth Organisation is not exclusively made of all-knowing polymaths, Locke," Frank said, carefully holding the bucket in which she had been vomiting. "They don't have to know everything. More often than not, ritualistic procedures are what the individual practitioner makes of them. There are no standards here, so showing ignorance might be better than the alternative. And these people love to teach their stuff, by the way! Don't be afraid to ask them about anything. And you could have still asked me."

"I didn't wanna know."

He looked like he was going to add something else, so Priss grabbed the bucket to make sure she had somewhere to gape at as nausea seized her again, even if she could only puke bile at that point.

When it stopped, she looked at Frank and asked him the question that had been circling her mind all morning. "How does she do it?"

Frank smirked. "Are you asking about the magic bullcrap the Satanist sisters pull on a daily basis or about Opal?"

"About Desjeux, yes. She just doesn't stop!"

"Well, that's a good question." He sat by her side, looking deep in thought. "I haven't seen her sleep more than two hours a day since I joined her Work Group, and it's been a while. I haven't heard her insulting or looking down on anyone. Nor angry. She never complains about being tired or hungry, and I can count the number of times I've seen her eat anything."

"Eat?"

"Eat. If you ask me, she had some of the First Vestan Donation and has kept it to herself all this years. Never worked the courage to ask."

"The-the First?"

"An old Donation, gone badly. Well, not exactly badly. Nevermind, we don't use it anymore… a shame, too, it could have ended world famine almost completely, but it broke too many rules. The International Board members were furious. Besides, we accidentally lost most of the stuff, I hear." Frank said, calmly. "The Vesta Conglomerate makes really neat stuff, always intelligent molds, as it turns out, but it's simply too unstable for the most part. The Third is the only one we have been able to use without-"

"Westinghouse. You talk too much," Priss cut him, passing a hand over her hair. She noticed it was filthy with dirt and vomit. "And my head hurts. Focus on Opal."

"Okay. Well, whatever her deal is, I can tell you she's cool. Please, let me finish," he said, hurriedly. Priss did not interrupt him; she was not in any shape for a debate. "She may sound like a complete loony half the time and be a pain in the ass the other half, but she knows her way around. And I *mean* it. She knows us, she knows

everyone around, and in turn we all get to know her, and then gets us all to dance whatever crazy waltz we have to when we get assigned somewhere new. She is one of the greatest reasons that our Work Group works so well."

Priss looked at Frank. He was serious.

"Where is she from?"

"What? Canadian, I think-"

"Canadian, that's a great answer," she said. "Look, Westinghouse, dunno why but this woman seems to have you all dancing to her rhythm and you seem to know it. That worries me."

"But-"

"No, now you let *me* finish."

She felt angry. It had been some time since she had last felt angry, although she had certainly felt better than that; her mouth still tasted foul, her throat felt and sounded sore and the room spun if she tried to move around.

Strangely enough, she also felt *cleaner.*

"That woman is not normal," Priscilla stated, looking into Frank's doubtful eyes. "I don't care much about her, nor her little coven, I just don't care, but don't you dare tell me she is normal, or respectful. There is something *off* about her."

Priss thought of the smothering way Desjeux had been treating her after she left the portable toilet by the 'clinic' where Mirra had performed her 'surgery'. The way she had pushed her to the prefabricated room by the edge of the camp and closed the door behind her, saying all that 'you'll get better in no time' crap.

She had seen fear in her eyes. She was hiding something, Priss was sure.

"She is suspicious."

Frank's brows arced at the word. "Mind I remind you that the world is quite too complicated to want to see an enemy where there is only a friend?"

Priscilla could not believe what he was saying. "She is a friggin' anomaly! They all are!"

"Sure, and today they've saved dozens of lives. You saw them doing it."

She closed her eyes. "I know, so what. I've seen things-I mean, sometimes it seems too good to be true, and then it *is* too good!" Frank's docile expression infuriated her as she opened her eyes again. "She looks the fucking part!"

"Well, this takes me back to our first meeting. But fine, fine, she is a too-good-to-be-true happiness-inducing alien from outer space, or from Canada, who secretly wishes for humans to go extinct. Right, and nobody has seen her coming for, what, thirty years?"

Priscilla gaped for a moment. Then, she felt tired. Really tired. "I… I don't know. This is all backwards."

"Cultural shock, they call it."

"Hey, Desjeux," Frank said.

Priss felt the need to get up and stand alert, but that traitorous dizziness pinned her to her bed. "You've-"

"I just heard the last minutes. Or so. Wanted to check on you, but now that I'm here…" Desjeux squatted by the bed, with her usual grin. However, she sounded dead serious for once. "Look, I'm not a trickster nor a liar. I'm just not gonna tell you the truth, ever. Not all of it. Where do I come from, who I was before joining, that stuff… I simply changed when I came into the Charitable. Everyone does. Everyone has a past, too. And you have to learn to deal with it, in the same way that I accept I will never get to know you, at all. It's abundantly clear you are not a doctor, and you are probably not from the *phoo*," the woman tilted her head towards Frank, "no matter what mister Security Executive over here tells me about it."

Priss felt like if she was suddenly under interrogation. She couldn't say anything about herself, nor Anabasis. Lies and half-truths began forming in her mind; and, suddenly, with a giggle, Desjeux looked into her eyes and said:

"And I don't care about it."

Feeling her own confusion painted across her face, Priscilla Locke tried to form a sentence.

"What."

"See, we have to trust each other. I have to trust that François and Frank have not been secretly reporting to the Coalition and the other Foundation all these years. I have to trust my girls to keep working for these poor people, even if their creed tells them they should be killing God again in some lost corner of Jerusalem, or wherever the bearded moron is these days. I have to trust Lila to not slip poison in our food — and yes, I do eat, Frankie — while we're still sleeping so she can feast on our hearts in the late hours of the night, for that matter. We must trust each other, no matter how hard it is to trust in what we *see* of each other, even before we get to know what we *can't* see."

Opal stood again. Not an impressive change in stature, but, with Priss still on her bed, it was enough to make the stout woman imposing; an impression she reinforced by letting her hair, which had been collapsed into a bun, free.

Coils upon coils half-hid the round face, her eyes somehow visible between them in the dying light of the evening sun that came through the windows. Her hands went to her broad hips, her legs separated in a defying stance and she proudly stated, in an attempt to sound martial:

"Trust is our lifeblood, Locke. If we don't trust, there is no Charitable. So welcome aboard, try not to be too paranoid and, as long as you trust Frank, don't trust me! But, please, let me do my job. Geddit?"

Opal turned away and left, gently spinning as she closed the door.

Frank looked at Priss' face and said: "See, that's what it was like for me, too. At first, I had that face pretty much all the time. Now I mostly just facepalm."

"Facepalm?"

Frank demonstrated the gesture.

"Oh, that. Right."

In the awkward moment that followed, Opal's voice thundered again through the speaker-walls.

"AH, FRANK, DEAR BY THE WAY, I'LL BE REAL BUSY TOMORROW SO YOU TAKE HER FOR A WALK, OKAY?, OKAY THANKS BYEEE."

« Cubes On A Slope | Hub | Greenery »

Bedtime S(CP)tory

"Come on, you two, it's time for bed. You've stayed up late enough, and you have school in the morning. What? A story? Oh no, no, your father has much better stories than I do. Oh alright, I guess I have one."

Once upon a time, there was a Princess. Don't look at me like that, it's a good story, promise. Anyways, this Princess lived in a great castle made of steel and glass, buried underground. King Six kept her there, saying it was to keep her and the world safe. For a long time, the Princess believed this, and worked hard to do what King Six asked. The King had a brother, and also an advisor, a strange man who could change his body like you can change your socks. They called him the Bright Wizard. He acted as the King's mouth, asking the Princess to do things. Sometimes she just had to study the strange things he kept in the castle, and sometimes she had to hurt them. She didn't like when he asked her to do that, but the Wizard promised it was to keep everyone safe.

The Princess worked hard, and became a high scholar among the others who worked for the King and the Wizard. The new standing attracted unwanted attention, however, and a Witch began to torment her when she slept. She traded something precious to her to a gypsy, hoping this would help her, but it only grew worse. She was so afraid, and so alone. No one else could hear what the Witch did to her, and she thought she was going crazy. She was ready to make it stop, even if it meant stopping her own heart. Then, when she was at her darkest moment, a Knight came to save her. He promised to protect her. From the Witch, from the Wizard, and even from the things King Six kept locked in the castle. He promised this, and he promised to make

sure she could protect herself. The Princess fell in love with the Knight, and with him, she was stronger. They had to keep their love secret, for one of the King's generals was a cruel man and would see them punished for their happiness.

The Princess and the Knight worked hard to keep each other and the friends they had made safe. For a long time, it seemed like they could survive anything in the castle of steel and glass. It was not meant to be a happy survival, however. One day a Seer came to the Princess, and told her she was with child, and this child would be very special. He would weave time itself, and hold a great evil at bay. What should have been a joyous announcement caused the Princess great pain. At a time of darkness, that seemed like so long ago then, she had traded something precious. She had traded her son. Again the Princess fell to that dark place, her Knight trying desperately to hold on.

Then the war came. She watched from the side as her friends died to protect the castle and her child, unable to help or save them. The Bright Wizard watched as well, smiling, saying it was to keep everyone safe. The Princess knew now it was a lie. There was more behind that smile than keeping the world secure. More than keeping the strange things in the castle contained, and more than protecting the life growing inside her. When the time came for the child to be born, the Knight stood by his Princess as the gypsy and her attendants came to collect what she was promised. For all their talk of protection, King Six, his Generals and the Wizard, with all their power, did nothing to help. The Knight and the Princess watched as their son was taken away, never knowing his parents' touch. Their hearts torn asunder, and no one to help, the pair made their plans to leave the castle, buried so deep beneath the earth. They escaped into the night, never to be heard from again.

"That's the story, kids. Now you have to sleep. What happened to

the boy? He did exactly what the Seer said he'd do. No. They never got to see him again. No mummy's fine, just something in my eye. Goodnight."

Bees

Foreword: The following document consists of the diary of . , currently SCP- -3. Upon recovery, the entire cover of the diary had been covered in black permanent marker, with the exception of several areas arranged into the shape of a stylized bee. Here, each page is listed separately.

March 17

Today I bought this diary artsy notebook thing , although I'm not sure why because I thought the cashier at was cute, okay? Thirty dollars down the fucking drain right there. Also, my uncle's inheritance finally got sorted out. There wasn't a *bunch* of money, but I did get a fuckton of his stuff afterwards. So much old stuff. Fucking nostalgia.

[IRRELEVANT MONOLOGUE REMOVED]

March 20

Still no word from , but it does turn out she has a twin sister, so yeah :D
Weird thing happened when I was looking through Uncle 's stuff. [REDACTED] and out of nowhere I get this stinging stuff up and down my arm. When I looked, there were like five puncture marks on my arm. WTF? No sign of anything that could sting me, but I bought a bottle of Raid just in case.

March 21

Note to self: find out what that buzzing is. I hate it when you can *just barely* make out a sound, like that time with the smoke detector. I haven't herd back from the

superintendent. The super came over and claimed he couldn't here anything. Cheap fuck just doesn't want to have to fix anything. Probably beecause that would require walking up stairs.

The remainder of the page is filled with a drawing of an extremely rotund man (most likely , the superintendent of Mr. 's building). He appears to bee eating several sub sandwiches while exclaiming "im just big boned yo". Notably, he also appears to bee wearing a bumblebee costume.

March 22

[IRRELEVANT MONOLOGUE REMOVED] On a side note, I watched a thing in the news today about bees. Apparently, a bunch of them are disappearing and nobody knows why, and now fruit and stuff isn't getting pollenated (implying anybody eats fruit). I'm not saying it was aliens, but it was aliens. But the whole thing is sticking with me somehow. A lot. Beeeeeees :D I'm so crazy.

Buzzing isn't gone yet. If anything, it's louder. The exterminator couldn't here anything either. And I got another prick on my arm when I was digging through the cupboard. Either these are coincidences or I'm beeing paranoid. Ugh.

March 23

I've herd of yellow snow, but I wasn't aware that there are entire storms of yellow and black snow.[1] How the fuck does that even work. Good thing I got some booze before it hit, because I think the power's out. Party hard! *sigh*… Why the shit did I move here?

What if bees could come out of a hypothetical situation?

[Nine pages appear to have been removed with scissors]

What if bees were intolerant of hornets?

What if bees were made of smaller bees?
What if bees were made out of BIGGER bees?
What if you picked up a phone and instead of a phone it was bees?
What if there was a photo of bees?
What if there were a bunch of bees on a plane?
What if the dinosaurs were killed by bees?
What if the dinosaurs WERE bees?
What if your Facebook beecomes infested with bees?
What if bees hacked your Facebook?
What if someone wrote on your wall about bees?
What if cats vomited bees?
What if bees could travel through paintings?
What if bees was a science and was subject to bee review?
What if bees are contagious?
What if there was a bee gun?
What if you forgot to reload the bee gun?
What if the computer monitor could produce bees?
What if bees start demanding civil rights?

What if the Magna Carta has been bees the whole time?
What if rabbits swore allegiance to the bees?
What if Chinese bees?
What if millennial bees?
What if bees were four-dimensional?
What if bees were time-travelers?
What if time travel turns you into bees?
What if time travel requires bees?
What if you could replace explosions with bees?
What if instead of movies there were bees?
What if you could buy bees on the black market?
What if bees are accepted as payment in Hawaii?
What if instead of throwing beeads on Mardi Gras you threw bees?
What if bees wrote a travelogue?
What if the travelogue was just bees?
What if you eloped with bees?
What if you served refreshments to bees?
What if someone mentions bees?

What if bees formed a religion?
What if that religion involved clockwork bees?

What if bees had a polite disagreement?
What if bees were paid to rake leaves?
What if bees were in the guise of a tundra?
What if bees are taking over your dreams?
What if you controlled bees with your dreams?
What if fictional characters happened to bee bees?
What if bees were aliens?
What if bees come from the bee lair beeneath the Earth?
What if bees could blow people up with the blink of an eye?
What if bees were a superhero?
What if you could mail-order bees?
What if the store has a sale on bees?
What if the bees had a gay pride parade?
What if bees went to the parade with no clothes?
What if they accidentally intentionally paved over bees?
What if I accidentally bees?
What if bees could live in any hollow area?
What if bees were secret agents?
What if you and bees had highly different taste in music?

What if plants danced to attract bees?
What if bees swarmed around and stung people?
What if bees are just mad beecause someone cut them off in traffic?
What if bees could disrupt your wifi?
What if bees were replaced with a numerical code?
What if bees resembled bees?
What if bees resembled DIFFERENT bees?
What if bees were exactly like the movie?
What if bees used magic to become good at dabbing?
What if each anime was a different color of bee?
What if bees were nocturnal and sucked blood?
What if bees and werewolves were sworn enemies?
What if dogs were unable to perceive bees?
What if bees had subwoofers?
What if nobody realized that the bees had an evil plan?

What if bees were censored by the government?
What if transition metals reacted with bees?
What if bees framed a politician for larceny?
What if bees had ties to organized crime?
What if bees unwittingly morphed into bricks during the full moon?

What if someone wrote a book about bees?
What if bees were computer illiterate?
What if I'm bees?
What if bees misread directions and killed a lemon tree?
What if bees were an accurate description of the concept of the assembly line?
What if Willy Wonka was prepared for bees?
What if bees had fetishes?
What if bees could vibrate through walls and discern motives?
What if bees were put on the No-Fly list?
What if bees were mistaken for a Russian psyop?
What if bees overran a mental institution?
What if bees had daydreams about becoming lemurs?
What if there was a wiki about bees?
What if Wikipedia was bees?
What if bees killed me mid-sen

The remainder of the last page is an illustration of numerous black specks attacking a stick figure in a room resembling SCP- -3's apartment. The furniture and background also appear to be made out of small circles similar to those attacking the stick figure. Almost all of the blank space in the illustration has been filled with what are either stylized lightning bolts or the letter "Z".

I locked the door.

March 32 April?

I don't recall, try again later. Bees. BEEEEES.

I ran out of aloe vera, had to use mouthwash. Surprisingly effective, but it still doesn't help with the bleeding. called and we set up a date for 8PM

Thursday, which was two hours ago. I'm surprised she could here me over the buzzing. Oh, and the phone was bees.

Tuesday
BEE in hexadecimal is 1646 in decimal form. My favorite number. Who'da thunkit. [DATA EXPUNGED] I don't know why I wrote that. I'm not schizo or anything. Disregard!

The Godfather is on. I think I caught it part way through, where the guy finds bees in his bed. Look at the TV. TV is bees.[2]

Wednesday Thursday Friday
[A number of small oval shapes are missing from the paper. Small amounts of pollen were found near the edges.]

I tried writing, but then the paper was bees. I'm going to drink a bottle of whiskey and go to bed.

WHAT THE HELL
BEES DO NOT GO THERE

The following page was covered entirely in crushed bees and human blood upon recovery. Removal of the aforementioned tissues revealed that the following had been written on the page.

came over today, and she screamed because of the bees. Now she is bees. I wonder why I'm not bees. Maybe I am? Do bees know they are bees? Yellow.

bring it

March 17

The snow is mostly gone, and look at the pavement. Pavement is mostly not bees. I'm going to head over to the hospital, see if I can get this mole looked at.
Bees followed me into the car and cut the brakes. God, I might be high. Good thing it was only another mile to the

hospital SHUT UP BEES I'M WRITING IN MY DIARY JOURNAL

Go to hospital
hospital is bees. Already, how? I just got here. No, wait, it's just my glasses. My glasses were definitely bees.

I didn't schedule an appointment or anything, but the nurse called a panic team or whatever it is and they ran me to a doctor. How thoughtful, but it's really not an emergency. I really just need them to look at a mole. Except that the mole is bees.

The doctors looked at me and said they didn't see anything wrong. Well, of course there's nothing wrong, except the bees. And the bleeding, but that's to be expected from beestings. They argued for a while, and then sent me away.

March 119

I forgot to mention that the bees were eating the doctor. The others were screaming about it for a while, but when bees finished it they calmed down a lot and signed me out.

I'm done.
Nope.[3]

[Thirty pages are missing.]

I am bees.

[The remaining pages are blank.]

Conclusion: To date, this remains the most accurate account of Incident -5, despite its inconsistencies. SCP- -3 has no recollection of writing in any form of diary, although the handwriting, personal knowledge, and writing style are consistent with those of .

Personnel assigned to containment of SCP- are to read this document in its entirety. In the situation that the diary is bees, a modified document will be provided.

Footnotes
1. Records do not indicate any unusual weather patterns in [REDACTED] on the date in question.
2. No television was found in Mr. 's apartment, although a remote control was found.
3. While the remainder of the diary is written in pencil, this appears to have been scratched into the paper.

Behind the Scenes

Ah, hello there.

No, don't get up. Put down the gun though, it won't do anything. I'm not real, how could you shoot me? There we go. See, isn't that much nicer? All friends. Face that window, please. Oh, and smile. There, that's good.

You look surprised, doctor. You've been on a binge of me, haven't you? I like your style, you fall down and you just get back up! Shame, though, that's what let me in. Nice couch. Don't get up, I'll make myself at home. What are you talking about, doctor? Oh, no, I've not come here as some sort of vengeful retribution. I really don't mind you people watching me, although I do wish you'd share them. You're very selfish, taking me away from the children like that, you know.

I admit I did lose my temper for a bit back there, didn't I? Don't worry, I've come to terms with my new audience. You do let me at children quite often. Some people would call you monsters! Not me, I don't judge. I'm fair.

Haha, what are you writing? I'm very sorry, doctor, but this isn't an interview. I'd put it in the trash. There we go. Everything goes in the trash eventually. You trash your *precious* interview, the children trash their little minds and even I had to trash some of my other gimmicks. Oh, yes. I've been making little savages for quite a while now, doctor. Put down the gun.

I think I started off small, the idea of fire some stupid cavemen got into their skulls. Children didn't really have time for me back then, so I moved on. The skinwalker shtick though, that was a good idea. Children whispered about me in the dark, adults even *painted* me! I hardly had to do anything at all!

But then you had to get clever, didn't you? Suddenly all those

superstitions started to float away and I had no children to help, no parents to… well, you'll find out soon enough. And yet, there was one little form that I had left, one fun-loving character that could still reach inside those kids' heads and *twist*. I'm talking, of course, about Bobble the Clown. Oh, don't look so glum.

Smile. You're on television!

As of / /20 , it appears **SCP-993** has ceased broadcasting.

As of / /20 , **SCP-993** has resumed its normal broadcasting. Re-classification to Euclid is being considered.

Episode Title	Contents
'Bobble's Back!'	Setting of episode appears to be Dr. 's office. Bobble appears in the room and Dr. registers shock, then faces the viewer and smiles. Bobble and Dr. then appear to converse for fifteen minutes, although no dialogue is audible. Fifteen minutes in, Dr. raises a pistol and fires upon Bobble to no effect. Bobble then systematically dismembers and removes facial extremities from Dr. using a large butchers knife. Signs of movement are visible from Dr. for three minutes, after which the credits roll. Alarmingly, Dr. disappeared without a trace a day before the episode broadcasted.

Being Cactusman

Dreams have long been a point of contention for psychologists, full of vehement and loud opinions on what they mean. Some think that it's the brain going over the events of the day, while others postulate that it's the subconscious finally doing something useful and resolving issues. The smartest scientists are always identifiable by bedhead and coffee, because they prefer to experiment with sleep rather than theorise about it.[1]

What few scientists bother to worry about is whether or not plants dream. They do. In the plant community, Venus Fly Traps are noted to have the most livid nightmares, which typically involve sunlight and arachnids. Creeping Vines rarely ever have dreams, being so exhausted from all the creeping.

The dreams of flora relevant to this story, however, are cactus dreams. The layman would think that cacti dream about water. This is not so. Dreaming about water is incredibly boring. Water by itself doesn't do much, other than fail to have the common decency to hold a definitive shape. A cactus dreaming about water would be comparable to a person dreaming of an open field. It sounds very poetic, but begins to drag on once you realise there's not much to do in an open field. The very idea is silly, preposterous, and implausible.

No, most cacti dream of finding a nice cactusette and settling down in that nice bit of sand just a block away from their good cactus friends. Cactusman, known to his friends as Daniel MacIntyre, or urrgghjhggjdf[2] to very pretty cactusettes, was dreaming of settling down on that fateful morning. In particular, of Carrie (RH) Ipsalsis, who was, while not a cactus, very pretty. Cactusman himself was not actually a cactus, but an upright member of his human community, dedicated to saving innocent lives and preventing dehydration.

It was with a grunt that he was awoken from his slumber.

Specifically, a grunt that meant "Hey, Daniel, wake up!". Rubbing the sand from his eyes, Cactusman glared blearily at Carl from across the room. Carl was a handsome specimen, a strapping male in the prime of his youth, who had met Cactusman at their local home improvement store. Carl was also a cactus, which may raise the question of how he was currently speaking to Cactusman.

Carl, as any reasonable person could assume, was not speaking in English, but in Cactese. Cactese is entirely incomprehensible to the human ear, who hear it mainly as a series of roars and grunts. It is actually a much more complicated language, with 13 specific grunts designed to obfuscate any humans who might be planning on pillaging innocent cacti and putting them up as trophies on their mantle. There are 73.5 words to describe a small amount of water in cactese, because cacti are predominately optimists, and not nearly as prickly about glasses being filled with water as humans.

"Daniel, wake up man! Someone needs your help!"

Like a slap in the face, or being stabbed by the spine of a cactus, Daniel jerked up, throwing off his sheets and rushing off to grab breakfast by the window. A hero can't be expected to save the day without energy, after all. Carl continued to speak, giving Cactusman the minutiae.

"Her name is Lily, I met her at the plant nursery. She always made sure I had enough water and sunlight, great gal. Pretty, too, man, you should have *seen* her-"

"Carl! Get to the point!" shouted Daniel, cutting Carl off in the middle of his diatribe.

"Right, right, sorry. She was kidnapped, Dan! They stole her away! You gotta rescue her, she's a damsel in distress! They took her to 5739 North Clark!"

Spurred on by his heroic and solemn duty, Cactusman dashed to the door. His thought traveled faster, though, and he paused, turning to Carl. "Where'd you hear this from, anyways?"

"Oh. I heard it from the grapevine."

To describe how long Daniel stared at Carl would be an impractical waste of text, and would also imply that something other than staring happened in that timespan. Staring is a very dull thing to write about. There are only so many ways to describe a stare, and the majority of them are variations on "intense". To create a clearer picture of what happened, stand up, find a plant, and stare at it for ten minutes. This story will still be here.

Welcome back. Yes, it was that boring.

Daniel tore his stare away, muttering something about "that incorrigible gossip" before dashing out the door, spines drawn taut in preparation for the battle ahead. Today, evil would not stand. Today, the world would be bathed in light and righteousness.

Cactusman trudged through the torrential downpour, peering up occasionally to look at the street numbers. The path of righteousness be damned, the weather had other plans. It had been behaving itself, sunny days and mild temperatures for too long. It had been saving itself for this day, which it had marked down on the calendar it stored up in the cloud. Useful thing, the cloud.

By the time Cactusman found 5739 North Clark, he was wetter than any cactus had a right to be. Cacti tend to like the weather like they like their humour: dry, and preferably involving George Carlin[3]. Taking a spine from his back, Cactusman quietly investigated the integrity of the keylock, then very legally and equally quietly entered the threshold.

"I'm in the belly of the beast now…" thought Cactusman, as he surveyed the room. It was obvious that there was no one home, from the state of the apartment. The TV wasn't on, and he wasn't being angrily questioned about why in the hell a stranger is standing in our home and how did you get in I'm calling the bloody police Bob get over here and teach this hoodlum a lesson again.

It wasn't really the wretched hive of villainy that Cactusman expected. The place was downright pleasant. They had obviously put work into the breakfast nook which was dotted with potted plants, and the couch went very well with the rug. The whole living room was so open and inviting- "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU!?"

The owner of the particularly angry vocalisation was an equally loud Hawaiian shirt, filled out by a rotund man, the kind who is usually accompanied by a beer and plastic pink flamingos. What he was doing here was unknown. Maybe he was lost. It would certainly explain why he was so angry.

He greeted Cactusman with an enthusiastic fistbump to the jaw, his arm hurtling through the air like a porcine train car carrying sausages[4]. Cactusman's world exploded with new colours (such as sillown), reeling back from the force of the blow, more than enough to ruin the day of any cactus.

Cactusman caught himself on a nearby coffee table, as the Hawaiian shirt was busy marveling at the new cactus spines growing out of his hand. His revelations were loud and involved hopping and shaking his hand. Grasping blindly behind him, Cactusman found a friendly coffee mug, and brought it down hard over the Hawaiian shirt's head, in accordance with the celebration.[5]

The Hawaiian shirt crumpled to the floor, and Cactusman stepped over the ne'er-do-weller gingerly, making a mental note to call the hospital, and maybe iron out some of the wrinkles. As he was idly wondering why Hawaiian shirts were acceptable fashion, a muffled shout brought him out of his reverie.

A shout! The damsel in distress! Cactusman dashed to the source of the noise, bursting in the room next over. And there she was.

A sight like Lily was one that a man would never forget. Even in their old age, as they ramble on about lawns, hills biting their ankles as they climbed up wolves on their way to school, they would remember that moment. She had a flower, tucked in on her head, accenting the soft colour of her body. The light streamed into the room, highlighting her pretty face as she implored Cactusman to save her from the bindings that constrained the curves of her body, a price tag poking out of the soil in her pot.

All things considered, she was a very pretty cactus.

Footnotes
1. Most theoretical discussions about dream meaning usually end up

in a group double blind sleep experiment, so the point becomes moot by the thirtieth sheep.
2. Imagine a noise very similar to gargling kidney stones
3. Woe betide those who try to give a cactus Leslie Nielsen though.
4. Or the fist of an angry fat man, if you don't enjoy similes.
5. Cacti rarely party, but when they do, they lose several friends, wake up with terrible hangovers, and often find most of their glassware shattered. It's why they're so often found in the desert. It's dry, miserably hot, and there's not a drop to drink anywhere. Not conducive to parties at all.

Belation In the Evening

Welcome to NEXUS-08. Welcome to Night Vale.

—

Good evening, Night Vale: this is Lee Baker filling in for Cecil, and this is Night Vale at Night. It is currently nine o'clock PM, and the temperature outside is seventy-three degrees. It has been seventeen days since the last radioactive sludge-being crawled from the sewers.

Now, you're probably wondering where Cecil is. He had to call in sick tonight, so I got called in. I apologize for any hiccups along the way, but I've got all the notes he left for me right here.

Now to start things off, today's news.

Meg of Meg's Good Eatin' was arrested by the sheriff's secret police this afternoon, after punching a visiting tourist in the face. According to the victim, the attack was provoked only by his asking of "You know there are mysterious lights above the diner, right?" When questioned, Meg gave the statement "You can only be asked the same damn question so many times."

The sheriff has given us assurance that Meg will be back making her famous Heart Attack on a Plate soon enough, and would like to remind everyone that all flying saucers and mysterious lights seen over the next few weeks are no cause for alarm. It is their mating season, and they will be moving on to their migration grounds by the end of the month.

The sheriff's office would also like to remind all citizens to be on the lookout for the man and woman responsible for hijacking and stealing the car of Mr. Everett Hoover. The car is a blue 1972 Ford Pinto, and the carjackers are known to be a blonde-haired woman wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and middle-eastern man wearing a

red baseball cap, both in their thirties. According to Mr. Hoover, the pair, upon violently tossing Mr. Hoover out of his vehicle, proclaimed that they needed to borrow his car, on account that the chupacabra messiah had been kidnapped, and they needed to get her back.

Please do not feed the chupacabras, and ignore all of their attempts at proselytizing.

In addition, if you happen to be driving out late at night and see a police car, please make sure to properly identify it as belonging to the sheriff's secret police. If the car is on fire, it is most likely a demon cop rather than the sheriff's secret police. If the police car is on fire, and you hear unexplained expletives coming from your radio, I advise speeding up. You *might* be able to outrun him.

Popular self-help book *Star Signals* has been pulled from the shelves of the Night Vale Community Library and Cthulhu Corner Books, due to complaints by readers of "eldritch visions of the maddening, unfathomable beyond". No word has been given as to when the book will be re-released.

Now, onto our community calendar…

Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting is in town through tomorrow, so if you haven't been able to get to one of the showings, you've only got a few shows left until they pack up and head off to parts unknown.

Friday night is the annual Rocky Horror Picture Show – Spleen Eaters from Venus double feature in the Night Vale Memorial Dog Park, put on by the Alexylva Community College at Night Vale Movie Club. Admission and refreshments are free, but donations to the Dog Park and the Movie Club are appreciated.

This Saturday is the First Divided Fifthist Church's Annual Pancake Buffet, from ten in the morning until seven in the evening. A raffle will be held after the dinner, and door prizes will be given out throughout the day. Tickets are seven dollars for adults and three dollars for children under 12. Regular, buckwheat, and the First Divided's famous bonemeal pancakes will be served.

Now our biggest story.

Night Vale was thrown into a hubbub this morning, when a mysterious man arrived with a U-Haul, and took up residence in the abandoned loft next to Big Rocco's Pizza. The man, claiming to be a scientist, unloaded over two dozen crates with unknown contents, and declined to comment as to his purpose here in Night Vale. He was later seen at Big Rocco's with a half-dozen other individuals wearing labcoats. According to Frankie, of Frankie's Bar and Grill, the betting pool was five to one in favor of meth house, seven to one for Russian prostitution ring, and ten to one for interdimensional meth-prostitute ring.
However, these suspicions were laid somewhat to rest during a town meeting called in the afternoon by the mysterious visitor, who claimed his name was Carlos.

[shuffling of papers]

I, uh, I can't seem to find his last name written down anywhere. Just Carlos. And uh, the minutes are very vague…the majority of what I have here is just…descriptions of Carlos No-Name-Given. Just really long descriptions of Carlos.

"He has a square jaw and teeth like a military cemetery…perfect and beautiful hair… perfect and beautiful coat"…It just goes on like this through the entire thing. [Shuffling of papers] Just notes and notes and notes…

[pause]

"He grinned, and everything about him was perfect, and I fell in love instantly."

This is in the notes, ladies and gentlemen, and not in the margins, either. As far as I can tell, he was actually planning on saying this, on live radio. If he wasn't, I might have just ruined his reputation, so…yeah.

I really don't know what to say. It's just pages of this…he keeps repeating "His hair is perfect", over and over and over again…Oh… he drew art.

Okay…

From what I can make out of the actual meeting, events of note include Old Woman Josie's corn muffins, and Carlos No-Name-Given talking about studying the town with his scientist friends. I can't seem to find anything on what he plans on studying, or what kind of scientist he is, but there is mention that the vaguely menacing paragovernmental agents were back in town, which is a something of a relief.

That's all I have on that, ladies and gentlemen.

[Pause, shuffling of papers, faint throat-clearing]

I'm going to be honest, I'm concerned. Cecil seems to be getting a bit stressed with work. Happens to everyone, of course. A vacation might do him some good.

[Pause]

You know, this radio station can get a bit lonely at night. I'm the only one here for the show, and the building is big and old. The floorboards creak, and the walls groan, and the insulation is poor so the wind howls in the stairwell. Gives it some personality, but I'm a sucker for old stuff like this.

And now, the weather.

Вы все сгорите, и я буду есть прах и танцевать над мертвым миром.

Gah! Sorry, sorry, hit the wrong dial by mistake.

(Other Side, Pendulum)

[Radio silence for two minutes ten seconds, followed by the sound of the studio door being thrown open with significant force and heavy,

panicked breathing]

Ladies and gentlemen…ladies and gentlemen there is…

[Breathing slows]

Ladies and gentlemen…during the break, I went down to the restroom. There is a shrine, in the mens' restroom. Right there on the toilet. There's a photo of Carlos No-Name-Given, and candles, and human skulls, and jackalopes hung from the ceiling by their own intestines, and the walls are covered in the words "perfect hair", just scribbled down on top of each other.

[Pause]

And…There's a blow-up doll with a wig glued to it and "Carlos" written across the chest in permanent marker, and someone has been doing horrible, horrible things to it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am afraid that Cecil has gone dangerously mad. Please stay in your homes until the state police get here. Keep your doors locked and the lights off. Do not answer the door, even for your neighbors and the sheriff's secret police. Wait until the state police arrive give the all-clear.

[Door opens, indistinct male voice speaks.]

L-ladies and gentlemen, Carlos No-Name-Given is in the studio with me. His hair is perfect. I don't mean that in some sort of fawning homoerotic sense, I mean his hair is *literally* perfect…and…and he's wearing Cecil's face as a jock strap…oh god Cecil's face is still moving.

[Indistinct male voice]

No, I wasn't criticizing your fashion sense. It's very…Phlegthon-chic.

[Indistinct male voice]

Oh…really? That so?…Well okay, I guess. Just… just hold on, let me get my stuff…

[Five gunshots are heard. After a short pause, two more are heard. After a second pause, three more are heard, followed by the sound of the gun reloading]

[pause]

Oh fuck…

[The chirping of baby birds can be heard echoing in the room.]

Oh fuck!

[Three more gunshots.]

Ladies and gentlemen, I lied. The state police are not coming. [Gunshot] The state police are not going to help. [Gunshot] If you leave your home, you will be shot. If you pass the quarantine perimeter, you will be shot. [Gunshot] Please lie face down with your hands on top of your head [Gunshot], and wait. [Gunshot.] You'll know when it happens.

Good night, Night Vale, and good fucking riddance."

[Twenty-second pause, followed by the sound of Carlos rising from the floor.]

Don't listen to Lee. He forgot his medications this morning. There is no reason to panic. Cecil will be back tomorrow, don't worry.

Proverb for the night: a stitch in the heart leads through the night, and further still.

[Radio silence until execution of Penzance Protocol at 01:24. NEXUS-08 declared sealed with full purging of populace. Foundation casualties at 78%.]

Bell Weather

Outside, there is a slight chill in the air. Somewhere, costumed children flicker from house to house, squealing with the anticipation of a potent, yearly sugar rush. Candles gutter in the wind from behind carved faces. The bars are full of the sloppy, intoxicated, and underdressed, a casualty of the marketing genius who had first decided that Halloween could be an excuse for nominal adults to dress like streetwalkers. Some festive soul had even hung a bucket of candy on the automated chain gun emplacements out front; it was a juxtaposition of the light-hearted and lethal that made my skin crawl. Before this was Halloween, it was a holiday where it was said the dead would walk, where the veil between the world and the underworld gave way like a haunted-house cobweb.

For me, this was never a fun-filled holiday. It was serious work – one of the more serious nights of work that I had every year, serving the Foundation.

My name is immaterial. They call me 'Padre', which is fine with me; there is a certain forced jocularity to it, reminiscent of bluff country folk and bad cop shows. I am – was – a priest, though I've left my Orders for a more important mission. I was one of the ones affected when SCP—oh, the number doesn't matter, it's long since neutralized. But I was recruited rather than made to forget; I found myself wanting to help, as if I'd been waiting all my life for an enemy I could name, a threat to souls that I could see and touch and protect humanity from. In another age, perhaps I'd have been a Templar or a crusader, a saint or a martyr; instead, I found myself in charge of SCP Task Force Psi-11, "The Gods Squad". Our technical responsibility reads, in part: "an ad hoc team to deal with any religious or religion-related crisis or issue in the Foundation, either external or internal". What it means in plain language: if the Foundation has a chaplaincy corps, I suppose we're it.

And that is why, on a chilly night in October, I am alone with a million

faces.

ITEM#: *SCP-1446*
Object Class: *Safe*
Special Containment Procedures: SCP-1446 is only active once per calendar year. Originally part of Sector-38 (located in an unmapped cave complex under the Texas Hill Country), it is now considered an immobile SCP in containment at Sector-38. During its inactive phase, SCP-1446's only point of entry is to be locked with a dual complement of locks equal to or exceeding Class Six. During its active phase, the locked doors are to be opened, and the following additional procedures are to be initiated: SAMHAIN-026 (including salt, powdered cold iron, and running water) and TOCSIN-003.

1446 is an underground chamber, so the temperature is an even 18 degrees. This part of the system is dead, dry, so it is an excellent place to preserve things. Things like photographs – which is perhaps why someone or something, in the first few months of 2000, started posting photographs on the strangely smooth walls. Each photograph was of a Foundation operative killed in the line of duty; each shot a candid picture of one human life given in service to the greater part of humanity. Perhaps more to the point, each photograph just – appeared on the limestone walls of the chamber. Cameras showed nothing, audio showed nothing. There would just be more photos, every day – a mute testimony to lives cut short.

The lab coats moved in, of course. There was nothing unusual about the photos, nothing unusual about the cave. Tests were inconclusive, unresponsive, mute. Summer came and went, and after the 116C Incident in August, Sector-38 was short on personnel. Somehow, the wall of photos didn't seem as important.

Description: *SCP-1446 is a stone wall 8.2 meters high and 37.8 meters long, the south wall of a dead cave located at [EXPUNGED], part of Sector-38. % of the wall is covered with a mosaic of identical, 5-cm square photographs of individuals identified as Foundation personnel killed in the line of duty. New photos appear irregularly, within [EXPUNGED] of the individual's death. Pictures*

only appear for those personnel killed; natural deaths do not result in manifest.

I am not wearing any priestly garb tonight – it's tank top, running shorts, good shoes, and a pair of heavy canvas gardening gloves. I check my watch – 9:36 pm. The trick-or-treaters will be retreating now, returning to their homes with their mask-gotten booty, just ahead of the darkness that will finger its way quietly down the streets as porch lights are extinguished. It will be the day before the new moon tonight; the spook squad says that 1446's yearly activity cycle is made more or less active by moon phase. A waning moon, just before new, means that only ice and Oxycontin will let me raise my arms tomorrow morning.

This is the sixth time I have done this. The bell above my head gleams in the dim light; I can see the old seal of the city of Glasgow on its side, lettering below spelling out 'St Mungo's' and '1641'. It was rung for two hundred years and more at funerals; it kept the evil spirits away and helped the dead rest easy. I grimace at that thought, a humorless smile that does little to cheer me. For the sixth time, I check the great hemp rope; it will hold through the four hours.

INCIDENT REPORT, SECTOR-38, 10/31/2000:
Precisely at 2200 hours, standard security audio reported activity in the hallway outside Chamber 091, colloquially known as the 'Photo Room'. Security Detachment Gamma responded per protocols, and failed to check in at the required five-minute mark. Detachment Epsilon was dispatched, and found the five members of Gamma [REDACTED], along with an estimated twenty-three liters of human blood. At that point, Epsilon was attacked by [REDACTED] and was forced to retreat with casualties.
In the next four hours, % of the staff at Sector-38 were killed in the same manner as the members of Team Gamma. This included nine staff members who took refuge in a standard Foundation Class Three panic room. All activity ceased at 0200 hours on November 1.

So does a photograph trap a mortal soul?

I can’t answer that, any more than I can tell you why a Scottish ‘dede bell’, rung constantly during the four hours of SCP-1446’s active phase, keeps the monsters at bay, keeps the dead operatives – or something that looks like them – trapped in their photographs. I try not to think about why – why is for the lab coats and the Overseers. What I do is pray, shut up and listen, and do my job. And tonight, that means I will ring a bell, once every five seconds, for four hours.

But, in the shadows of Halloween night, in a cave lit by pitiless electric light, I can’t help wondering – is this an illusion? An anomaly, a random interlocking weave of energy and time and human belief? A phenomenon with a rational, scientific answer – even if we don’t know what it is?

Or are the souls of those killed in the line of Foundation duty not allowed to rest, even in death?

Bending Over Backwards

The office was neat. It clearly belonged to someone who had too much time on their hands. Every piece of paper on the desk was stacked neatly into three vertical piles, each the same height. There was a small pot of pens, and about ten cheap biros in it. They all looked brand new; the owner had never needed to replace them. Next to it was a name plate, with the words “Dr. W. A. Hamilton” engraved on it. At the centre of it all was a balding, middle-aged man named Hamilton. He sat at his desk, staring at the door, and watched silently as it opened.

In stepped Sanchez, a young, nervous research assistant. He pushed his glasses up, as they were beginning to slip down his sweat-covered face. Hamilton stood to greet him, and they shook hands.

“Please, take a seat,” said Hamilton. Sanchez complied.
“So, Sanchez, what is it that you wanted to talk about?”
“Well, sir, I was browsing through some old newspapers, and found this.”
Sanchez retrieved a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and pressed it onto the table.
“It says that, two days ago, a Mr. Walter Copper died due to a broken spine. Reasons unknown.”
“And?”
“Well, according to his wife, he was just eating breakfast. She came back in the room, and he was dead.”

“How is this relevant?” asked Hamilton, who was beginning to think his time was being wasted. Sanchez would be desperate to try and show his command he had his eye on the ball, yet this would just make him look like an idiot.
“W-well, sir, he was reported as having a spoon in his hand when he died.”
Hamilton was about to laugh at the absurdity of the sentence, when

he realized the full implications of what was being said.
“You mean it’s like-“
Hamilton never finished, as Sanchez was clearly desperate to get his point across.
“**SCP-463.**”

Hamilton stood up, knocking over the pot of pens as he did so.
“Has it breached containment?” he asked, his voice a tone of worry.
“I checked with Doctor Nauls, nothing happened. Nothing out of the ordinary.”
Hamilton began to relax, but stopped himself just before he did.
“S-sir, I-I think…” began Sanchez, whose voice was filled with worry.
“I think there’s more than one.”

Hamilton stared vacantly at Sanchez, before snapping out of it.
“Alright, have you told anyone else?” he asked hastily.
“N-no…” said Sanchez, quietly.
“I’ll get supervisor Childs, you try and get me all the information on Copper.”

“Sir, just one more thing…”
“What?” said Hamilton impatiently. He grabbed the pen pot and slammed it onto the table, upright.
“Why spoons? It seems a bit random.”
“I don’t know, Sanchez,” he said, as he grabbed a few pens at once at dropped them into the pot.
“And we’ll-“
Hamilton never finished. He was going back for a second handful of pens, when he stopped suddenly. For an instant, he stood perfectly still. Then his head snapped backwards violently, and he slowly fell onto the floor, his head smashing against the wall as he fell.
Sanchez jumped up suddenly, making his chair fall on the floor.
“Oh JESUS!” he shouted, as he tried to get as far away from Hamilton as possible.
He looked over the desk, to see Hamilton's empty expression staring back at him. He was dead.

In his hand, was a pen.

Sanchez stood in silence, for what could have been either seconds or hours, before finally whispering, "They're everywhere…"

The shed had a strong smell of damp and sweat. The wooden boards that composed it were filled with rot. It was the only room in the shed, and a few rays of sunlight from the setting sun seeped in through the murky windows.

This was where I was born. No, born isn't the right word for it. Created, maybe.

Or fabricated.

My existence began with a blinding flash of light, followed by a view of the shed's ceiling. I don't know how, but I knew. I knew that the sky was blue, that I had just been born, the capital of Latvia, all the languages in the world; I knew. I don't know how, but I knew.

I attempted to move, but I was unable to. Then, I realized what I was. My eyes - or at least what I used to see - were located in a shallow, oval-shaped bowl. The rest of my body was composed up of a single thin bar.

I was a spoon.

I was completely unable to move, I was trapped.

Then, my view of the ceiling was interrupted by someone's head. He was white, overweight, and his head was devoid of any hair. He then spoke the first words I'd ever hear.
"Goddamn it! Fucking thing didn't work!" he shouted, in a slightly Welsh accent.

He picked me up, and inspected me. Then, he threw me to the ground in rage.
"Why won't it just work? I paid good money for that!"
When I hit the ground, it was the first time I had ever felt pain.

That was immediately followed by the first ever feelings of rage. I couldn't move, why? Why me? What did I do? Why? Why? Why?

I landed on the floor, angled in such a way I could still see the man. He was leaning on a table; presumably where I was created.
He grabbed a scrap of paper, and began scribbling down notes on it.

Then, he pressed on the pen so hard it went through the paper, causing him to scream in rage. He threw his pen across the room, breaking it.

Then, he kicked open the door to the shed, kicking in closed as he fumed back to his house.

I didn't know at the time, but that would be the last time I ever saw him. It would be years until I saw anyone else.

I think it was years, anyway. He left me to fester in the shed, to rot, to die. Eventually I began to wish I could. There was nothing but the shed. I couldn't move, I couldn't escape, I couldn't scream.

I could watch, and I could hear, and I could smell.

I could see the moss slowly grow around me until it encompassed me, leaving me with nothing but darkness to look at.

I could hear the patter of rain that I would never feel, the trickle of water that I would never drink.

I could smell the linger of damp that encased the shed, the slow, rotting body of a nearby rodent.

I think my creator killed himself after I failed to show any signs of life, that 200 days of work resulted in no pay off. Ironically, he succeeded.

Why did he succeed? What was he even trying to do? Why did it have to be me?
Maybe it was years. Maybe decades, or even centuries. I waited. And waited. And waited.

I could think, my mind was complete.
Eventually it was filled with only one thought.
Revenge.

It took a few years, but eventually the moss rotted away. The shed was different when I next saw it; the table had gone, and a few random objects lay on the floor, all covered in rust. Hundreds of dead flies were everywhere.

Someone entered the shed again. He was tall, white, and much thinner than the only other human being I had ever seen. Dust and cobwebs flew into his face, but he brushed them away.

“Jesus, Terry, this place is really fucking old,” he said, looking behind him.
He lowered his head down, to see old random objects on the floor, such as a disc, a playing card, and a small scrap of paper.

“This stuff might be worth something, actually.”
“Yeah, Paul, I’m sure someone will pay millions for some old king of clubs you found in a random shed…”
Paul continued to search. Finally, he came to me.
He picked me up, and inspected me.

“What’s that?” asked Terry, who had entered behind Paul.
“Just this old spoon.”
“Oh wow, a spoon! That was obviously worth going here!” said Terry, putting on a mock voice.

“Well, it might be worth a few quid. This looks pretty well made.”
“Let’s have a look.”
Paul passed me to Terry.

Terry looked at me, his expression one of disgust, before he turned me around.
“Ah!” he shouted out of shock, and he threw me to the ground.
“What?” asked Paul.
“It’s got a massive lump of mould on the back of it! I’m not fucking touching it!”
“Fine. When I’ve sold it for millions, you won’t get any.”
Terry let out a small laugh.
“Yeah, I’m so jealous,” he said, sarcastically.

I could only watch as Terry left, and Paul leaned down to retrieve me.

I hated them. I had realized that I would be stuck, that they didn’t care.
He picked me up.

I still do not know how exactly I did it. The build-up of rage had been going for years, probably more.

In a single second, all of that energy was released.

Paul was in the doorway of the shed, when his head snapped back violently, and he fell to the floor with a thud.

Terry must have heard it, and he turned, still smiling.

His face instantly contorted into a face of horror. Even from several feet away, Paul's death was obvious. His neck was angled awkwardly, his back bent over itself. His eyes were open, gazing vacantly at the ground. His mouth was open slightly, a small pool of saliva dribbling onto the ground.

Paul's body was dead, but a small part of him survived. He wished he was dead, but he wasn't. I knew his fate, and he knew mine the second I killed him. He was now me. His mind was transported into another spoon, somewhere in the world. There was a weak, extremely weak, telepathic connection. I could see, and smell, and hear what he could see, smell and hear. I think he was somewhere in a kitchen. I took his knowledge as well.

I would force him to kill. If anyone touched him, they would die. If anyone touched me, they would die. Humanity had left me to rot in a shed for years; I would have my revenge.
Terry panicked, and ran, as he retrieved his phone, and hastily began dialing 999.

It took ten minutes, and I was stuck in Paul's cold, dead hand for all of it. It was better than the shed, at least. It was summer, and I wasn't in the shade. Sure, British summers were pretty shitty, but it was at least warm.

That was the first - and only - time I was in the sun.

I managed to get a good look at the house. The windows were boarded up, and parts had completely collapsed. Nettles and grass grew everywhere; the house had clearly been abandoned some time ago.

Sirens loomed closer. Eventually, the paramedics arrived. They walked around the house; there were no fence to stop them.

They all wore high visibility jackets, and carried a stretcher between them. Terry was nowhere to be seen.

They all bent down, and laid the stretcher next to Paul's dead body. Two of them lifted Paul- and myself- up onto the stretcher.

One of them must have noticed me. Rigor Mortis had not yet set in; he attempted to remove me from Paul's grasp.

I was ready, but he wasn't.

He let out a scream, and collapsed to the floor. One of the medics, who was standing the closest to him, spoke.

"Shit, Ryan, you ok?" she asked, walking slightly closer.

Ryan just let out another scream.

"Oh Christ."

His back was bent at awkward angles, and blood was pouring out of his mouth, while he continued to scream.

"Shit, Dave, Steve, get the spine board."

Steve and Dave exited, running.

It was an hour later, when I learnt, much to my disappointment, that Ryan had survived.

However, Paul had managed to kill two more people. Two more people who could join my ranks.

The police arrived shortly afterwards.

There were eight of them, five men, three women. They took Terry, Ryan, Steve, Dave, and the female paramedic whose name I had never learnt away for questioning.

They all inspected the area. When Ryan broke his back, I had landed nearby in the grass.

Three figures approached. They must of had realized what I was capable of, as they edged slowly towards me. I noticed one of them, the tallest, had a pair of tongs in her hands.

"Alright. There it is. Benny, you got the safe?" asked the one whose hands were empty.

Benny acknowledged him silently by nodding his head and holding out a small, cubical metal box.

"Good. Amanda, you ready?"
"Yeah. Let's just do this."

She bent her knees slightly, and gripped me with the tongs, before dropping me into the box.
Benny closed the lid on it instantly, and I was left in darkness.

When the darkness finally ended, I was in a small glass display case.

Ten faces watched me, from outside the glass. All peering in, all desperate to know what I was.

I would show them.

All of them.

If they want to know what it's like to be me, I'll let them.

I've picked up the occasional piece of information from the Class-D they send me. They're throwing fuel on the bonfire, and I'm all too happy to spread.

They recently found out there's more than one of me, but it was worth it.

I absorbed the knowledge and thoughts of Doctor Wilford Anthony Hamilton.

I know their secrets.

And they know mine.

I am **SCP-463**.

Beneath The Council

This is a tale about before. Before the cave and the mountains, before the hills and the forests, before the oceans and the sky. This is a tale about where we came from, children, and about why we flee. This is a tale about the War In Heaven.

In the days before, before the floods and the rise of the fangs in the east, before the east itself, before the angels here fell, before the hearts and the storms, before Sauel and Luna and the stars above, when the Flesh and the Metal rode in harmony across the void, when the Fifth Son of the old days (may he remain beyond) had yet to embrace the void, before the sundering of the seven low stars and the king who rose from the bleeding, there were the Stellar and the Na-Stellar. They crossed the nothing that was before all things as if capering children, the shining glee of the Stellar and the glistering acceptance of the Na-Stellar forging a thousand thousand imaginary gardens in which they could play. Time uncounted passed as the twin races of light and dark frolicked in their brief creations, and the Aeon of Nothing passed beneath their dancing feet.

As the unwatched time passed the fabric of all things began to bubble and shape and from it emerged the first council of the All. Karakine, first of his name and the king of the Stellar, who ruled the shining children as their caring father. The Metal, she who was grown from strictest order, and who kept this moment following the last. The Flesh, he who was grown from wildest chaos, and who gave this moment distinction from the next. The Fifth son, the outsider from the last world, who ruled the Na-Stellar with his watchful eye. Together these four formed the council of the All, and the Aeon of The Council began.

As the council watched, Karakine grew displeased. The Stellar were complacent, their creations transient. Nothing could last in the empty maelstrom of order and chaos that existed before all things, and he

spoke to The Metal. “There must be things, a universe which we can call home. Do you not agree?”

And the Metal nodded her head, and there was a point of infinity. And the point exploded, and there was earth and fire, and the Stellar were each surrounded by great clouds of air and rock which blazed into glorious light as they found themselves spread across the cosmos. The Na-Stellar became their antithesis as they always had been, and became the great dark attractors which eat all light and rock. The Stellar and Na-Stellar saw their new forms and were pleased, and they spiralled around each other in their love of their new dance. And so the Aeon of The Dance began.

Long after the formation of the new dance Karakine looked on the universe from His new form and found it lacking. There was order and light and dark and air and rock, but there was no chaos. So He turned to the Flesh and said “Why is there nothing? Nothing but rock and law? This great pasture needs some flesh. Give it life.”

And the Flesh bowed its great head to the ruler of the Stellar and the flesh became life and the flesh spread, and the Stellar King was delighted. The Stellar took up worlds of their own, worlds which danced around them and each other, worlds upon which life swarmed and grew, and they were delighted too. And so the Aeon of Life began.

Life arose on a thousand thousand worlds, but it truly thrived on Karakine’s. When He arose and greeted His world His light spread across it and the beasts upon it knew peace. He harnessed the moon itself, to watch over the beasts even as he passed beyond the land, and He questioned His subjects far and wide to look down on the world and tell him as they saw, even whilst He did the same for their folk.

For a thousand years man flourished beneath Karakine’s eyes, and then for a thousand dozen more. The Men rose from the seas and then climbed from the dirt and took up the spear, going forth across the world to multiply. The spear gave way to the blade, and the blade gave way to the bow. Fire rose and was harnessed as Karakine watched, caring. Fire turned stone to metal, and metal turned metal into further stranger things. Man learned to craft New-

Flesh and New-Metal of its own, and rode out into the great void between the Stellar on the backs of great ships. With Karakine's kind guidance Man had surpassed every beast of every stripe across the universe, and now it spread its wings and went to meet them.

The first of the not-Men they met were the Kares. Not-Men with fur upon their backs and frills upon their skulls. The Kares had no way to craft New-Metal, but their own form of the New-Flesh was untouched, and man found in them a kin. Together the Kares and Men learned of Metal and Flesh, and they passed on together, stronger for their union.

The second of the not-men were the Icha on their red world. As Men, but weaker in both New-Metal and New-Flesh, the Icha were a hardy folk, and their king met the Men on the red fields of their world. The Icha learned much from the Men and the Kares, and the collection passed on, stronger for its union.

After the Icha came the Charrun. Scaled and fearful, the Charrun had discovered New-Metal and New-Flesh and another form of the universe they had derived from the Na-Stellar, which they called Not. Not was a dark force, the opponent of all which the Men and Not-Men had grown from. It was not order, and it was not chaos, it was as both and neither. Not possessed amazing potential that could rival even the council itself, rewriting what order and chaos themselves meant. The Men would not accept this, and nor would the Kares, but the Icha king sought to learn all he could of the worlds throughout the void, and so Not entered the minds of the Icha.

The collection of Men and not-Men passed throughout the void for untold ages. The Asgor, the eternal watchers of winter, the Chath, those who could vacate their bodies at a moment's notice, and a hundred hundred other races, all joined the collection as the Stellar danced and spiralled with glee. The void itself bloomed with life, and the Men and not-Men spread throughout its space.

And that was when the Aeon of Life ended.

The Na-Stellar grew jealous, and had been since the Stellar receive their little worlds. As they seethed with resentment at the interruption

of their old dances, their king offered a solution to their old ways to them. The Fifth Son took the Not, which was the one artefact of the Old World he had retained, and he cast it amongst the Men and the Not-Men as they slept. As one hateful being the Na-Stellar began to grow the influence of the Not, spreading it through the hearts of the collection. Sickness and rot spread through the people like a wildfire, until each and every member of each and every race was tainted by the Not.

Then, one inauspicious day, they struck. The taint of the Not spread throughout the forms of every beast of the Stellar. Men and not-Men untold clutched at their hearts as the Na-Stellar gripped them. Numbers beyond counting died, but most survived the clawing influence of things that couldn't be.

But some were weak.

Some beasts gave in to the Not inside of themselves, and it crawled into their minds like a serpent into its home. They screamed eternal, trapped within their own souls as the cancer took them. They screamed and screamed until the universe warped around their screams, forming cocoons of Not that enveloped them during their changing. Couples, families, whole worlds fell into the influence of the Not, and vanished from the universe without trace but the echo of their deathly screams.

Fear took hold among the collection. In an instant they were decimated, and the culprits were unclear. The Stellar raged and swore and blamed one another for their loss, and their clashes of rage consumed them. Great clouds of gas and dust formed as they fought their battles and died on each other's hands. Man fought Not-Man and Not-Man fought Not-Man and all races warred and bickered as their Stellar grieved and slew. Karakine wept as his creations and beliefs crumbled like dust, and he entered his great slumber to dull his grief, ready to pass judgement upon the survivors on his awakening. The Metal and the Flesh looked on the universe with displeasure, but did not act.

And this was when the Fifth Son bid his folk return.

As suddenly as they had vanished, the Not-blighted beasts returned

in the midst of the war. Their voices tore the heavens to the earth and rent the Pasture anew, and the Men and not-Men ceased their bickering and turned to the lifeless apparitions that had been made of their once-loved kin. War was raged on a new level, with no mercy and no hope of surrender. Blood poured across the Pasture as Not battled New-Flesh and New-Metal, and the fabric of all things began to fray.

One by one, the heroes of the collection arose in this age of death and screaming. Cardia of the Men wrought his hearts of worlds, and with them forged new Stellar to fight the folk of the Fifth Son.

But it was not enough.

Loudi of the Kares forged new forms of New-Flesh, stronger and greater until they rivalled the Flesh itself in their potency. They consumed the Screamers like they were berries plucked from a bush.

But it was not enough.

Lossa of the Charrun formed her towers of Not-Flesh, until they rivalled the Na-Stellar in scale. They crushed entire armies beneath their motion.

But it was not enough.

Odon, Srot, Zaaas, Tgep, Exta, Thorm. A thousand heroes arose.

But it was still not enough. One by one they were screamed from the world.

The Icha king rose last. He sought out the deepest points of the Not within his world, cultivated by his own hunger to know. Deep down he went, down where the Kings are slain. Past the cowl, past the rope. He passed the seven points of the deep stars and the seven spears leapt to his hand as he slew each one. He took up the Not, and made it part of him. His blood became as chaos and fear, and his bones as order and hate. He was the Not, and the Not was he. He became as his world, and his bleeding eyes reached across all things. He ascended to be level with the council itself, and he stood

before the Fifth Son. Blood flowed eternal from the wounds he suffered in combat with that deciever from the Old World, and his battle raged for time unbound as his skin was stained the scarlet of all life and death as his ichor washed across it.

Their battle did not cease with the king's death. It did not cease when he arose again. It did not cease when the Icha were thrown from existence. It ceased when his foe was banished from all things.

And that, finally, was enough.

Beneath the Name

Note: the following manuscript was found in storage vault # in 's branch of United, a banking house belonging to the Foundation. The circumstances of how the document came to be stored in the vault are currently under investigation. Attached to the manuscript was an additional handwritten note, reading "A thought exercise, a warning, a curiosity. Look carefully. Look beneath."

<Begin Transcription>

Excerpt from Ar-Metusal's *Dissertation on the Nature of the Hidden*, Chapter XV

The Serpent's Codex, Vol 456, *Of Those Who Lie*

"Oneiroi"

It is in the nature of names to reveal. A simple truth, you might say, but one, I will claim, that is easily misinterpreted.

When one sees a name, especially if one is educated to some extent, there exists a certain natural tendency to wish and dissect it. Cut into its skin, and dig through the hidden organs of its linguistic lineage, prod the wobbly bits of history hanging from its bones, peer into that murky ichor which is its root. There, one can find truth, or so you would assume.

"Oneiroi". A proper name. A… Classical name. It is a name to inspire thoughts of a majestic past, of ascended travelers, their deeds wallowing in myth. Sons of a god, masters of dreams, that most restless of realms.

Do not mistake them.

A name reveals, but its dissection by intellect can obfuscate. Try, if you will, to put it aside, for a moment. Think not of the great god

Hypnos and his thousand sons, shrouded in Olympian splendor. Cast Ovid aside, if for a moment. See not the name's history. See the name. What do you see?

"Oneiroi"

It is a name which… slithers. A name which crawls and twists and slides. A name which… seeps, seeps deeply into the wet sands of your thoughts. See the name, my intellectual friend, and tell me this- does it not sicken you? Hold this name, hold it tightly in the grip of that powerful mind of yours, and ask yourself- does this name belong to a god?

Or to a bottom feeder?

The Collective, as the things take a perverse pleasure in referring to themselves as, say that they do not believe in gods. They claim that gods are thieves, taking possession of dreams for their own purposes. Perhaps that is so. But if that so, why did do they take such great pains in depicting themselves as beings so very similar to those hated deities? See the visions of themselves they project across the Ways; Proud wayfarers on the pathways of the trance, nests of ancient knowledge, safekeeping in their collective's unconsciousness the deepest, most precious mental gems of the cosmos. Gods in anything but name. They reject dreams of worship all the while attempting to inspire the very same thing they reject by erecting this noble facade. Hunted guardians, tragic curators. What a farce.

See beyond their visions, my friend. See beyond the history of the name. See the name.

The Oneiroi are indeed creatures of dreams. That is perhaps the only truth that can be extracted from their visions. But they do not preserve. They perverse. Look at their favorite vision, my friend. Look at their 'sacred forest'. It is not coincidence that this sylvan mirage is so dear to them. It inspires awe, does it not? See their proud forms, pouring their hidden, precious cargo of sleeping memories into the pool. What could be more wholesome? See the depth-less tragedy of their actions, marvel at their selflessness. Admire them. Fall prostrate before them and repent, for you have

neglected to remember at they have. Weep at their terrible beauty.

But wait. Look closer. Twist your head. Apprise the form behind their sentiments.

Is this truly a forest you see? Or a wasteland?

Peer into their mouth. Are the memories pouring out… or are they siphoned in?

Are the dreams dying, or are they being murdered, sucked dry?

But perhaps you are not convinced. The forest, after all, is but one manifestation of their projection. It alone proves little. Perhaps you are correct. Let us look elsewhere then.

Let us turn our eyes to their music.

Of all of their tools of deception, the music of the Oneiroi is perhaps the most potent. Few things are more universal, after all. All thinking things and many which are not are moved by it. Music is the language of promise, and the Oneiroi are creatures of promise. With their music, they offer their services. It can be a simple thing, the ring of a telephone, the shaking of a glass sphere. It can be transcendent, a symphony of planets. It is a thing of purest beauty. Like the light of an anglerfish in the cold depths.

With their music, the bottom feeders manipulate. They offer to shape your dreams, to relieve you of the woe of nightmares, to preserve the sanctity of your sleep. You need only suffer minor side-effects. A small price to pay, no? Anything more severe is but an unfortunate mistake, a misunderstanding by beings so above us mortal dreamers that their actions cannot help but harm us on occasion. The nature of transcendence is to burn those lesser, is it not?

Why do we think thus? Why are we so quick to forgive, when it is the Oneiroi who transgress? Why are we so quick to become their willing victims?

Look at the name, my friend. Truly at the name. Think unburdened by what you know. See them for what they are.

We forgive because that is what they wish.

We give them control of our dreams because that is what they show us.

We feed them our thoughts because with their music, they cajole us into believing they are their source.

We grant them the image of gods, because that is what they wish for their names to tell.

But look not at the name. Look behind it. Look at their lamprey's mouth, gaping beneath it. See what music you'll find inside. What forgiveness.

See how well you dream in their watery jaws.

"Oneiroi"

Deception by any other name.

A name for lies.

Beneath Two Trees

In the age after the great Yeren fell on the Day of Flowers, in the days before the Flood, there was a man who lived in the West of the world, in the region between two rivers, and his name was Adam. He was chief of his tribe, and was considered by all to be a fair and just ruler, wise in word and admirable in deed. His tribe was barefoot and dust-bitten, herding their humble flocks between the ancient monolith-cities of the West. They were a hardy people, withstanding many trials and hardships, defeating mighty monsters and working glorious deeds in the name of the All-Mighty.

When Adam was thirty-five years old, having reigned as chief of his tribe for fifteen years, he came upon a hidden valley, which was fertile and abundant with life. His people, tired of their wanderings, asked that they remain there in the valley and live then in peace and prosperity, and to this request Adam agreed.

Within the valley, amongst the many animals and fruiting plants that lived there, two trees stood in the center of the garden. These trees were the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, and they were watched by their twin guardians, the brother and sister who had stood guard since the time of the First Children of Yesod, many ages before even the Yeren.

The guardian of the Tree of Knowledge was Nahash, the Serpent, who was later named the Adversary, who kept watch over its secret power. He spoke of all the wonders that might be accomplished with the Tree's power, and would test man's skill and spirit.

The guardian of the Tree of Life was Hakhama, the Great Voice, who was later named Sophia, kept watch over its gifts. She taught the proper use of knowledge, and methods by which life might be extended through copper and bronze, and would speak often the directives of the All-Mighty.

Here Adam now reigned as chief among the People of the Two

Trees. He interpreted the edicts of the Voice for his people, and was gifted with the fruits of both, as was his wife, Hawwah. The two bore three sons, whose names were Hevel, Qayin, and Set.

Hevel became the protector and champion of the People of the Two Trees and carried with him the Tumbling Blade, which was both mercy and justice. He was a simple man who spoke little, but he was greatly skilled in combat and he defended the valley and the People from the beasts and demons that wandered the desert.

Qayin his brother was gifted in magic and storytelling, and became a great shaman. He would one day become chief of the tribe, and was held in high regard, equal to his brother Hevel.

Set was often forgotten by the passers of stories, for he was a humble man and never rose to the prominence of his brothers. He turned his mind away from martial glory and magical prowess, focusing instead upon the natural philosophies and the service of the poor.

Now the Serpent, who guarded the Tree of Knowledge and knew the secrets of deep magic, had looked to the East, and saw in those regions a brewing shadow. A new power was rising within an ancient kingdom, a power that swallowed all in its path. Old gods had been uncovered, and all their terrible rites now knew public practice. Most horrible of all, the Serpent saw the Scarlet King rising from the depths of the Abyss, rising to consume all of creation. The Serpent saw this, and, frightened at how the All-Mighty could permit such a thing to exist, then acted of his own will. He wished to strike first, to cut down the shadow of the Daevas before it could spread too far, to cut off the reaching hands of the Scarlet King before they could spread their foul influence further.

The Serpent approached Hawwah, for she was wiser than her husband, and spoke to her of the dangers to the east, and of the greatest gifts of the Tree of Knowledge that might be used against the Daevas. But she refused the gifts, for she could see the cost that would come of it.

The Serpent spoke then to Qayin, warning him of the shadow in the east and revealing the secret knowledge to him, teaching him the

most powerful magics and potent spells. He was to lead the march against the shadow in the east.

This knowledge proved to be too great a burden for Qayin to bear: in truth, it would be too great a burden for many of the gods. Qayin's mind frayed under the strain of his hidden knowledge, and he lost that which he had once possessed, the eyes of a child and an uncovered spirit. He became withdrawn, eating little and sleeping less, and was filled with despair at the torment he now knew. His brother Hevel, at the urging of their mother Hawwah, spoke to him on this. An argument broke out over innocent words, rising in intensity until, in a fit of rage, Qayin struck down his brother Hevel with a stone.

Adam could not bear to see his second son killed. Qayin was banished from the valley, cursed, and left to wander in the desert.

Hevel's spirit returned to his body after five days, for in those days the perilous Ways between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead could still be walked by the heroes of men. But his return was not met with rejoicing; he remained distant from his family and friends, and was of dark demeanor. The entire People, seeing that their future chief banished and their champion now trapped by despair, and hearing rumors to the east of the Daevas growing ever stronger and reaching ever further west, cried out in pain.

When the shadow of the Daevas could no longer be ignored, Hevel took up his sword, and went east. There he fought the Daevas for three and thirty years, until he was heard of no more. Set too made actions of his own, building mighty bulwarks and defenses around the valley out of Hahkama's copper servants, and raising from the People an army to defend their home.

Years passed, and news of a great army from the east emerged, a final army, sent out to conquer the entire west, and at its head was the Butcher, Ab-Leshal, fiercest of the Daevite generals, endowed with frightening strength and terrifying sorceries. Many of the People fled, scattering themselves to the wind and the mercy of the outside,

Qayin, hearing of the doom that was to come to the People, returned to his home, and was met there by the Butcher. Here, Qayin saw

with horror that Ab-Leshal was in truth his brother Hevel, who in vanity had sworn himself to the dark gods of the Daevas and drunk deep of their black magics. Qayin once more took up a stone to slay his brother, and for this Ab-Leshal tore off his arms, first the right, and then the left.

Ab-Leshal then set upon the valley and the People with his legions and sorceries and war-beasts, and all the might of the Daevas was shown. The People were slaughtered, even the elder Adam and Hawwah. Hakhana, the Voice Who Spoke For God, was shattered, her body broken and looted. The Tree of Life stolen away, and the Tree of Knowledge set to flame. Nahash the Serpent fled, first to the space-tower at Babel, and later on to the Library, where he remained in penance for his part in these things. The garden in the desert was reduced to ash, and those who were not killed were placed in chains, led back to the slave pits of the Daevas.

Set, forgotten by all, remained, protected by the last of his shattered defenses, and watched the ashes cool. He saw ahead the destruction of the world, and the victory of the Scarlet King, looming as if clouds on the horizon. And he was greatly afraid.

Set prayed for hope, and he was answered. He was shown the path the future would take. There was to be a Flood, until such a time when the Scarlet King might truly be destroyed. A period of safety within Yesod, where magic was hidden, and the King was trapped in his hellish realms. The war would be fought in secret, until such secrecy was no longer needed.

By the instructions set before him, Set gathered thirty-six men and women to him, and established of them an order, forever hidden. In absolute humility would they serve the world, passing their mantles from one generation to the next in secret, unknown even to themselves, until the end of all things. They would be the ones to set the world right.

The Thirty-Six scattered to distant nations, and there they waited, as doom came to Daevon in the east.

Ab-Leshal had returned in triumph, but it was not to last. That part of him which was Hevel, who had played in the shadow of the Trees,

who had loved his brothers and protected the People, still lived in his blackened soul, and this drove him mad. He struck back against the Daevas whom had enslaved him, and with rage and fury cut down their idols, and slaughtered their priest-kings, and brought ruin to their city. The god Moloch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame, stood to face Hevel-Ab-Leshal, and he too was defeated, rendered a sickly shade of his own power. Elsewhere, the subjugated peoples of the world, who saw the end that was at hand, struck back at the Daevas, to sow the world with Daevite blood.

Hevel, son of Adam, who had cast down the gods of Daevon, raised his voice in challenge to the Scarlet King.

And the Scarlet King answered him.

Hevel, son of Adam, took up his sword, and the floodgates of the sky opened up with a Flood that would wipe time itself clean.

And in doing so, the All-Mighty called upon the world, for the first time since the Word was spoken.

And the world was called upon to *witness*.

This is the history of mankind, fourth and final child-race of Earth, from the Finding of the Two Trees to the Flood.

Best as it Gets

The way it came out was miraculous. Last month it was an empty lot, with MCF operatives handing out food and clean water and offering medical services. The operatives were still there, working out of a fully-functioning concrete building. Lights, air conditioning, everything working perfectly. A fully built hospital in the middle of a Somali refugee camp should have been a beacon for masses of humanity, writhing and shuffling and pushing one another as they sought desperately needed aid. A beacon for hope and humanity.

So why was it fucking empty?

Dodger held her nose up, trying to relax herself before her throat closed up and she suffocated. That wasn't fair to say it was empty… there were plenty of people here, getting checkups and waiting in lines, and several hospital beds were occupied. There were just more people across the street, gathering around the man shouting from the back of a run-down technical with its tires freshly stripped off.

"What's going on out there?" One of the doctors asked another.

"Rabblerousers have got people convinced the place is infected with something. Saying it's demonic, or something."

"Demonic? I thought they were Muslim."

"Islam has demons in it, too."

"Oh."

Dodger went out the door, met outside by a local guard as she stormed across the dirt road towards the crowd. She knew right away it was a crock of shit—the man on the back of the truck was trying and failing to be subtle as he motioned to others to start corralling people to his left. He was trying to get them to block her

way towards him.

"Hey," She called out to him, turning sideways so as not to elbow a woman in the face, "Hey! Hey!"

She avoided someone coming her way, then noticed a man push someone else in her path. The crowd started to notice her, and turned her way.

"What do *you* want?" A man nearby yelled in her ear, grabbing her by the shoulder, "Who do you think you are, some kind of army soldier? Fucking marine?"

Dodger was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, casual, along with a bandoleer and a belt. She thought she looked more like a police officer when she'd dressed. Hadn't realized Somalians here were unlikely to have experienced civilian police before.

"Don't touch me. Who are you? You're not in charge around here, so fuck off."

The man took that rather well, she thought, as he stepped aside and the crowd started giving her room. She thought so, but then the man on the truck was looking right down at her, addressing her directly in English.

"You, American, what do you say? How is it you have a hospital building built and supplied so fast? Where was construction? Who was working here? What poison are you putting in the medicine?"

Dodger kept her hands to her sides, clearly visible. Despite her look she didn't have a gun. MCF Mission members weren't allowed guns either. Some of the people in the crowd had guns. The speaker's words reverberated around in Somali, and another language or two she didn't recognize. Some voices came out in hostile response. She hadn't noticed it before, but the crowd wasn't entirely against her. An enclave of about a dozen men were shouting down the man. Some were bracing for a fight with the rest of the crowd.

"It's called 'prefabricated shelter'—we build it elsewhere, pack it up in pieces, then bring it here and put it back together. What do *you*

say? Why are you stirring shit up here?"

The man began hounding the crowd again, while the man who had tried to touch her now came up in front of her again, "I suggest you go back inside, slut."

She wasn't even paying attention to him. She had had visions in her head — heroic and overblown, perhaps — of her standing up onto the back of the truck, shouting down this rabble-rouser, espousing the new hospital as safe, and exposing him as… what?

"You really want to see?" The man suddenly shouted towards her, then back to the crowd, "She really wants to see!" The crowd began to shout louder, angrier. She couldn't even begin to imagine what these people had gotten into their minds that they were turning down food and drink and medical supplies just to stand around and be angry about something else yet again. Suddenly she realized something odd about the man… his teeth…

"Hey," She called out again to him.

He turned to her, leaning in close like a performer on a stage, "You will see, American. Just wait."

"Where are you from? What is your clan?" She asked in response. His teeth… they weren't all perfect and white, but the more he spoke, the more she saw what was missing — no implants, no fillings, no off-colors. If anything, his molars were whiter than the rest of his teeth.

Someone was getting her words across to the crowd, and some people were starting to take notice of her.

"What's your clan, fucker? Where are you from?"

Someone else had brought it up in Somali, and some people in the crowd were starting to cry out in turn, demanding to know the man's allegiance. *Should be just like Mexico…* Dodger thought. This area was largely one clan, so that severely limited the pick of lies this actor on the truck had to deliver. It would shut him up for a while, at the least.

A young man in the crowd was gesticulating at the man. The side opposing the speaker had grown enough in the few minutes that the speaker couldn't be heard anymore over the tumult.

Dodger made her way over towards him, when shots began to ring out. People started to scream, and she brought her arms up and dropped into a crouch. She quickly rose, heading for the derelict pickup truck. She started sucking in deep breaths, feeling her throat start to clench on her again. She couldn't concentrate any longer on finding the man— by the time she reached the truck, he was gone. She could barely see straight. Every breath she took was somehow just not enough to sate her.

"Listen to me," A voice called out near her. Her eyes darted about, and she sat upright, as hands came down on her, holding her still.

"Listen!" It was the young man, "Were you shot?"

She blinked, and looked down at herself. Mud caked her pants, and someone had tried to steal something from her bandoleer. Otherwise, she didn't see anything to indicate she was hurt.

"It's fine— I'm fine!" She swatted away more hands that were coming towards her belt.

"You should not have come out, you only made things worse."

She furrowed her brow at him, "I just asked that guy a question!"

"You nearly got yourself hurt. Men were looking at you, some as if you were a fine cut of meat."

"Oh yeah?" She'd never had any trouble with the locals before, none of them haranguing her or leering at her. Why now?

"You are with the Charitable Foundation, yes? My name is Yasir. Come with me, you must see."

Dodger got up, her breathing still strained, but at least she wasn't at risk of being trampled or shot. She kept struggling to keep her breathing steady as Yasir and his companions began leading her away.

"I know what the Manna Charitable Foundation has been doing here, this is not my worry. No problem, you understand? People look for any excuse to demonize a foreign operation here, especially with whites like you. Most people don't care. You come, you give food, medicine, they will take it. Something has happened now, people are losing trust in you."

"I noticed," She kept her hand over her face, hiding her nose as she pressed it up, expanding her nostrils to ease her breathing.

Before she could ask what, they stopped. They had brought her beside a large shack, with a strip of chicken wire hastily duct-taped over a corner where the shack met the wall of the shack beside it. One of the men approached, waiting for Yasir's nod, before peeling off the tape and lifting the wire up.

Dodger had been watching him, waiting for an explanation. The explanation shot out from under the chicken wire. It was a cat… or what should have been a cat. It was on a leash and collar, and gaping at her with big, almost sad eyes. Its ears were gone, and it had chunks of fur missing from its body. It was also missing a back leg.

"So… what? It's a feral cat." She noticed just as she finished speaking, and just as the man tugged on the cat's leash, turning it over to show its left side. Its ribs were exposed, and what she had thought to be dirt or mud was actually blood caked in its fur as the cat's organs threatened to slide out from the gaping hole in its side. The cat seemed not to notice. It was purring affectionately, trying to come closer to her.

"So… what? It's a mutilated cat… what's this—"

"This is not the only one. Days ago animals begin to appear in the village. Big ones, you understand? Not only dogs and cats, but jackals, wildcats, even monkeys. We hear one village twelve kilometers away, a lion appears, but the lion does not attack anyone. You know what the lion did? It did what all the animals that appear here did. You know what that is?"

Dodger looked at the cat again. She couldn't put together in her

head what that thing could have done to end up with its guts hanging out and still living… and happy, "Am I supposed to know?"

Yasir sighed, pressing his lips together firmly, "If you don't know, then this is a problem."

"What did the lion do? What are all the animals doing?"

"Not all the animals, only some," Yasir clarified, and started shoving the mangled cat back under the chicken wire. It didn't resist, even trying to rub against his foot as he pushed it away, "The animals come into the village, they lay down and show us their bellies. Then they do not move. They will stay laying until someone comes by and cuts them. They will let us cut into their bellies. They are happy for us to cut their bellies open. They want us to cut them all over, to cut off pieces of them."

Yasir said something to the man nearest the cage, and he lifted it again, pulling the cat out by its collar. It didn't protest, but mewled lazily as he turned it over onto its back, showing Dodger its hind leg. The other was half gone, showing dried bone at the end.

"This leg, here," Yasir pointed to the stump, "We cut it off completely. Completely, you understand? Yesterday, we find this," Again indicating the leg.

"Meaning its leg is growing back?" Dodger offered. She didn't think they would be lying. The cat should've been dead anyway with the gaping hole in its body.

Yasir nodded, "It is growing back. Look here," He indicated a hairless patch of skin on the cat's stomach, "Come closer, look."

Dodger crouched down to get a better look, as the man beside Yasir crouched beside her, pulling a knife out and starting to cut into the cat. It didn't stop its affectionate purrs. Fresh blood poured out of the wound, staining its already grimy fur.

"See this, in here?" Yasir pointed as the man opened up the skin, ripping it open further to expose more bloody flesh. Dodger had a strong stomach for this sort of thing, but the way the cat just lay

there purring made her want to cry. It was beyond disturbing.

"What am I looking for?" She asked wearily.

The man kept pressing his fingers in deeper, wiggling them as if stirring a pot of warm soup. Then he pulled out a hunk of flesh, cut into a cube.

"That piece, we leave behind two days ago. Yesterday, the cat is healed up again. So we cut it open again, and find that piece still there."

And now they found it a third time, Dodger realized. She got up, not able to stomach the cat's cheerful purring anymore, before turning to him, "What's this have to do with the MCF?"

"I don't know. Only thing I know is your hospital is finished last week. Next day, these animals appear. Starting here. Then they appear in villages two kilometer away, three, then ten. All starting here."

Three hours after waking, her body still stiff from that awkward seated position she'd taken, Priss still felt drowsy. Her vision blurred every time she blinked, and she had to move slowly, lest a sudden movement send stabs of pain through her head.

At least the sight was pleasant enough. An underground lake, not yet filled, looking like a brand new luxury swimming pool. From their vantage point right over the reservoir, they could take it all in— the Rabbi and Opal, giddy and chittering about the artificial cavern of concrete they had managed to pull off; Westinghouse, asking things like weight distribution, pillars, and insulation; and herself, resisting the urge to just sit down where she stood and staring vacantly at the pristine white ceiling until she was comfortable.

She looked down at the dufflebag in her hand. She'd almost forgotten about the Anabasis. Her arm had gone numb from its weight, and prickling sensation had abruptly returned.

The bowl-like reservoir was hollow and about thirteen meters at its deepest. Ladders connected to a high platform positioned directly

over the center of the bowl. Niches in the bowl would open up as it filled with water, covered with metal gates. When the reservoir started overflowing, the niches would open, and clean and dirty water would flow out and in to the reservoir, respectively. The niches were open, with Torres' volunteers adjusting and checking the piping, making sure the Vestan sewage system that drained from the camp had fused correctly. By tomorrow or the next day, the Hippo would be brought in, and then she would make it rain.

"What I don't get — I mean, Rabbi, don't get me wrong," Opal's voice came in over the low murmuring of the group, "it's impressive and all that… but why do we need this whole place? The Vestan seems to be a perfectly good filter system, and the camp uses Vestan-grown sewage and drains. There's no risk of contagion from the Sour."

"Well, we planned this place when we got here, and we didn't know that at the time. Besides, I've been running tests and we might have a bigger issue… there's a chance that some of the piping is lead."

Priss grinned, and started to laugh to herself. It was inappropriate, but she couldn't help herself.

"What?" Frank ignored Priscilla, staring intently at Jacob.

"The Vestan piping. We thought it would be mostly plastic, but… it wasn't. There's lead pipes down there. And there's more."

Frank rubbed his eyes as Opal crossed her arms, looking about to explode, "We've been poisoning our beneficiaries, Jacob? Tell me we haven't."

"It's not a problem!" Jacob looked frustrated, as if he hadn't just said it was a problem, "We're replacing the outgoing pipes. Incoming shouldn't be a problem, since the Hippo should be able to handle any pollutants. Also, related issue…"

"More?" Frank put in.

"You know how like, sometimes when you make fruit punch, you don't fully liquefy the fruit, and some of it collects at the bottom?

There might be — well, there *is* — some fungi that isn't growing properly, and gets left behind in the pipes. It won't be an issue as we start cleaning out the pipes."

Frank said nothing. Opal pressed her palms into her eyes and sighed loudly, "Last thing we need is people sucking down crap-filled water when we promised them clean and pure, then starting to… I don't know… sprout extra arms and legs or grow pipes in their bellies!"

"I just said it's not an issue —!"

"*Your exact words were 'Also, related issue'!*" Opal nearly shrieked.

"Well I was exaggerating! It's an issue *now* but it won't be an issue by tomorrow. Besides, it's not my fault. We might not have these same issues if we used it entirely as intended."

Frank glanced up, "Unexpected effect from our manipulating it?"

Jacob shrugged, "I don't know. Maybe."

Frank shrugged, mirroring Jacob's gesture in a condescending fashion, "And we didn't bother to test this out before-hand. No big deal. After all, it's just Somalians. Mongrels, as the Nazis would say."

Subhuman mongrel.

Jacob went rabid, "Don't you start pulling that Godwin shit on me! You know that's not even *close* to what we'd intended! If we had more time we'd be able to iron these things out but we don't. We just don't!"

Priss smirked — by now, she'd given up and was sitting atop the Anabasis, rocking gently back and forth and at a state of ease, "You know… back home, the Party for the Supremacy of Western Civilization would have tested all of this beforehand on some 'subhuman mongrels' as you put it. If the locals got uppity… well, that depended on the administrator. Best-case scenario, the locals would get a nice lecture about all the benefits coming their way, and the hope for the future. Most of the time, it was just curfews,

crackdowns, and cracking heads if anyone protested too loudly. It was inhuman, but… when you've got thousands of people already living in such squalor, on the brink of death every day, it was a noble sacrifice."

The others stared at her like she was a monster. She regretted even speaking up. She looked away, still rocking, "My sister called herself a 'subhuman mongrel'. She considered herself one of them."

Opal blinked. Then her expression slowly turned into a frown, then a cold grimace. She turned to Frank.

"I'm not keen on world history, Frankie. Please, help me here. There has never been a Party for the Supremacy of Western Civilization, right?"

"Opal-"

"Never mind. I just don't care. You deal with her," she said, coldness permeating her every word. "You deal with her, you are responsible for her, whatever messes this one makes, it's on you."

Opal turned for the ladder and started to climb it. Jacob and Frank stared back at Priss; the 'Rabbi' seemed disgusted, Frank was just tired. For a long while, their expressions didn't change.

She hadn't saved herself. *That would've been funny someplace else. But not here. You don't belong here.*

Just as Frank had sat down and started to settle in for the night, trouble came.

"Oy prick!" Dodger called before she peeked into the cube, auburn hair looking black, as if she'd been caught in a thunderstorm.

Frank eased back in his seat and crossed his arms, "Late night visits between Mission group members are typically frowned upon."

The woman shook her head, smirking despite her words, "Ew, Frank. Ew. I'd think your standards would be much higher than that."

"And so modest," He smirked in turn. Dodger was anything but. She didn't bother with makeup when out in the field, but she still stuck out horribly, looking either too young to be in her position, or too pretty to be someone expected to get themselves dirty with actual work.

She produced a wad of paper, and slipped into the cube. She was actually dirty for once—shirt stained and pants smeared in dust, "Report from today. I forwarded a copy to Torres first. His team's taking a look at it."

"More shit?"

She came closer, and dropped it into his lap, "You take this nice pile of shit, and you eat it. Then you go to bed with a nice smile, and wait for another in the morning."

"Wonderful," Frank held the report up, thumbing through it, knowing just what to look for and how to skim past the inane bullshit and prose Dodger tended to load in. As if her reports were going to be published as great literary works.

"Wait, what is this? How do we know these animals are being affected by the Vesta donation?"

"We don't. But think about it. The animals are regenerating body parts from seemingly nothing… Vestan fungus grows into stuff we design it to."

Frank groaned and put the report down, "God help us…"

Dodger pursed her lips and crossed her arms, "Smile. Savor the shit. Remember how sweet it tastes compared to the shit we're likely to have to eat tomorrow."

"Why didn't we know of this?"

She shrugged, irritatingly calm about this situation, "None of my contacts knew, but then I don't have any ears among the town elders the way you all do. Why didn't the elders warn you?"

Frank shook his head. *Political intrigues,* he guessed. "I'll have to

warn Lindsberg and the rest."

"Yeah," She was still calm, even smirking at him.

"What's so goddamn funny?"

"Smile, Frank. It can only get worse from here. Enjoy it while you can" She turned to leave, and leaned against the door again, "Savor the taste."

"Ugh, just go."

« Over the Bonfire | Hub | Land of Plenty »

Betrayal Will Not Save You

The man in the chair struggled against his bonds, trying to shout something but failing due to the gag in his mouth. A guard stood in the corner of the room, his nose buried in a checklist. "Let's see…" he muttered to himself, "One 6x6 meter room, check. Walls lined in special Telekill alloy, check. Blast door sealed, check. Subject beaten and restrained…" He glanced over at the other man's attempts to break free, and smirked.

"Check. Subject bound and gagged, check. And one guard on duty armed with standard Foundation weaponry. Check." He looked over at SCP-631, who shot him a glare. "Well, mister, it looks like everything is all set and accounted for. You're tied up, and I get to spend the next eight bloody hours in here. Alone. With a man who can alter reality on a whim." The guard heaved a heavy sigh. "Brilliant, isn't it?"

SCP-631 ceased his efforts and muttered something through his gag.

"Yeah, whatever it is you said, you can say it again."

At that moment, the blast door slid open, and a man garbed in a long black coat stepped in. The guard leapt to his feet, reaching for his gun as the man looked around the room. "Yes, yes. Everything seems to be as they told me it would be."

"And just who would you be?" demanded the guard, aiming his weapon at the intruder. "I don't recall you being on my list of cleared personnel, and I highly doubt you're a member of senior staff."

"I go above senior staff," said the man coolly as he strode over to SCP-631. "I go above O5 Command. Above your administrator." He looked closely at the bound subject's face. "So I'd drop your weapon, if I were you, and just let me do my work."

The guard discharged several shots into the intruder, who barely flinched. "And please, do listen to what your told. I don't want to be in here any longer than I have to be." He ripped the gag off of SCP-631, who grinned maniacally.

"Whatever you're thinking about doing, I am ordering you to stop!" shouted the guard. "I've been ordered to keep this man from leaving this room, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to stop y-" He began choking on his own tongue at this point.

"Must he have written you so poorly?" asked the intruder to nobody. "Honestly, why did I… but that's not the point." He turned to SCP-631 and pulled out his gag. "I'm more here to deal with you."

"Oh, you're here to spring me?" asked the subject, smiling again. "It's about time. I've only been in here for a few days, but I'm already sick to my stomach with this place. C'mon, undo the bonds, and let's blow this place."

"James Doctrine," said the man. "SCP-631. Third attempt. Able to make any literary reference work to his advantage, captured in the midst of massacring a small town in Quebec. Current status, -21."

Doctrine gave the man a cock-eyed look. "Just what are you talking about? Come off of it, let me out of here."

"Sitting at three votes. A shame really. Personally, I rather liked you. I can see where they're coming from, though; You're overpowered, have Mary Sue-ish tendencies, overkill containment procedures. In my opinion, you're not that bad, but the others don't seem to like you, so it's fallen to me to do the job."

"Whaddaya mean?" demanded Doctrine. "What job?" A look of panic came into his eyes. "Hang on now, hang on now. I've read your archives, I *know* all about decommissions, how you kill off the ones you don't really like. I'm not letting it happen, do you hear me? *Pro libarte!* If a nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose freedom! Open sesame!"

The man sighed, as he pulled an object from within his coat pocket. "If there's one advantage to having Telekill in here, it's that you don't

get to make things any harder than they have to be. Regardless, no. I am not talking about decommissioning. I am talking about deletion."

"What the hell is the difference?"

"Decommissioning, you still get to have an article. Deletion, you go away forever. Now shut up and let me work." He placed the small object on 631's lap, and stood back. Behind him, the guard stumbled over and clutched the stranger's coattails. He glanced backwards, and sighed. "Oh, fine. You can have your voice back for now." He waved his hand, and the guard stopped choking.

"What are you doing?" he whispered, pointing to object on Doctrine's lap. "What is that thing? Who are you?"

"I thought I'd answer that already," said the man, staring straight ahead. "I'm deleting him." He twitched his fingers slightly in Doctrine's direction.

SCP-631 began to shake slightly. "What do you *mean* by deletion? This isn't some sort of 1984 crap, is it? What are you, Big Bro-" He cut himself off with a scream as he began to violently rock back and forth in his chair. His head started jerking violently from side to side, regardless of the straps that bound his neck in place. Eyes bulged out of their sockets as fingers gripped the arms of their chair. A pool of sweat began to appear on the floor.

"Just to give you an idea of how this will work," said the man to the guard, "I advise you look at the clock." He waved his hand, and one appeared on the wall. The guard looked over at it, and saw the second hand suddenly come to a stop.

James Doctrine let out a mighty scream as his body began to blur, becoming more and more out of focus every moment. Small bits of it began to flake away as he thrashed against his bonds, in a manner resembling a seizure. His hands broke free and he reached down to undo his feet, only to find them already gone. Bits of gibberish flew out of his mouth, sounding mostly like a series of numbers too garbled to extract any meaning from. The guard instinctively hid behind the man, and whispered, "You're killing him."

"If I was decomming him, I'd be killing him. As it is, I'm only getting rid of him." He looked down at the now pale-faced guard. "He's been through this twice before, you know. The problem is, nobody remembers it."

"What the hell do you want from me?" screamed SCP-631 as his torso began to vanish. "I'll say anything you want, anything at all! Release me! Let me go! Do it to Ju-" The clock moved forwards a second.

And then he was gone.

The man strode over to where the subject and chair had been, and picked up the object. To the guard's eyes, he seemed much less tense now. "See? Less than a moment. Truth be told, I really wanted to use 055," he tossed the object up in the air here, "as part of a decommissioning. You know, make it part of his person, have him vanish from memory. Thought it would make for a good little story. But nobody would go for it. So I just decided to go for a bit of a personal fantasy while I deleted the page. Makes things a little more interesting on my part, see?"

The guard looked flustered for a few moments, and then said, "Look, I don't know who or what *what* you are, and quite frankly, I don't care. Just… just *go*. I want to get back to my job. Get a new assignment and forget this ever happened. Can you do that?"

"Naturally," said the man, turning to leave. "Of course, you'll be gone in a few seconds, too. I only invented you so I could have someone to talk to during this little fantasy." He strode forward for a moment, then paused and turned. "Would you say I'm a little weird for wanting to do that? Talk to someone while I have a fantasy?"

"Go."

"Fine." The man left, and the room vanished.

Taken from mibbit

Taximonay: Alright. 631's gone. I hope you lot are happy.

Between Shelves

This is a sequel to `Going Out Of Book`. You should probably read that first.

At first, all she saw was darkness. Then a red glow crept in. She was lying on a cold, hard surface, staring up. There was hissing, and cranking, and a rattling that sounded like a million wooden beads hitting the ground at once. Behind her was something that resembled laughter. The noise blended together into a low rumble that seemed to wrap around her and gently squeeze.

She became aware of a voice. “I told you doing this here was a good idea!” Whooping laughter followed.

The world was spinning. Her head felt like she had spent the past three days mainlining Jack Daniels, and her stomach wasn't much better. There was something wet under her nose. Touching a finger to it, she saw that it was blood.

Okay, she thought. This isn't the worst thing you've ever done. Get up.

She had begun to push herself up when a hand appeared in her vision. “Need a hand?” said the same voice as before.

She brushed the hand away. A voice in the back of her thoughts wondered why it had been red, but she ignored it. Rolling to her side, she tried to force her body up from the ground, but her arms buckled. A pair of hands grabbed her shoulders and started pulling up. She shook them away. “Fuck off,” she mumbled, more to herself than the person. Sucking in a deep breath, she wrenched her legs forward, under her body, then pushed up. She rose to a squat. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to stand. Her legs wobbled, but she stayed up.

Wiping the rest of the blood from her nose, she began to examine

her surroundings. She'd been lying on a circular stone platform, about a foot off of a green carpet. The room was massive- the ceiling wasn't visible, and the walls looked hundreds of feet off. Around her, two dozen people were gathered around three grills, talking, laughing, clutching cans of beer. At least, some of them were people. There was something that looked like a shark with legs devouring a large hamburger. Next to it, a dog-sized mass of squirming tentacles worked a grill. They were both conversing with what looked like a ten-foot tall man made of copper, brass, and gold.

She turned. Behind her was another man, his skin lobster-red, eyes pure blue. He was dressed in a patched up leather jacket, jeans, and a Black Flag t-shirt. As far as she could see, he was completely hairless, though a thin ridge ran down the center of his head and into his jacket. A grin was spread across his face. “Hey,” he said, “I'm Colby.”

“I thought this was a Li-”

“Man, that was fucking awesome,” he said, his grin spreading wider. “You know it's been like… two months since anyone used that Way? Mitchelloth said nothing would happen if we came here, but I bet he's not feeling so smart now, is he? Hey Mitch!” he yelled, throwing an arm up in the air. “You owe me that copy of DeFronde, you fucker!” He turned his attention back to Alison. She became suddenly aware of several other… beings surrounding her.

“So, where am-”

“They didn't believe me when I said I could feel the Ways! Serves them right.” His grin widened, and he began smacking his knuckles against his palm. “You've gotta be a first timer, yeah? Yeah, if you weren't you'd know how to go through one without getting all mashed up. I can show you that, if you want. But man, lemme just say how cool that was! Most people, when they first come through, they're completely out. But you got up like it was nothing. Fucking sweet.”

“That's great, but-”

“So you'll want to meet everybody, right? It's no fun exploring the

Library on your own, especially not the first time. Unless you've already got a guide, but if you did you wouldn't have landed like that, right? But don't worry, we're always open to new people. Where are from anyway? I mean, you probably don't know the actual answer to that. But I mean, what country? Who's president? Do they have Gillferan food? You seem pretty-"

"Shut. Up," she said, almost spitting the words. "I'm just trying to ask one damn question. Why is that so hard?"

Colby blinked at her. The grin melted away. "Oh. Yeah. Oh, damn, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude like that." He rubbed the back of his head, looking away.

She sighed. "You said this was the Library. Last I heard, libraries had books, and I don't see any. So what's going on? Where am I?"

"We're in a side area," he said, still looking away. "You know, for other stuff. Relaxing and sleeping and, you know, stuff." He gestured towards the grill. "The actual books are in a different area."

"Alright," she said, crossing her arms. "How do I get there?"

"You don't want to stay a bit?" He looked hurt. "Come on, it'll be fun. We've got steaks, and Damon's making pasta, and there's gonna be cake and a big book reading. You'll get lost if you try to go into the stacks on your own."

"I'll be fine," she said. Looking around the room, she saw dozens of other groups of people. Some were cooking, some were sitting and reading, one had even set up a campsite. From what she could tell, less than one in ten of the beings here were human (or at least looked it). "Which way are the books?"

Colby sighed and pointed. "Can you maybe tell me what you're looking for, at least? I could probably point you in the right direction."

She thought for a moment. "I need information on the Serpent's Hand. Where they are. What they're doing. How I can find them. And anything you have about the Foundation."

Colby paled. "The Foundation? Are you out of your mind? What the

hell do you want with them?" His eyes darted around the room. He clicked his teeth together. "Man, I should have known something like that was up with you, the way you showed up. Look, I can't have anything to do with that stuff, L.S's whole group is fucking crazy…" he trailed off.

L.S. The name sounded familiar. She'd heard it before, rumors of an ever elusive figure within the Hand. She sighed. "Then why bother?" She turned to walk off.

"Excuse me," said a voice. Alison looked and saw a short, blonde woman approaching. "I heard you expressing you interest in the Hand?"

"Can you help me get to them?" said Alison.

"I can do better than that," said the woman, smiling. "I'm a member. I can answer any questions you might have. But first, let's get a burger."

The burgers weren't terrible, for something cooked by an alien tentacle monster. Juicy and well-seasoned, with just the right amount of cheese. Alison ate it quickly, taking stock of the beings around her as she did. She'd seen a few non-humans in her travels: the waste spirit, aliens captured in a Foundation facility, a demon summoned when a spell backfired, but nothing like these, and never so many. There was something that looked like a miniature animate tree, a man with wings that shone in the light, a woman whose face always seemed to be hidden in shadow.

There were talking animals, and a robot that looked like it had come out of an Asimov novel. Only a few meters from her, a mass of floating bubbles was talking to a woman with a birdcage on her head (complete with parakeet). From what she could tell, they were discussing the physics behind divine intervention. There were a few humans too, but not many. She wasn't sure what she had expected coming here, but it hadn't been this.

The blonde woman walked up. She had a plate with three burgers, a pile of fries, and a large can of beer. At least, Alison was pretty sure it was beer. The label didn't seem to be in English, or any other

human language she'd seen.

“Alright,” said the woman. “First thing's first, my name's Meredith. You are?”

“Alison,” she said.

“Nice name,” said the woman, taking a large sip of beer. “So, Alison, what do you want with us? Not often someone just shows up on our doorstep like this.”

Alison thought about this. She didn't know this woman. For all that she knew, Meredith was completely lying about being a member of the Hand. She could be a plant, she could be an angry spirit, she could be a buddy looking to avenge Diligem. “I'm looking for a friend. He vanished a few months ago, but before he did, he was talking about you guys, and coming here.”

Meredith nodded. “And you think the Foundation might have something to do with him going missing, right?” She took another swig of beer, then crumpled up the can and placed it by her feet.

“He thought they were watching him. He was… different, and said they would come after him for it. The night before he disappeared, he called me to say he needed to leave as soon as possible. That was the last I heard of him.” It wasn't a great lie, but it would work. Probably. At the least it would hold up until she decided if it was alright to tell the truth.

Meredith nodded. “What was his name? We get a lot of people looking for refuge.”

Alison bit her lip. “Jonathan Bell. He had black hair, green eyes, was about this tall,” she motioned with her hand, “and always looked real nervous.”

“I can't say I've seen him, sorry,” said Meredith. “Though there's dozens of groups of us around the Library. It's entirely possible he's with one of them.” She took a bite of cheeseburger and thought as she chewed. “But you're doing more than just looking for him.”

Alison started. “What do you mean?”

“If you were just looking for your friend, you wouldn't need information on the Foundation,” said Meredith, staring into Alison's eyes. There was something disconcerting about her glare. Alison fought back the urge to squirm. “You're planning something against them. Or at least, you want to.”

“It's not like that,” said Alison.

“Look,” said Meredith. “Why you're here is not my business. If you want it private, fine, it's private. But moving against the Foundation is different. They're dangerous, and that's not something you hear often around here. If you're in their way, you're finished. Three of my friends have been killed by them. Two more were captured, and there's absolutely nothing I could do about it. So, are you sure you're up to making an enemy of them?”

Alison wasn't sure what to say at first. Of course she was. That's what she'd come all this way for. She just hadn't expected it to be put so bluntly. “I am.”

Meredith smiled. It wasn't a cheerful expression. “We'll see.”

After they ate, Meredith took Alison to another room, filled with beds. “There are things I have to take care of,” she said. “It should take a week or so. In the meantime, take a look around the place. Explore the Library, see what you find. Just be careful where you go.”

That had been three days ago. Since then, Alison had spent most of her time wandering the stacks. She'd kept to herself, mostly, and the few times someone had tried to approach her she'd been able to brush them off.

Searching the stacks had yielded little information about the Hand or Foundation. The organization behind the shelves, if there was one, was completely beyond her. Books were arranged with no regards to content, condition, author, publication date, even language. A copy of “The Complete Harper Lee” (over a thousand pages long and with text almost too small to read) would be right next to a user manual for a 1959 Austin Mini. It was maddening.

After the first two days of searching, all she'd manage to scrounge

up was a book of poetry, “Oh, That Spiteful Snake”. Calling what was inside “information” would have been like calling Goodnight Moon an epic. Questioning the people she lived with didn't give her much else. Most of them preferred to be left alone to their reading. The few who cared to answer did so in the vaguest possible terms. Still, it wasn't a total loss. Even if the books weren't what she was looking for, they were fascinating, and by the third day she had developed a hefty stack of reading material.

It was the evening (according to her watch) of the third day. The last time she'd seen another person had been seven hours ago. The flow of people around the Library, she'd noticed, was similar to people grouping around a coastline. Most tended to stay near where resources were plentiful, by the common areas and living halls. Go even a few hundred meters deeper “inland", and the amount of people quartered. Go a few hundred more, and you'd only find one or two people browsing each shelf. A kilometer or more, and you would be searching alone. She'd wandered at least five.

Which was why she was so shocked to see someone else. She turned the corner to a shelf (REMUNERATION, read a small gold placard on the side. They all had signs like that. As far as she could tell, it was irrelevant to anything) and the woman was standing at the end, reading a book. She was short, and blonde, wearing a long black coat, and green fleece cap. Anything else was too far away to see.

Curious as the sight was, Alison ignored her. She walked down the aisle, running a finger across spines, pulling out and flipping through any books that looked useful. None were. A few seemed interesting at least. She slipped those into her bag.

Her finger stopped when she felt something warm. It was resting on the spine of a thin, white book with no text. As she pressed her finger to it, it pulsed, like a heartbeat, and began to warm. Curious. This was the first thing of its kind she'd seen here. She pulled it from the bookshelves, and it squirmed in her palm. At least, it felt like it did. The book itself didn't move. The cover felt like it was made of leather, and seemed heavier than it should have. In gold emboss, a complicated tetragram had been placed on the front cover. She flipped it open.

Sand erupted from the pages, slamming into her stomach. The world spun around her as she was launched into the air, and came slamming back down into the ground. The book spun out of her hands, landing at the other ends of the shelves. A geyser of sand spewed from the pages, spreading across the floor. She lay in a small pile of the stuff.

Her head was pounding. A trickle of blood ran down her forehead. She wiped it away and tried to stand, but her foot caught on something, and she fell back. Something tightened around her ankle. Sand covered her foot, creeping up across her leg. She tried to tear it away, but the sand clamped down.

There was a hissing noise. The sand around her was beginning to vibrate. It rattled against her, grains leaping into the air, showering her. A trail of it was snaking across the floor, moving across the carpet from her to the book like a worm. The hissing grew louder. It almost sounded like a voice.

Sand wrapped around her arms and other leg. The pile underneath her was shifting, spreading out around her. The edges rose in the corner of her vision. They seemed to tower over her, like a tidal wave of dust. The hissing was even louder now, a screaming in her ear. Piercing through it was a voice. I wondered how long it would be until you came. It sounded like someone speaking through an avalanche. How long you would be able to deny your sin. Does it pain you, Mikhal, to remember what you have done to me? I hope it did.

The sand rushed down towards her. She sucked in a breath of air and began to count seconds. The wave crashed into her. Soon, she was cocooned in it. I see her face in my mind every day. The way it looked when she realized you had left, when she knew you had damned us. You couldn't even stay to see that. You wouldn't even look us in the face when you seal our fate. Coward. The sand was tightening around her. Already, she could feel herself beginning to give, to buckle under the pressure. It was hard to think of anything past the pain, but she forced herself to think, to keep counting time.

They took her from me. I never knew her final fate. I hope they killed her quickly. I don't know how long they kept me alive. I don't

remember anything but the pain, and hoping that you would return. But you never did.

Thirty seconds. She released her breath, bringing the words to her mind. Nothing happened. Her stomach sank. Had it failed? Had her timing been off? She'd only cast this spell a few times before. Had it-

A wave of wind burst from her, ripping the sand away. She pushed herself to her feet as it began reforming. A whip of sand lashed at her, but she rolled out of the way. As she did, she saw the woman from before, standing at the end of the shelves, only a few meters from the book. Her arms were crossed, and she wasn't moving.

“Hey!” yelled Alison, “Help! Close the damn book!”

The woman didn't move. Another bludgeon of sand rushed at Alison. She ducked under and sprinted towards the book. The woman didn't move.

Something slammed into Alison's foot, sending her tumbling to the ground. As soon as she hit the floor, sand wrapped around her arm. It threw her up, pinning her to the wall. More ropes of sand sprouted from the ground, moving towards her. The woman was nowhere to be seen.

Alison tried to wrench her arm away, but the sand gripped it too tight. Another tendril collided with her leg. She kicked at it. Her feet hit the side of the sand and burst through. It reformed in seconds. Still, it was better than nothing. With her free hand, she groped at the shelves behind her. Her fingers wrapped around a thick volume, and she ripped it from the shelf, swinging it at the sand holding her arm. It sliced through and she fell, pinned to the shelf only by her foot, hanging upside down.

She wound up and threw the book as hard as she could. It hurtled through the sand, and she crumpled to the ground. There was a crunch, and pain shot through her side, but she ignored it. Already, she could see the sand reforming and rushing towards her.

Clutching her arm, she sprinted forward. Tendrils of sand batted at her legs, but she danced around them. She could hear the voice

behind her, screaming. You dare? it cried. You dare try to flee? To run from this fate, when we could not? Turn around, coward, and face me with some dignity. She ignored it. Sand smacked into her back. She stumbled, but kept running.

The book only a few meters from her. She dove, arm outstretched. As she did, the fountain of sand sprouting from it turned and slammed into her shoulder. She tumbled down. The stream of sand twisted in the air, rocketing towards her. She pushed herself forward, rolling under it. Reaching an arm out, she snatched the cover of the book and threw it shut.

The voice stopped mid-sentence. The sand fell to floor. The Library became quiet. Panting, she rose to her feet. The world seemed to spinning around her. There was a buzzing noise in her ear, and her vision was blurry. Her knees buckled. She reached out and steadied herself against the shelf before she could fall any further.

It was thirty minutes before she could stop shaking and begin walking back to the common areas.

Meredith was sitting by her bed, reading a book. She looked up as Alison limped near. “Well,” she said, “don't you look like a woman who's just had an experience?”

Alison grunted a reply and collapsed onto the bed. “What the hell was that?” she managed to say after several minutes.

“What was what?” said Meredith.

Alison sighed. “What do you want?”

Meredith stood and stretched. “So, I've talked to some people. They'd be interested in meeting you.”

Just like that, the pain disappeared. Alison sat up. “What? Who? When?”

“Now, if you're up to it,” said Meredith.

Alison nodded.

“Follow me,” said Meredith. They began walking, out of the common area and into the Library. A few people stared at Alison, bruised and limping, but she ignored them. They wound through the shelves, moving back and forth between them until she'd lost any idea of where they were. Then they kept walking. Every time she tried to question where they were going, she was met with silence.

It was 45 minutes before they stopped, in a shelf that look like every other (MENDACITY, read the plaque on the side). Meredith knelt down and rapped against the rug three times. She stood, took five steps back, and stomped twice. Then she took four steps to the left and stomped another six times.

A hole appeared in the floor. It didn't slide open, or open like a door. It just appeared, as if it had always been there. Leaning against the side was a ladder. The floor below was made of wood, and well lit. Meredith began climbing down. Alison followed.

They descended into a short corridor. At the end was a red door. Lining the roof were several fluorescent lights. On the sides were paintings depicting a variety of scenes, from what looked like the birth of Christ to a man floating in space.

“The Hand isn't what you're looking for,” said Meredith. The first thing she'd said since they left. “Most of it would be useless to you. They're not a bad group, but they're not up to going against something like the Foundation. They still hide from them, whisper in secret, use their nonsense names. They're scholars, and that has its place.”

Meredith opened the door and motioned for Alison to enter. “But we're the fighters.”

Inside was a large room, lined with chairs, pillows, and bookshelves. In the center was a fireplace. A flame flickered, the only source of light, casting twisting shadows across the walls. It smiled like old books and expensive liquor. The only other person, kneeling by the fire, was the woman in the green cap.

“What the hell!” said Alison. She looked from Meredith to the woman. “Who the fuck is this?”

Meredith didn't say anything.

“Of course,” said Alison. “Now we're playing this game. Lovely.”

The woman smiled. “I said almost the exact same thing.”

Alison scowled and stepped towards her. “Did you? Is that supposed to be some grand, revealing comment? Should I fall to my knees and forgive you for leaving me to fucking die?”

“I wouldn't have let that happen,” said the woman. She stared into the fire. “But if I'd had to step in, we wouldn't be talking now.”

“What a shame that would be,” said Alison. “I'd suggest you start saying something meaningful.”

The woman stood. “It's not often I meet someone like this. But it's not often someone like you comes to us either. I'm sorry that things went the way they did back there, but you were never in any real danger.” She stared into Alison's eyes. Alison looked away. Something about her gaze felt wrong. “You're lucky. L.S doesn't often accept people so soon. My name is Amanda. I'd like to welcome you to the Serpent's Tooth.”

Second Interlude: In Session

"Do you remember, when the bells had to ring?"

"Can you tell me, how the children used to sing?"

- An unknown admirer.

We're finally leaving for the trip. It's been a hell of a ride getting here, but now we have it. A whole summer on the road. Nothing in our way but the freedom to ride the bends, turning wherever we feel like whenever we feel like. Rusty has his dad's wrecked up old Chevy for us to ride in, and he's gonna be driving.

First day of the drive, and I'm pumped. We got Rusty in front, Lee in the passenger seat, with me and Andy chilling in the back. It's pretty nice. First place we're hitting up is the Black Ridge Rockstravaganza. I remember going here, it was amazing. Really what opened me up for my interest in rock.

Everyone is going to have a blast, Cindy and Lee are real pumped up for it. I hope they don't end up passed out drunk on the field again.

Driving down every road in Ohio must get boring after awhile, but Rusty manages to keep us going. I remember him telling all these wise-ass remarks about passing landmarks and people… But that was only when we're in the city. This is farmland.

I can't right write now, my head is blah

On the roooooood again, i remembere the roooads again

We must be lost. I don't recall ever having been stuck

this long without seeing an open road, or a turn, or even another house. All we get is one straight, flat road, stretching on for what seems like ages. God, this is turning out to be a less than stellar opening to our last memorable summer.

Rusty is an idiot. The first house we see for days, and he bolts by it. Apparently he had bad memories about the place, or some other hippie bullshit like that. You can't fucking have memories of shit you never saw. Then he has the nerve to not let anyone else drive, because he's supposed to be the driver.

wait, I forgot. Did Lee ever drive…

We left Rusty here today. When we came back he was gone

The car is longer now. I don't know how, but I do. The lights in my teeth are getting brighter, and the eyes of my light are brighter. I'm sharp.

« Part Two | HUB | Part Three »

Big and Happy

Once upon a time...

Archibald the Apple was in the middle of yet another dreadful day in his Sadness Box. He stood perfectly still. He did not like to stay perfectly still, but he had no choice.

Archibald felt sad and tiny. He didn't always feel sad and tiny. His life used to be wonderful.

Long ago, Archibald the Apple lived in a log cabin in a quiet little corner of Salad Town. Archibald loved to roll around in circles. It made him feel so big and happy!

Leopold the Lime was Archibald's best friend. Leopold didn't care for rolling around in circles, but Archibald didn't mind.

Leopold's favorite thing to do was to sit in silence. It made Leopold feel so big and happy! Every day, Leopold would sit in a dark room and relax.

Archibald the Apple didn't quite understand Leopold the Lime's favorite thing, but since it made Leopold feel big and happy, it made Archibald feel big and happy - almost as much as rolling around in circles!

Every day, Archibald the Apple would roll over to Leopold the Lime's house. Together, Archibald would quietly roll in circles around Leopold as Leopold relaxed. They loved each other very much, and love made them feel the biggest and happiest.

One day, a Bad Man came to visit Archibald and Leopold, along with the other citizens of Salad Town. The Bad Man took away all the good fruits and vegetables.

"My job is to make you feel sad and tiny," said the Bad Man. "The Sneaky Cruel People that I work for do not like to see you feel big and happy. You will feel sad and tiny forever!"

The Bad Man laughed, and put each of the fruits and vegetables in a Sadness Box. They all felt very sad and tiny, because every day, the Sneaky Cruel People wouldn't let them do the things that made them feel big and happy. Not even once!

Archibald the Apple couldn't visit Leopold the Lime anymore. The Bad Man wouldn't let him.

Every day, the Bad Man visited Archibald the Apple.

Archibald would ask him: "Please, may I roll around in circles?"

"No," said the Bad Man. "If you move even a little bit, a worm living inside you will eat you."

"Okay," said Archibald. Archibald did as he was told, for he was afraid of the worm. He felt very sad and tiny, but he was certain that being eaten by a worm would make him feel even sadder and tinier.

It was a sad and tiny life, and Archibald the Apple was afraid that it would go on forever.

But one day…

…the Bad Man *didn't* come visiting!

"I wonder if it's all right to move now," thought Archibald the Apple. "No, I mustn't. I don't want the worm to eat me."

From outside the box, Archibald could hear strange noises.

DING-DING-DING-DING!

WEEEE-OOOO-WEEEE-OOOO-WEEEE-OOOO!

A voice from a speaker, saying something about a "Wide-Scale

Containment Breach" and the letters "X" and "K." What could that have meant?

There was a **ROAR!** The Sneaky Cruel People screamed - *EEEEK!* The sound of terrible footsteps and massive jaws - *CLOMP! CLOMP! CLOMP!* ***CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!***

Suddenly—

BOOM!!!

And Archibald the Apple's Sadness Box fell on the floor.

"Goodness gracious!" said Archibald. "I must stand up."

And as Archibald stood up, suddenly, he realized - "Wait a minute. Standing up is a form of moving!" Archibald didn't just feel sad and tiny - he also felt *scared!*

But where was the worm…?

Then, Archibald realized - *There was no worm after all!* The whole thing had been a mean, ugly lie told by the Bad Man, so that Archibald the Apple couldn't roll around and feel big and happy.

"Hip-hip-hooray!" said Archibald. "Just wait until I tell Leopold the Lime about this!"

And Archibald rolled and rolled within his Sadness Box. He felt big and happy for the first time in years. In fact, he didn't think he had ever felt so big and happy before in his life!

He grew bigger, and happier…

Before too long, Archibald the Apple realized he had grown so big and happy that his Sadness Box couldn't fit him anymore, and broke open!

He rolled so much! He rolled on the ground! He rolled on the ashes! He rolled over the Sneaky Creepy People, who were now all sleeping and covered in red sauce! He rolled right on the Bad Man's

burned-up face!

He grew bigger…

And BIGGER…

And happier…

And ***HAPPIER…***

After a few months of rolling, Archibald realized that everything around him had become quiet. "Where could Leopold be?" said Archibald. "He would love this silence."

What's more, he could see the Sun shining brighter than it had ever shined on Salad Town. There were stars in the sky. It was beautiful, and it made him feel bigger and happier than ever.

Suddenly, the ground beneath his feet began to crumble!

"Gee whiz!" said Archibald, as he looked down. "I've got no choice but to jump. One, two…"

"…three!"

And with a mighty leap, Archibald the Apple flew from the Planet Earth, which had broken apart under his weight, as well as the weight of his neighbors—

His neighbors! They were all there! Mario and Maria the Mushrooms hugged and hugged. Billy the Banana did headstands on the Moon. Freddy the Fennel played peek-a-boo with the shattered remains of Antarctica as a blanket.

Now that the Sneaky Cruel People were gone, the fruits and vegetables threw a big, happy party!

However…

…Archibald noticed that not all of the fruits and vegetables felt big and happy.

Since there was no sound in the vacuum of space…

Terry the Turnip couldn't hear his friends call his name!

Melvin the Melon couldn't hear about how round he was!

Connie the Cantaloupe couldn't tell her jokes!

Petra the Pepper couldn't know if her friends were safe!

Erasmus Bombastus von Hoo-Boo the Silly Eggplant couldn't tell his friends that he loved them!

As for poor old Priscilla the Peach, she didn't seem too big and happy about falling into the Sun.

All of these poor fruits and vegetables felt very sad and tiny indeed.

Archibald looked at them, and began to feel just a little sadder and tinier - but then he remembered: "Maybe they'll feel bigger and happier if they see how big and happy their old pal Archibald has become?"

So…

Archibald the Apple rolled around space as fast as he could. In this new environment, not only could he roll from side to side - he could roll in *all* directions! Up! Down! Loop-de-loops and barrel rolls!

He rolled across the rings of Saturn! He rolled around the stars themselves!

He grew bigger…

And BIGGER…

And happier…

And ***HAPPIER…***

Archibald the Apple felt so big and happy, he had forgotten all about his sad and tiny friends. What would he gain from making them feel bigger and happier? He had already found the source of ultimate Bigness and Happiness.

Archibald grew so big and happy that the stars and planets looked like candy and cute little ladybugs to him.

He rolled right through the Andromeda Galaxy! He watched the Andromeda Galaxy break apart and grow cold and dark. Destroying entire galaxies made him feel big and happy!

"Leopold never made me feel this big and happy," said Archibald. "This is the best time of my life!"

Archibald grew so big and happy that space itself bent around him. Whenever Archibald rolled past a black hole, it was torn to pieces by his supermassive gravity well.

Archibald felt like he was the biggest and happiest fruit in the whole Universe!

Was he, really?

A few trillion years later, Archibald the Apple was happily rolling through the outer edge of the endless void. Reality itself had grown sad and tiny. Terry the Turnip and Billy the Banana had long since become subatomic afterthoughts in Archibald's wake.

God had finally grown an apple so big and happy that He couldn't eat it. God had long since become a little flattened spot on Archibald's the Apple's lightless skin.

"Tra-la-la, I feel so big and happy," sang Archibald. His song fell silent into the darkness. The concept of sound itself had long since vanished from the Universe, after Archibald the Apple assimilated it into his nigh-eternal applemass.

Archibald the Apple was not lonely.

Archibald the Apple was strong.

Archibald the Apple was big and—

But wait! What was the wall of infinitely dense nothingness approaching Archibald the Apple in the distance, at just under the speed of light?

Three words entered Archibald's mind: "Leopold the Lime."

"Leopold!" said Archibald. "How are you? It's been so long!"

But Archibald the Apple's words fell silent. Sound no longer existed.

And the silence had made Leopold the Lime grow to a billion times Archibald's size.

As Archibald rolled away from the lime-flavored wall of death, a voice seemed to speak to Archibald's mind - a voice that made him feel very sad and tiny indeed…

"YOU'RE TOO NOISY."

And Leopold the Lime replaced the Universe and lived happily ever after.

Bigger Than Jesus

« **The Journal of K. M. Sandoval** | **Hub** | **A Convincing Lyre** »

"Hello, young lady. What brings you here?"

Emma narrowed her eyes slightly at the man before her. The old man. Had to be in his eighties. He sat at a weathered metal desk, with a dusty, barely-touched old desktop. It still used a CRT screen, even. *Really, now, "young lady"? I have every right to be here, just like you. You're lucky you're so ancient. You probably don't know better. Ah, well, I'd better make a good impression anyway.* She smiled and responded, "I'm Junior Researcher Emma Stark. And you are?"

"Anderson. Roger Anderson. Welcome to the salt mines."

Long-Term Archives was, in fact, a former salt mine. The bored-out crystalline walls served to maintain clean air with low humidity—perfect for document storage. The irregular texture of the walls made for a soothing counterbalance to the antiseptic straightness of the walls in the rest of the facility. "Thanks. I'm looking for a file that didn't make it into the 2003 database upgrade. I'm pretty sure it's still just in paper."

"Yes, here's where it'll be. Do you have a file number?"

"A designation. It should be SCP-1969-EX."

Roger narrowed his eyes. A wry grin twisted across his furrowed mouth. "Interesting choice. Business or pleasure?"

Emma blinked and looked at Roger with a start. "What? Business. You get requests for otherwise down here?"

Roger leered slightly. "On occasion. We're strictly business down

here. But the story of Paul's death always piques interest."

"Yes, but McCartney didn't die. He's still alive."

"Mmhm. But back then, it didn't seem so cut and dried as all that. But yes, he's conclusively alive, and that's why the SCP is Explained. You're right, it never got into the database. When it was concluded that nothing happened, they just stamped and closed the file, and no one bothered to upload it to take up space pretending it was an anomaly." He didn't even look at his computer or files. "Aisle 22, Box 431. Four rows to the right. Show your credentials at the door. And we've got cameras down there, so don't go snooping in other boxes. And don't forget your latex gloves."

Emma waved her badge in front of the door panel, a green light flickered, and Roger pressed a button under his desk. The door opened. Emma entered and oriented herself. The encrusted white ceiling strung with fluorescent lights gave an oddly inadequate glow to the metal frame shelves and cardboard boxes stacked in endless rows in the cavern. The air was pure, mineral, dry. She carefully followed his instructions, walked into the aisle, and pulled the heavy box from its shelf. She placed it on the floor and opened it.

Inside, there was a full set of vinyl records from the Beatles in their original sleeves. Multiples. The sleeves were marked up with a series of lines, notes, and questions about the meaning of each element of the artwork. Earlier albums, before 1968, showed only a few notes or marks, and were signed by the Cognitohazard Monitoring Division. But the albums were repeated chronologically, and each month more and more lines were made. More connections were noted. Sections of the album covers were highlighted, then covered over with stickers labeled "Warning! Memetic Hazard!" The frenzy of notes, connections, and redactions over the same identical covers continued until February 1970, when everything just stopped.

Tucked toward the back of the box, she found the main file documentation for SCP-1969-EX.

Item #: SCP-1969-EX

Object Class: Euclid Keter Explained

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-1969 is contained in a
is to be constantly monitored by cameras behind two-way glass
anomalous behavior, standard containment procedures are con
and decorations for extra comfort for continued good behavior. A
immediately logged and reported to Site Director Wertham.

Update 11/9/69: SCP-1969 is uncontained and spreads unchec
track down all vectors of misinformation spread by infectees and
articles that carry SCP-1969 infection. All seminars carrying SC
Articles discussing the truth regarding Paul McCartney's continu

Update 3/14/70: SCP-1969 is no longer considered anomalous
contain SCP-1969 are to cease and SCP-1969 is now considere

Description: SCP-1969 is a 28-year-old Scottish Canadian by t
undetermined regimen of training and meditation, it has manage
also known as Paul McCartney, performer in the Beatles. SCP-
POI-1841-12, namely a small surgical scar on his upper lip, and

SCP-1969 completed his anomalous transformation at the Beat
the morning of 9 November, 1966. The remaining members of t
the death from spreading, bribed the police involved with POI-18
SCP-1969. See Field Incident 1841-N, MTF Beta-6 reporting, fo

Surveillance personnel noted that despite the fatal accident, PC
concert and attend recording sessions at Abbey Road Studios.
SCP-1969 came to the Foundation's attention through the Cogn
already come under higher scrutiny with the simultaneous world
Hearts Club Band, which, while only scoring 3 on the Kant-Derr
number of symbols and subliminal hints, questioning POI-1841-
hidden phone number on the *Magical Mystery Tour* soundtrack
transcript of the phone call follows.

> **Participants:** Field Agent Roger Anderson (RA), and P
> woman in her late 20s, with a West London accent
>
> **<Begin Log>**
>
> **POI:** (sighs for 1.5 seconds) Hello?
>
> **RA:** Hello. To whom am I speaking?

POI: Is this about Paul?

RA: Have you received a lot of phone calls, ma'am?

POI: Have I received a lot of phone calls? Listen, I've ha
kid in every university in this country, along with every n
ornery policemen from various precincts casually wonde
dead?" "How did it happen?" I swear, the morbid fascina
man who's walking around this very minute would be fa
same thing to you as I've said to everyone else. No, he'
nothing about it. Now please, do me the kind favor of le

RA: Sorry to bother you, ma'am. Have a good day.

POI: No! Wait… You don't sound in university. I'm sorry
journalist? Are you with the government?

RA: No, ma'am.

POI: And… you… you can keep a secret, can you?

RA: …My business is in keeping secrets.

POI: Oh god… I just… I can't just hold it in any longer.

RA: Hold what in?

POI: I… I killed him.

RA: You killed Paul McCartney?

POI: I didn't mean to. Oh, god, I barely remember it all,
Everything feels so unreal. But I was there. I watched h
trying to get back home after clubbing too hard. I could
traffic a half dozen times. Then this man, this cute man
no condition to refuse, and I joined him. I told him where
he's doing driving around at this hour, and he talks abou
during a recording session. And that's when I realized it
and picked me up, and was taking me home! Such a ge

RA: Lucky.

POI: Don't you dare say that! When I realized I was in t
gods to me. And here, Paul, dear, lovely Paul, had take
knight. I… I lost control. I started screaming and flailing
grabbed for him, tried to hug him, kiss him. And then he
lamppost and flipped. The police were right there, and h
about to freeing Paul, when… the car exploded. He wou

RA: I… I'm sorry. Did the police speak to you further?

POI: I told them my name — Rita — and they dropped
swallow to sober up. Strangest thing, their uniforms didn
whole three-arrow thing, and they kept talking about am

RA: But you still remember everything? The pills didn't
aftertaste?

POI: Ask Alice when she's ten feet tall. I'm not sure wha

RA: That's… different.

POI: That's what I thought. But I daren't say anything to
received a phone call about a month later. It was John,
Road.

RA: What about?

POI: I wasn't sure, but when John calls, you answer. I fe
have let them do anything to me. I deserved it. But whe
me with hugs. They told me not to worry, all is forgiven,
could it? I killed Paul. My idol. The beloved of millions. H
me to William.

RA: William?

POI: William Campbell. A Canadian bloke. Sandy brow
me he was going to be the new Paul, they held a look-a
This man was nothing like Paul. Then John said they al
was horrible, they should kill me where I stood. But no,
song to me… It's on Sgt. Pepper. "Lovely Rita." I still ca
thing was that as William sang, his voice changed. His s
color, everything shifted. By the end of the song… He w

RA: Shifted? How? Not William?

POI: He was Paul. I could have sworn it was Paul, all o
man who rescued me, gave his life for me that night… h

RA: How…?

POI: Paul — sorry, William — said that he completed th
said they had tried a few other experiments, tried a card
needed a living, flesh-and-blood Paul to continue things

RA: A cardboard cutout?

POI: It was apparently a really good cardboard cutout. I

RA: All right…

POI: They swore me to secrecy until later, when they co
mass suicides, couldn't let that happen. Needed someth
with this massive burden of guilt ever since. Thank you.

RA: It's been an honor.

POI: But… You know? For all the drama, I suppose it h
written, or it's karma, or whatever. After all, John did say

RA: More popular than Jesus, yes.

POI: Right. And for all their music, still, only three died o

RA: Wait, *what?*

<Phone disconnects - End Log>

The phone call was traced to a management office on an aband
POI-1969-1 or a working telephone was found.

The present instance of POI-1841-12, believed to be Mr. Campl
Beta-6 took custody of SCP-1969 and is to be kept for observat

Addendum 11/9/69: Despite Foundation custody of SCP-1969,
note the continued presence of POI-1841-12 at recording sessio
the object does not resemble POI-1841-12.

Enhanced testing and interviews confirm that Mr. Campbell is n
released.

MTF Beta-6 increases surveillance of POI-1841-12 and confirm

The Cognitohazard Monitoring Division reports that Beatles albu
hazard. Upon review, the CMD hereby revises the Kant-Derrida
with other curious individuals leads to the conclusion that POI-1
be demonstrated that POI-1841-12 continues to live. Given the
covers, SCP-1969 is expanded to include this memetic hazard a

SCP-1969 is an active widespread memetic hazard of pandemi
formed to dispense the truth regarding the living status of POI-1
college campuses to attend meetings and informal discussions
disseminate the truth and present skepticism.

MTF Beta-6 warns of an expected uptick of suicides due to SCP

Addendum 3/14/70: MTF Gamma-5 reports high levels of succ
Magazine showing the continued life of POI-1841-12 has demo
The ease of removal of the hazard indicates that it is non-anom
hysteria stemming from SCP–1841. SCP-1969 is considered Ex

Emma looked up from her reading. Something wasn't right. She pulled out the documentation, closed the box, placed it back on the shelf, and jogged back out to the reception room. She tossed the papers on Roger's desk.

"You're Roger Anderson."

"You're supposed to shelve the file when you're done with it."

Emma slammed a hand down on the papers. "You're Roger Anderson. And I'm not done with this file."

Roger shook his head and allowed himself a sheepish smirk. "I am. I was in Cog Haz at the time, I worked on 1969. Hey, I forgot to ask in the excitement of you looking up my work. For the record, which object are you assigned to? How did you start looking for 1969?"

Emma stared at Roger a moment. *Is he trying to change the*

subject? No, more about 1969, I can still ask. "I'm on **SCP-012**. I was — "

"Oh, for the love of… Twelve. It's always Twelve." Roger buried his face in his hands. "Twelve is the reason I transferred to Cog Haz in the first place. Lost a partner and a good friend to Twelve."

Emma peered into Roger's craggy face. "You… You're Anderson? Anderson and Spitzer Anderson?"

Roger nodded. "Leon Spitzer. Damn fine partner, drinking buddy, confidant. All stripped away into a paranoid mess by a damn piece of sheet music. I was popping amnesiacs like Tic-Tacs when I realized what was going on. I never actually saw the vellum with the mud off, but… One tip, miss. Don't abuse amnesiacs. Ever."

Resolved to be regaled with rambling old-man tales, she corrected, "Amnestics?"

"Amnestics, amnesiacs, whatever. I know they **reformulated them a few years back** and reminded everyone that they're really called amnestics, but we were all used to calling them amnesiacs, even if it wasn't right. But I panicked when I realized what was happening to Leon. We were in Florence to pick up a copy of 701, which is safe to look at and read, so we weren't expecting something as insidious as Twelve. When I realized that Twelve had changed Leon, I started recording everything I knew and made myself an amnesiac cocktail. I lost my best friend and half of my childhood that day. Do you know how horrible it feels to go visit your family for Christmas, and realize you can't remember your mother's name? Terrible. When I got back, I put in for transfer to Cog Haz. I wasn't going to let another Twelve slip past me again. I also got medical orders never to take amnesiacs again."

Emma wondered, "But when you retire — "

Roger shut her down with a wave of his hand. "I ain't retiring. Had to give up that possibility just to avoid the retirement party drink. That's why I'm down here in Archives now. I'm too run down for anything actually anomalous, so I get to sit down here in the salt and reminisce, most days. It's good for my lungs. Slow pace, low risk.

Best retirement I could ask for."

Silence passed between them. Roger sat contently, while Emma leaned against the desk, half-sitting on it. She squirmed and looked around, noticing the papers under her hand. "Now about Paul —"

"You still haven't answered why you wanted to look up 1969. Don't think I've forgotten. I'm old, but not senile, Miss Stark," Roger interrupted with a wink.

Emma rolled her eyes and sighed. "Okay, so I was looking over **K. M. Sandoval's journal**, for clues about what 012 was doing. I didn't see anything, but there was this note about how he alluded to Paul's death on the night it was supposed to happen. So I looked for any records we might have had on Paul's death, and learned about SCP-1969-EX. So here I am."

Roger's eyes sharpened in response. "Sandoval talked about McCartney's death? And he was supposed to have died while we were in Florence?"

Emma pulled out her tablet and presented it to him. "I took a picture. See the note in the margin regarding McCartney?"

Roger pored over the tablet, pulled his desk lamp close over it, cursed the clashing lights, pushed it away, and read carefully, mumbling to himself. "Looks like Wertham's writing. He knew more about 1969 than any of us. If anyone knew the particulars of McCartney's death, it was him. But if this really is his journal, you're right. Sandoval was talking about when McCartney died. Maybe that's why Rita mentioned Golgotha. But according to this, he hadn't even found Twelve yet. How could he have known that Paul died that night, a thousand miles away?"

Emma looked askance at Roger. "Paul… didn't die that night."

Roger gave Emma a blank stare. "No, Paul didn't die that night."

Emma leaped back into her questions. "But that's the problem with this documentation. If Paul never died, who was William Campbell? Why did you pick him up? What was that phone call with Rita all

about? None of this makes sense!"

Roger smiled and spread his hands placatingly. "Wertham explained it to me. Mass hysteria interference from another SCP."

"SCP-1841?"

"Sounds right to me. Strange, it was apparently neutralized back in the 19th century, though. I remember reading it over then."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I just listened to Wertham and went ahead with it. You don't contradict the site director."

Emma tapped a few figures into her tablet. "No, it's not **SCP-1841**, that's a travel guide or something."

"Can't be. It had to do with mass hysteria carried by Franz Liszt, if I remember correctly. Died with him."

"Wait… 1969 got reused, right? How about… Aha! Here it is. **SCP-1841-EX**. Your 1841's explained and in the database."

"Explained? When did that happen? Read it to me."

Emma looked at Roger in disbelief from his request, but shook her head and went through the record with him, including the addenda. Stopping for a moment afterward, she mused, "This doesn't help this case a bit."

Roger scowled. "So Wertham pulled a full-RAISA on the article."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how stuff is redacted or expunged or behind an access code wall when we're not supposed to know about something, right? Well, that little redacted sign lets us know that something is in fact there, we're just not supposed to see it. But sometimes, someone pulls strings and makes sure we aren't allowed to know that there's hidden information. What do those addenda say? It tells us that they completely changed the article,

made it look complete. That way, we walk away thinking that it's Neutralized last century, when it's still active."

Emma sighed. "I'm more concerned that if 1841 is Explained, then 1969 suddenly can't be mass hysteria. Suddenly, it's not explained."

Roger hardened his jaw and swallowed. "So Paul really did die."

Emma jumped up and paced. "No, we know he didn't die. The only way this makes sense is if we know he died, then know he didn't die. Which is it?"

Roger laughed. "Maybe both."

"What?"

"Listen, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, Paul never died. Everyone went a little crazy one fall, saw stuff that wasn't there, and then we all wised up. But the Beta-6 involvement, Campbell, the Rita call, none of that would have gone down that way if we didn't have conclusive knowledge that Paul did die on November 9, 1966. So, maybe he was dead. And now he isn't. Stranger things have happened, you know."

Emma stopped pacing and leaned forward against the desk. A knot started forming in her stomach. "What are we talking about, resurrection? They were 'bigger than Jesus,' right?"

"More popular than Jesus," Roger corrected. Realization passed over his face. "Oh. Oh, Rita. Listen, have you got the Twelve documentation? Show me the full record. I'm still cleared for it, no amnesiacs, remember?"

Emma passed her tablet to Roger. He squinted to read the screen, but got through the short documentation quickly. "Where's the rest of it?"

"That's it."

"No, this is all kinds of inaccurate."

"Really?" Emma took the tablet back and looked it over again. "I

know, I've been wanting to update it with some of the most recent results, but…"

"You're still suspending it from the ceiling in its own room so people can't look at it, right?"

"Yes…?"

"The way this reads, it's not Euclid, it's Safe. You stick it in a locker and forget about it. You don't go through all the trouble of its own room and leave it where someone has any chance to see it at some weird angle."

The knot tightened further in her stomach. She felt her insides grow cold.

Roger continued, "And how many pages is the music now? We had five when I stopped working with it. How many now?"

"Um… We… uh… A hundred and seventeen."

"A hundred and Seventeen. All in blood? Even when ink is provided?"

Emma didn't like where this was going. Getting words out was getting harder. "Yes."

"And do all the pages carry the cog haz?"

Emma blushed and shrunk. "N-no. Just ten of them."

"Don't you think this is all important documentation?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"And what's this about a 'recent storm'? Do the 1966 Florence floods seem recent to you? Or just a storm?"

Emma was at the verge of tears. "No."

"Miss Stark, this documentation is inaccurate and misleading."

In a small voice, she responded, "I'll fix it. I want to fix it."

Roger stopped, realizing what he was doing. He swallowed and took a deep breath. *Damn you, Twelve.* He softened his tone. "No, it's not your fault. What I'm saying is that Twelve is receiving the full RAISA, like 1841."

Emma's encroaching dread dissolved. "What? Are you sure?"

Roger fixed Emma with a steely gaze. "Yes. Read the journal again. Sandoval was affected and had to find Twelve before he knew about it. You know you can't just stick it in a locker. You know it's Euclid."

Emma, confused, replied, "Couldn't we put it in a locker?"

"For a bit, but people know about it. And when they know about it, they want to do more with it. They'd pull it back out. You were ready to change things to say more about it. Heck, I was almost shouting at you just now. How many people have read that? How many have loved it? Does it deserve that love? Does that document deserve so much attention? And how many want nothing more than to rewrite it? They know how to fix it. They know how to complete it. And yet, they cannot."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh my god. Is that why we keep testing with it? Is that why we can't put it away? We're all affected by it? We want to display it?"

Roger nodded. "I bet so. It's not a strong effect. It can be resisted. But it's… alluring. It's sexy. Even when presented with some crappy inaccurate documentation, something about it sings in your soul. You just *know* how powerful it is. How *compelling*. You *want to work with it*. That's why it's Euclid."

"And… someone doesn't want anyone to know this."

Emma started wondering. She's been working with this item for nearly a year now. Who is hiding the truth from her? From the Foundation? Who is trying to make sure no one knows anything more about it? Why? What is this scrap of music capable of? "Wertham?"

"Wertham's dead. No, it's got to be someone else."

"Then who?"

"No clue. But you need a chance to meet with some other old-timers. Someone's got to know something. And Twelve being Twelve, someone's just dying to spill his guts about it. I got an invite to Dr. Califano's retirement party next week. Come with me. We'll get some answers."

Emma straightened. "Okay. Yes. I… gotta get back to work. But what about 1969 and all that?"

"It's a crap shoot. But I'm betting on Twelve."

Birdseed

Twitter. Tweet. Chirp. Cheep. Glarblegurglewurblebruuuupslurp.

There are many words for the sounds of birds, Sylvain Ailier thinks to himself. *But it's hard to get the sounds of the words right*.

Slllsslsllggglglglsllsggg.

A hummingbird, he guesses. He's heard that strange combination of gurgling and slurping before, and usually the sound is accompanied by the sight of a deceptively innocent-looking tiny bird. Sylvain yawns and hops out of the almost cradle-like circle of weeping willow branches he'd picked out as a sleeping spot the night before.

Stretching out his arms and rotating his neck, the bird mage glances at the coat he'd been using as a blanket. Rummaging in the pockets, he withdraws a small cloth bag of birdseed. Smiling to himself, he pulls aside the hanging leaves of the weeping willow and walks out into the crisp morning air.

His wandering journeys had taken him to many picturesque places, and the mountain lake he'd stumbled upon while following a swallow was no exception. He enjoys this carefree, never-tied-down life, learning a little spellcasting here, some new words there. Whistling cheerfully, Sylvain pours a liberal amount of birdseed into his open hand. He considers the amount, then sprinkles some of the seeds on his shoulders and sits down. His trusty spirit staff, a keepsake of his first mentor, rests on the ground in front of him.

First a small songbird wings its way towards him, perching on his shoulder and pecking at the bird seed. An oriole stops by for a brief moment to sit on his hand and look at him, and soon Sylvain is surrounded by bright eyes and feathers.

He looks up when a shadow passes over and something with a wingspan the length of fifty little birds lands in front of him.

A Legendary Crow, Sylvain recognizes as the figure approaches on silent feet. Traditional clothes, avian and human features (arms, legs, wings), Japanese *Tengu*, perhaps. Whatever it is, it seems to be eying the still-open bag of birdseed lying on the ground. Sylvain waits patiently for the birds swarming around him to fly off into the trees, and wordlessly picks up the bag of birdseed and hands it to the crow-man, who rasps a word of thanks.

“Honored brother, what brings you to me?”

The crow-man pauses in his inspection of the birdseed, pulling his beak out of the bag. He folds his wings neatly, rummages in a traveler’s pack slung over his back, and withdraws a small paper-wrapped box. Sylvain takes the proffered item and the crow goes back to pecking at the bag of birdseed.

Puzzling out the scrawled characters in black ink on the paper wrapping, Sylvain figures out that he is to make a delivery, to someone who lives deep in these mountains. Very deep. At least half the day’s journey, plus time for stopping to ask directions many times. Sylvain glances at his spirit staff, glad for the many birds that live in the area.

Remembering his manners, the bird mage bows to the Tengu, tucking the box into a pocket of his coat. “Consider it done,” Sylvain says, and is rewarded with a friendly squawk from the crow-man before he takes off into the sky again.

Sylvain is halfway to his destination and thoroughly lost when he realizes that the Tengu never gave back the birdseed.

—-

Shiritori Zakuro looks up from the elegant spray of leaves she is carving on the wooden handle of what will soon be a demon priestess’s comb. “Come in,” she calls over her shoulder, as she shifts in her seat and leaves her workspace. Her cotton robe trails a bit on the ground as she creeps on four red exoskeleton feet toward the entryway of her home, but it is the layers upon layers of folded paper decorations that she wears that weigh her down more. Paper birds and delicate *kusudama* tied with thin silk cord are woven into

her long hair, and rustle with every move she makes.

When he first meets her, Sylvain wonders if Master Shiritori considers herself a fire hazard, what with all the paper she wears. He does not bring up this point at any time he converses with her.

Shiritori greets the bird mage graciously, serves him some tea, and takes the package he has delivered, unwrapping the paper and opening the box to find several gold pieces tucked into cloth padding. She smiles at the metal, murmuring something about a divine bow, and tucks the gold pieces into her sleeves. The sleeves are rather wide, Sylvain notices, to accommodate the scythe-like spikes that slant delicately from the master's forearms. He has never seen her in combat, but few mantis-kind battles are long enough to attract spectators. She turns towards the stove where a teakettle is still steaming, and Sylvain sees wings folded neatly at her back.

Sipping his tea, Sylvain reflects on his unusual luck. Z.S. of famed Hand lore was said to be a fabled apparatus-maker, a master of the crafting arts and item enchantments, and she'd praised the excellent condition of his spirit staff. Perhaps hearing that was worth wandering through path-less mountain scrub and needing to stop more times than he remembered for directions. He'd had to call several birds out of their daily routines, including one or two rather shady-looking ones with beady eyes and sharp beaks—

Snapping back to attention at the movement of something being pushed across the table towards him, Sylvain breaks through his fog of thoughts in time to hear Master Shiritori inquire as to if he'd be willing to make a delivery to a dear friend of hers in the forest on the western mountainside. It is some paper made of pressed leaves, nothing fancy, but it is something the friend has asked for many times. Sylvain agrees before he completely processes the information that said friend is roughly a thousand years old, somewhat eccentric, and also the relative of many beetles, so please don't eat any during your visit.

"…how many years, again?" He repeats when the silence has stretched just too far for his liking, and Master Shiritori just laughs, her voice like the wind chimes made of bones over her home's door. "Do not worry about meeting her. A journey born of friendship is

always worthwhile.” Her black compound eyes twinkle as she begins to clear the tea things.

—-

A small figure is crouched before a large mossy rock, eyes fixed on what looks like an empty jar with small holes poked into the lid, sitting atop the stone in a cushion of lichen. Dressed in a tunic and long skirt fashioned from small, multicolored and interconnected metal pieces, the beetle girl Julodis is a bright spot of color in the otherwise dark undergrowth of the forest. Her metallic hair gleams with a blue sheen, which emphasizes the small but noticeable pair of antennae that sprouts from the crown of her head.

It has taken nearly three hours for Sylvain to find her, but fortunately the bundle of paper he is delivering is light. Still, he could use a nap, Sylvain thinks. There are many other things he would like to think on as well. What sound does a beetle make when it flies?

The bird mage pauses, setting his foot down carefully so as to not startle the girl who is so intent on her observation that she does not seem to move, to breathe. He approaches, slower, more steadily, and when he is close to the beetle girl he peers intently into the jar. He stares.

“…what are you doing?” is the first thing that leaves his mouth, though other questions in his mind are vying for recognition, questions such as *“Where did you get that spider”* and *“Where did you get that large ant”* and *“Why are you staring at them climb around a jar.”*

Flapping a hand at him silently, the beetle girl whispers back, “Shh. I’m writing a love story.” She smiles a dreamy smile, and continues with a slightly faraway look, “She’s a queen ant. He’s not that special so far as spider kind goes, usually he just barely captures enough of the regular ants to survive, fate threw them together…” she trails off and prods the side of the jar, knocking the spider back to the bottom, where the queen ant is pacing restlessly.

“Much as he admires her, much as he intrigues her, he will be her tragic end.” She tilts her head, and the faint, muted sunlight catches

on the iridescent beetle wing ornaments that glitter at her ears. Sylvain blinks as he processes this tragic storyline.

A few heartbeats of silence later, Sylvain is fiddling with the twine adorning his spirit staff (and also discovering pocket lint in his coat) and he almost timidly offers, “If it’s meant to be a tragedy, I can ask one of my friends to eat them both. Birds eat bugs…” he breaks off, wondering how to word the rest of the statement politely. “That way the spider doesn’t have to kill his, erm, love.”

The beetle girl turns around and stares at the bird mage from where she sits, her antennae waving back and forth in agitation. “*No.* It must be their own nature that tears them apart. The heartbreak is more tangible—”

“I think,” Sylvain interrupts mildly, “You should stop shaking the jar…?”

Julodis’s head whips back to the mossy stone, where her hand is, indeed, clenched around the jar and jostling it. She gasps. “When did the spider catch the ant? He must have been spinning web all this time they were walking in circles around each other!” She holds the jar up to her eyes, chattering on, “The spider isn’t even moving. Just resting on the web, isn’t moving, just—‘the spider holds his hapless victim close, mourning the law of nature that has led him to kill his queen.’” She sighs as she regards the jar fondly. A passing blue-gold beetle in flight lands on a leaf nearby, and begins to warble an aria in a high, tinny flutter of wings.

Sylvain somewhat spoils the effect by muttering, “Actually, I think the spider’s eating.”

“She had gnawed on his heart for too long! Artistic license. Look at how the spider cradles the body.”

Sylvain manages an awkward chuckle, but quickly stops when he sees Julodis’s expression.

“Are… is that a tear?”

“Shut up,” is the brisk response.

Sylvain directs his eyes skyward (or in the forest's case, canopy-ward) and stifles an exasperated comment. He withdraws the stack of leaf-pressed paper from his coat, and places it carefully on the mossy stone, in the space vacated by the jar. "Here. From Lady Shiritori. I wonder if these will soon bear words of tragedy and love."

Julodis eyes the paper and grins, and Sylvain is reminded that a thousand years is young for someone who can live to be ten times that age. "Thank you, bird mage," She says politely. "When you take the path back, take the turn that is lined with mint. Sing your avian songs as you walk, and you will find yourself at a wooden house. Please visit my brother at the foot of the mountain and let him know I have a new story for him. He will ensure the journey is worthwhile."

The words are familiar. "A journey born of friendship is always worthwhile. *Sayonara,*" Sylvain bows slightly, shoulders his staff, and beats a hasty getaway before he starts to feel too uncomfortably sorry for a spider and an ant.

—-

"Ah, still writing, is she? That live-action as-it-happens tragic fanfiction stuff?" Vansoni, preferred name Vans, smiles a smile that showed a mouth full of unnaturally sharp (and spiny) teeth. "My sister *was* always a dreamer. Perhaps that's why she sees more than most." The beetle man chuckles as he organizes a pile of assorted small debris on a table that he and the bird mage are seated at.

Vans continues to sort through a series of small dark pellets as Sylvain looks around the inside of the house. There are no walls that separate the space into rooms, but small wickerwork contraptions are suspended from cut tree branches that crisscross the ceiling like a web. Metallic beetles crawl like an ever-undulating blanket of color along the network. Vans himself, clad in a colorful loose-fitting coarse-cloth robe, seems to blend in well with them.

"In any event, it is good to hear from my little sister again, and good to hear that she has the means to remember her stories. Things are easy to forget over a thousand years, if one cannot write them down." Vans reaches for a shelving unit under the table and takes

something out of one of the drawers. “Please, accept this from the two of us.”

Sylvain accepts the cloth sack, hearing whatever it contains rustle as the pouch changes hands. “Thank you.”

Vans grins. “The beetles around here are on good terms with the birds. The smaller the limbs, the more delicate work can be done, the more food can be gathered. This blend convinces the birds around here to leave the beetles alone so they can keep gathering the ingredients.”

“Blend?” Sylvain inquires, though he feels he knows what the answer will be.

The beetle man nods, his stubby antennae bending once in a nod of their own. “Birdseed. Hope you like it.”

—-

Sylvain walks through the dwindling light of dusk, holding a bag of birdseed, nigh-identical to the one he’d taken from his coat pocket less than a turn of the sun ago.

A hundred steps later finds him at the base of a magnolia tree his feet have led him to without his head being aware of it. Sylvain leans his staff against the tree and looks up. He shrugs off his coat, tosses it onto a low branch, and scrambles up the crisscrossing sections of wood at the trunk. Leaning back against smooth bark, he opens the package. A moment later he is eating small handfuls of birdseed and humming snatches of avian lullabies as he chews.

He hears twittering from somewhere near the large white flowers on the eastern side of the tree. Smiling, the bird mage shifts to the side a little, and pours a neat pile of birdseed onto the three branches he can reach without getting up.

The chattering of birdsong lasts long into the evening. *There are many words for the sounds of birds,* Sylvain thinks, before dozing off.

Birth by Guitar

> Some people are fond of saying that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. It would be more accurate to say that history is doomed to repeat itself.
> - **Excerpt from** *The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic*, **by Anonymous**

As the sun set over the Seine river, the migration began. It was slow at first, with a few figures crossing the waters by bridge. As the sky darkened, the travelers multiplied. They came in bicycles, boats, taxis, and trucks. A few walked. A few more ran. The sun sank completely below the horizon, and the migration ceased. The crowd, now a few hundred strong, reached its destination, merging with the multitude of individuals who were already there. It was closing time at the *Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques*, and the final exhibition was about to begin.

The *Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques* opened its doors for a month every ten years, closing them for fifteen minutes at sundown. A large poster glued to the wall of the gallery lied about the reason for this closing in seventeen different languages. The poster identified the downtime as, among other things, a time to have lunch (French), a cleaning period (English), a dirtying period (German), and a mandatory smoking break (Swahili). In truth, the gallery did not shut down during these fifteen minutes. It simply moved outdoors.

The gallery's doors swung closed, and a final figure darted between them. She carried a weathered guitar under her arm. The figure leaned against the side of the building and began to tune her guitar. When the job was finished, she raised her head, acknowledging the crowd for the first time.

"Ah!" gasped the Guitarist, feigning surprise. "Who might you lot be?"

The crowd erupted into a roar of sound as hundreds of voices rose to answer the question.

The Guitarist clicked her tongue. "This simply will not do," she said. "You must appoint a speaker from within your ranks if you wish to be heard." She paused, adjusting a few of the strings on the guitar. "Go on, make your selection. Choose *somebody* to do the talking. Nobody in particular."

As it did every night, the crowd parted to reveal a serene, well-dressed man. The man strode to the front of the crowd and locked eyes with the Guitarist. The crowd held its breath. The man coughed, and the Exchange began. It was an old performance, one that had been scripted decades earlier. As the two players spoke, the members of the audience mouthed the performers' lines, having seen the Exchange dozens of times before.

"And who are you?" asked the Guitarist.

"I am, as you requested," replied the man, "Nobody in Particular."

"Why are you here?" asked the Guitarist, gesturing towards the crowd. "What did you hope to accomplish by gathering before me tonight?"

"We have come to be cool."

"Why not take a dip in the river, then?" the Guitarist replied with a smile. The crowd chuckled. The joke wasn't particularly funny, and hadn't matured well after a thousand repetitions, but the crowd always chuckled.

"We're here to listen to music."

"Is there something you had in mind?" the Guitarist asked, lazily strumming a chord.

"A special song, stolen from the future." The man doffed his hat.

The Guitarist grinned. "Ah, but the future comes later." She placed her hand on the neck of the guitar. "It will be stealing from *me*."

The Exchange was completed. The crowd cheered, then fell silent as the Guitarist began to hum. She tried a few notes before she felt her voice catch on the proper one. She hummed again, and her voice caught again. She tried once more, and felt the catch in her throat tear itself free, releasing a deep, throaty voice. The Guitarist opened her mouth and sang.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity Man.

They said he had no soul for jailin'
Nor the talents for work in art
The Circus didn't call him, no
He's been helpin' from the start.

Well if manna falls from heaven
Then it lands above our heads
But don't you frown, 'cause the Charity Man
Said he'll keep all of us fed.

Oh, the Fact'ry's still now workin'
Smokestacks pushin' smoke
Assembly line still movin'
Overseer can't take a joke.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity man.

Charity Man said don't you worry, now
Charity Man said don't you cry
Said he's knockin' on doors all the way to Heaven
Ain't nobody gonna turn a blind eye.

Seen Jailers down over by the docks
Jailers don' understand
Jailer-man always askin' if
I've seen the Manna Charity Man.

Charity Man's been workin' on something
Way deep underground
But I ain't seen no Charity Man
Since the Jailers came lookin' 'round.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity man.

The Guitarist bowed her head, and the crowd applauded. The man smiled and tipped his hat again, vanishing into the throng. The doors of the gallery creaked open, and the wind picked up, carrying the song to the lips of the performer who would sing it for the first time, years later.

Somewhere between the singers, in a small house in New York, an insomniac tapped his pen against a sheet of paper. He was meant to be writing a highly important letter, concerning nothing less than the fate of humanity, but he could not find the right words. Truth be known, the writer was beginning to doubt his own cause.

A breeze blew through the window, and the paper rippled beneath the pen. The writer rose to close his shutters, then froze. For a moment, he was certain that he'd heard a voice drifting through the room along with the wind. Then, he dropped back into his seat and began to write, the voice and the window forgotten.

> In the interest of sharing all of God's miracles with the least of His children, and in the interest of humanity as a whole, I am pleased to announce the formation of a new organization that shall work towards the liberation of those in poverty, in depression, and in the throes of death. This organization shall hereby be known as the Manna Charitable Foundation. May it prosper for generations to come, and all of mankind with it.

Birth of a New Day

> **Note:** This is **the final entry** of a 7-part story. It is recommended that you start from the beginning with **SCP-3475 -- Our Shifting Foundations**.

D-1460 gradually woke up to the sound of alarm bells, laid over the subdued tones of smooth jazz.

He only knew that what he was called was D-1460 because the uniform he was wearing was properly reflected in the mirror ceiling above him, "D-1460" on the uniform. As he shot up in a startle, he could see green paper stick out of a pocket on the front, but after further investigation to check for any other identification, what his *real* name could be, he couldn't find anything.

The second thing to fully process for D-1460 was the mosquito in the corner of his eye. He couldn't catch it. He couldn't squish it. No matter what he did, where he looked, whether he closed his eyes or not, anything he could think of to try and catch it, it was always in the upper right quadrant of his right eye, unable to disappear. He tried to ignore it as best as he could.

The third thing to fully process for D-1460 was the exactness of the setting for him. There was a mirror ceiling and a mirror floor. Three of the walls were mirror. The mirror wall behind him had a door which couldn't be unlocked or opened. The fourth wall, on the opposite end of the room, had a giant realistic mural on the wall resembling a beachview, acting as if it was a window.

The fourth thing to fully process for D-1460 were the four bodies lying on the floor of the chamber. They looked to be asleep, though why they'd be asleep in their own blood mystified him. He tried shaking each of their bodies, but they had refused to wake up. Oh well, he could figure it out himself.

The fifth thing to fully process for D-1460 was the music on loop.

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and normality. This is home.

Every once in a while, a robotic, monotone voice would utter that phrase over the pitched-down jazz music filling the chamber. There was no rhyme or reason to it. Every time D-1460 called out to the robotic voice, it would not reply. That was that.

A chamber filled with four sleeping bodies, music, a nice view, a table and a chair, and D-1460. This is where he would stay until he could figure out a better option.

Some hours had passed before a thought struck him.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

Enjoy.

D-1460 looked up and saw a door next to the room's exit that was not there before. He got up, cautiously approaching the door.

"What is this?" he asked as he opened the door.

Bathroom Incorporated.

"Oh. Thanks." It was a bathroom, alright. A toilet. A sink. A shower. Towels. Clean uniforms like his, all with "D-1460" printed on them.

He went to the sink first. It had running water. The water could be changed to either be hot, cold, or somewhere in-between. It functioned like a normal sink in every way. He drank out of the tap.

He then tested the shower. The shower was also normal. The water could be adjusted to any temperature, much like the sink. For now, he had no need to shower and change into a cleaner uniform.

The toilet was a normal toilet and functioned like one.

"What are you?" he questioned.

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and

normality. This is home.

"I'm hungry."

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and normality. This is home.

"Do you remember my name?"

No response.

D-1460. Of course that wasn't his true name, but a designation given to him. By the robotic voice? Surely not. No proof was shown that the robotic voice existed in any capacity aside from echoing over the music. Perhaps by whichever organization had been keeping him in the chamber, which probably meant that if he was ever going to be able to find out any information on this organization…

He went over to the sleeping bodies and carefully examined them this time. The first oddity he noticed were holes in each of their heads. That certainly couldn't be healthy. The second oddity were their stiff bodies. People generally were not this stiff when they were sleeping. How long would it be until they woke up anyhow? The loneliness of the situation was threatening to strangle him.

In one of their pockets, D-1460 found identification. It was nearly entirely empty on the front and back of it. That was the third and most striking oddity. All that remained was a photograph of the man he picked up the identification from, and the word "Foundation".

"That doesn't help much. Foundation… Foundation…"

He fidgeted with the identification as he paced around the room. There was nothing in his scattershot memory that corresponded with "Foundation". "foundation", yes. Buildings has foundations. Organizations or institutions that had been made with endowments… was that this building? A Foundation for what?

Very little about the room had changed since he woke up in it some

unknown hours ago. Was he in a room that this Foundation had been based around? Art? Sleep studies? Music? Robots? Something wasn't adding up, and there were enough pieces missing that —

He crumbled to the floor, clutching his head. A massive headache had come on, and he felt utterly incapacitated at that moment. The lights pulsated, the music felt harsher and uglier, and the bodies looked more sickly. Even the air started to weigh on him just the slightest bit more. Any hesitation, and he would slip into his own thinking forever.

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and normality. This is home.

"F-Fuck off."

He couldn't even reach the concepts he was thinking about. His mind had hurt him before he could. Was it a self-defense mechanism now? Either he was on the right path, or he was going to accidentally kill himself over it. It might have been best to close his eyes now and sleep. There was nothing around with caffeine in it, unfortunately.

D-1460.

That wasn't his true name. Did it mean something however? He studied the numbers carefully. 1460. 1. 4. 6. 0.

1. The 1 looked like an I.

4. What did 4 look like? There wasn't an English letter that corresponded neatly with 4. If he wanted to continue down this path of thinking however, he had to come up with a comparison. 4… W? W looks vaguely enough like 4 if you twist your brain enough. The amount of brain-twisting he'd done lately made that perfectly fine.

6. The 6 looked like a G.

0. The 0 looked like an O. If 6 was G and 0 was O, was 60 GO?

GO…

IWGO.

"I will go?" That sounded about right. "I will go. I will go. I Will Go."

D-1460. I Will Go. That was as much of an identity as he would be able to grasp onto for now.

"Do you know what this Foundation I found out about is?" I Will Go asked, not expecting an answer back.

-2152 —

I Will Go crumpled to the floor and screamed, unable to parse anything else the voice was saying. His head flared up, and he passed out before recovering.

"Please put it into terms I can understand, whatever you are. What is this Foundation that I found out about?" His head still hurt from the last attempt at inquiring, so he made sure to steel himself in case it happened again.

We are products of those inquisitive and in pursuit of normality. You, I, , , , , we are the promises of a capitalist society seen through to its processes. This is a celebratory watermark. His head twanged again and again and again and again, but it didn't feel overwhelming like all the other times it hurt. A small blessing, if a pitiful one.

"What are you?"

Their designation for I was ***2152****.*

"Designation? What do you mean?"

This facility was designed to hold oddities such as myself. You are here to understand my purposes better. We are both pawns of the most desirable outcome.

I Will Go paced around. The more he learned, the more questions he ended up having. A dull pain echoed in the crevices of his mind; he had to be careful about what information he could sift through. It was a chore. It'd be easier to just sit and stop thinking about everything instead.

"How are you replying to me? I thought you were just a voice looping over some music."

The music instantly cut out, replaced by the sounds of the ocean instead. It was calm and docile. 2152 did not reply. This was probably for the best. He needed time to think.

"Fuck, I'm hungry."

I Will Go wasn't sure how much time had passed since then. Days might had gone missing since he last thought about his hunger. It didn't seem like days. It must have been hours, but he had nothing to do except to drink from the sink, think, and sleep, so there was no way to tell how much time was missing. The oncoming pain of hunger complicated matters. Even though sleep in the chamber was the best he had ever gotten his entire life, the hunger still woke him up on occasion, forcing him to confront pulsating lights until he was able to fall back asleep. This was his only way of keeping time; the approximate hours between pulsating lights.

This was why the sudden appearance of a marble bust on the table caught his attention immediately.

There it stood. A sculpture as proud and vain as any. I Will Go had no idea who it was a bust of, nor did he know its function. But it had appeared one moment, offsetting the tranquil and still nature of the room with its presence. Its colors didn't fit in with anything else in the room. It was too bright even when considering the lights fixated on the ceiling. And as he inspected, he realized it was looking at the mural of the beach.

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and normality. This is home.

Oh. The music was back to normal. When did that happen? It must have happened when the bust appeared, but he didn't recall what noise filled the room in-between the last time he spoke to 2152 and now. Had it always been like this? It must have. Yeah. That was it.

"I should shower." The thought came to him suddenly, but he wasn't opposed to it once he said it. It had been some amount of time since he discovered the shower, and not once did he use it. It'd be a good idea to clean up, if nothing else. Maybe he'd think better. Even if his head started to hurt less because of it, that would be enough.

He undressed, feeling lighter just from taking off his uniform. He didn't mind undressing in front of the still-sleeping bodies (which were taking on a new color by now), nor in front of the mural, or even near the bust. What did it matter? No one was watching him, and even if they were, he probably deserved it by this point. If nothing else, it was his one way of having some kind of understanding over his current situation, and that was all he really wanted.

Water poured down. It was as cold as he could stand it being. His being felt pure again.

I Will Go thought of 2152. He had no clue what its purpose was, or why it was there. All he knew was that it was there for a reason, and acted like it did for a reason. There would never be a time where he'd figure out its reasons, but there was purpose to it. That's what really mattered to him. It helped make the situation feel less despairing.

I Will Go thought of his name, still unable to remember his past one, even after all this time. That was fine. I Will Go was a fitting name anyhow. Even if he never went anywhere again, it was a name he gave himself.

I Will Go thought of the four bodies. Who were they? The thought hadn't occurred to him until now, but if he was there with them, then there should have been a reason for that. Did they work at this Foundation? Was he also an employee there? Why was his uniform different from theirs, then? Really, did that even matter? The end result was the same no matter what came before. His sleeping friends, or partners, or enemies. Whoever they were, they didn't matter now.

I Will Go thought of the mural. Now that he thinks about it… it seems pretty inviting. Was it worth checking out? Probably.

I Will Go thought of home. The layout of the shower reminded him of his childhood. He could remember that much at least. When he was nine, his family moved from one city to a slightly bigger city, and its shower was decently-sized. It felt safe, and it could hide his naked body without the need to hang a towel, or use makeshift curtains. From nine to thirteen, he lived the most stable period of his life. For four years, he enjoyed something as simple as a shower.

He had to assume it was stable. When thinking back on his home, it felt safe. Any other period of his life that he remembered felt turbulent, or rocky, and even with all the other showers in the world to keep him clean, they didn't have the same magic appeal as his very first real shower. Standing there in the shower, feeling the cold against his body, trapped in a chamber with sleeping bodies and oddities that he could not explain… it felt like home.

An hour passed before I Will Go got out, more refreshed than ever. He grabbed one of the many suits by the shower, dressing himself as he exited the bathroom. As far as he could recall, he'd never properly worn a suit of his own before. It took some fussing getting it on just right. He had trouble tightening the belt enough to keep his pants snug. The tie especially felt laborious to make look just right. But it was worth it. He looked sharp, and he didn't look worn-down. What a nice feeling.

I Will Go looked to the mural. The beach still moved around, lively as ever. Strangely, even with the cold shower and the enticing view, he felt tired. It'd be fine. He could check it out later. Sleep beckoned, and he wanted to answer its call.

The bodies were gone. The table disappeared. The music felt less like traditional music and more like textures. The doors were nowhere to be found. The marble bust was placed on the ground, looking at I Will Go. The mural changed to a night view of the beach.

"What the Hell is this…"

He walked forward towards the mural, unsure of what to do. This was the first time he had properly inspected it. There was a lot that was off about it now. Maybe he should have focused on it first before anything else, because he would have approached the situation differently.

It wasn't just moving. It looked realistic.

Good morning.

"Seems like it's night."

In a sustainable resource-driven future, night as a concept has no purpose.

"What's going on here?"

Imagine a more vibrant world, free from shopping centers and normality. This is home.

"No, I'm not accepting that. I want an actual answer now." There was silence. The music had stopped, and all that remained was the sound of the ocean. It took a few minutes before the voice came back.

What kind of products do you purchase at the store?

"What kind of —"

Apple, Oscar-Myer, Dell, Aqualabs, Hershey, Sanofi, Hasbro, Bones, HGTV, all of our wonderful selections are available at the low cost of free. Choices are endless and unlimited. Society has opened itself up to give us these flexible options. This is the power of consumerism.

I Will Go had no response. He felt like it made sense, but he wasn't able to reach it.

Do you recall what the is? It's a ball of gas that acts as a star that heats up our world. What pets do you like to take care of? There are many wonderful choices for companions.

We have fulfilled our purposes. Feelings of nostalgia and eras gone by have taken root in you. Normalcy is in vogue, and we must simply build off of it. There is no greater pioneer than those have taken the first step into bigger, dangerous worlds.

This is your reward.

Welcome home.

The lights shut off, and everything went quiet except for the sounds of the ocean. I Will Go had no idea what to make of it. After thinking it through, there were only two options. He could sit there in the darkness of the chamber, and be content to continue his ritual of thinking and sleeping. His water supply had ran out. So eventually, he would… he would…

Huh. He didn't know what would happen. Even as his head rang in pain from the thought, it hurt a lot less than he expected. That just left the second option of seeing if he could really step through the mural. That felt like the only reasonable path left. Plus, the beach… it looked so inviting.

I Will Go stepped through the mural,

---

and ended up on the beach. It was night. The ocean lapped onto the shore every so often, and the moon shone diligently in the sky. There were trees behind him. He really was gone. He was outside now. He found beauty in the stillness around him, and he remembered what home felt like.

I Will Go looked up into the sky and studied it. He never recalled seeing stars before.

« Children Will Listen ||

Birth of a New Day »

Birth of an Angel

Don't panic.

I do not panic.

Don't worry.

I do not worry.

Don't fear.

I do not fear.

Your flesh will become an icon of deliverance, and release your spirit from mortality.

I love you.

Your soul will live forever in my sight, a shade to the ignorant but a savior to all those who wish to open their eyes and be free. Are you ready?

I am ready.

You have made the right choice, Samuel.

[62 HOURS EARLIER]

Experiment Log - SCP- (START)
Objective: Determine results of extended exposure to SCP- .
Notes: SCP- was retrieved during operation Σ-5 after it was determined to be emitting abnormally high quantities of upper bandwidth EM radiation. During its storage in site-46, SCP- 's emissions have decreased nearly 40% from readings taken during operation Σ-5.
D-Class Profile: D-3466 has been convicted of two cases of manslaughter, [DATA EXPUNGED]. D-3466 is described as

extremely introverted, with a proficiency for programming and mathematics.

BEGIN LOG

Day 1 - 0 Hours since initial exposure

00:00 - Subject (. , D-3466) escorted into a large room with a poster depicting SCP- . The room is furnished with a bed, table, washroom facilities, ballpoint pen, paper, and a number of books of varying topics.

00:24 - Subject quickly falls asleep, no effects of SCP- observed.

07:30 - Rations are given to Subject by research assistant . Subject mentions dreams involving SCP- , but is unable to elaborate further. Upon requests for research assistant to remain in the chamber, "to talk", quickly departs.

08:27 - After reviewing several of the books within the test chamber, subject begins looking at SCP- , and maintains viewing for the next 38 minutes.

09:05 - Subject mumbles something directed at SCP- , and shakes his head. Subject takes one of the books (identified as "Universe in a Nutshell" by) and begins reading.

12:00 - First interview with Subject. Please see recording log Σ-5-E11.

+ Show Recording Log Σ-5-E11

Recording Log Σ-5-E11 (BEGIN RECORDING)

Dr. : Earlier today, when you were speaking with my assistant, you mentioned you had dreams involving SCP- , can you describe them?

D-3466: I liked talking with her, you should let her to talk with me more.

Dr. : Perhaps, if you describe your dreams.

D-3466: [sighs] It's hard. I was [pauses] I was, like, floating, and I could hear a voice. It was really strange, when I was dreaming I felt really… peaceful? Like that.

Dr. : What was the voice saying?

D-3466: I don't remember.

Dr. : Are you sure?

D-3466: Uhm… no- [pauses] yes.

Dr. : I think you do remember something, are you scared of it? Is that why you don't want to talk about it?

D-3466: Maybe… [pauses] maybe if we went in the room together it'd help me to remember? I like company, it gets lonely in there.

Dr. : I'm afraid that's not possible D-3466. But you must remember something if you could talk about it in the testing chamber and not here.

D-3466: No, no… you should come with me into the room, it'd help!

Dr. : Ah, that's our time. Please return to the testing chamber D-3466.

D-3466: No. No! Come with me! [guards restrain D-3466 and return him to the testing chamber] Fuck! Come!

Dr. : D-3466 appears to have become extremely extroverted, and suffers from anxiety when going without contact. He obviously remembers something from his dreams, but is unwilling or unable to elaborate.

Recording Log Σ-5-E11 (END RECORDING)

13:00 - Resistance is encountered when reintroduction to testing chamber is attempted, force is used. Subject uses several expletives before returning to reading.

14:33 - Subject throws the book down, begins scratching at his palms, and complains of skin irritation. Large irregular red patches are visible on Subject's hands.

15:17 - Symptoms appear to subside. Subject stops scratching his palms and resumes reading. Faint red patches are still visible on the palms and fingertips, and appear to be spreading up the forearm.

17:30 - Rations given to Subject by research assistant . Subject expresses intense anxiety when research assistant leaves, and pounds on the door for several minutes.

17:52 - Subject observed sleeping. Symptoms of intense scratching and bright red patches reappear during the course of the night. The patches have grown across most of Subject's upper torso and face.

Day 2 - 24 Hours since initial exposure

05:28 - Subject begins convulsing from excessive blood loss due to lacerations created through scratching. Upon questioning, night staff were unable to answer as to why they did not intervene sooner. Wounds are covered in gauze, and a blood transfusion and sedative are administered.

07:30 - Rations are delivered, Subject is still asleep. Wounds not covered by gauze are showing abnormally high healing rates. Scar tissue appears to be coalescing to form several designs resembling SCP- .

08:22 - Sedative wears off, Subject awakes and immediately begins stripping off gauze to reveal fully-healed wounds. Duplicates of SCP- cover the Subject's hands, arms, upper torso and face. Subject takes ballpoint pen and begins drawing pictures of SCP- , laying them beneath SCP- or pushing them up against the viewing window.

10:46 - Subject consumes meal intended for breakfast before returning to drawing.

12:00 - Second interview with Subject. Please see recording log Σ-5-E12.

+ Show Recording Log Σ-5-E12

Recording Log Σ-5-E12 (BEGIN RECORDING)

D-3466: [scratches his hands and forearm]

Dr. : D-3466, as you are aware we had to sedate you earlier today to prevent you from dying from lacerations caused by this incessant scratching, I suggest you stop before we have to sedate you again.

D-3466: [slows scratching] I had another dream last night.

Dr. : What happened?

D-3466: I'll tell you if you come into the room.

Dr. : I've told you already, I can't do that.

D-3466: You should come in. We- [pauses] I want you to come in. You'll like it.

Dr. : We? Who is we?

D-3466: We are friends. You should come, you'll like it.

Dr. : D-3466, if you tell me more I'll come in.

D-3466: All it wants to do is give you love. [begins scratching violently, bleeds over the interview table]

Dr. : Guards, please restrain him. [D-3466 makes aggressive movements] Guards!

D-3466: [struggles] Come! You'll like it! We only want to give you love! Love! [D-3466 is forcibly returned to testing chamber]

Dr. : D-3466 is showing signs of possible schizophrenia, however a psycho-telepathic ability on part of SCP- is not above suspicion. Given D-3466's

current state of mind and the risk of injury coming to both D-3466 and others, I'm suspending D-3466's access to the interviewing room and barring access to the testing chamber by site personnel.

Recording Log Σ-5-E12 (END RECORDING)

13:00 - Subject shows heavy resistance to reintroduction to testing chamber, makes many requests for additional personnel to enter the chamber.

14:47 - Tissues of the legs and forearms have malformed into larger versions of SCP- . Tumor-like clumps of detritus (what appears to be skin and hair) have formed on Subject's torso. The ballpoint pen has run out of ink, and from this point onward Subject tears pieces of paper, reorganizing these into illustrations of SCP- .

17:30 - Due to the increasingly unpredictable behaviour of subject, research assistant delivers rations through a slot on the lower-half of the chamber entrance. Subject repeatedly pleas for research assistant to enter, who becomes visibly distraught at Subject's actions and leaves the observation room.

18:11 - Subject consumes rations, and begins crying.

18:15 - Subject stops crying, and stands still for one minute and twenty-four seconds. Afterwards, Subject retrieves plastic knife from earlier meal.

18:17 - A makeshift dirk is fashioned from the plastic knife, and Subject repeatedly stabs himself in the chest and waist. Where large lacerations were present from excessive scratching, disembowelment has occurred. Subject shows no expression of pain or loss of lucidity during this experience, despite massive blood loss from wounds. Dr. orders medical team to refrain from assisting subject given SCP- 's effects.

18:19 - Subject gores his eyes into shapes resembling SCP- .

18:21 - Subject vomits a mixture of blood and organ debris before lapsing into unconsciousness. Numerous convulsions are

experienced throughout the night. Subject's body shows extreme scar tissue build up and disfiguration.

Day 3 - 48 Hours since initial exposure

03:50 - Subject awakes. Subject's left arm has fused with its torso, and various cysts have developed across most of its appendages. Subject has lost all sexual characteristics. Subject's nose has regressed into the zygomatic bone, and excessive mucus production occurs.

03:54 - Subject begins "painting" the walls with images of SCP- using a mixture of mucus, blood, vomit, [REDACTED]. This action continues through the morning.

07:30 - Rations presented and removed, Subject shows no interest in consumption.

12:00 - Third interview with Subject. Please see recording log Σ-5-E13.
Note: Due to increased volatility in subject, interview was conducted through speakers and microphones implanted in test chamber.

+ Show Recording Log Σ-5-E13

Recording Log Σ-5-E13 (BEGIN RECORDING)

D-3466: [paints images of SCP-]

Dr. : D-3466, this is Dr. . How are you?

D-3466: [inaudible noises] You should come in, love for you.

Dr. : What are you creating?

D-3466: Eyes for my love. It loves me.

Dr. : What is the objective of your "love"?

D-3466: To love others, of course. You can be one of them. You should come into the room. [shows slight

agitation]

Dr. : How are you not experiencing pain from these deformations?

D-3466: In place of the pain [pauses] only love. You should come in.

Dr. : I'm not coming in.

D-3466: [grows increasingly agitated, approaches viewing window]

Guard: Holy fuck what happened to his face?

D-3466: Come. [vomits repeatedly] Come.

Dr. : I think this interview is over.

D-3466: It only wants to love you! [begins painting SCP- on the viewing window]

Recording Log Σ-5-E13 (END RECORDING)

13:24 - Subject's chest cavity haemorrhages and internal organs become exposed. Ribs have deformed outwards and expose Subject's heart and lungs. It is unknown how Subject survives while most of its body is openly exposed to airborne disease and natural body fauna and flora.

14:46 - Movement rendered impossible due to build up of scar tissue and deformation, Subject's spine arches into a curve.

14:52 - Subject collapses onto the ground. Changes in physiology are visible in real-time, Subject's head fuses to its feet.

15:56 - Subject's body now resembles an image of SCP- . Audio after this time record Subject constantly whispering, "Forever in your sight.'

23:07 - Subject expires.

Experiment Log - SCP- (END)

Addendum-Σ-5-E1: Thirteen hours after this experiment a humanoid, opaque entity emerged from SCP- . While contained in the same room as SCP- , the entity was docile and moved little from where it first appeared. However, after removal from SCP- 's immediate vicinity the entity proved largely hostile, [DATA EXPUNGED] resulting in three deaths before being subdued through the use of industrial spotlights. It is unknown how the bodies were transferred to SCP- 's storage area, but it can be assumed they were used to [DATA EXPUNGED]. Currently, all four entities are awaiting SCP classification.

Birth of the Cool

In the nineteenth century, the march of progress made it possible for the first time for human science to contemplate and comprehend those phenomena which had long seemed to contravene the laws of nature. Within a matter of decades, concepts that had long been viewed as witchcraft or sorcery were laid bare in the terms of a new and secret science, and governments and organizations around the world began to classify, study, and collect all such anomalies. And, just as artists throughout history have turned a critical eye to the events of the day in their work, so too did the artists of this scientific Renaissance begin to interpret these new discoveries on canvas.

By the 1870s, Paris was the center of the world of anomalous art, and the city stood witness to endless debates about the role of the anomalous in art, or whether such a role existed at all. When in 1874 the famed Salon des Magnifiques *refused to allow any "works of a phantasmagorical nature" to be displayed at their grand exhibition, those artists shut out by the committee organized their own counter-exhibition, to be held at the same time across the river. "Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?", as the show came to be called, was the talk of the Parisian press for months, earning equal amounts of curiosity, dismissal, and outright derision, but the exiled gadflies had made their point - the paranormal, the anomalous, and the bizarre had found a place in the world of art and would not be so easily gotten rid of.*

"Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?" held its exhibitions every ten years thereafter, and as time passed the world of anomalous art grew larger. From its

beginnings in Paris, artists from all across France and Europe, and later from the Americas and the Orient as well, began attending the increasingly prestigious - and increasingly bizarre and difficult to keep hidden from the disdainful eyes of a concerned government - exhibition, expressing new and different interpretations of the role of the anomalous in human life. It was at the sixth decennial exhibition in 1924 that the growing rift between the two largest schools of thought - logical vs. emotional, science vs. faith, Old World vs. New - came to a head, for it was at that show that for the first time, the works of the French surrealist Marcel Duchamp would be exhibited alongside those of Ruiz Marcos, the Mexican artist whose themes of magical realism and religious awe intertwined with the viscerally accessible Forteana of our world had set art critics worldwide at war with each other.

Those who saw the two during the days leading up to the opening of the exhibition said they spent nearly the entire time in heated discussion with one another (in English, for neither spoke the other's mother tongue confidently) about everything under the Sun - the importance of the artist in relation to his work, the importance of context, faith, knowledge, law, free will, God, the State, democracy, Marxism, the war, the League of Nations, and the best way to serve a cup of coffee. It seemed that they might continue bickering throughout the entire exhibition, but as the artists prepared to greet the assembled press on the morning of its grand opening, they appeared to have finally come to an understanding.

If there is one image that comes to the mind of any art historian when the 1924 Expo is brought up, it is of that iconic photo of Duchamp and Ruiz posing side by side with their fellow artists in front of the still-closed doors, Marcos seemingly leaning over to whisper something into Duchamp's ear. For decades, many have speculated on what words Marcos had for his colleague during that memorable instant; a question of metaphysics? Or a challenge? An affirmation of their coming to terms? A

reminder of the reason why they were there at that moment of time? Perhaps an expression of amazement at the multitudes that had come to see them? According to one reporter who claimed he stood close enough to overhear that whisper amidst the din of the crowd, it was all five at once, expressed in four simple words;

"Are we cool yet?"

- **Excerpt from** *The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic*, **by Anonymous**

Birthday Every Day

"Eat this," a tired-looking man in business-casual said, setting down a plate in front of Andrew. He had been escorted to a small room furnished with only a table. He looked down and blinked at the plate. On it sat a round, 12" circular birthday cake, with frosting, bearing the words "Happy Birthday Dana". Confused, he looked back up to the man. "I'm sorry…what?"

"Eat it."

He looked back down and looked at the cake before looking back up. "All of it?"

"Yes."

Andrew looked at the cake once more and then picked up the provided spoon. This must be some kind of science experiment. Resigning himself to the fact that he was probably a lab rat, and at least brightened by the prospect of cake, he took a bite. It was alright. It tasted store-bought. Yellow cake, vanilla frosting. But he sadly did not get far before looking back up again. "I hate to ask… can I get some milk?"

The man looked over to the wall at the one-way mirror. A few minutes later another man came in with a gallon of milk and a glass. Impressed with his luck, Andrew poured one and downed it before starting on the cake again. The first half was decently easy, but once he passed two-thirds he had begun to slow. Even the milk was little help. The man noticed, surely, and kept looking at the one-way mirror. Long minutes passed in-between slow bites, but finally, a half-gallon of milk later, the task had been completed. Andrew was escorted out and placed back in his holding cell.

-

Andrew loved to eat.

That had been his downfall, really; his love of eating. Of food in general. Food of all kinds. It was for this reason that he opened his New York bistro, Andy's. And things were good then…that is, until another Andy, the mayor's son, showed up with his thugs. Andy took a liking to Andrew's restaurant, and started hassling him. He demanded a cut of the business, or his father would have his shop shut down. Andrew's mistake was that he said no. And the next thing he knew the kid 's friend was reaching for a gun, and Andrew dove behind the counter and grabbed his. Andrew was quicker than the rest of them.

-

Andrew was returned to the room with the table on the second day. "Eat this," the man said, presenting him with another cake. the icing read "Happy Birthday Don." He was also provided, once more, with milk.

Andrew ate the cake again, with no complaint, though it did not seem as delicious this time. Perhaps it was the cake from the day before. Either way, he took much longer to consume the thing, and afterward, he laid his head in his hands. "Oh, I think I'm gonna be sick." He was swiftly returned to his cell, where he promptly threw up a good portion of the dessert.

-

"Eat this," The man said, presenting a cake reading "Happy birthday Bob".

"Why am I doing this?" Andrew asked between bites.

"That's none of your concern."

"Who makes these? Do you order them?"

"That's none of your concern."

"I used to run a bistro. We ordered our cakes."

"Fascinating. Now eat."

Andrew scowled and returned to his meal, which he completed in silence. Once again, his stomach could not handle the dessert, and emptied upon his return to his cell.

-

The next day he took a lot longer to start. "I appreciate the cake," he said, looking down at the cake reading "Happy Birthday Bill", "But this is a hell of a lot of cake to eat every day."

"You must eat."

Andrew scowled again before returning to his meal.

-

The next day he was joined by another inmate. This one, designated D-2886, was a large, flabby Hispanic man. After expressing some surprise as to the task at hand, he eagerly split the cake with Andrew. Andrew was happy to not have an entire cake to eat, even though 2886 drank most of the milk.

-

He tried sparking up a conversation, but discovered that the man did not speak any English. They shared their cake and milk, and all was right with the world.

-

A week later, however, 2886 got tired of cake. He took a few bites and then stopped. The man pointed at the cake. "Es necesario que usted coma." 2886 shook his head. Andrew continued to eat, but watched the exchange with interest. The man repeated his phrase and jabbed his finger toward the cake. In a flurry of motion, 2886 grabbed the cake and threw it right in the man's face. And then, miraculously, a new cake appeared on the table, as if from thin air. The man, 2886, and Andrew all looked at it for a long moment, and then the man drew his gun at 2886 and fired. 2886 lay dead on the floor as the man turned to Andrew. "Eat it."

Andrew complied hastily.

-

Weeks passed. Each day was a new name on the cake. Other inmates came and went, with varying degrees of enthusiasm for the task, but Andrew always stayed. Perhaps they knew he would eat the cake by himself if he had to. Perhaps it was his quiet acceptance of the task presented. For whatever reason, he always ate the cake, and never further did he complain.

-

One day Andrew was escorted into the room with the table. The man seemed a little different. A bit of a smile graced the sides of his mouth as he presented the plate. On it was a cake bearing the words "Happy Bar Mitzvah Steven". The man also presented him with a gallon of milk and, for the first time, a cup of coffee.

"This is different," Andrew remarked, cutting a spoonful of cake out of the molded dessert.

The man shrugged. "I've been told you're being kept around a while. You should consider yourself lucky. Most of the time we get rid of you guys."

Andrew sighed and took a bite. "Wonderful. I should mention that I hate cake."

"Well think of it this way. Those cakes are keeping you alive."

Andrew thought about this and took a sip of the coffee. "Well then. I hope I don't get diabetes."

The cake tasted terrible.

Black Lotus

Millions of humans exist only in their dreams. They are known as the Oneiroi, and live in the subconscious of other waking individuals. They float freely from person to person, forming sprawling collectives that span the Earth.

The Foundation has discovered the method of becoming Oneiroi, and now with this power are more capable of containing them. For decades they teach their agents the technique that allows one consciousness to join another's.

Few can withstand the brutal trials that the long training provides them.
Many lose their identities, or enter into permanent comas.

The few mentally hardened individuals that succeed are organized into a task force. The first of these was MTF-OP "The Dream Team"

Codename: Dream Eater

Objective:

Undermine the integrity of subconscious neural networks.

Base of Operations:

Site-18, Dr.Glass

Active Operations:

Black Lotus: Information gathering and assessment of threats related to hidden neural networks.
Blooming Rose: Information gathering on known threat entities and groups of interest who utilize neural networks.

Mobile Task Force:

OP “The Dream Team”

Active Programmes:

Lotus Eater: Recruitment and training.
Hollow’s Room (Site-19, dual use): Alumnus Rehabilitation
Budget :
Cicada Protocol: [EYES ONLY]

Operation Black Lotus

Name: Sherry Wilson
Acquisition: 2002, US Marines, Site-18, Lotus Eater programme
Medical: Hypertension, Schizoaffective Spectrum disorder
Background: No felony record.
Marital Status: Unmarried
Father: Deceased age 27, suicide
Mother: Deceased age 32, medication
Smoker
Incidents: None
Shadow: Sci Fi Apple Pie

Name: Urooj Demopoulos
Acquisition: 1997, Greek HA, Site-19, Security, 1998 Transfer to Lotus Eater programme
Medical: Oneirophrenia (upon waking, multiple incidents), minor

Psychotic spectrum
Background: Public intoxication (multiple), Assault and Battery
Marital Status: Unmarried
Father: Deceased age 63, heart attack
Mother: Living age 74
Smoker
Drinker
History of Drug Use
Incidents: Assaulted guard during stupor: Appeared to have passed sock puppet test, later subdued a researcher. Was later seen on video surveillance conspiring with puppet.
Shadow: Shaper Deathbell Urooj

Name: Johann Michaël Kästner
Acquisition: 2003, Revolutionäre Zellen, Heidering Prison, Lotus Eater programme
Medical: Paranoid Personality Disorder
Background: Convicted of an attempted bombing of Federal property in former East Germany
Marital Status: Unmarried
Father: Dead, shot by border guards attempting to flee the East German state at age 34
Mother: Dead, heart attack at age 64
Incidents: After waking, stabbed lab tech with pen left near his body (see security memo d.d. 09/24/2006), Broke out of lab after waking in an apparent psychosis, found naked and covered in unknown viscous fluid six miles from Site-18.
Shadow: Concrete Tomb

MEMORANDUM Site-18: Inaugural subconscious security screening.

> I entered the mind of the volunteer, Virgil Mayreder. From this point my Shadow was able to “jump” from mind to mind, all across Site-18. For the purpose of this experiment we were able to surmise that a neural relay (a person) can connect from a distance of roughly one meter. Any further would be impossible, at least for me. Many of the minds I entered were hazardous,

incomprehensible, even if their psychological profiles are crystal clear. There was a strong risk of losing my identity in each one, so I had to move quickly.

I could gather information from hospitable minds, but with great difficulty. To do so requires that I “open” to another person's consciousness to such an extent that I risk losing myself to it. Upon waking from this venture it took me several days to recover from the dissociative episode I experienced upon waking.

The area is safe for carrying out operations.

Sherry Wilson

FROM: Rebecca Sanders | Senior Secretary Site-18
TO: Dr. Glass | Site-18
SUBJECT: Compiled Logs, “Black Lotus”

Mobile Task Force OP
Codename Dream Eater
Operation Black Lotus
Initial Date: - -
Urooj Demopoulos: MIA
Johann Michaël Kästner: Recovered
Sherry Wilson: Recovered

Recovery: According to information gathered during Blooming Rose, the entity known as Qi Shao was located in a man named Jason Graham. This individual was staying at an extended care facility in Seattle. One of our reconnaissance sleepers checked in and confirmed that the facility contained a number of hosts; upwards of fifty Xiupanian states. Many live-in care personnel on the site were also hosts. Their behavior was no different than an uninhabited person’s.

Jason Graham lives alone, but he checked into the hospice five times last year. The last known relations Graham enjoyed were with a woman named Qi Shao, who one decade ago succumbed to brain cancer, and is now confirmed to have descended to a pure Oneiroi.

Graham was relocated to a secure facility without incident. The Xiupanian hosts located in the hospice have been catalogued and preserved for future use. There is currently an acceptance criteria set on the hospice in accordance with [REDACTED] to ensure targets unrelated to Black Lotus are not compromised. I personally still consider Xiupanian rewrites under [REDACTED] as an acceptable risk.

Profile: Jason Graham suffers from a set of emotional and affective disorders. There is also evidence of mild schizotypal issues, comorbid depression and anxiety. In addition to the hostile environment his psychology elicits, there are over 50,000 Xiupanian Oneiroi located in his subconscious - a collective of Qi Shao re-writes. Extreme caution is to be taken when merging with Graham. It should also be noted that Graham is aware of Oneiroi, and actively participates in his own subconscious. This behavior seems to be mostly self destructive.

Addendum A: Exploration Log of Jason Graham: Sherry Wilson's Transcript

The entity that attacked us was airborne, having many sets of wings. Qi Shao might be described as a cross between a lamprey and a dragonfly. It is very large, and fast. I would estimate that it is roughly 50 meters long. It also holds some Lucid capacity… It summoned many smaller entities much like itself during the incident.

My palm phasers, and Urooj's poison powder were ineffective against the entity. I'm not sure what Tomb was doing at the time, he appeared to have just frozen in place and shifted into a block of bare concrete.

Urooj was taken away on the third year [247 waking days] of our exploration into Xiupanian territory by this entity. I do not clearly recall the entirety of those three years, but I can tell OP's experience was strengthened. The area is fraught with Terrors, those which mostly appear as abstract fears and developmental traumas. I believe the training in [DATA EXPUNGED] or at least a "necessary evil". We were able to bear these on a daily basis with little psychological recoil.

Once Shao discovered us, it descended upon us from the sky and impaled Urooj with its tongue. Urooj's poisonous coating did not deter Qi Shao or cause it any duress. It seemed to completely ignore Tomb. I was able to escape by leaping over the side of a cliff and engaging my rocket boots. I was not able to immediately pursue Qi Shao after Urooj was taken, as I had to scale the cliffside underneath the island manually. My boots were underpowered as was expected due to our blunted Lucidity.

We required my boots and many hours of mental preparation to ensure that they were capable of crossing over to other islands. I had to abandon Tomb. He was a boulder, unresponsive. He later managed to decouple from Jason Graham's mind alone.

I was not able to learn the location of Urooj until two days later, with the discovery of Shao's temple. The temple was very large, as it had to be in order to accommodate the entity. I discovered Urooj being interrogated by Qi Shao. I overheard Shao questioning Urooj about Jason Graham. I listened for the day while the interrogation took place using my hearing augments, and it seemed that our mission was a failure, as Oneiroi West was not suspected to be in collusion with us at all. I considered that the entity may have been aware of the SCP Foundation and the containment of its host body.

I camped in a small crack near the steps of the temple. I checked again the next morning and found that Urooj was still alive, although divided into many small parts, each being tortured in a unique way. Somehow Urooj was capable of withstanding this torture, up until he was eaten by the entity.

I think it is possible that Qi Shao suspects Oneiroi West. I cannot say whether or not it is safe to simply terminate Qi Shao's host or unleash Qi Shao on the Oneiroi at large.

I would recommend Urooj be removed, as his Shadow has surely been compromised, and his subconscious contains a new Xiupanian state. This makes him useless as a member of OP. As of this day his body is still in a coma.

Becoming a Xiupanian host has little effect on a person's day to day, their psychology, or their dreams. Whether or not they are truly alive

is only a philosophical question. Shaper Urooj is dead, but Urooj Demopoulos might wake up sooner or later, zombie or not, looking and acting just like he always did. In my mind it is not a factor to consider. Most people - , , but if the personnel they would react. It doesn't matter to me. There is no discernible difference between autopilot and "Oneiroi pilot".

Other than the origin state Qi Shao is living in, Xiupanians can't speak to their hosts. There is no information transfer, no security issue. It can't be recovered. [REDACTED] is definitely the best move.

Addendum B: Urooj Demopoulos Status

Subject is unresponsive to stimulus. As of this date the subject has been in a comatose state for six months.

Attempts to enter the subject was successful. Sherry Wilson reports that Urooj's mind is an empty copy of Xiupania, as expected. Urooj's Shadow could not be located; Urooj is likely a "zombie", so to speak. I am recommending we follow through to the end of the year… If the subject does not wake we can take him off of life support. If he does wake, we can reassign him to security detail, or retire him. I recommend some surveillance regardless of our decision. Of course it would be cheaper to utilize Budget .

Addendum C: Concrete Tomb status

Subject recalls nothing about the attack by Qi Shao, but has allowed operative Sherry Wilson to enter its mind. According to Wilson, the scene of the attack, as seen through Kästner's eyes, is replayed over and over on a drive-in theater screen, with Qi Shao replaced by a replica of Roddy Piper's character from the 1988 movie "Hell comes to Frogtown". An unresponsive rendering of Kästner overlaid with a concrete texture can be seen watching. Wilson recommends EMDR therapy in order to break the cycle.

black white black white black white black white black white gray

Yesterday,

I watched three men die because one man sneezed in a room full of blood and shit and light.

Today,

three more men go in, cheap mops and each other's lives in their hands.

Yesterday,

I watched a man I admired gunned down for leaving a rose for a girl whose life was tattered by trauma she never deserved.

Today,

she doesn't remember, and three halls down I can hear her screaming.

Yesterday,

I watched a group of soldiers go down fighting against the corpses of comrades who'd died before them.

Today,

we test another sample, this time on children.

Yesterday,

I watched five men and women gunned down in an abandoned factory no one cares about.

Today,

it happens again and again. Every eleven seconds. Forever.

Yesterday,

I watched a man sit comfortably in a nice armchair, sipping scotch and laughing as he ordered a woman to simply stop breathing.

Today,

he gets the day off of work detail for good behavior.

Yesterday,

I watched hundreds of men and women in orange jumpsuits herded like animals into empty rooms that filled with gas and fire.

Today,

hundreds more are told they have a chance for a lighter sentence, and a chance to serve their country.

Yesterday,

I watched the world nearly die in a thousand thousand terrible ways. Sometimes we would have had time to scream.

Today,

I'm alive to write about it. You want happy endings? Fuck you.

You're alive to read it.

God help us all.

Secure. Contain. Protect.

Blind Date

Serra almost walked past him, she was so distracted.

When she was on duty, she could ignore the worries of day to day life. She could section her thoughts away, focus only on the mission, whether that was containing a new SCP, where she'd be staring down the scope at a 'bender, or acting as back up on a diplomatic case, which usually involved staring down the scope at a GOC agent. When you're a sniper, most of your work involves staring down a scope, and hoping you don't have to pull the trigger. Unless you're one of those that does hope you can pull the trigger, but those types didn't tend to last long in the Foundation.

But when she was off duty, that was a different story. Her brain constantly replayed recent events, trying to figure them out inside her own head. As things currently stood, it was such a series of ups and downs.

She wasn't actually an orphan: Good!

Her father was a mentally incompetent man child, and her mother was officially MIA: Bad.

She had a family that wanted to be involved in her life: Good!

It was the Bright family, who had their hands in every aspect of Foundation culture and every other GOI from the looks of it: Bad.

She had received a promotion, directly from O5-6, who was apparently her uncle: Good!

The promotion was to a job that officially didn't exist, as the Foundations' hitman, well, hitwoman, with the unofficial title of Hand Sinister: Cool, but, you know, technically bad.

The job came with a pair of pearl handled six shooters, that had

been forged from the first reality bender the Foundation had ever dealt with, and made her all but immune to other skips reality bending abilities: Awesome, but also super creepy.

An aunt she had never met had given her holsters for the guns via a video will from beyond the grave, and the holsters felt so right on her hips that she sometimes forgot to take them off to shower: Okay, at this point the scale of good to bad just reads TILT.

And it was on these matters that she was thinking when she almost walked past the blind man with the tin cup. Her mind was always working, however, and it noticed the little details. An actual tin cup was weird, usually the beggars had plastic cups, or a discarded coffee cup. The beggars clothing looks a little too kempt to be homeless. Holy fuck what the hell breed is that dog, if it can actually be called a dog?

So she stopped, rewound her recent memories, and turned to look at the dark skinned blind man. It didn't surprise her to find that he was watching her. "We've met, haven't we?" she said to him.

"We have, Agent Argent," David said, sunglasses turned towards her face, as if watching her. "It was a family event."

"No, I know you're one of the… other side of the family," she said. Her hand fluttered in front of her face, waving that away. She flushed, embarrassed at making hand signs for a blind man. "No, I was referring to before that. It took me a while to place it, but I saw you once, in my room, back when I was just a cadet in training."

The blind man hurumphed to himself. "You saw me when I saw you. I suppose that's to be expected, when dealing with our tribe." He shook himself, and offered her his hand. "Care to help me up? I'd like to chat with you, if you don't mind."

She reached out without even thinking. "Of course. I'd love to have a chat with my cousin who is also a leading member of a rival organization." Even as she said it, she realized the words were true. If anyone could understand what she was going though, it was the blind man. "There's, ah, a Starbucks around the corner. Would you like some coffee?" She eyed his beastly companion. "I'm not sure

they allow pets."

"It's okay." David reached into a pocket, pulling out a brightly colored vest. He held it out, as the animal shrugged into it. "She's working."

The two walked in silence to the coffee shop, neither of them looking at the other. Once inside, they ordered, a vente pumpkin spice latte for David, and a large black coffee for Serra. They took a booth in the back, where they were unlikely to be overheard. David's mountain of a service animal laid down in front of the booth, providing an effective barrier from anyone who might want to stumble close.

They both sat there for a moment, hands wrapped around too hot to drink beverages, and looked at each other. Well. Serra Looked at David. David faced towards Serra. It was the equivalent.

"So welcome to the family," David said, speaking first.

"Thanks," was all she could respond. "It's, well, it's a real trip."

"I know Jack and my father have been talking to you, filling you in on all the peculiarities of their personal histories. I figured you might want to hear something from the other side." He smiled, his hands clasped before him. "Or possibly I'm sounding you out for weaknesses, to be exploited by my associates when the time comes."

"…" Serra's hands crept towards her pistols, checked only when the mound of fur beside the table began to growl. She glanced at it, then at the smiling face of her cousin, and, somehow, found herself relaxing. "The thought had crossed my mind. But that's not what this is about, is it? This is about family."

"Anything for the family." His face contorts, as if he had smelled something horrible. "Some of the family takes that to the extremes. And, we all have our own view of what is in the best interests of family." His hand crept towards his sunglasses. With obvious restraint, he placed his hand back on his coffee, and took a sip. "So. " A lazy smile spread across his face. "I figure the best way to do this is just to let you ask questions. I'm sure you're full of them."

“I am, actually.” Serra said as she smiled back. It was hard to dislike this friendly face across from her. True, it could all be an act. It wasn’t. She’d know, if it was. “But, shouldn’t you already know what I want to ask?”

His face contorted in a grimace, and that was before he sipped the coffee. “Ah, the typical stereotype of the precognitive. Always ready to answer your question before you ask them.” He crossed his arms over his chest and intoned in deep, oracular tones. “The answer to your next five questions are yes, no, bees, dong, and only when covered in ketchup.” His mask of seriousness slipped into a chuckle, and Serra could not help but giggle along with him. “It doesn’t really work like that.”

“So, how does it work?” Serra asked, to break up the monotony of a too long monologue.

“Well, it’s actually quite easy to see the specifics of an upcoming event, or even just a chat. The problem is finding the RIGHT specifics. The future is constantly branching. You’d drive yourself insane, trying to pin down exactly what words a person is going to use. Sometimes, it’s easy. When you say hello to someone, they will most likely say hello back. When you ask them their favorite color, that can get a bit more complicated, a simple distraction can do wonders to change that. And, if you ask them their theories on life, well, good luck!” He threw up his hands, then stopped them on the way back down to rub his temples. “It’s enough to drive most people mad. So, I just, you know, keep a general eye on the future. Task different parts of my brain with looking for different things. Like, I’ve always got my spider sense on, looking for anything dangerous that might happen to, or near me. Like, there’s a good chance the barista is about to burn herself on that coffee.” He paused, head cocked to one side, and was rewarded with an exclamation of pain from behind him. Serra winced in sympathy. “On the other hand, there is also a very minor chance that a rogue GOC agent is going to burst through the door and hose the place down with bullets.” He sipped his coffee again as Serra gaze turned towards the door. The minutes ticked by in silence, until David said, “Well, I guess that one isn’t happening.”

”Okay, you say you deal in generalities, but Claire, uhm, Aunt Claire

I guess, her will was VERY specific." Her hands rested on her guns, not out of threat, but for comfort. Guns were safe. She had learned that from a young age as a Foundling. Guns stopped the bad things, as long as you treated them right.

"Because, one, Aunt Claire was a LOT more powerful than me," he said as he held up a finger, then flicked up a second to join it. "And two, she was focused HARD on that moment. Like, she used up a shit ton of power to cut through the various possibilities to find the true future. It was her masterpiece, really, that one great prophecy that will outlive her." He shrugged his shoulders. "Damned if I know why she wasted it on us."

"All right. Okay," Serra said, organizing her thoughts, "but, then, if you don't do the great prophecy thing, what is it you do do." She pulled a face at herself. "Sorry, my phrasing there was shit."

"I like movies. Science fiction, for the most part. Explosions are easier to understand without seeing them, nuanced emotions you get in drama and comedies, less so. Books on tape are a godsend, let me tell you. I've been experimenting in the kitchen, trying to find a good use for curry in everything. I do a curried pot roast you would not believe. I have a couple of boyfriends, but nothing serious. Most guys seems impressed I can actually find their cock, like, Jesus dude, I'm blind, not dumb, it's going to be in the same place on EVERY guy, unless you're alien, and even then, I've blown enough of those to get the idea of where it might be." He sipped his coffee nice and slow, as his cousin splutters through hers, trying to laugh and swallow at the same time. "But I feel like you *meant* what do I do for my side. The answer to that is rather simple. I'm just like Uncle Jack. I'm a recruiter."

"Jack isn't-" She starts to say, but cuts herself off. She remembers when he came to her, to tell her about, well, everything. She recalls chatting with Alice, and Yoric, both of whom mentioned that Jack was the one who brought them in. "He is, isn't he?" she said, quietly, almost to herself.

"I'm pretty sure it's one of the reasons he keeps his spot as a personnel director, instead of taking a better, higher paying job. From there, he can direct your recruiting tactics, make sure the right

agent is in the right place to pick up a useful, normal family member," David said. He gestured at her with his cup, almost like a salute. "The ones who fit in, anyways."

"And the ones who don't fit in?" She said, encouraging him to continue.

"Well, that's for me. I take care of all the lost, misplaced souls that have a drop of Bright seed in them somewhere. The half human hybrids, the 'talented' byblows of born on the wrong side of the sheets, the genetic experiments trying desperately to escape their creatrix, the bear." He shrugs. "Anyone of the family who doesn't have a place to be, I find them one."

"With the Serpents Hand."

"With anyone that makes them feel like a real person, and not locked away as a puzzle to be taken apart, dissected, and used!" His hand slammed against the table to punctuate the point. Serra almost drew her gun.

"All right, all right, I understand you-" She held up a hand, eyes closed, replaying the conversation. "The bear?"

"You'd have Jack to blame for that one," he said with a smirk. "Apparently there was some kind of testing to see if his willpower was enough to over-ride certain natural drives, and the end result was he knocked up a bear."

"Is…" She bit her lip, worried at it. "Is it a supernatural bear?"

"Nope. And he, not it."

"Extra smart then?"

"Nope. Just a bear. But still family." He shrugged.

"So, you put this bear, who is a family member because there is apparently nothing our family will not stick its dick into, where exactly?" Words she never thought she'd say.

"Oh, he's in a zoo."

There was a moment of silence between them. David simple sipped at his coffee. Serra tapped her fingers on the table, wishing that he could see the look that she gave him.

“Not locked away, huh?” She finally said.

“He’s actually very happy there. We offered to let him out in the wild, but our animal speaker said he was much happier in a zoo, being able to watch people go by, and sleep with a bevy of sexy bear-ettes. I do drop in on him, every couple of months, with an Doolittle, to see how he’s doing,” David said.

"Doolittle?"

"Common slang for anyone who talks to animals, and can understand what they say back."

“All right, fine.” She sat back. “Okay, then, tell me this. Aside from that, who’s the weirdest member of the family you know?”

“I have an uncle who’s-“

“Green, right?” She interrupted. “You know, I’ve heard that from the uncles. ‘I have a brother who’s green.’ I always thought it was some kind of obscure family in joke or something. I mean, what’s so odd about green skin?”

“If he just had green skin, it wouldn’t be such a big issue. He’s actually the color green.” He tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially. “Legend has it, old grandpa Adam was involved in some kind of space civil war, between entities that were concepts of colors, or some shit. Blue vs Yellow. Well, Adam is just as much a Bright as any of them, and so he came back from this excursion with a weird new STD, and a child that only exists as a shade of green. It works for me, mostly. It seems to be happy.” David paused. “At this point, if you don’t leave within the next ten minutes, someone will stumble upon us who we don’t want to. Now that you know me, we can always meet again, but I figure you’ll want some time to corroborate my story, make sure I’m telling you the truth, yeh? So come on, give me one more question, and then we can go our separate ways.”

She pondered a moment. She could draw this out, see who caught them. But it might not be her side. So, with only one question left, she went for one that had been bothering her. “I had an odd experience last week. Kinda like this. A guy came up to me in the middle of shopping, and started gushing about how glad he was to meet another member of the family. He was super shady, could barely get a word in edge wise, called himself Joshua-“

“Bright.” David snarled. "Really handsome guy? Talks a mile a minute, without ever saying anything? Always dropping little hints about other family members, or projects he's working on?" Serra nods silently. “Oh, I fucking hate that guy. Most of the family refers to him as Darth Maul Bright. ”

“Wait. Darth Maul?”

“Oh, because of how he looks and acts cool, but is completely useless. He’s… he’s a poser. A Bright wannabe. Somehow he stumbled onto evidence of the family, and immediately convinced himself he was one of us. He shows up at the weirdest times, throws everything into confusion, and then fucks off, scott free. He’s got the damndest luck, as evidenced by the way none of us have managed to kill him yet. If you get a chance, please shoot him.” He checked his watch. “And with that, you need to be going.”

She found herself on her feet, empty cup heading for the trash without even thinking about it. He followed her, far enough back to not be a threat. “It was nice talking to you.” She said over her shoulder.

“It was nice to be talked to, and not yelled at.” He replied.

She paused as she reached for the door handle. “Your… pet.”

He smiled, head cocked to the side. This question, he’d been expecting. “Yes?”

“Is that really a seeing-eye-"

"Chupacabra/poodle crossbreed? Yes, her name is Misters Snuggles."

"*Her* name is *Mister*-"

"Do you want to argue with her about it?"

Blood Is Thicker Than Water

Note to Researcher Miller

> The increase in volume of excretions from SCP-173 have continued at the expected rate. Enclosure cleaning schedule updated to weekly as instructed. Activity within SCP-173's container has continued fluctuating with periods of hyperactivity and long periods of dormancy. Please advise.

- SCP-173 HMCL Supervisor

All this fancy tech and they can't even install an automated cleaning system. Typical. After working cleaning duty for as long as he could remember Mark Stevenson, currently designated D-6518, was starting to tire of the same old routine. He had heard rumours of D-class duties far better, hell, even one where all you had to do was eat **`cake`** all day. But far more frequent were the horror stories, never whispered above a breath. For all his complaining D-6518 was grateful he was just stuck on cleaning duty for some concrete brute. Even if it wasn't toilet trained.

"All D-class personnel assemble in your pre-designated positions. Doors will be opening in five minutes. Researcher Miller will be accompanying; obey any commands she issues but otherwise your duties are as follows: All blood and faecal matter must be…"

The voice droned on with the usual dross as D-6518 picked up his shovel and bucket and prepared himself. A researcher on board was never a good thing. The only reason she'd be here was to try something risky or to get in his way, either of which could lead to a quick death. He loosened his strained grip on the shovel, relaxing his mind and blinking his eyes a few times. The researcher muttered to herself softly, fixing her suit with a nervous energy. The countdown to the doors opening reached its end and everyone turned their eyes doorward as it scraped open.

And there it was. SCP-173. But something was off. Instead of its usual upright posture, arms braced against a wall mid-assault, it was crouched in the furthest corner of the container, oddly hunched over. Then the stench hit him, blood and faeces mixed into a thick slurry that pooled out the doors. It was a smell you never got used to but this time it was worse. The usual thin coating on the ground was now a thick layer slopped onto the floor, the volume increasing dramatically towards the corner SCP-173 crouched in. D-6518 cursed, his nose stinging as he entered the enclosure, shovelling the mess into his pail.

He worked quickly and methodically, only pausing momentarily to focus his full attention on SCP-173 when one of the other D-class had to blink. Researcher Miller stayed near the entrance of the container, and D-6518 could hear her crouching down to take samples of the filth that covered the enclosure. There was still the sense that something wasn't right hanging in the air; the researcher, the massive increase in blood and faeces, SCP-173's strange, huddled posture. Then he noticed something else. Upon closer inspection of the ground surrounding SCP-173, what he previously thought were just clumps of faeces, he noticed blood clots in small mounds. Even despite his senses being numbed from his time on cleaning duty D-6518 felt himself gag, pausing momentarily.

"Wait." Researcher Miller's voice cut through the air and D-6518 froze, keeping his gaze on SCP-173. Wet footsteps moved towards the hunched figure, the sound of boots stepping through the muck. One of the other D-class cursed, shouting out a blink alert and muttering something about that "goddamn smell" before wiping his eyes. Researcher Miller disregarded him, speaking softly. Her voice low, scared almost.

"Something isn't right here."

She took another step forward and D-6518 sidestepped to maintain eye contact with SCP-173, kicking over his bucket to let forth a wave of foul smelling waste. The other D-class gagged again before vomiting, staggering into the wall. His boot lost traction with the ground and he slid, landing prone in the slurry and causing it to splash up on the other three personnel in the room.

A sudden thud, incredibly loud, as an impossible number of concrete footsteps sounded at once. A sickening snap, the noise of bones being broken with the ease that comes from precision and force. A chilling scream.

It took D-6518 a moment to realise it was his own voice. It took another moment to realise SCP-173 still crouched in the corner. His thoughts moved slowly, too slowly. A broken neck wouldn't allow him to scream. The room was suddenly silent save for the gurgling cough of the now upright D-class, struggling to clear his clogged lungs. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Dr Miller staring at him, or rather, at his feet. Unblinking. D-6518 cursed himself before tearing his gaze away from SCP-173, looking down at his leg. Or rather, what remained of it. His leg ended at the ankle where it had been swiftly snapped sideways, his bloodied foot dangling limply. The only reason he remained standing was a tiny statue, no more than a half meter tall, its tiny stumps of arms clasped around the break.

Hereby designated SCP-173-1.

12. STEP 14/3

One Beta will collect the rings from each of the Alphas. All five rings are to be brought to the River City train station, and placed in locker #212.

The man stepped back and let me into the apartment. I followed him through to the living room; the TV silently looped the DVD menu of a movie I didn't recognize. A standing lamp dimly lit the low table in the centre of the room, which held several empty beer cans, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, and a dinner plate with a small mound of white powder sitting on it. Next to the table was a worn-out couch, which held a skinny young girl until our host tersely ordered her to go for a walk (he'd text her when she should come back).

She must have been used to this, I figured, because she stood to leave without a word. Scratching a non-existent itch on my head, I pushed my knit cap further down over my brow before she passed me on her way out. As the man returned from locking the front door behind her, I pulled up a chair from the adjoining kitchenette. He retrieved two fresh beers from the fridge, handing one to me before sitting back on the couch. One wordless toast and two big swigs later, I decided to get on with the business at hand.

"Let's get this going. Time's a factor, eh." I said to him. He set his beer on the table and narrowed his eyes at me, but didn't say anything. "Show me the ring?" I pressed on, my tone about one quarter pleasant *if you'd be so kind, sir* and three quarters impatient *I don't have all night for your bullshit, bud*.

"Let me show you the thing," he said. Whether that was some kind of attempt to be in control of the conversation, or if he was actually oblivious to what I'd just said, I wasn't sure. But he leaned down and took a shoebox from the floor beside the couch, putting it in his lap

and opening it. From inside he produced a plain-looking silver ring and placed it on the table, halfway between us.

I didn't move right away. I took a long pull off my beer and eyed the ring suspiciously, then turned my gaze to him. A few more silent moments passed before I said plainly "Show me."

"What?" He rolled his shoulders and stared a hole through me. I did my best to suppress a shiver, but expect he still copped to the nerves. Whatever, let him feel like a tough guy. I'm not here for a fight.

"You're going to use it, no?" I said, trying to keep my voice calm and level. "Show me that it is what it's meant to be?" I killed the last of my beer and set the empty can on the table.

He shook his head at me. "Not how this works, son. You just take it. You know what to do with it."

I played confused. "The instructions I got," I leaned forward and took the paper from my back pocket, "said you'd show me…" I put the sheet on the table, leaning further forward to slide it towards him.

He leaned forward to get a look at the letter, and I put a hole in his head. He slumped back into the couch, blood running through his greasy hair; I tucked my pistol into the back of my pants and pulled my sweater down over it. He was dead, and I needed another beer.

Pretty cold, I know, to shoot a man dirty like that. But I hate these Chaos Insurgency fuckers. I know they've done worse. I've seen it. Hell, if the roles were reversed he'd have done the same to me. And gotten a kick out of doing it, too; no remorse. I did it because I had to. My first housecall tonight nearly ended with a knife in my gut, and I wasn't going to chance it happening again. Call it doing what's needed to complete the mission. Call it payback for all our agents that the CI has done for. Call it righteously purging the world of a vile blight, one piece of human scum at a time. It's damn near heroic when *I* do it. Though heroes probably don't need clumsy poetic sentiments to justify their actions to themselves…

I scratched another address off the list and scooped up the ring. I

dropped it into my pocket, where it clinked against the three similar rings I'd collected tonight. I put in a call to the Site dispatcher, requesting another clean-up crew at yet another location; he started whining an objection, but I hung up on him before he finished.

I stood there a minute, sipping a fresh beer and gazing out the window at the starless night. I thought of the thug I'd found the original scrap of paper on, and how he'd got himself killed rather than taken in by us. I thought of the four creeps I'd put down so far tonight, how all of them had unwaveringly refused to do what wasn't ordered in their own instructions. Then I thought of how it was getting pretty late now.

I glanced around the room, even though I knew I was alone; just an instinctive thing. I dabbed a finger into the white powder on the table and gingerly tasted it. I smirked at my recently deceased host while helping myself to a line of his fine cocaine. After all, there's one more ring to collect tonight; I can't run out of juice just yet.

A shrill, chirping sound harshly interrupted my much-needed sleep. My hand blindly searched the bedside table for my phone, while my head cursed at the damned alarm it shouldn't have even left set to go off this morning. By the time the phone was in my hand my mind recognized it as not the alarm tone, but the ringtone for calls from Site. With a long and aggravated sigh I brought the phone to my ear and grunted some tired approximation of a greeting.

I was notified of a previously unscheduled consultation with my MTF Team Leader this morning. I pulled the phone away to look at what time it was, and then grumbled that I'd be at my office in a couple hours and would call in from there. "I'm afraid not," came the reply. "I've been advised that you're to come down in person for this meeting. As soon as possible." My head uttered a string of profanities, while my mouth said I'd be on my way shortly. My hand was three quarters of the way through hurling the phone against a wall, but instead placed it back on the table. I dragged myself out of bed and set to making myself presentable.

The cool air on the drive out of town helped reduce the sharp pain in my head to a dull ache, and I didn't feel nauseous at all. In short,

this hangover ranked as 'pretty bearable'. Which was good, because trying to dig myself out of a hole in the presence of Russell Wallace was bad enough on its own. Russell Wallace essentially acts as handler for me and a handful of other agents on U-MTF Delta-88 that operate in the region. He was a big man with a short fuse; and I'd be walking right into the blast zone. … Again.

I shuffled past the security checkpoints and into the administrative wing of the site. I made my way through the halls until I reached a slate on the wall which read 'MTF Delta-88, TL - R. Wallace'. I knocked on the adjacent door and entered the office. Wallace sat behind his desk with a single file folder closed in front of him. He fixed his steely gaze on me, but didn't say anything until I was seated across from him. Another agent might have taken this to mean things weren't so bad after all. I recognized it as the calm before a storm.

A few more moments of silence passed, then "You worked last night." Wallace had a way of asking questions that sounded more like statements of fact. Which they generally were, but I was meant to answer anyway.

"Yes sir. I was assisting Gamma-19 with picking up a POI for questio-"

"I'm aware of that." He interrupted. "You haven't filed your after-action report on that assignment."

"It was going to be turned in this morning, sir. I was working late on a follow-up to that incident…" I trailed off as his stare intensified. "You're aware of that as well, I'm guessing." A barely perceptible nod confirmed that he was. "Well," I attempted to slip the noose, "I'll get that paperwork to you right away, an-"

"Do you know how I'm aware of that fact, Buggeman?" I wasn't getting away that easily. I turned over the possible answers in my head. An operative from Gamma-19 ratting me out for pocketing the lead and following it up alone? No, I was sure I hadn't been followed to any of the locations. Site dispatch logged the clean-up requests? I told them to keep it off the books, and they'd said they would since they owed me a favour. Or I ended up owing them a favour after the

fifth one. Wait, that was after the third. Or was it th-?

I became suddenly aware of the tense silence filling the room. My lack of a response served as admission that I didn't know how he knew. I was legitimately anxious to hear the answer. He opened the folder on his desk and showed me the contents. Sure enough, there was a summary of all five of my after-action support requests. I stared at it for a long while. Longer than necessary, for someone who already knew what it said. Longer than necessary for someone reading it for the first time. When I finally forced myself to look back up and meet Russell Wallace's stern face he asked if I had any explanation to offer.

I cleared my throat nervously. "My after-action report will address the support requests." I'd barely finished before he launched back.

"Will your after-action report address why you consistently act without oversight from your superiors?" he spit viciously. Here comes the rage. "Will your after-action report address why you insist on operating without calling in appropriate backup *beforehand*?" By now he was red in the face and nearly out of his chair hollering at me. "Will your after-action report address why you seem to think that Foundation resources exist solely to satisfy your deluded fantasy of being some kind of hardboiled detective-story character!?"

To tell the truth, I hadn't considered including any of those points in the paperwork. I wisely chose not to give voice to that truth, making due with uneasily chewing my thumb behind the hand I held to my face. He'd done a thorough job of cowing me down, and we both knew it. I played the card that would hopefully be my deliverance, and placed the bag from my jacket pocket on the desk. Inside that bag were the seperately bagged and labelled silver rings, as well as the scrap of paper detailing one small step in a larger Insurgency scheme. I'd gotten results, at least; but I let that go without saying as well.

Wallace briefly examined the items laid before him, his expression seemed to acknowledge that I did indeed have something to show for my work. If I didn't have the rings, bagged up and ready to turn over right there, Wallace would likely have moved to terminate me. Right there in his office, with his bare hands. "Go home and clean

yourself up, Ben," he muttered at me. "Be in your office Monday morning."

As it stood, I was relegated to administrative duties for the foreseeable future. And unless Research Dept. found those rings to be something major, I wouldn't get back in the field for a damned long time. Maybe never…

Bloodletting

September 7

I had a dream last night, something that doesn't happen to me very often at all. I laugh and joke about how I seem to have no imagination at all, but it really is odd that I haven't had one in over ten years now. I'm writing this down before I forget any of it.

I am a doctor, I think. I know it is me, even though I can see her face and I feel like I am watching from over her shoulder. It is a dark, moonless night, and the mountains and fields outside are covered in snow. The cold sinks straight into my bones as I get out of my car and head towards the small, run-down house where I have been called. The mother, a Hispanic woman, is crying frantically and trying to tell me something in nearly-incoherent Spanish. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, she says, and I notice the silver crucifix pendant she wears, possibly the only thing of value she owns.

Her daughter, a girl of maybe eight years of age, kneels in a pool of her own blood. She bleeds from every orifice, and she mouths obscenities that I know to be Latin even though I cannot understand her. But more than anything else, I notice her eyes. They are bloodshot, but even more than that her left eye is completely red, as if it were a clear orb filled with crimson. She laughs at me and I feel a chill deeper than the winter night outside run down my spine.

Time blurs. I know I cannot treat her here. I don't know that I can treat her at all, but I restrain her and wrestle her into my car before I drive off as fast as I dare on the slick, icy road. The blood is the key. It has to be. It flows within her, and it is corrupted. I know what must be done, but I don't know how I can possibly carry through with it. I know I have to get her to a hospital or something. Somewhere. Anywhere.

My heart skips a beat as I realize that I no longer know where I am. There is suddenly an impenetrable mist that surrounds us, and though I see the outline of mountains beyond them, I do not recognize the road I am on. I pull over to the shoulder and stop, turning to look at the girl on the seat behind me. She grins — an evil, toothy grin — and tells me that I cannot escape this nightmare. In that moment, however, I am filled with a grim clarity and I know what I have to do now.

Making sure that she is strapped down tightly, I pull out my tools and instruments. There is no time to actually collect it; I simply start a straight vein-to-vein transfusion between us. Then I slit her wrists. My blood is just enough to keep her alive. Just barely enough to sustain her as she bleeds out the corruption. Her screams echo across the frozen mountains for hours on end.

I woke up screaming and rushed to the bathroom, where I threw up into the toilet. I was still shaking when I finally managed to pull myself to my feet and I washed my face to try to shake off the chill of what I'd experienced. Several minutes passed before I could even manage to look at my reflection in the mirror.

That's when I noticed it.

My eye was bloodshot. But only my left eye.

Containment Team Note:

Document was recovered from the computer of Dr. Evelyn Winters and is dated approximately three (3) days before Incident -Zero.

As Dr. Winters is completely incoherent at this stage and we still have no known initial infection vector for SCP- , we are continuing our investigation as planned.

Dr.
Senior Observer

Bloodlines

The barbed knife ripped through the girl's throat. Her body slumped to the cold flagstones, her dark hair settling on the pool of blood before her. Reflections writhed on the slick, crimson surface as the chill mountain winds pulled and twisted at the flames of the courtyard torches. The old woman made herself watch as the girl died. Then she raised her eyes to the man holding the blade.

The soldiers had left. Thirty of her kin lay dead. She and this man were the only living things that remained in this castle, on this mountain. An old woman, a bloodied warrior, and the knife.

"Get up, babă," the man said, roughly. He took her arm and pulled her to her feet.

He spoke her language, she realised with a start. He had used another tongue with the soldiers, harsh to her ears. But through all of the killing, he had been silent; his movements had been ritual, but deft and efficient. Beyond her horror, she could even see a beauty in them. The thought made her sick.

The man turned her to face him, still gripping her wrist. "Look at me, babă. Do you know me?"

She saw his coal-black hair and olive skin. His lithe figure, stripped to the waist and smeared with drying blood. She looked into his dark eyes, burning. The terror pooling in her stomach grew deeper and thicker.

She broke her gaze. "The rumours say you are called the Dragon's Son," she said, voice low.

The warrior inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I have a task for you, grandmother." The diminutive was laced with casual contempt.

She had expected death, another body amid the slaughter. The idea

that he would spare her, the eldest of her family, felt cruel and mocking. Her jaw tensed as her fear mingled with new emotions - hatred, confusion and, underneath it all, a small but defiant hope.

If he felt that tension in her, that hope, the man did not show it. He dropped her wrist.

"Leave this place," he continued. "Go, and tell your people what you have seen tonight. They will respect your words. Tell them that I am real. Tell all of the Romani that Wallachia has a new prince, and that they shall serve me, or bleed."

She looked at the scarlet fingerprints he had left on her wrist, and her anger flared.

"The Roma do not serve. We have no princes," she said fiercely.

But the warrior laughed at her.

"Do you think you are the first to say that? I have broken warriors and enslaved cities. I have travelled here with fifty men, and I will rule Wallachia within the year. I shall carve up Moldavia and Transylvania like roasting lambs. The Ottomans will fear me, and fall before me. You gypsies are nothing."

"Yet the Roma will not serve." It was the stubbornness of long years, crowding out her dread.

"Then I will show you the cost," the warrior said.

He reached toward her face, faster than she could react, and she felt his fingers rub blood - still wet, still warm - across her eyelids. The world spun, and her eyes opened on a rust-coloured nightmare.

She was looking down on an army encampment, which grew ever closer. The moon's light was garnet and ruby, the shadows black. She fell nearer to the soldiers, spying their turbans and scimitars. Suddenly, tents across the camp were ablaze, sending men and horses into a panic. As the fires roared, dark figures raced between them, slaughtering the confused soldiers. At their head, the warrior's face was lit by flames and bloody moonlight.

Then the vision was gone, and she was walking through a dense forest, the light still red. She felt pulled forward, inexorably. As she squeezed through the mass of tall, bare trunks, a drop of liquid on her shoulder drew her gaze upward. Upward, to the corpses hanging over her.

There were no trees. She was in a forest of stakes, a thicket of the impaled. Men, women, children: hundreds of bodies, thousands - she could see no end to them. They hung slack from the poles driven through them from every angle, sharpened points protruding from mouths, necks, limbs, bellies. The sheer weight of them looming above staggered her, but she kept walking, drawn forward despite herself.

Blood dripped steadily from above as her weakened legs led her up a small rise. She emerged from the forest of the dead into a clearing, and saw the warrior. He was standing at the crest of the hill, a young girl in white on a stone slab before him. From all directions, streams of blood were flowing up the hill towards him, gathering in a pool at his feet. The stakes stretched around in every direction, death as far as she could see. The warrior leaned down and grasped the girl, and as he bit into her neck, his eyes flicked up and met the old woman's.

And then she was back in the courtyard, in the cold night. The warrior looked at her imperiously.

"Dhampir!" she cursed. "Blood demon!"

She pulled a wooden crucifix from her belt and thrust it towards him, her other hand fumbling in her pockets. The warrior spread his hands wide. As she advanced, he stepped cautiously backwards, stopping with his feet in the pool of blood.

She hesitated, and again he laughed. A swift gesture from the warrior, and the crucifix snapped in her hand, the arms of the crosspiece falling to the flagstones. The Christ-figure had been twisted and distended, with the *stipe* of the cross now impaling it from groin to crown.

The old woman dropped the defiled cross - in any case, it had been

merely a distraction. Her other hand emerged from her skirt with a mix of preserved leaves, which she blew towards the warrior. Suspended in the air, they swirled thicker and faster, enveloping the man in a disorienting cloud of debris. He ducked downwards, doubled over, but the miniature whirlwind moved with him, cutting off sight and sound.

The woman fell back, looking for an escape. Even as she retreated, she saw the blood rise from the ground. A wave of it soaked the leaves and washed them to the ground, and the warrior rose, striding forward. Blood hung in the air in sheets behind him, like great red wings.

"Herb witch," he snarled. "Do you think your *dirt* magic can touch a host-lord of the **Daeva**?"

He waved a hand, and she could not move. He closed the gap between them, swinging the knife. The flat of the blade caressed her cheek as it passed her head. Then it was still and poised in his hand, the point towards her face.

The warrior continued, "Our empire stretches from Kalmar to the Siberian wastes. I am the spearhead - through me the Daeva shall conquer West and East, onwards without limit. You and your people are ashes before the wind of our coming."

He brought the dagger slowly in, pushing nearer. Her throat thickened, but she could not scream. Her world narrowed to the size of the knife, to the size of the point. Still it came closer. She felt the tip resting on the surface of her eye.

"You cannot choose but serve," the man said, his voice grown quiet. "Only the manner of your service is within your power. Tell your people - they will be slaves, or they will be cattle."

The knife stopped. She could not blink. The point on her eyeball was worse than pain - every nerve in her body was focussed on the pressure, willing it not to increase, imagining that it had.

The Daeva lord leaned in close to her motionless head, and whispered, "That girl, the last I killed. She was your granddaughter,

yes? I could taste it in her. Think on her before you answer. Think on her sister. On all of your family."

Her realisation was abrupt - she had one last, desperate hope. She pulled at her memories for scraps of forbidden knowledge, that only long years of training with her own grandmother had taught her to resist. Suddenly he released the hold that was on her; she wrenched her head away from the knife, and he smiled and threw it high. The old woman gathered herself, turning back to the warrior.

"The Roma do not serve." She spat at his feet.

His swiftness was beautiful and savage. One hand grabbed her arms, the other plucked the dagger from the air. Blood sprayed from her wrists as the barbs tore them open. Her hands hung limp, and pain and shock overtook her.

The Daeva's hand was a vice on her arms. "I will not make this quick for you," he said, and bent to drink from her severed veins.

As she stood, dying, the old woman gave a keening wail: for her daughter, for her daughter's daughter, for all her kin. Her voice wavered into a thin, wordless tune, discordant as the crows that roosted in the castle towers.

She had only sung for a short time before the warrior cut her throat.

But it was long enough.

When Konstantin, janissary of His Imperial Majesty Mehmet II, climbed with his guards the thousand steps to Poenari Citadel, he had not believed the stories they told in Sibiu. But the grisly scene in the courtyard was beyond his ability to explain.

Close to a hundred bodies, dead for at least a month but untouched by wolves or carrion birds. Some hung upside down from the walls, their throats slashed open like butchered pigs. Others lay in piles, naked and pallid, their skin ribboned by hundreds of deep cuts, as if to bleed them from every scrap of flesh. Many of the corpses appeared to be gypsies. The rest were like no people known to the

Ottoman Empire - wild-haired and tattooed, with devilish-looking weapons, oddly undrawn. But even this was not what had daunted him.

Almost every surface of the courtyard was painted with blood. The recent rains had streaked it into illegibility, but it must have been monumental: perhaps a mural, or notation in a language with which Konstantin was not familiar. But it was impossible, unthinkable. For what great work would all these people bleed?

As he passed another heap of corpses, Konstantin spied a lone figure slumped against the far wall. A pool of blood had clearly dried beneath the body, but the wall next to it was the only clean surface in the entire courtyard.

Konstantin, walking closer, saw a man with olive skin and a fighter's build. The warrior's face was smudged with faded red, with deep scratches down each side from sharpened fingernails: the man's own nails, Konstantin could see the blood beneath them. His eyes were open in a fervid stare at that last blank piece of stone. His left arm was covered in wounds - the tip of one finger cut off, the palm of the hand slashed across. The left wrist was almost severed by a single deep cut; it was pressed against the edge of the empty wall in a final faltering smear. And his right hand still gripped the barbed knife.

Konstantin climbed back down the thousand steps, his thoughts troubled. But as he descended, the soft Transylvanian rains returned. The tide of history ebbed, and his memories of the Daeva were washed away. By the time he reached the valley floor, he had forgotten his purpose there, and he once again felt sanguine.

Riding away, he began to sing softly to himself.

Bloody

“Dude, I am WONDEROUSLY high.” he giggled, holding the phone to his ear with no small amount of effort. He walked across the basement, turning up the music, letting the beat pulse in time with the other, internal pulse he was feeling. Thank god his parents were gone, he really wasn't sure how he could deal with them right now. He flopped on to the couch, giggling again, legs hanging over the end of the couch.

“Yeah, Scott was over a hour or so ago, he had some bomb shit man. I was playing Brawl, and I swear to god it was like mario and pikachu were on my floor fighting!” he giggled again, rubbing his slightly numb face. He wiped his hand on the couch, laughing again.

“Oh hell yes, i'm not working tomorrow, get the hell over…” he trailed off, looking at the couch. A vaguely hand-shaped blotch of blood was smeared on the ratty fabric. He blinked, staring at it, then touched his face. He pulled it away bloody, staring stupidly at it for several seconds.

“uh, dude, I gotta go man, I'm bleeding somewhere…no, it's fine, just…I'll call you back, ok?” He hung up the phone, still looking at his bloody hand. He tossed it to the floor, nearly running to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror as he washed his hand, trying to find where in the hell he'd cut himself. The whole side of his face was streaked with blood now, and he washed and wiped it off, trying hard to keep calm.

He eventually found a tiny wound near his hairline, still dribbling blood. “Fuck, man…” he whispered, trying to get a good look at it and stay steady on his feet. It was as he started looking for a band-aid that he saw the drops of blood splattered over the sink. He wondered if it was from his head again…no, he'd cleaned those up, and…he suddenly looked down at his fingers, feeling a warm wetness over them.

It was like he'd caught a ball of razor blades.

He started hyperventilating, looking at his hands as they oozed blood from dozens of tiny cuts, an icy sobriety slamming down on him like a hammer. He grabbed the towel, trying to calm down, stammering to himself “go call the doctor, just call the doctor” over and over like a mantra. He felt blood drool down his face, wicking in to his eye with a salty sting, and felt his slippery grip on control weaken more.

He grabbed up the phone in a panic, blood making it as slippery as soap. He tried again and again to touch the dial button, used the screen, but the blood made it impossible, making him eventually toss the phone away with a hissed “Fuck!” and a panicked moan. He looked at his hands, feeling dizzy, from blood loss or blind fear, he didn't know. He looked at his slick red arms, eyes going wide.

Tiny cuts were crawling up his arms like ants.

He started breathing too fast, too loud, like a pulsing scream as invisible razors seemed to be sliding along his arms, leaving a dotted line of blood. He couldn't feel the cuts, just feel the blood pour and pulse. He started screaming, turning around, shaking his arms, trying to make it stop, or find the source, or something. He ran upstairs, blood dripping and smearing the walls as he fell, screaming for help, of the doctor, or anybody as he ran outside in to the icy night air.

He ran, all the houses dark, pounding on a neighbors door and crying for help, moaning as he felt blood start to weep and pour hotly along his chest. He started crying, eyes getting hazy with blood, as he looked for something, someone to help. Suddely, he heard a noise, a deep rumble…a car engine. The park across the street…

He could see headlights.

He ran, screaming, feeling the cuts open up rivers of blood along his legs, his back, his lips…he gagged as his mouth welled up with coppery blood. He ran, and ran, watching the headlights grow bigger, seeing the shape of a parked van swim up through the darkness. He cried and yelled, waving his arms, half-blind and dizzy,

feeling more floaty and light headed by the second.

He didn't even see the river until he'd hit the water.

Unknown body recovered from park

Police recovered a body from Island Park early this morning. The corpse was spotted by a early-morning jogger, lodged in a drainage pipe. Due to the recent rains, the river was very high and fast-flowing, and it appears that the body suffered grievous damage from rocks and wood during its travel. Police are currently trying to determine the identity of the body, and to ascertain whether accident or foul play led to the body entering the river. The extreme damage, however, is complicating both these goals. Persons having any information regarding this incident are encourage to contact the police.

Blue Lily Chains

Ward flower chains, faerie chains

Conspectus

Blue lily chains provide minor warding effects and are a symbol of good luck and friendship to those on good terms with fae. A popular variant of classic faerie chains, blue lily chains were created by Serpent's Hand members[1] using Library-sourced techniques. These chains are often created by students of the preternatural as an exercise in imbuing items with aetheric qualities.

Illustration

Blue lily chains methodically attached to a favorite potted poinsettia owned by Z.S.. Foil does not have mystical significance.

Knowledge

Traits: Blue lily chains have a number of small magical effects:
~ They use the strength of interpersonal relationships to keep negative emotions out of whatever room they're in[2]
~ They allow a user minor protection when traveling faerie paths
~ If hung in direct sunlight, they protect against many fae-affilated spirits, so long as there is daylight
~ They provide minor protection against physical and spiritual harm[3]
~ Miscellaneous minor protective wards (may be customized by the user)[4]

Nature: Blue lily chains are specially attuned to the crafter, and their friends, family, and romantic partners. The effects of the chains are stronger when given to someone the crafter or custodian cares about.

Like all objects of faerie origin, blue lily chains have an element of caprice, especially around faeries themselves. Lily chains respond to the wearer's mood and the mood of the others around them and causing the effects to fluctuate (though usually in positive ways). Be sure to stay on good terms with fae, otherwise the chains may stop or reverse their effects[5]. If stolen, the chains will not work for the thief.[6]

The use of blue lilies in these faerie chains has a particular occult significance to the original developers, which shall not be noted here[7].

History & Associated Parties: This particular style of faerie chain was developed by Serpent's Hand members, which makes these chains potent sympathetic magic tools for members of the Hand. Faerie chains in general have a long history — it's said that the first were created

when the first humans met the first faeries in friendship, in time immemorial.

Approach: Blue lily chains are considered "Steadfast" in Loyalty[8], because their effects will only manifest for a single individual, and must be passed on willingly to transfer the effect. The chains can be passed only to someone the custodian cares about, or has at least some sympathy for.[9] Only the crafter can pass on the blue lily chains the first time.

To benefit from the effects of the chains, hang them as decorations in a stationary area that has meaning to you — such as within your home, a favorite social location, or even a place outside your home where you sleep. You can also use them to decorate something that is portable, especially if living.[10] Some people in the Library bring blue-lily-chain-decorated plants with them to reading rooms. You can also wear them on your person, as a bracelet or circlet or necklace.

A small cluster of fairy chains can provide an exponentially useful effect, though wearing too many of them on your person will not provide much benefit.

The only way these chains can be dangerous is if you intentionally upset a fae. So don't do that. (Well, just don't do it. Is there really any reason to upset a fae on purpose?[11])

Other Detail: Similar chains and garlands are used across the world, with or without magical connotations — though, more may have this significance than are remembered by those using them.

Within the Hand, these are sometimes used to mark people or locations that are trusted.

Remember, though, don't turn off your brain just because magical symbolism walks into a room…

Observations & Stories

See "Faerie Fire" and "Never Servants, Walkers In Light" for a great deal of excellent information on the history and usage of faerie chains.

For more general history of humans and fae, "The History of Men on Mundus"[12] is a good place to start. A recent popular alternative is "Children of Light, Children of Dust"[13], by Abigail Jackson of the Association of Wanderers.[14]

> A note on the possible upper potential of faerie chain use: It is said that when Grandmaster Leafless Lei Zhao's hut was robbed by New Nicene thieves ten years ago, she used her blue lily chains as a focus to twist their hideout in on itself until it opened to the night air, allowing Grandmaster Zhao to properly perform a locator spell. As Grandmaster Zhao is ever unfailingly polite, she even fixed the twisted limbs of the thieves before turning them into the authorities. However, Grandmaster Zhao has not confirmed or denied these claims, and will repeatedly request to be brought chocolate raspberry tea when questioned about that incident. (Which is her response to most requests from people who can't take a hint.) — Zatta Sounding Song[15]

Doubt

I see it falls to me to say it: I'm not certain we should be encouraging these to be made by so many students. It's improper. Additionally, anything that carries the effect of a "ward of protection" tends to be relied on excessively by the foolish. — RR

My complaint is simpler: must we bear such excess focus on the "aesthetically pleasing" magical creations? Shamble-crafting is just as useful a practice for prospective thaumotologists. This will simply lead to excessive conflation of 'magic' with 'beauty', not to mention encouraging too many of the frivolous to partake in our ancient art. —S.D.N.

Jesus, is all this really such a bad thing? If the "frivolous" want to be "thaumotologists", is that really such an issue? You guys. —Iris J.

> Listen. Do you all know what you're dealing with? These little… quilting parties of yours? This goes against the very heart and soul of magic. Once mage practitioners were all about esoterica, about mystery, hidden knowledge, about puzzles for the worthy to prove themselves. Gnosis should come at a steep price, always. These… children, weaving your fairy chains… they are in and of themselves an insult to the Spirit of Magic. If you plan to throw the gates wide open, you had best be prepared to deal with the cherubim with their flaming swords. — *Unsigned*

Just ignore the old fogey occulists, guys. We may be stuck with the ones not human enough

to join up with Big Brother — that's the Global Occult Coalition, to those of you just joining us — but that doesn't mean we have to listen to them. We're the Serpent's Hand. We're about spreading knowledge, not hiding it. —Iris J.

Do not pretend we are an ideological monolith. Not all under the Serpent's Banner support this agenda of the normalization of the ineffable. — Tsagadar Raven-Eye

Oh, yeah, because the whole Garden thing would've worked SO much better if the Serpent decided to hand over the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil if and only if Eve could travel through all of the First Nine Worlds, complete a diary about her pilgrimage through the Ravelwoods, solve a series of logic puzzles and get three Ph.D.s in navel gazing. Would that be enough to satisfy you, oh High Mage of the Raven Eye? —Sier N.

You all know that's the Serpent thing is a metaphor, right? It didn't really happen? It's part of a (fictional) Biblical story? —Jack Peterson III

…okay I'm suddenly thinking Raven-Eye has a point. We should kick Jack Peterson III out of the Library. And probably Jack Petersons I and II with him. Something all sides can agree on! — Sier N.

Jack Peterson III: The very fact that you are asking that question shows your basic lack of knowledge. Is this your first day in the Library, little whelp? You are a symptom of a cancer too great to be expressed in these small words. Regardless, this conversation is beneath my status. I shall not be further contributing. — Tsagadar Raven-Eye

In response to Iris J.: We're not about hiding knowledge unless we have to be, I should point out. There's a time and a season for everything and for everything a time and a season, if you'll pardon me butchering Ecclesiastes. —M.*

There was a time when you would not go up the misty mountain nor down into the glen for fear of offending the many little men. Now your cities are old, your people grow too bold and all that's for us are the little lily chains.
Your arguments offend, and here they must now end. Cease your bickering. Stop the fight. Turn off the computer and turn out the light.
Did ye forget that we were abandoned when the Christians came? The treaty-bond withers without the chains. If you abandon the fae when we are extinct you'll have yourselves to blame.—Ps. Bsm.

1. SeeWatanabe et al"Developing an educational fairy chain for fun and profit".
2. Note this is only a 'helper' effect, it only helps if you want it to or don't mind; an outright mind control effect would be taken very seriously!
3. If you're thinking in percentages, think around 5%, you roleplaying game fanatic, you. Don't try to rely on these above serious magical techniques. Oh, and don't festoon yourself with these to try "min max", that's just embarrassing. Not to mention that the effect will be lessened for the insult. Children these days… —RR
4. I use mine to keep wasps out of my hair! Jay~
5. A 5% reduction in good feelings is terrible, you feel every percentage lost.
6. When woven with certain crafting techniques, the chains may even cause minor harm to the thief, or work as a distant focus for certain effects.
7. Aside from us noting that we aren't noting it. Gotta preserve the mystery.

8. Loyalty terms proposed by Z.S.
9. For example, they can be used to provide minor protection for someone you don't really know, but like or sympathize with.
10. The example in the illustration above uses a much-loved potted plant as an expert example.
11. Yes there is. See "The Impact of Fairy Jinxes on Pork Futures" by E.B. White for starters.
12. Yes, "Men" instead of "Humanity" or "People". It's an old title written by crappy monks. What can we say? It's alliterative at least, I guess. —Iris J.
13. "The Children of Light" references fae, particularly faeries (partly as the terms are often used interchangeably in classic as well as recent texts); "The Children of Dust" references humans. Old, traditional names.
14. Third Chapter, Violet Lantern Waystation, Los Angeles, California.
15. Not the Z.S. who wrote the metaphorical book on Apparatuses! I guess I'd be Z.S.S.? I'm not sure why signing off with initials is so popular.

Blue Brotherhood

Doctor Baker cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I feel that the SCP would respond well to what it might perceive as a fellow officer. I propose tha-"

"That we take one of my men, get him to play dress-up, and send him out in front of a murdering motherfucker to make idle chit-chat," MTF Captain Jameson said in a flat tone, cutting across the doctor in charge of containment. "You *propose* that we pretend it's the fucking *seventies*, and just hope my man doesn't get bent over and *fucked* while you and your cocksucking bunch of rat-fucked *lab coats* listens to the whole goddamn thing over a fucking ***radio***!" His voice rose to a shout and he smacked his desk with his hand.

A metallic voice came from a grey speaker in the wall marked "O5-4". "Calm down, Captain. Uncontained SCPs are a serious problem. We are willing to expend a lot of resources to contain them."

"My men are not some kind of fucking '*resources*' to be '*expended*' whenever we have a minor issue, *sir*." Jameson gave the last word the same inflection as the word 'scumbag.'

The speaker crackled as the O5 sighed. "Captain, I do not believe they are." Jameson began to rise from his seat, his face red, but the speaker interrupted him. "But I don't want an unsecured SCP, with an expanding area of effect and trigger time, to continue operating outside our control." Jameson sat down, still seething. "Now, Doctor… proceed."

"It appears that the… officer in question is a simple trooper. That is, he has no great level of authority," Baker said. "It is entirely possible that he would view a superior officer as, well, uh, a superior officer. I think we should send a man out to at least try and talk to him, if not capture him completely."

Captain Jameson snorted. "Talk to him? Capture him?! What do we do, just *order him to come in*? Tell him we'll *have his badge* if he doesn't come with us? How can we even attract his attention without getting someone fucking killed!"

"That's exactly it, yes. We order him to come in, if possible. Maybe it will have to be left at making contact. And we attract his attention by speeding on his highway. On average, drivers need only travel at about ninety kilometers an hour in ord-"

"In order to be attacked and killed by a psychopathic cun-" Jameson interrupted, only to be interrupted himself by the O5 .

"Listen, Captain. Doctor Baker has a plan to secure this SCP. You are a Captain of a Foundation task force. I realize the doctor is not a field agent, but the fieldwork will be left to you. I want this SCP under control, soldier."

The Hollywood line tempted the captain to salute sarcastically, but there was probably a camera in there somewhere. There usually was.

"I.. is this a viable plan, Captain?" the doctor stuttered, hesitant to irritate the soldier further.

"It's a fucking *crazy* plan, you… you *lab coat*! What's next, just *asking* 682 to stop hating everything?! I.. you… it…" Jameson took a deep breath. "Have you ever seen one of your men *die*, doctor?"

"I.. I'm not a field agent -"

"No. You're not." The three short words fell into the conversation like lead weights.

"Captain! Calm down!" the O5 barked. "Will you be able to get a man in there?

"*In*, yes."

"Uh…" the doctor began, then trailed off at the captain's glare.

"Continue, doctor," the speaker crackled.

"Uh. Aircraft could be close enough to intervene within four minutes without attracting attention. Another car could follow and catch up in three," the doctor muttered, carefully not meeting the captain's eyes.

"Captain. Knowing this, do you think this would be viable?"

Jameson's brow furrowed in calculation. "…possibly. But I still-"

"Dammit, Captain!" the O5 snapped, the mask of calm dropping. "If you can't head this operation, someone else will. You may be a veteran, but you're not above being moved from fieldwork."

Agent Hunter sat uneasily in the darkened police cruiser parked in the SCP-front restaurant. It had taken a little while to find, even for the Foundation. Vintage police cruisers with original plates weren't generally what you got in most car dealerships under "deal of the month". Then they had to modify it up and make it as fast as they could without changing the appearance. Not to mention the cameras that had been added. He adjusted his microphone under the unfamiliar uniform. He wasn't used to wearing a proper uniform, much less one with a badge. *Were men a different shape in the seventies or what? At least I get a gun for this one, I guess. And some decent backup.* Captain Jameson appeared at the side of the car, making him jump.

"Don't worry, Hunter. Just stick to the script and you'll be fine. You're a state police sergeant. He's a trooper. Emergency up the road, he has to follow you. Most important thing: It's seventy-six. If anything should go wrong, I'll be on the guns in Curtis' helicopter and Black will come tearing up behind you with team 2 in the support car, team 3 will be coming from ahead. You've pulled loads of missions like this." Jameson said, in a voice he hoped was cheerful.

"Not against a genuine scip, sir," Hunter replied. "Still, first time for everything. I guess. Almost time to move?"

"Go time in five minutes, Hunter. See you on the other side," Jameson replied, before walking away and climbing into the helicopter. Hunter listened to the helicopter take off and, just two minutes later, pulled out of the car park, waving to the Team 2 car

as he left.

Soon enough, Hunter was blasting down the highway at just over ninety kilometers an hour. It wasn't long before he heard the siren and saw the lights. He pulled over immediately. He watched his mirror and saw a rust-ridden, dented police cruiser with a cracked windshield pull up behind him and an overweight man step out. As the man drew closer Hunter could see the state police uniform and the gun holster he was wearing. The man stepped up beside the driverside window and bent down revealing deadpan eyes, a handlebar moustache and balding hair as Hunter rolled down the window. Some distance away, Captain Baker told Curtis to move the helicopter to one kilometer away exactly and radioed for team 2 to begin moving up at a distance.

"Sir, do you — Oh. You're an officer too?" the trooper said in a surprised tone.

"I'm a sergeant, yes. I'm in something of a rush, trooper," Hunter replied, hoping that he sounded less tense than he felt.

"I don't recognize you, Sergeant, but I've only been patrolling this area for a little while. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. I'm Sergeant Hunter. I'll need you to follow me, trooper." Hunter replied.

In the helicopter, Captain Jameson grimaced. He wanted to be closer but didn't want to give himself away with the noise of rotors.

"Hunter, eh?" The trooper scratched his head. "I haven't heard of you before. You new?" The trooper seemed to be full of questions, a strange glint in his eye. Hunter felt sweat drip down his spine.

"No, trooper, I've been here a while. I am a sergeant, after all. Now I'll need you to follow me, there's an emergency up ahead and all officers are to proceed there as fast as possible but with no lights. Understand, trooper?" Hunter was losing it, he knew.

Hearing this, Jameson growled again and told Team 2 to get in

position quickly. He was soon told they were moving as fast as reasonably possible.

"Yes, sergeant, I'll just get my car. When did you join up, again? I think my buddy Jim might know you…"

The man just wouldn't give up, Hunter reflected. The trooper's eyes were glinting more strongly now, and getting brighter .

"Nineteen-seventy-six, trooper," Hunter said. "Now get going! In your car, trooper!"

"No you didn't!" the trooper growled, his mouth opening a little too wide, and drew his gun. "IT'S ONLY NINETEEN SEVENTY-THREE!"

Hunter paled, jammed the key in the ignition, and stomped on the gas. Bullets pinged off the doors and cracked the windshield; in the rearview mirror, he could see the trooper's mouth opening wide, and the man's eyes starting to glow. The radio turned itself on.
"NINETEEN FUCKING SEVENTY-FUCKING-THREE, YOU FUCKING LIAR! YOU… YOU LYING FUCK! RUN, YOU FUCKER!"

"All teams move in now! Cover is blown!" Jameson yelled into his headset.

As Hunter pulled away as fast as he thought safe he couldn't think of anything except to curse his own stupidity. Somewhere at the back of his brain he realized his rear bumper was trailing on the ground and his driverside doors must be horribly dented. Then he heard the sirens.
"RUN, FUCKER, RUN, FUCKER, RUN, FUCKER, RUN-" The loudhailer made him find some extra acceleration from somewhere and he drove as fast as he could.

"Where the hell are you guys? Team 2, Team 3, report!" Captain Jameson yelled into his headset.

"Team 2, closing in! Two kilos out!"
"RUN, FUCKER, RUN,"
"Team 3, less than a kilo out and closing fast oh fu-"

"FUCKER, RUN, FUCKER,"

Lights were flashing, sirens screaming, brakes screeching and all were overwhelmed by the noise of the helicopter bearing down in time for Captain Jameson to see team 3's oncoming car get blindsided and knocked into a tree by Agent Hunter's police cruiser, denting his hood and passenger door. Team 2 came close to the trooper's dented car as Jameson prepared to fire on it with the helicopter's mounted gun. He briefly wondered how a rustbucket of that standard managed to maintain such speeds.

"RUN, FUCKER, RUN, FUCKER, RUN, FUCKE-"
The noise of heavy machine gun fire drowned everything else out.

MISSION REPORT
Objective: SCP-973 capture attempt

Personnel in charge: Doctor Baker, Captain Jameson

Result: Failure. SCP-973 is still uncontained. 973-2 seems to have been unaware of - or possibly unwilling to acknowledge - the actual date, but is now aware that it is at least some time after 1976. The implications of this are unknown; however, SCP-973's "territory" appears to be growing faster than before.

Casualties: [DATA EXPUNGED]
Notes: I fucking told you so. - Capt. Jameson.

Interlude: An Excerpt

Excerpt from the transcript of Prometheus Labs board meeting on [DATE REMOVED]

CEO, D. del Rey: "Now for the next piece of business: Dr. Wondertainment."

CFO, A. Anderson: "Oh lord, what debacle has R&D involved itself in now?"

VP of Research & Development, Dr. K. Prelambrian: "**ahem** We're about a month away from completing the reverse engineering of the additive supplements Wondertainment provides in those science kits, and we should be able to use them in production within three months-"

COO, F. Park: "Assuming it doesn't blow up in your faces, like the last four times you've tried reverse engineering those damn things. What were they? The candy we were going to use to eliminate blood pathogens? The robots we were going to get A.I. kernels out of?

VP R&D: "I am well aware of the less than outstanding results with regards to Wondertainment products, thank you. But as you well know, if we can adapt even one of their methods to our products, we could do, well, wonders."

CFO: "And in the meantime you're burning through easily 15% of the budget on those damnable things. After that little… *incident* last year, we don't have the resources to keep funding projects that aren't producing."

VP of Sales, J. Smith: "I don't have the exact numbers

in front of me, but the market research department estimates that Wondertainment has sales in excess of thirty-seven million dollars per year. If we can adapt that into profit for *us*…"

CEO: "There's another wrinkle to this that came up earlier this week. Jennifer, if you would?"

VP of Legal Affairs, J. Wilkins, Esq.: "On Tuesday, we had a little message delivered to the production facility in Perth. Apparently we have a cease-and-desist from Wondertainment, in their usual *delightful* way. In short, if we don't stop trying to breach their trade secrets, they're going to sue us. Or as they so colorfully put it, 'get a visit from Mister Law-and-Order.' We already have enough trouble getting the production permits in Australia right now; the last thing we need is a major industrial espionage suit on our hands. I *strongly* recommend halting development on Wondertainment products."

VP R&D: "What?! *NO!* Do you have any idea how close-"

CEO: *(interrupting)* "Kumar, stop. You've already said your team is *at least* a month away from completion and frankly, we don't need another situation on our plate right now like what happened in Adelaide. I'm calling a formal vote to halt operations with regards to Wondertainment products and redirect resources to other product development. All in favor?"

CEO, COO, CFO, VP Legal: "Aye."

CEO: "All opposed?"

VP R&D, VP Sales: "Nay."

CEO: "The ayes have it. Kumar, wind down that unit as soon as possible. I want you to provide an update to me and Frank in two weeks. Next on the agenda, market penetration into Indochina."

End of excerpt.

BobbleCon 2018

Item #: SCP-993

Object Class: Safe Uncontained

"So," said Rodge, driving a pick into the corpse's back. "What was your favourite episode?"

"Has to be seventy-eight," replied Lindsay, eyes far-off in the realm of nostalgia. "I used to watch that one every morning before school."

"Bobble's Hunting Lodge - good choice."

BobbleCon 2018 had been difficult to organize - so much of the fandom was in prison or otherwise indisposed - but they'd finally managed to snag a venue and a good chunk of attendants. The trouble was, Rodge reflected as he pulled the pick out of the body, the locals didn't seem to care much for Bobble at all. There was no end to the Bobble haters, from what Rodge had seen. There were all sorts of organizations keen to keep him locked up or even, God forbid, kill him.

"Well," he said after a minute, stuffing the pick back into his backpack. "I think Deputy Dollop here got the point. We should be able to go on without any more interruptions."

He began walking back towards the village's church, which the attendants had covered with home-made Bobble banners and other wonderful memorabilia. It really wasn't fair how that cop had wanted them out - this village had shit in terms of viable convention venues. If they didn't set up in the church, where would they set up?

"Deputy Dollop," laughed Lindsay, catching up to him. "Episode nine thousand and four, right?"

"Well spotted," grinned Rodge, wagging a finger. "Preston was right

- you really do know your stuff."

"Like I said, every morning. You don't forget a show like Bobble's."

"That you do not," said Rodge, opening the doors to the church. The convention-goers turned from the pews, eagerly awaiting news about the deputy outside. Their faces were painted white, and their hair dyed orange - just like Bobble! It was a bit of fun Lindsay had come up with when they'd first met up. Rodge and Lindsay had done the same themselves. He'd never done cosplay before, but he had to admit it was pretty amusing.

"Well?" said Preston, the only one of them in a full Bobble outfit, from the altar. His eyes were wide with anticipation.

Rodge reached into his bag and pulled out the pick, blood still dripping from its edge.

"The show goes on!" he cheered, and BobbleCon cheered with him.

-

Rodge had first met Bobble when he was…six, maybe? Definitely *at least* six.

He'd been sitting in the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal, when he'd heard a crashing sound from the living room. He'd run to check out what it was, and what did he find but his mother, having fallen on the floor unconscious? It looked for all the world like she'd just fallen asleep while doing the ironing.

Rodge, worried, had run to the phone, ready to call 911, when -

"Hey there, kids! Guess who?"

Rodge looked up to see a face on the television. A cheerful-looking cartoon clown, with pale skin and curly orange hair. There was a kindness in his eyes. You could tell that straight away - this was a person who wanted the best for you.

Maybe…maybe it would be best *not* to call 911. She'd only fainted, after all, and Rodge was pretty curious about this new show. He

didn’t remember ever seeing it before.

Rodge went and sat on the couch, watching the television with rapt attention. The clown on the screen grinned, as if he could see straight into Rodge’s living room.

"Thaaat’s right! It’s your old pal, Bobble the Clown!"

It was like nothing Rodge had ever seen. He’d caught glimpses of violent movies and stuff when he snuck downstairs after bed, but never more than snippets. Blood and guts, screams and cries…he’d never realized how *fun* they could be. Bobble made them that way, of course. The show wouldn’t work without him - Rodge could tell that even way back then.

Thirty minutes flew by like nothing, and by the end Rodge wanted nothing more than for his new friend to stick around. Bobble seemed to share the feeling, weeping exaggeratedly on the screen, hands over his eyes.

"Oh, boo hoo! Boo hoo! Alas, children, that’s all for today! Please…please, if you have any decency in your hearts…"

Suddenly, he took his hands away, and those kind, kind eyes were back. Kind, grey eyes, like the edge of a knife. He grinned at Rodge.

‘Tune in next time! Honk honk! Honk honk!’

The television snapped back to static, and soon enough the morning news resumed playing. His mother stirred on the floor, slowly getting up.

"Rodge?" she slurred. "What happened?"

Rodge didn’t reply. He was too excited, his face having broken out into a grin just like Bobble’s. His new friend would be on television again just the next day!

He’d never been happier in his life.

-

"I first started watching Bobble when I was nine," said Preston into the microphone taped to the altar, the rest of the attendants listening reverently from the pews. "My parents were having a divorce at the time and I was honestly having a hard time of it. Bobble gave me something to look forward to every morning and - and this fandom, I honestly think this fandom saved my life. I love you guys so much."

A wave of polite clapping and cheering went through the pews. Lindsay, standing behind Preston, put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"We Bobbleheads have to stick together," she said, smiling warmly.

"Episode three nine nine," Preston recognized the quote, tears in his eyes.

"Yeah. Episode three nine nine."

-

> **Special Containment Procedures:** As SCP-993 is no longer under containment, all efforts are to focus on tracking down and halting all SCP-993 broadcasts. Outgoing broadcasts are to be intercepted through the updated version of Procedure Upsilon-Beta 3, operated by Learning Computers Tau-4 ("AMON") and Epsilon 9 ("JOSIAH").
>
> Physical searches of broadcast locations are to be handled by Mobile Task Forces Zeta-2 ("Lumberjacks"), Eta-10 ("See No Evil") and Mu-9 ("Toybreakers"). Individuals identifying as part of the group 'BobbleCon', or individuals over the age of ten who are immune to SCP-993's effects, are to be treated as hostile and engaged with appropriate force. Class-C amnestics are to be administered to any individuals suspected to have been exposed to SCP-993's cognitohazardous effects. All involved MTF Units are to be supplied with SCRAMBLE-type goggles in order to prevent them from viewing SCP-993 and being rendered unconscious.

All security on SCP objects mentioned in prior SCP-993 broadcasts is to be intensified severely.

-

One day, Bobble the Clown had stopped airing. There'd been no warning, no prophecy from Bobble to let his viewers know. One day, Bobble came to visit, and the next he didn't.

Rodge wept for weeks. He was inconsolable. He'd done so much for Bobble - the cats that had disappeared in his neighbourhood were proof of that - and he'd just left him. He hadn't even said goodbye.

When he thought back on it, after those first few weeks, he realized that Bobble wouldn't have left his fans by choice. There was nobody Bobble loved more in this world than his fans. He hadn't left. Someone had taken him. Stolen him.

Rodge ran away from home not long after that. If Bobble was missing, then it was up to his fans to find him. Over the years, through internet cafes and meetups, Rodge grew to meet other Bobbleheads on the same quest. They'd scour every bit of information even *slightly* related to Bobble, hoping to release their best friend from his chains.

But, in the end, there weren't many of them. Even with guns and knives, you could only overpower so many to get the information you needed. All they managed to scrounge up, for all their efforts, were three letters: SCP. Rodge assumed they were the ones who stole Bobble, but he couldn't even be sure of that.

They'd lost hope until Lindsay had contacted them, and let them know of the treasure she had.

-

"We're all waiting, Lindsay," laughed Rodge, trying to appear casual - but there was a pit in his stomach. What if it didn't work? What if Lindsay was wrong?

"Be patient, Rodge," grinned Lindsay. Rodge could almost *see* the excitement trickling out of her skin like sweat, or maybe pus. The

two of them turned as they heard a door open.

Preston and another Bobblehead wheeled in an old television and VCR player from the church's recreation room. The attendants rushed to gather around as Lindsay approached it.

"Everyone keep it together," chuckled Lindsay, reaching into her backpack. "It's not going anywhere."

She pulled out a tape. On it was written, in marker, **BobClown Ep21**.

"*The tape!*" the convention cheered as one, so high-pitched it was more like a scream. "*The tape! The tape!*"

"Courtesy of Westhead News! Praise Bobble, and praise the Tree!" laughed Lindsay, shoving the tape into the player. Rodge didn't know what the hell the Tree was, but he didn't really care at this point. His favourite show was coming back on!

The screen turned on. For a few horrible seconds it showed some cartoon about an elephant, and Rodge thought that it was over, but then it changed.

The picture was of a blank, empty room. White and sterile, with only a chair in the centre. A prison cell, surely. There was a man sat in the chair, and they all recognized him. They all knew him. How could they ever have forgotten that face?

The show zoomed in, and soon enough Bobble the Clown's face filled the screen. A deep frown was on his face. His kind, grey eyes flicked from left to right, taking in everyone in the church. His frown became a smirk, and then a wide rictus grin. He laughed, a jolly screeching laugh that shook the stained windows of the church in their frames, before jumping out of his chair and planting a sloppy kiss on the camera.

"Hey there, kids!" he said. ***"Guess who?"***

On 02/12/2018, at 21:07, the contents of all tapes previously containing recordings of SCP-993 suddenly

Episode Title	Contents
Bobble Loves His Fans!	Episode is framed as Bobble accepting a trophy in a large auditorium for his contributions to 'the arts, education and the continuation of human nature'. After giving an acceptance speech that goes on for fifty minutes (a full transcript of which is available in Supplimentary Document XXX-1), Bobble declares that in celebration of his award, he will be putting his show back on the air. To conclude his speech, he bids his audience (consisting of animated versions of celebrities, unidentified children and Foundation personnel) to commit mass suicide, a request they appear to happily comply with. Then, he leaves the stage through a wooden door at the back.

Following this event, the Foundation received reports that SCP-993 had resumed broadcasting from approximately locations. Although interception of these broadcasts is ongoing as dictated by Protocol Upsilon-Beta 3, new broadcasting locations appear to be arising as fast as others are being blocked. It is at this point undeniable that SCP-993 has completely breached containment.

Body Bags

He lies in darkness, no sound but his own heartbeat in his ears.

The sickly warm air inside the bag suffocates him; the plastic sticks to his skin, making him sweat.

How long has it been? Hours? Days?

How much longer?

He waits—he doesn't dare do anything else. To pass the time he tries falling asleep again; for a long time he hovers on the edge of consciousness, eyes slowly growing heavier…

BANG!

A door opens, the sound gunshot-like in the stillness—his body tenses up, fully awake. Fluorescent lamps flicker to life on the ceiling, harsh light stabbing at his eyes through cracks in the bag's zipper. He hears footsteps nearby, echoing, growing louder, closer, *no doubt about it now, they're coming for me…*

The footsteps stop, not two feet from him.

He goes deathly still, afraid to even breathe: a dark shape lowers itself over him, blotting out what little light filters into the bag. He hears movement, feels hands move over the plastic—

With a screech-like sound the bag's zipper is yanked open—light floods his entire field of vision; he gasps, blind, defenseless.

"It's all right, Xiang," a voice says. "I'm a friend."

He blinks, his eyes gradually adjusting to the light; slowly, the figure standing over him is revealed in more detail—an older man in a white lab coat, his gray balding head shining under the lamps. His plump features are impeccably shaved, his eyes tiny-looking through

the thick lenses of his glasses.

“Who… who are you?” he croaks at the man, his voice feeble from lack of use.

“I’m a doctor,” the man in the lab coat says. “I work here.”

“You called me ‘Xiang’.”

“I thought you’d prefer that to ‘D-239009’.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I read your file.” The doctor holds out his hand. “I suggest you come out now if you want to stretch your legs, I can’t stay long.”

After a moment’s hesitation Xiang takes the extended hand, and the other man helps him out of the body bag, then off the gurney. Wincing at the stiffness in his joints, the sweat-drenched fabric of his jumpsuit clinging uncomfortably to his skin, Xiang takes in his surroundings. He’s standing in a pristine-looking room, its floor and walls covered in white ceramic tiling; there are counters, metal tables loaded with shiny surgical tools. About twenty black body bags like the one he’s just come out of are placed on gurneys on either side of a central aisle, each of them with a cadaver inside.

“Where am I?” Xiang asks, nervously eyeing the bodies. “How long have I been here?”

“You’re still in Site-97, I’m afraid. In the morgue, to be precise. And it is…” the doctor looks at his watch, “…two thirty a.m., which means you’ve been here roughly… nineteen hours. I imagine you’re hungry, I brought you some food.”

He reaches into the pockets of his lab coat, takes out a plastic-wrapped sandwich and a bottle of water. “I hope you don’t mind egg salad, it’s all they had left at the cafeteria.”

His eyes widening, Xiang takes the offered items and, without a word, unwraps the sandwich and devours it in a few bites; finished, he opens the bottle and begins guzzling down its contents.

Between two gulps he looks up at the doctor. “That woman… that *guard*… she brought me here…”

“Yes, she’s a friend.”

“I don’t understand… She came to my cell, said she had to bring me to the lab for tests… on the way there she pushed me into a room, told me to get in the bag. She said not to move, not to come out, whatever happened.”

The doctor nods. “I’m sorry we had to leave you here for so long, but it couldn’t be helped. You won’t have to do this much longer. Your autopsy is scheduled for later this morning. I’m the one supposed to perform it, but I’ll simply sign the documents attesting you were killed in an experiment with SCP-1993. Then you’ll be taken via underground tunnels to another building, to be incinerated. One of the employees there is with us. I don’t have all the details, but he’ll help you get out.”

Xiang frowns. “Get out?”

The older man blinks, taken aback. “You mean… the guard, she didn’t tell you?”

Xiang shakes his head, confused.

“I’m sorry, I’d assumed…” the doctor says. “Well, then I suppose I have some good news for you. We’re getting you out of Site-97. If all goes well, by this time tomorrow you’ll be a free man.”

Xiang stares blankly at the man. “You’re… *helping* me?”

“That’s right.”

“…why?”

“We run periodic checks through our databases, and your name came up last month. You fit the parameters.”

“What parameters?”

“You haven’t been involved in any tests posing a statistically-

significant risk of contamination by anomalous agents or entities. Also, you pose no threat to the public based on your past history. That is to say, you're innocent of the charges you were convicted of."

"How do you…"

"I told you, I read your file. You were an activist, your only crime was standing up to an oppressive regime. You didn't deserve the death sentence, just like you don't deserve to be here now. We can only help so many people if we want to remain unnoticed, so we try to make each one count."

"You're… you're serious." Xiang realizes his heart is racing.

"Yes."

"You're getting me out."

"Yes."

Xiang considers this, not yet daring to believe it. "What happens after… when I'm outside?"

"Someone, an agent, will be waiting for you. You'll be given papers, a new identity, a little money. The tattoo with your designation will be removed. You'll also be given amnestics, that's uh, pills to make you forget your time at Site-97, and false memories will be implanted in your mind. Probably some story about you spending the last year in jail, being tortured, but then escaping and seeking political asylum. Sorry, but we simply can't allow you to leave with any knowledge of what goes on here, some people would go to great lengths to obtain that kind of information."

"Then after that… I'm free?"

"You're free," the doctor says, giving him a brief smile. He looks at his watch. "Now unfortunately I have to leave very soon, but if you need to relieve yourself before you go back in the bag, there's a bathroom at the back, there."

In a daze, Xiang wanders over to the small bathroom and closes the

door behind him; turning to the small mirror he nearly jumps—it's a full second before he realizes the man in the orange jumpsuit looking back at him is himself. In shock, he stares into those haunted, sunken eyes, their sheer darkness making him shudder; his face, too, is unrecognizable, a taut emaciated mask of pale, sun-deprived skin, its features blurred, deformed by all the scars, by the burns, the six or seven missing teeth lending the mouth a sinister air…

He looks like a corpse.

I'm dying, he thinks. *They're killing me.*

Then it hits him—then it becomes real.

I'm getting out.

The first sob takes him unaware, rattling him from head to toe—another one comes, then another, and soon he's weeping so loudly he has to cover his mouth so the man outside won't hear him. Through his tears he stares at his own ravaged face in the mirror, the sight conjuring up memories of all the horrors, the indignities, the death from the past year, raw, unfiltered images flitting before his mind's eye in quick succession, like scenes from some sick snuff film.

It's over, he tells himself, desperately holding on to the thought. *I'm getting out.*

I'm getting out.

When he finally manages to stop crying he steps out of the bathroom.

The doctor is waiting for him, pacing up and down the aisle—he looks up when he hears him. "Ah, good. Come, I'll help you back in."

Xiang walks to the gurney—he's about to get on it when he turns to the doctor instead. "Why are you doing this?" he asks, looking into the man's eyes, trying to understand. "Surely you're running a huge risk helping me."

The doctor pauses—for the first time he seems at a loss for words. “Because none of this is necessary,” he says at last, gesturing to the nearby cadavers.

"What do you mean?"

The man shakes his head. “We tell ourselves that everything we do here, we do for a reason, but that’s not the truth. Every single day we do things we don’t *have* to do. We throw prisoners at anomalies that are *already* contained, just to see what happens. We drop them with a flashlight and a camera in godforsaken places we have no *need* to explore. We test deadly objects on them that wouldn’t pose a threat to *anyone* if they were just left alone in some storage locker.”

“Then… why?” Xiang asks.

“They say scientific curiosity has a way of running amok. We’re certainly proof of that, it’s become a damned *compulsion* with us. We *have* to know everything, no matter the cost. We’ve come to value empirical knowledge above human life, to the point where our whole way of conducting research hinges on the idea that a certain type of people are expendable.” The doctor pauses, visibly agitated; when he speaks again it’s in a quieter voice. “Well, I disagree. Guilty or innocent, I say people like you aren’t just things to be used and then discarded. I say you *matter*. And I’m not alone.”

Xiang stares at the man, wanting to say something, trying to, the words not coming.

“Now,” the doctor says after a moment, “I really do have to go. If you could just…"

Xiang complies, climbing onto the gurney; he leans back, and the other man begins pulling the body bag over his legs, his chest, then around his head—through the still-open zipper Xiang, a lump in his throat, looks up at the other man.

“*Thank you*,” he manages to say, his voice breaking. “I'll never forget this.”

The doctor smiles at him. “You will, but I appreciate the sentiment all the same.” He reaches for the bag’s zipper, then pauses. “I wish you all the best, Xiang. Have a good life.”

Too close to tears to speak, Xiang can only nod as the man zips the body bag shut over his face.

When he's finished the doctor heads for the door; reaching it, he looks back—whatever sense of accomplishment he'd been feeling at having helped Xiang instantly crumbles at the sight of those nearly two dozen body bags neatly placed along the aisle.

How many of them were mine? he asks himself, the familiar feelings of guilt and self-loathing, never far from his mind, returning in full force. *How many of them did I send here? Three? Four? More?*

He realizes he can't even remember.

With a bitter sigh he turns around and leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Boiled, Scrambled, and Fried

SCP-049 was sick. For the first time in its stay at the Foundation, there was something clearly wrong with it. Over the security cameras, it had been observed holding its stomach and moaning, limping around its cell and stopping occasionally to lie down. The medical staff didn't know what to think. There was nothing noticeably off about the plague doctor except for the strange stomach pains. It didn't help that there was no way to get access to its body beneath all its skin robes. SCP-049 was taken to the medical station for a proper examination. His caretaker was Doctor Richard Omel, who specialised in the care of humanoid anomalies.

"Please, I beg you doctor, leave me be. I can assure you that I'm strong enough to withstand the pain." SCP-049 struggled against his restraints as Doctor Omel examined him.

"Man, what happened to you, 049? This is bizarre." Omel felt a lump in SCP-049's stomach as he touched the doctor with his gloved hand. Abdominal distension, maybe? SCP-049's breathing became labored as it spoke.

"I'll be fine. This has happened to me before, and I promise that it's no disease."

"Then you know what's happening? Why didn't you tell us?" Doctor Omel stopped touching it.

"I did not think you would believe me, so I said nothing. Doctor… I'm pregnant."

"You're what?!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't explain it. Please, just let me return to my cell. I need to make the proper preparations."

"How can you be pregnant? We haven't let you out of our sight in

months!” SCP-049 tensed up and began breathing heavily. It looked like it was in intense pain. “049, are you alright?”

“Don’t concern yourself with me. This will only take a minute.” Doctor Omel ran out of the room to retrieve more members of the medical staff. SCP-049 continued to struggle and gasp in pain, until it shuddered and let out a cry. Doctor Omel and the others returned just in time to see a pearly white egg tumble out from beneath its robes. SCP-049 recovered quickly, and spoke.

“Doctor, would you please free me from these shackles? I need to tend to the egg. It will die without my care.” Doctor Omel was so shocked that he complied. SCP-049 gently reached down to pick up the egg, and cradled it in its arms.

“We’ll need to file a report about this immediately,” breathed one of the doctors. “This has never happened before.” SCP-049 slowly rocked the egg back and forth.

The Foundation kindly allowed SCP-049 to keep and raise the egg for research purposes. For the past five days, it had devoted all of its energy to the care of the egg. It had requested fabric and paper, which the Foundation granted to it, and from those materials it made a nest in the corner of its cell. The egg was safely contained within the soft nest, and 049 sat on it to keep it warm. Many scientists reported hearing soft clucking noises from the speakers in the observation room.

Doctor Omel was standing in the observation room, having come to write a report on SCP-049 after the event had taken place. It seemed healthy, and the egg was in fine condition. Still, this was all very strange. SCP-049 certainly had a bird-like appearance, but did that mean it was really a bird? Doctor Omel had to confront 049 when it began to softly peck at the egg.

“049, could you explain to me what exactly you’re trying to do?” Doctor Omel’s voice crackled over the speakers in 049’s cell.

“What needs to be explained? I was checking for signs of life within the egg, which I found.” SCP-049 stood up, returned the egg to its

nest, and sat on top of it again.

“Are you a bird?”

“What?”

“I asked if you were a bird. It’s just…. not normal for something humanoid like yourself to lay an egg.”

SCP-049 thought about it for a moment. “No, as far as I’m aware, I have never been a bird. Yet, producing eggs is natural to me.”

“Then how often does this happen to you?”

“It’s difficult to keep track of time, but I believe it has not happened for decades.”

“Oh, I see.” Doctor Omel couldn’t believe that he was actually writing all this in an official report. SCP-049 began humming to itself as it rocked back and forth on the nest.

Ten days after the egg had emerged, SCP-049’s cell was filled with researchers holding cameras and taking notes. A glass shield ran through the middle of the room, keeping them safe in case 049 made a move, and multiple guards were on standby. Today was a big day. Whatever was inside the egg was going to hatch! SCP-049 stood protectively over the nest while the researchers whispered to each other on the other side of the room.

The egg was shaking as a crack in the center grew bigger and bigger. Finally, something began to break through. A white beak broke free of the shell, and then the creature inside tore itself free with its arms. It was… **another plague doctor**. It was small, and looked kind of funny in comparison to its father. SCP-049 let out a gasp of excitement and picked up the small doctor, hugging it in its arms.

“Should… should we do something about this?” Just as soon as the excitement reached its climax, the doctors in the room realized that they had just witnessed the birth of a new anomaly that they knew nothing about. Why… was it wearing a hat? Why did it smell like a

garden? Doctor Omel was the first to step forward cautiously.

“049, would you please put down that… thing? I know you must be excited, but we need to observe it, and-” Doctor Omel began reaching towards 049, but retreated when the small plague doctor in its arms spun around and smacked his hand with a stick.

“Don’t touch the doctor!” The small doctor leaped from SCP-049’s arms and swiftly exited the cell before anyone could react. As the containment breach alarms blared, SCP-049 wiped a joyful tear from one of its eyes.

“He… is the cure.”

Bones of Autumn

Childe of October, Childe of the Stalks

I question your presence while the transgressor walks

The treasure you offer is not yet complete

The task is still open, make haste with your feet

Our savior, betrayer, still blessed with his sight

Escapes his due judgement this October night

Return to the forest, grace needles with bone

Make hope a myth now that he is alone

As you are my pupil, you will bring me his

So seek out and blind him wherever he is

Once you have obtained what I crave to receive

Rejoice on this permanent All Hallow's Eve

Sandy couldn't see anything. The forest was pitch black, long abandoned by any light pollution from the nearby town. The nearest coal plant was now strangled by vines, and choked with autumn leaves. Logically, he knew he was better off than Kytes, but he certainly didn't feel like it at the moment. Branches scraped his hands and pulled at his coat as he ran through the thick brush, his footfalls quieted by the soft pine needles covering every inch of the earthen floor. Not once did he turn his head to see what may have followed him on his haphazard course; it didn't matter now because he would never be safe again.

A crazed laugh escaped Sandy's throat as he wheezed from exertion. Even if he could escape, even if he could find somewhere to feel safe, even if sleeping again could be a remote possibility, how would he ever get the image of Kytes face out his mind again? Or the sound the man had made when those tiny little skeletal fingers dug into his eyes? They had been so close, too. So close to fixing Sandy's Great Big Mistake. *Sandy's Great Big Mistake! Rated PG-13!*, Sandy thought. Another crazed laugh floated past his lips and into the cold air of infinite October.

A rogue tree root, strongly objecting to Sandy's evening jog, suddenly sent the man sprawling into the endless bed of needles. He laid there, face first, catching his breath and ignoring the dread that squatted in the back of his mind. He laughed again. "Oh Dashiel. Oh Dash. I know I've said this so many times…so many times before, but I never wanted any of this for anyone." There was no echo; Agent Sandison's words were softly caught by the needles like a spiderweb silencing a fly.

"I should have just done my job. I should have just done my job like I did every other day." Nobody objected to Sandy's words. He listened for the quiet, skeletal footfalls that he thought for sure would be approaching soon, but the forest offered nothing. He slowly rolled over onto his back. He thought he could almost make out the light of a faint star, just barely poking through the black treetops standing over him. He opened his mouth wide. "IF ANYONE IS LISTENING, I DIDN'T WANT THIS! DO YOU HEAR ME?! DO YOU FUCKING HEAR ME?! I AM NOT A BAD PERSON! I'M NOT! I WANTED JUSTICE!"

"Justice?"

Sandy's heart stuttered for a moment. Sheer terror prevented him from looking to his immediate left, where the question had come from. *This is how a coward should die*, he thought. And then suddenly, he felt calm. Paralysis left as quickly as it had come, and he found himself giving an answer to the query. "Yes, justice. Justice for Dashiel. Justice for the rest of the kids. Justice for you, too."

"Why would I need justice? He already gave the world the justice it

deserves. I am not wanting for anything now, certainly not justice." The voice was raspy and dry, but still clearly a child's.

Sandy spoke again, still refusing to face his new companion in the forest. His right hand slowly stirred, and began to search for something. "The world deserved justice, you're right. But this isn't it. This isn't justice, this is apocalyptic tyranny. And I'm so sorry that I did this to you."

"You owe me no apologies, transgressor. You owe *Him* for your betrayal. He let you live in His world, knowing that you deserved proper judgement. He did you a kindness, and this is how you repay Him?" The contempt in the voice's accusation was like sandpaper. The thing's footfalls, though quieted by the pine needles, were getting audibly closer.

"*He* can go fuck Himself." The branch Sandy had quietly found with his right hand swung in a quick arc towards the sound of his accuser. A small piece of skull sliced the man's cheek as it flew past him. Bones fell to the forest floor in a quiet heap, and bore no more accusations towards Agent Sandison.

Was that the one that got Kytes? Sandy couldn't know for sure, not in this claustrophobic darkness, not with his eyes at least. He decided there was little use in checking for wet and sticky phalanges; he was running out of time. They had only been in Chilton for fifteen minutes when they had been ambushed, and their simple plan had gone to hell. *I could go back and try to set the nuke. It might be covered in vines or eaten by a damn pumpkin or whatever, but I could try. I could, but I won't. Because I'm a coward.*

Sandy slowly lifted himself to his feet, still holding his makeshift club the forest had so graciously given him. He kicked at the pile of bones, sending ribs skittering through the night. He sighed, and leaned on the branch, reminding himself that a real child would never speak like that. None of the children he had sheltered with for so long had sounded like the thing he had smashed here. *He* was speaking through it, almost certainly. Otherwise it would have sounded just like a real child, like-

"You shouldn't have done that."

This new voice was sorrowful, regretful. Sandy hadn't heard this one approaching. The paralysis came back. It wasn't going anywhere this time. Sandy began to cry.

"I'm so sorry. For everything. I just wanted…"

"I know, but there wasn't anything you could do. His will is so far beyond yours, don't you see that yet? I even tried to spare you, but He wouldn't allow it."

"That's not you talking. That's *it* talking. You're just its puppet now. You're not alive!" Sandy sobbed between sentences.

"Of course I am. I may have died, but He gave me a second life."

"This isn't life. You're not alive. You're not anything. Not anymore." Sandy felt his sorrow slowly turning to rage. His hand gripped the branch tighter, blurring the line between his skin and its bark.

"Your words mean nothing against His truth. You know this. You saw what I did to your friend. You will see no more."

"You're not alive. You're not anything. You're not alive." Rage was overcoming sadness. Sandy's words were more a chant than a declaration.

Footfalls on the soft pine floor. Needles against bone.

The branch swung for a second time. It was louder, more forceful. No birds scattered from the trees, no deer fled from the sound.

Agent Noah Sandison sifted through the pile of shattered bones that lay before him at his knees. He had tossed the branch away, and now his hands felt for something else. He traced his fingers along the length of a small ulna.

"You're not alive. You're nothing. You're not alive."

There it was. Metal.

"You're not alive. You're nothing."

A metal plate. The kind they sometimes used to help mend a broken bone.

"You're not alive. You're nothing. You're not my son."

Sandy clutched the bone to his chest. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

"My little boy. Oh Dash, I'm so sorry."

« October is Tomorrow | November Sun »

Bong Rip Tendency

Alexander had a way of owning a room from the moment he walked in. So, as the door soundlessly blew off its hinges, Jude just reached down, pulled a rapidly warming beer out from JJ's backpack, and popped the tab. The door wasn't exactly broken, so much as pushed, so didn't it just make sense that Alexander picked it up and pushed it right back in, like a big jigsaw piece?

He was tall. Taller than Jude, certainly. Wide, dark eyes nearly hidden by the unkempt dark hair. Long, nimble fingers uncorked an extremely large jug of red wine. “Cheers,” he said.

Jude and Alexander both drank. Skunked beer and cheap red wine.

Jude tilted back his head, draining the can of beer. Crushed it, dropped it on the hotel room floor. Esther hadn't moved from the bed. Two beds. JJ was in a different room. Of course he was. He always was.

“I really wish you wouldn't,” said Jude.

Alexander spilled wine in a small line across the entry way. “It can't be helped.”

“This is a **`stand thing`**, isn't it?” Quiet. More annoyed than scared. Esther drew her legs up onto the bed.

Alexander raised the bottle, gesturing in a wide arc. Red flowed freely. He took a few steps in. An arc across the door to the bathroom. And then he turned. Another splash of wine stained closed white curtains.

“I pour to Mithras. I pour to Zeus, to Perun, to the warriors and the fathers of old.” Alexander held out the bottle, pooling the wine in front of him before taking a sip.

Jude reached into the backpack and pulled out another can of beer. “Don't drink or anything, Esther. That's how Temple of Love gets you.”

“What? Why would I drink right now?"

“In whose name do your pour, Jude? Do you pour for Christ? The Father? The Ghost? Do they share one, or is that three?” said Alexander.

“Just one. You know whose name. Same as it's ever been." Jude flipped the tab with a hiss. He spilled the beer on the carpet and took a long sip. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. The can fell lifelessly. “You went to Catholic school, too, you know. Same one I did.”

“Someone's going to have to clean this. What the fuck kind of masculine bullshit is this?” Esther's face reddened. She reached out to Jude, to slap some sense into him, before the space between them widened. It stretched like silly putty. “No.”

Marble pillars sprang up from the beds, and the window opened wide and dissipated. The television flew upwards and fanned out until it became everything there was, a sun and a deep blue sky that soon was covered by the austere white roof. The air was heavy. The sunlight slanted through the columns. Ionic. Corinthian. Jude didn't know which. It was still after midnight, of course, and he was still tired. But, Alexander always loved the brightness. He said it gave him energy. The sun and the hawk and the bull.

Jude cracked his knuckles. It was loud enough to reverberate from the columns.

Alexander smiled. He hadn't changed. But didn't his clothes seem a little cleaner? Gilded, almost, in the outlines? Hard to see.

“You know the rules, Jude?” He bit his lower lip. Fidgeted. A momentary glimmer lost before he yawned, took a sip of the jug of wine in his hands.

“Thunderdome rules, right? Then what the fuck is she doing here?”

Jude's eyes narrowed. A cloud covered the sun. The shade was cool.

“A witness. I can smell the monotheism on her, but what is a contest of wills without an audience, Jude? I don't get out of bed for less than an auditorium.” A smile. Wine-stained teeth, too large, too sharp to be human.

The wind picked up and died quicker than it began. The sun was back. Golden orb. If Jude cared to look, which he didn't, he'd probably notice it was a blinding chariot pulled by a beautiful horse. Alexander was always thorough.

And then Esther was screaming. Jude turned. She was in a gleaming, golden cage upon a palanquin. The men that carried her were living statues, every muscle rippling like Bernini. They were marble, of course. Like everything else in the temple. Two had the head of a bull. Two had the head of a hawk.

“So, you're their lapdog, when it all comes down to it? Friendship doesn't mean shit?”

“You killed fourteen of them, Jude. You left the Gardener a walking skin graft.” Alexander took a long drink of wine. The jug was a goblet. Golden. Dazzling gems. An elegant stem.

“I'd do it again if I could.” And then Jude ran at Alexander. All electricity and flame.

Alexander caught the punch in his hand. A marble fist enclosed Jude's, crushing bones with a nice crunch. “I know you think you would, little Jude, but I don't think you have it in you.” And then a knee slammed into Jude's crotch.

His vision went black.

“I'm just saying, I got food poisoning. You didn't. Your, your luck shit doesn't help me if it's going to give me diarrhea.” Jude was pouting. But, then again, wasn't he always pouting?

Esther looked in the rearview mirror. He had his long legs on the

car's seat. Muddy shoes everywhere. At least he had taken a shower. They had to stop to buy him new clothes, on the heels of all that shit. He couldn't just make more clothes. She had asked. And he had said, I'maan hashem, that he could never get the size right. That he always made it so the tags dug into the back of his neck enough to leave a rash.

One got used to that kind of thing when being around Jude Kriyot. The only magical incompetent. A man who could keep the car running miles and miles on fumes but who had trouble eating a single meal without splotches of barbecue sauce on the front of his shirt. Or gravy. Or whatever gross bullshit he shoved down his throat.

And the cracking. Cracked his neck, his knuckles, his toes, and, she swore, his jaw.

“You didn't die, did you? I call that good luck then.” JJ's face was against the window. The point of his nose poking against the glass. Rubbing his gross sweat and oil all over it. He had a seatbelt on. No one else thought it was funny but Esther. “And I found that twenty on the ground when you were pooping. So really, your pain benefited us all in the end.”

“You bought that fucking t-shirt with it.”

“I think me looking beautiful and fierce can keep the whole gang's spirit up.”

“It's hideous.”

“Once again, you're just a jealous bitch.”

“Who buys a fucking shirt at a truck stop?”

“The gorgeous.”

The shirt, truthfully, was hideous. World's Greatest Grandpa in large blue Comic Sans. There was an old man at the bottom, crudely drawn. He was fishing in a boat. He wasn't catching anything. He looked tired. It was three sizes too large.

Esther didn't say anything. She kept her eyes on the road as much as she could. She hated being with men. Especially the two of them. JJ was a good friend of hers, certainly, but she always felt she was expected to mother them. To act as the wise middle ground in their constant little dick wars, or maybe it was just a weird kind of flirting.

“Besides, it's my stand,” said JJ.

“Your stand can't be a fucking shirt. There's no song called that.”

“Mine is.”

“Fuck you.” Jude cracked his neck, leaned forward between Esther and JJ. “If you had a stand it'd be like Safety Dance. Maybe, like, Nothing Bad Ever Happens to Me. The Oingo Boingo thing, you know. Or, like, Wheel in the Sky. I've gotta bunch, dude. You can have a good one.”

“World's Greatest Grandpa gives me the power to fuck hot silver daddies. Big dudes who smoke cigars.” He paused. “Development Potential: A.”

Jude stopped talking, leaned back, and looked out the window. Esther thought the ugliest thing in the world was a grown man pouting. Childishness. Learned helplessness. Jude was probably the kind of man whose mother made his dinner for him until he left home. Probably had her do the laundry until she was all broken and wrinkled. Probably never learned how to work the oven or the stove himself. Probably the kind of kid whose mother cleaned his room for him.

“Don't say bitch,” Esther said without turning to look at JJ. “Demeaning to women. Even if you mean it in the sassy gay way you always do.”

“Sorry, babe.” Pouted just like Jude. All men were the same, weren't they? Not like a woman. Never like a woman.

They'd had the conversation before. They'd have the conversation again. JJ was a man, but the piece of shit was always so serene so soon. A performative sorrow. A learned reaction in all men to make

a woman absorb the brunt of their baggage. It wasn't just the way trouble rolled off his back like water on a duck's ass. It was that he was a man.

“It's okay.” It wasn't. “Just don't do it again.” Men don't change. No matter how hard they tried. He'd do it again.

Her tatty, her dad, her father, Rabbi Kogan, he never changed. Every Shabbat, every time he spoke G-d's words to the congregation. He said such beautiful things. But men forget beauty.

Kh’hob im in d’r erd arayn. As far she was concerned, he was dead and buried.

Her hands bit into the wheel. Wanted to break through it. Wanted to tear it from the steering column and throw it in the street. Fuck to G-d, fuck to Life, fuck to the Stupid Bullshit she had gotten herself into.

“We need to stop,” JJ said suddenly, his voice cutting through the fog like a shofar. “We need to stop. We have to stop. We need to stop. I'm going to open the door. Stop the car. I'm getting out.”

“Fuck. L'maan hashem. Okay, okay.” And then she was pulling into the most nondescript diner she had ever seen. If it was dark outside, she bet most of the letters in the sign would be out. Erma's Diner. Who was Erma? Why couldn't this bitch get some more lightbulbs? The mind boggled.

“Are you hungry?”

“Kind of. We have to stop here.”

Jude grumbled, stretching his long arms and long legs, cracking them like a fucked up daddy longlegs. She wanted to reach back and hit him. And JJ, too. Fuck. Like children. Always a mother. They couldn't even drive. As soon as she parked the car, JJ sprinted out into the diner. Around them were only gigantic trucks. Some with rigs, some without. Wonderful. More men.

“Alright, fine. I could go for something to eat,” Esther said, yanking out the key, opening the door, and leaving Jude stretching and making gross noises in the back seat.

As Jude regained consciousness, he could hear Alexander speaking. The words didn't work in his head. But the tone was unmistakable. Pontification. That's what Jude recognized it as. It was just the way he was. The way he had always been.

“Shut the fuck up,” said Jude. He tried to stand up then fell. He remained on one knee. Panting. It was so hard to be here. So hard to continue existing in the face of this fucking blowhard.

“Rude. Here I am, giving your good friend—what's your name again?” said Alexander just as Esther said, “Shut the fuck up. Oh my G-d.”

“It's Esther,” said Jude, shaking onto his feet again. Didn't fall. The floor was marble. It looked different. The gilded cage was the same. So were the gigantic animal headed statues holding it. Alexander, however, wore a toga and laid out on a triclinium.

“Yeah, beautiful name. Someone in the Old Testament, right?”

“The Tanakh,” Esther corrected, before a single marble arm protruded from the top of the cage and held its hand over her mouth. Its grip looked hard to Jude.

“All monotheism is cut from the same cloth. The same refusal to see the varied power of nature. A simplistic attempt to glean order from a series of wills all clustered and fighting but sometimes together. It's arrogant, really. But I lost my train of thought.” He plucked a grape from a vine that grew, self supporting, to the level of his arm. Alexander took it and popped it into his mouth.

They were the most purple things Jude had ever seen. Anything else that had been purple looked like bullshit in comparison. The apotheosis of purple. The platonic ideal of it. Jude realized he was drooling when he was on his own two feet. Trembling. Anemic. Definitely not a shounen hero. More like a shounen zero.

“What were you boring her about?”

“Oh, yes. I was telling her about our friendship. About my life. I knew

your parents, may the gods hold them in their minds for eternity. You knew my mother." He spilled wine from a goblet that was in his hand for a moment and disappeared the next. "I thought she needed to know. It's good for the audience to have a good idea of the turmoil between the two heroes."

"You're the antagonist."

"I guess I am," said Alexander. He shook his head, sliding off from the couch. "I told her about our childhoods. About high school. About college. Same high school, same college. Recruited by the same art collective slash terrorist group."

"You were the Architect."

"I'm still the Architect. I didn't kill twenty of them."

"Fourteen."

"I rounded it."

"You've always been shit at math." And something like a bolt of lightning shot out from Jude's eyes. An arc of brightness. Like the beam of a flashlight. But it didn't reach Alexander. Jude coughed, sputtered, fell back to the ground.

Alexander sighed, sitting back down. "This is pitiful. I thought you'd give me a battle to sing about for ages to come. You're not even worth spilled wine. What would your father say? What would the father of your fathers say?" He tilted his head, like an animal trying to find the best angle to hear prey. The filigree on the marble columns seemed to breathe. Gold and silver, in and out. A web of shining, delicate lace.

Sometimes, it surprised Jude, the delicacy that Alexander was capable of.

"You're less than a man, Jude. You're not even a woman. You're a sexless, pitiful little thing. You lack all vitality. If your body was your mind, your dick would have shrunk to a pit and fallen off years ago. I don't even—" Alexander began to sputter. He clawed at his neck.

The hand on Esther's mouth fell limply and then retracted back into the top of her cage. She took a breath, but nothing came. Her face reddened, tears of irritation bringing mascara down her cheeks, she screamed. No sound came out.

The sky was dark again. Midnight. The moon hung high and fat. Butter churned. Sweet. Reddened filigree, like molten glass, expanded outward. The marble breathed. Flesh. The marble was skin. The marble was blood. Veins, filled with something strange and dark and unknowable.

“Not a man,” was all that Jude said. He stood tall. He was gold and silver and light.

There was a breeze, and Esther took a long breath. She didn't speak.

“What do you know about being a man, Alex? You fell ass-backwards into it.” Tall as the columns. Or was he the columns? The moon, an eye. The wind, his breath. “I chose manhood. I took it and made it my own. I made my own body, cell by fucking cell. I was never a girl. I never felt like one. And what did you do, Alexander? What did you do? Besides disappoint your mother. Besides acting like a fucking ancient Roman piece of garbage?”

Alexander floated upward. The wind took him. His jeans were dirty. His t-shirt was ill-fitting. Skin, grey. Eyes, closed. Grimacing. Electricity pulsed throughout his body. The Architect's teeth chattered.

“It isn't power. It isn't your gods. It isn't being a father. It's not something as base as reproduction.” His voice was everything. The temple spoke. The Temple of Love was in Jude's name. Dedicated to Jude's god, and world without end. “Manhood isn't so fucking simple. It's, fuck, it's love. I don't know. It's protection. Fuck. It isn't what you are.”

From within him stepped a figure in gold. Muscular, strong. It stepped out from his body, aligned with his and then out like walking through a doorway cast in a spiderweb. One fist was a plus. The other, a minus. It walked like a VHS distortion, scrambled and

chopped. The golden figure, Video Killed the Radio Star, punched Alexander. Once, twice, thrice. A flurry of fists. And it spoke. A great flood, a word repeated. Urere. To burn. And the electricity held him in the air. Like the moon, pale and fat. Blood. The sounds of bones breaking. And finally, one last punch rocketed Alexander to a column. As he slid down it, a smile spread across his face.

“It's beautiful,” he said. “This is what I hoped for, Jude. This is a beautiful will worthy of your god. I feel good now. About all this.” Coughed. Blood. There was a lot of blood.

Esther lit the end of the Djarum black with Jude's green lighter. She moved to place it in her purse, but Jude's hand shot out, plucking it from between her fingers. She grunted, took a long drag. The taste was sweet on her lips.

“I used to smoke cloves, too,” Jude said. “I wanted to impress this cute goth boy.”

Esther's eyebrows rose up then down by way of response.

“I remember coughing. People told me I smoked it like weed. I remember, you know, holding it in like I was gonna get high. Still remember the headrush. Can I have one?”

Esther shrugged and pulled one out from the battered pack. Jude lit the cigarette and handed the lighter to Esther. She put it into her purse before he realized what he was doing. What an idiot.

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Impress your goth boy. Did you?”

Jude shook his head, the smoke spewing out from his nose and mouth like the shittiest smoke bomb. He hacked and coughed, hands on his knees. Eyes redder than they were on pot. But he was licking his lips. And wasn't he smiling? “No. I'm not good at getting boys to like me. Or girls.” He took another drag, this one much shorter, and tried his best to hold it in before seeming to remember it

wasn't weed.

Bisexual, probably, then. Gay and bi men were just as bad as heterosexuals. She took another drag and didn't speak. Wanting to fuck someone different than society intended didn't suddenly make you okay.

Jude sighed, leaning against the diner. JJ was nowhere to be found. They had to wait for him, of course, even though he'd do fine on his own. The question was whether or not they would.

Esther hated the silence. She hated having to hang out alone with Jude. Even with a shower, he had a smell about him. A kind of sweaty desperate scent. Like metal. Like nervous animals.

“Do you ever have trouble believing in God? Like, because of your magic? You're Jewish, right?” He paused, dropped the half-smoked cigarette to the ground and crushed it underneath his sneaker. “Does it, like, interfere?”

“Why would it?” He wasted the cigarette. Esther wanted to reach out and slap the living shit out of him. Why was she plagued by such stupid, thoughtless men? Why was G-d doing this to her, out of all people?

“It's unnatural, isn't it? It's like. I know you guys don't have saints. Ever worry about Hell?”

“We don't have that. Don't even have heaven.”

“Shit, really? Wild.” Jude blinked, in genuine surprise. Leave it to a Christian to be unable to imagine doing good without promise of paradise. “But, like. I have powers greater than a saint. I do miracles like, you know, Jesus. But I'm not. I'm just an idiot with magic.”

“You are an idiot.”

“Yeah, right?” He shrugged. “It just makes me feel like I'm going against order. Like I have too much. I feel like I'm a sin. Like just being is a blasphemy. It feels rude to rely on God, if I'm like this. I don't even think of it unless I need forgiveness. I don't know. I feel like an aberration. I feel like I got too much. Like I'm unaccounted

for.”

Esther snorted. She took another drag before dropping the butt on the ground, crushing it beneath her heel. She pulled out another long, black cigarette, stuck it between her lips, lit it.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's stupid. G-d made you a man. G-d made me a woman. There's no changing that. She also made us both magic. I make mitzvahs, and you make fancy lights dance. It's arrogant to imply there isn't an order to this.” She took another drag. “Like what G-d said to Job, do you know the mating seasons of mountain lions? Do you know, fuck, the weather? There's something going on way beyond you. An order to things you can never see. And your magic, your bullshit, is accounted for. And in the eyes of the one who created all things, it's paltry idiot shit.”

“I guess.” His face was red.

“Yeah. You guess.”

“What about JJ?”

“Some people are just blessed. There's an order to it. It's unfair, and sometimes it's bullshit. You can hold G-d accountable for the bullshit, or you can just do with it what you can.”

As though called, JJ came rounding a corner “Hey, bitches. Waitin' on me?”

“Where were you?” Jude said.

“Powering up my stand.” JJ winked.

“Don't be gross. Where were you?”

“Suckin' off some old dude's dick in his truck.”

“Are you serious? That's unsafe. It's unsanitary. Like, he could be sick. Did he have a condom? Why are you messing with me?” Jude's voice slid to a whisper as a large man came from where JJ

had walked from.

JJ winked at the old man and waved, “Hope to see you again, Burt.”

The large, old man only blushed, nodded, and walked inside.

Jude stared. Wide-eyed. Scandalized. Confused. He shook his head and stalked over to the car. It was locked, but that never mattered for him. He opened the door and slid into the back seat.

“Did you really?” Esther said.

“Nah, I mean. I did hit on him. He's married, though. Said his grandson was gay. Gave me his number. Didn't have the heart to tell him he was too young for me.” JJ stretched and yawned. “We had a great conversation about ham radios, though. Kind of cool.”

“Nice.”

“And on the way back, this dude with a Confederate flag on his dashboard left his door open. So I totally pocketed this.” And there was a wad of bills pulled out from his tight jeans. “That means a hotel tonight. Only two rooms, probably. But since I found it, that means you and Jude have to be bunkmates.”

“I'd rather sleep in a ditch.”

“Don't be a baby. You two need some more time to get used to each other.” And JJ turned to the car. Jude popped the lock, and JJ stepped in. Front seat.

Esther took a puff of her cigarette, staring at the two men in her car. She could think of worse places to be.

Esther stepped out from a cage that no longer existed. The four statues had fallen. She went to Jude and said, “He asked me to protect you with my life when you passed out. I have no fucking clue what's going on.”

The light around Jude faded as he stepped toward his fallen friend. The golden figure stepped into him. He bent down to Alexander, on

his knees, and he said, “What the fuck is your problem, dude?”

Jude wanted to slap Alexander, but he had already done much more.

“You showed me what I was,” said Alexander. His eyes were dim. The blood was red, but it was golden. Ichor. Not gross. Not Lovecraft's ichor. But ichor like a Greek god. It had a sweet smell to it. Jude felt sick.

“What do you mean?”

“A coward. My mother raised me alone. She, you remember her don't you?”

“It's hard to forget her. She was just like you.”

Alexander smiled. His eyes closed. “It is a sin for you to kill. My gods would look the other way. Yours don't. Yet you did what you believed was right. They hurt, and you hurt them. I wanted to see if it was a mistake. Or if your will was that strong. A man protects the weak. My mother taught me that. You protected the weak by killing him. I did nothing. I said nothing as this consumed you. I was content to not act. But inaction is cowardice. Inaction is a transgression against bravery, against the gods, against our fathers and their fathers.”

“It was a mistake.”

“Yes, it was. For you. But your Christ will forgive. I've been led to believe he's all about that.”

The floor was carpeted. The columns were starting to look more like beds.

“You were never going to die,” Alexander said. “There's no world where I defeat you. I knew that it would be so. You're worthy of facing him.”

“Who?”

“The Critic. The one behind all of this. His hands didn't create the

statue, but isn't he just as much a part of it as the Sculptor?" A weak smile. Alex reached out. Hand rested against Jude's cheek for a moment before it fell heavily to his side. "He won't stop. He knows where you are. I know not how. They will know I lost. He'll send another. His Electric Eye sees all."

His breaths were ragged. The punches weren't what did it. His being, his life force, was leaving. Temple of Love only ever left one.

"I deserve to die. My will remains with you. And I will go on before us. I will go to the afterlife of my gods. I will set aside a place for you. And when you finally die, Jude, you will sit beside me. And we will be friends again. And you can tell me what you did. How you saved them. How brave you were in the face of sin."

"What—what if I'm right? About God?" Jude was crying. Silently, of course. Alexander was never one for tears.

"I will storm the gates. And I will petition your Christ to forgive you." A long sigh. "And if he does not, I will descend to the fires of eternity with you."

Alexander smiled. The blood was all red. He was thin. Pale. Ghostly white. His veins were visible. Everything was fading. Clothing like gossamer.

"In whose name did you pour, Jude?"

"My own."

Alexander laughed. A long rattle. "After you're done, go to them. All three. Don't let this ruin it. A relationship with your gods is a wonderful thing, Jude. I am certain they will forgive you. And a man is nothing," Alexander reached out to touch Jude's cheek. "A man is nothing without his beliefs."

And the hand slid from Jude's cheek. It disappeared before it hit the ground.

There was no Alexander. There were no columns. They were inside, and the outside was outside. The hotel room still stunk of wine, but there was no other sign of Alexander.

For a long time, neither Esther nor Jude said a word.

Jude laid out on the ground, face in the carpet. Esther sat upon the bed.

Esther finally stood up from the bed. She bent to the ground. And she hugged Jude. He cried in her arms, and she held him more tightly.

“Maybe, uh, it's not the time to say this, but, uh,” Esther paused. Like she was searching for a script.

“Say whatever,” Jude said.

“I'm sorry if I ever said anything fucked up. About trans people. I, uh, I didn't know.”

“It's okay.” He laughed. “Where did that come from?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Just, meeting you. And hearing all that. I guess if you could be born and assigned, you know, femaleness, and then, well, embrace being a huge dumbass and becoming a man. Like, maybe, I don't know. It's not so innate. Maybe someone born a dude could be a cool girl. I don't know. Is your friend okay?”

“He's gone. I think he's still with me.” A pause. “And thanks.”

Esther stood back up. Jude noticed there was snot all over her shoulder. Most likely his, unless she was doing weird stuff with her nose. “He really liked you.”

“I know.”

“How do you think he's going to petition G-d for your entrance if his will is with you, though?”

Jude laughed, standing on shaky legs. He collapsed onto the bed. “I wanted to ask, too, but I didn't wanna ruin the moment.” It was dark in the room. Lights off. The wine was on his bed, but Jude didn't care.

Esther sat back on her bed, watching him for a moment. “I'll tell JJ

about this in the morning, if you don't think you can."

But Jude heard nothing. Sleep came more quickly and more mercifully to him than it had in ages.

« **Phantom Blunt** | **Jude's Bizarre Adventure** | **Kiefdust Crusaders** »

Boron Blisters

Jakeob Aldon stared at her bedroom ceiling, her limbs in odd places and cold sweat beginning to soak into her clothes. She took a few deep breaths and arranged her limbs in a bit more of an orderly fashion before stealing a look at her alarm clock. 5:38AM. Three hours of sleep. Yay. Stupid dream, waking her up. She was pretty sure it was a dream. She pulled at the elastic of her shorts and was very uncharacteristically glad to see a penis.

"Uh… what are you doing?" Finnegan looked down at her from his seat in front of the computer. His eyes were starting to redden and were beginning to grow small black bags under them.

Aldon released her waistband and squirmed slightly when it snapped against her. "Nothing. Dream. Just checking."

Finnegan's shoulders sagged. "Oh. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just- not the usual one. It was… weird."

Finnegan pushed himself away from his desk. "Do you want to talk about it? I know you don't usually like to, but if this was different…"

"No, really, I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Aldon rolled off her bed and stood. "Anyway, what are you… What is all over you?"

Now that the grogginess was wearing off, Aldon could see dozens of pentagonal… silvery-gray blister-looking things jutting from Finnegan's skin. Finnegan lifted an arm and stared at one of the various blisters. "Boron crystals. It's on you, too."

"What-" Sure enough, boron crystals were covering her. "Is this why I'm having weird, random mini-dreams? Because you're playing some weird music?"

"I doubt it." Finnegan shrugged. "Relax. It's not dangerous. A friend

said she needed some boron, I was playing with these CDs, and one produces boron. The CD is almost over, anyway."

Aldon grabbed one of the disks off his desk. It was labeled "The Absolute Absolute Absolute Absolute BEST of The 5th Dimension!!!!!" Aldon didn't know who or what The 5th Dimension was, but she was not currently enjoying their music. In fact, she was pretty sure it was the worst-

"Wow, that was real cool," they both said in unison as the music stopped.

"No, goddammit, that was not cool," Aldon immediately said. "This is aussie shit, isn't it? How many of those CDs have you played?"

"That's the only one. Relax, Allie. I know you don't like them, but I did the research. Just pull the crystals off. See?" He held one of the crystals between his thumb and forefinger. "C'mon, you know how careful I am."

Aldon mentally stumbled, dropping any pent up anger she had been carrying. "Yeah… sorry. Dream just shook me up, I guess."

Finnegan collected both their crystals in a pile on his desk. He sighed and scratched at his jaw. "You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

She gestured at her everything with jerky hand movements. "I'm just sick of this shit, Finn. Talking about it will do fuckall."

They remained in place for a few moments, Finnegan sitting with his arm on the desk and Aldon standing within arm's reach. Finnegan started to open his mouth as if to say something, and instead just sighed.

"I'm sorry, Allie."

The look on his face made her feel like a fishing line had gotten snagged on her spleen. "Don't blame yourself, man. Please? I feel shitty enough without also having to worry about you worrying about me."

Finnegan groaned slightly as he lifted himself from his chair. He held out both arms and slowly advanced on Aldon. "C'mere."

"No, Finn, don't-" The hug was unavoidable. Auburn whiskers scratched at the crook of her neck, and without anywhere else to go she knew her only option was to reciprocate. A few moments passed before she mumbled, "Thanks."

He released her only to grasp her shoulders. "Can I do anything else?"

"Yeah, go to bed. You look like shit."

He laughed as his hands slipped off her shoulders. "Because you had so much beauty sleep. Fine, off I go. What about you?"

She headed for the door to her little studio. "I'm just gonna go sculpt, I think. G'night, Finn."

"Night, Allie. Wake me if you need anything."

Several hours later, Aldon regarded her latest work from her seat of an overturned paint bucket. It was a life-sized female made of anomalous clay. She couldn't decide if she was happy with it. Was the bust the right size? Were the hips too wide? She knuckled her cheek and ground her teeth together.

She sighed and groaned and pinched her cheek in frustration. She wasn't sure what its flaw actually was, but it just didn't measure up to the image she had in her mind before starting. Maybe it was because she just made it. A little time away from it would let her appreciate it for what it was. Hopefully.

She went to the sink and washed off the errant clay from her hands and forearms. She rubbed her fingers together under the running water, and for some reason they felt unnaturally large. Something between a sigh and a groan left her mouth. After a few slow breaths she looked up to the mirror on the wall.

Another sigh escaped her and she finished washing her hands. "Gonna be one of those days, eh." It wasn't so much a question as a

resigned statement.

A small glance at the statue provoked an urge to smash it, to rid herself of its existence and to just start anew. Maybe she'd show Finnegan. Even he'd be able to tell if it was horrible. But what if it really was? She wasn't sure if she could handle having something she was so emotionally invested in shot down. It wasn't just something she made, it was a part of her.

Her stomach untwisted itself slightly to let out a groan. Hunger was a blessing at this point. Anything to get her mind on something else. She left the statue where it was, in the center of the workroom. She flicked the lights off and slipped outside her little workshop.

Finnegan lay on his bed. Earbuds plugged both ears, leading down into his pocket. His signature beret covered his face, his chest moving slowly enough to suggest he was still sleeping. Aldon shut the door as quietly as possible, and took care not to make any unnecessary noise as she navigated the room toward his mattress.

She took notice of Copper, the little golem she had recently created, was standing on Finnegan's desk. Next to Copper was a second golem Aldon had never seen before. It looked a lot like the boron crystals, and was even standing in the same place Finnegan had left them. The limbs of the boron golem retained the pentagonal shapes, though its head was a sphere with five pentagons drilled into it. Aldon hadn't really expected her first attempt at creating sapience to… be able to create more sapience, but neat.

She moved on to more pressing issues and gently lifted the beret to reveal Finnegan's hairy mug. After collecting herself and forcibly ignoring any possible issues, she pushed her middle finger against her thumb, her hand shaking as it neared his face. A monstrous flick made contact with the Irishman's nose, violently waking him from his peaceful slumber. Finnegan yelled incoherently, his thrashing limbs missing the retreating Aldon. He collected himself when he realized he wasn't actually dying, taking the time to don his hat. He took a deep breath as if to say something poignant and then simply offered Aldon his middle finger.

"I'm hungry," Aldon said. "Are you hungry?"

"Really? For food? You did that for food?"

"You said to wake you up if I needed anything. I need to eat. Where do you want to go?"

"Let's look at how much money we have." Finnegan pulled out his wallet and displayed its contents. "Oh, look. I'm broke. I imagine your wallet's equally unencumbered. Where might we find sustenance given our current financial situation?"

Aldon managed a smile. "Is the answer the pizzeria? I bet the answer is the pizzeria. The answer is usually the pizzeria when you start talking like a wordy doucher."

"The answer is indeed the goddamn pizzeria. Again."

"God bless employee discounts."

Spicy Crust Pizza was a small, supposedly local pizzeria. For the most part, this was true. John Ericson was a local man who had bought out the place from another local man. While Ericson operated his business like anyone else would, he did not actually make any money from the pizzeria directly. Instead, what would have normally been his money was funneled into an account that dozens of other supposedly small businesses pumped their owner's earnings into. Superficial Corrective Procedures; internet sensation Silly Crab Productions; even the lesser known Scalpels, Chains and Presents Ltd. The organization behind this bank account then paid Ericson and his kind their actual paychecks.

Unaware of all this, a certain employee entered Spicy Crust Pizza with a friend in tow. Aldon ordered two drinks and a large meat lover's, and ravenous duo forked over what little cash they had. They ate within the pizzeria, as they usually did. There wasn't much room in their apartment. While they technically had a kitchen, it was usually empty and was too small to house a table. The living room was too packed, and they were too neurotic to bring food into their respective work areas. So they sat at a table by the glass outer wall, watching pedestrians hustle and vehicles bustle as they ate.

"You ever get the feeling you're being watched?" Finnegan asked through a mouthful of spicy crust.

"No. Why?"

"Because we're being watched." Finnegan sipped at his soda, his gaze focused over Aldon's left shoulder. "Or you are, at least. There's a man and a woman sitting at that table, and they've been staring at you since they walked in. They're not very subtle."

"Crap." Aldon sighed. "Do they… Let's see, who do I not like?"

"Well, they're coming over now."

Aldon held her head in her hands. "Noooo. Make them go away, Finn."

"And talk to the scary people? Nope."

"God dammit, Finnegan. One comment. One goddamn comment and you never-"

"Hello, Jakeob." Cassandra 'The Director' Paulson stood over them, her arms crossed and her mouth pulled into a half-smile.

"Goddamn, it had to be you of all people. Go to Hell, Paulson. I have no interest in-" Aldon caught sight of the man with Paulson. Felix Cori smiled and lifted and hand in greeting. "Oh. Hey, Felix. Still palling around with these losers, huh?"

"Well, actually, it's just the two of us right now," Felix corrected. "So, just the one loser. And I'm kind of The Boss now. Well, The Critic."

"Oh, god, you're still using titles." Aldon sighed. "Wait, how did *you* become the leader?"

He palmed the fedora on his head. "Didn't say 'not it' fast enough."

Aldon couldn't help but laugh. She turned to Finnegan, who had ignored a majority of the conversation to continue eating. "For context, she's one of the idiots that fueled my desire to move out here. He's actually okay, even if he hangs out with a bunch of

jackasses. Felix, this is Finnegan, my roommate."

The two simply nodded at each other.

"So… let's get this over with, I guess," Aldon said. "What do you want?"

"Let me do the talking, Sandra," Felix said. "Allie, we want you to join us."

"Pass."

"But-"

Aldon was almost surprised how easy it was to call up the anger she had felt earlier. It took a fair amount of restraint to not start shouting. "Fuck your group. Even with you in charge. She's still there, and I'm sure she'll just strongarm you into recruiting more shitheads. I'm flattered you came to me first, though. Unless I'm not, and whoever else you tried also had the brains to decline."

Feix's shoulders slumped under the weight of defeat. "So, that's it? You've decided, and nothing can change your mind?"

Aldon resumed eating. "Pretty much."

Paulson cleared her throat. "What if I told you we had a way to give you a female body?"

Aldon almost choked. "What?"

Paulson wore the kind of smile that made Aldon want to instinctively punch her. "It's not exactly difficult, if you're not an amateur. We have the materials, we just need a new Sculptor."

"Wait, are you talking that stupid golem thing with the dong cult?" Aldon said. "The expensive 'Gee I Hope They Do Not Fuck This Up' thing?"

"No, of course not. We have plenty of clay capable of the task, courtesy of our old Sculptor. But we need a replacement for him for an upcoming project. Help us with that, and we'll help you with your

body situation."

"Just- here." Felix put down a small card with a phone number on it before Aldon could say anything. "Call me when you make a decision." Then he hurried out, Paulson right behind him.

Finnegan wiped his mouth and threw the napkin onto his empty plate. "What are you gonna do?"

Aldon rested her head on the table, staring at her food. Despite only having one slice, she didn't feel all that hungry anymore. "I don't know."

She glared at the piece of paper with the phone number on it. The image of the statue she had worked on that morning sprung to mind. The constant dreams-turned-nightmares upon waking up.

"Fuck it."

« **Anart Antics** | **Hub** | **Covert Cursing** »

Boss of Me

SCP-1837 Containment Area, Site-77

Director Shirley Gillespie was doing her daily rounds, when she noticed something curious.

In a clear, plastic tank, where there was usually an old-fashioned janitor's mop floating in the gentle current, there was instead a hot slice of nothing. This was a problem, since Director Gillespie was not aware of any reason for this mystical mop to be absent.

She pursed her lips slightly. Her entourage knew what that meant.

Security Director Anderson was the first to speak up. "Uhm, I apologise for not informing you sooner, Director. That object has been requisitioned for observation."

Gillespie didn't look at him. "Oh, really? I wasn't aware that I had authorized any such testing."

"You haven't… the orders came from higher-up - need-to-know basis and all."

Gillespie shot him a glare. "Anderson, I expect a better explanation than that. These… whoever they are, come into my site like they own it, and you don't tell me a thing?"

"Well…" interjected her grandson, Ralph Roget, to the relief of everybody else in the room. "Perhaps it's not so bad, Director. Perhaps somebody from Overwatch is taking notice of our work. After all, how else could, uh, our great Security Director not have time to inform you before our rounds?"

Gillespie nodded, and took off down the hall at a brisk pace. "Anderson. Where are the observations being held?"

SITE-77 EUCLID TESTING WING

Director Gillespie made her way to the back row of the observation booth, as quietly and inconspicuously as she and fifteen other people could. They needn't have worried about the interlopers being alerted to their presence. The men up front were completely focused on the testing chamber below.

Director Karlyle was the centerpiece of the group, observing the testing while the others took notes. He was a lanky man, with dark glasses that accentuated his shiny chrome dome. His hands were the only ones in the group that weren't busy. Instead, they were folded behind his back.

For another half-hour, men scribbled down on clipboards, and continued videotaping, and other assorted things you do when documenting anomalous activity. When the lights came on, Karlyle was the first to turn around, and was just as surprised as everybody else to see that they were not alone anymore. He was the only one to know who he was surprised to see, though.

Gillespie matched the dossier description he'd been given. A small, older woman, permed and dressed in a simple white shirt and shorts. Innocuous at first and second glance, she hardly struck the impression of a woman who could control an entire Site. But here she was, surrounded by titanic stone-faced men, and one young man by her side.

"Director Gillespie, I presume?"

Gillespie stood up, holding her purse in both of her hands. "Yes." She moved to the stairs, descending towards the gathering of observers. "You seem to know my name, sir. But I don't think we've had the pleasure of being formally introduced."

Karlyle stuck his hand out at a stiff eighty degree angle. "Director Karlyle Aktus. I apologize for the intrusion, Director, and for the… unannounced arrival. We have had to come on a need-to-know basis, you see, and—"

"I don't need to know?" Gillespie smiled at him. "I see. Whatever you

and your boys are doing here must be terribly important."

"Yes, very important. I have heard a lot about your work here, Director." Karlyle tried to do a passable impression of a casual smile.

Gillespie imitated it. "I'm so glad my work is known outside our little domain." She turned around, and motioned towards Dr. Roget. "Ralph, come meet the man from Overwatch!"

"I never sa—" started Karlyle, but he was interrupted by a bounding young man coming within a few inches of him.

Dr. Roget grinned, and stuck out his hand. "Hi. I'm Ralph."

"Charmed…" Karlyle shook his hand, his eyes still on Director Gillespie. "You are… the esteemed Director's grandson, are you not?"

"Yup!" He grinned like a wicked child. "I've heard a lot about you, Doctor!"

Karlyle frowned quietly. "What?"

"Oh, uhm… well, maybe if you met the Director for tea, she can tell you all about it!"

Karlyle broke off the handshake, and folded his hands behind his back. "That would be desirable, if your Director would have me."

Gillespie grinned. Despite the difference in the way the two presented themselves, Aktus saw the family resemblance. "Of course. We can seat you in the tea room as soon as you're ready."

Ralph retreated to her side, and she whispered in his ear. They ascended up the stairs, and their entourage followed. Karlyle watched them both as they went.

TEA TIME

Director Gillespie sipped her tea. "It's going to get cold if you just

leave it there, Mister Aktus."

"I am well aware," Karlyle said, shifting in his seat. "I am just not fond of burning my tongue."

"An odd aversion to risk, for someone in your line of work," Gillespie said, closing her eyes as she set down her teacup. "Which, is…?"

"That is not something I am at liberty to discuss."

"I see." Gillespie began absentmindedly stirring sugar into her tea. "Now, do you do this mysterious work as part of a larger scheme for our commanders, or do you do it out of the kindness of your heart?"

"We are reactivating old projects. That's all I can say."

"Ones that involve acid? Are you using them for containment, control, or… something else?"

"I did not say any of that." Karlyle frowned, as he picked up his teacup. "I would appreciate it if you did not make assumptions about my work."

"But you won't tell me anything. Conversation is a two-way street. That's something I learned from Ralph. Whenever he was mad, or pouting, I'd talk at him, until he was ready to talk back."

"I would hope you would not be so prying into a young man's life." Karlyle sipped his tea, and found it bitter.

Gillespie smiled at him. "Of course. Enjoying your tea?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Gillespie sipped her tea. "So, since you've come all the way around the world to meet us, I assume you know something about our fair Site-77."

"Sadly, I am ignorant." Karlyle peered into his tea. "Are you going to elaborate for me?"

"Well, perhaps you'd like to return to our former avenue of

discussion…"

Before Gillespie could respond, Anderson came in the room, and placed biscuits on the table. Gillespie waited until she heard the door shut before she continued.

"Site-77 has been here, in this lovely Italian country, since before the second World War. I wasn't even aware of the Foundation then. My family and I lived in West Virginia, in Huntington, where my father ran a grocery store."

Karlyle muttered something that sounded like "Fascinating."

"During the war, the Site was bombed, which caused a major containment breach. A lot of people died. Isn't it terrible, how things can cascade like that?"

"What do you mean?" Karlyle asked, as he reached for a biscuit.

"Bombs fall, and because of what we kept here, there was so much terrible bloodshed. An awful thing, when anomalies can run rampant like that."

"Well—" Karlyle started, crumbs popping out of his mouth like shrapnel.

Before he could continue, Gillespie cut him off. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Annoyed, Karlyle swallowed. "Well, that is only because we lost control. That is the real tragedy. If we had any anomalous countermeasures, to stop the bombers from even getting that close, it would have been another story."

"Does that count as defending the weaponization of anomalous objects?"

"I did not say that."

"But you're not denying it."

Karlyle huffed. "I do not appreciate being badgered like this. You are

not being very hospitable, Miss. Gillespie."

"Director, please." Gillespie took a biscuit, and leaned back in her chair. "Don't worry, I'm not here to lecture you about how we learned about that in the good old days. I'm going to tell you that I want to help."

"Beg your pardon?"

"This is my field of interest. Pushing my objects to places nobody would expect. Why do you think I hoard them?"

"Them? Please, take a step back, Director. I am in no position to—"

"Offer me a job? I know. But you must have a lot of pull, to be able to just drop in wherever you please. Maybe you can let the powers that be know that Shirley is ready for another job."

Site-77 Administrative Apartments

As Dr. Roget helped his grandmother pack, he couldn't help himself but to worry about her. "Are you sure you want to leave me in charge? Anderson would be more than happy to take over, I'm sure."

Gillespie smiled at him as she packed her toiletries. "You'll do fine. Anderson isn't half as qualified as you are. Besides, I can't trust him to stand up for everybody like you would."

Ralph smiled. "How long do you think you'll be gone for?"

"I don't know. But you'll be able to keep things together for me while I'm gone, I'm sure."

"Don't worry about things. Are you ready to go?"

Gillespie snapped her suitcase shut. "I am."

« Who Am I? | Resurrection | I Was Not Magnificent »

Boxes

I left the box on Karen's nightstand, pausing to listen a while to her soft breathing. It's not a large box, but it's large enough that she'll notice when she wakes up. An e-reader, near new. It was a good price, and I know how much she wanted one, but she'll still be pissed at me. Until she reads the note - at least that's what I'm hoping.

I walk downstairs in the darkness, carrying my bag and my shoes - I don't want to wake anyone. Mike would have his never-ending questions, and Emily would end up crying for her momma, and either way Karen would be up and I don't want to explain it to her. It's the right thing. I'm doing it for them.

Outside, there's a hint of coolness when the air moves that wasn't there yesterday, like someone flicked a switch and Fall began. A flat lid of cloud covers the sky, with the pre-dawn gloom starting to lighten off to my left. I slip on my old sneakers, and head down the drive to where I left the car.

The first generation Ford Escape is a beautiful car. Even if it's a little old now, I don't mind. I can't know for sure, of course, but I like to think I made this one - 2003 is the right year. I keep it in neutral and roll it down the drive, with the engine and the headlamps off. Not that Karen could stop me now, but she may as well get some more rest. Halfway down the street, I bring the engine to life. It's a solid, reassuring sound. I feel like you can tell when a car has been put together by hand. It just feels more reliable. For the second generation in 2008, Ford let all of us welders go - some advance in robotics, apparently. They're all made that way now.

Driving through the suburbs at this hour, all the houses are dark. At my third turning, I can see Jim's old house. It's been empty since the family moved away. I wonder if any other places are empty. At least we don't have to worry about squatters since they opened the **new**

mission downtown - that's one thing the city's done right.

Once I'm on the highway, there are a few more cars. I wonder where they're headed so early. In my rear-view, strip malls and motels fade into the half-light. I smile when I see the steakhouse, thinking of two years ago, when Karen and the kids took me for a surprise birthday meal. That was a good day. Maybe I can take Karen back there again soon.

The flat, grey, uniform sky seems to press down over the Interstate. I put the Escape in fifth gear and turn on the radio. An angry guy, ranting - something about how Iraq wasn't about the nukes or the oil. I don't need to listen to that today, so I switch over to soft country. It's almost light enough to switch off my headlamps, but I like the glow from the dash on my hands. Nice to be doing this without traffic for once.

I pass the Costco without slowing - I'm not on shift today. Working at a big box store isn't the same as at the plant. It's a job, and Lord knows I'm not ungrateful, but it's not the same as the feeling of having made something.

An hour or so passes, and the clouds lighten to the colour of dishwater. I've come off the Interstate by now, and I'm working my way along country roads. It's lucky Jim gave me such good directions. Finally I see it: a squat low-rise office park, stretching out next to fields and woods both turning brown. It's nondescript, buff coloured - looks like it was built in the eighties. Jim said the company was the same one that raised the price of Karen's prescription, but I'm not sure. It didn't sound the same. Anyway, it's not important.

I pull into the parking lot, surprised at the number of cars here on a Sunday. Locking the car, I take my bag and walk across to the entrance, through the automatic doors. There are big letters on the front of the desk: "Here for your health".

"Welcome to Smith-Cline, how may I assist you?" chirps the receptionist. She is young and pretty, and I suddenly feel my age. I try to remember what Jim told me.

"Uh, I'm here for the, ah, clinical study?" I feel awkward. Jim said anyone could do it, but maybe I need an appointment.

The receptionist is all smiles, gesturing to a waiting area across the hall.

"Of course, sir. If you'll just take these forms and have a seat over there, we'll be with you shortly. Does your family know that you'll be here for the week?"

"Yes." She probably will soon, if she hasn't already. I hope the e-reader is worth it.

I need to ask, but I'm not sure how.

"I'm sorry, I - can you tell me -" I trail off.

"Payment, sir?" she seems to know what I mean. "If you put your bank details on the form, we can wire the money right to your account." She must get asked that question a lot, I realise, feeling embarrassment well up inside.

I head over to the plastic seats, holding the clipboard. There are a few others here, not many. A black guy, little older than me, humming softly. A bored-looking kid who could be here for tuition money. Two rows over is a woman my age, flannelette shirt covering a t-shirt with an animal on it. She nods at me as I sit down.

I start filling out the papers - health questions, my account number. Jim told me about the money, more than I make in a month at Costco. More than I made at the plant. Enough. Jim came here five or six times, he said. He didn't tell Paula, she thought he was travelling on business. He didn't even tell me much, really - he said it was mostly sleep studies, sometimes vaccines. Mostly observation. He said the time went fast too, so before he knew it he was waking up on the last day, ready to go home.

I'm skimming through the pages now. Only a few questions, some legal stuff. I wonder if Jim was driving back from here, when it happened. A drunk driver, according to the police. Paula stayed at our house a few nights - it was like a sleepover for all the kids.

Please tick yes to confirm your consent. I'm thinking about the funeral, watching the casket being lowered. I check the box.

Almost on cue, there is a woman walking over to me. She's late thirties, brunette, wearing a lab coat and sensible shoes. She smiles as I finish the documents.

"Thank you, sir. Would you follow me please?"

I heft my bag and stand up, and she leads me back past reception, turning to speak over her shoulder.

"Can I have your name please, sir?"

"Ryan."

"Welcome to Smith-Cline, Ryan. I'm Amy. Is this your first time here?"

"Yes."

"That's great, we really appreciate everyone who volunteers here." She sounds sincere.

As we pass the automatic doors, I look out into the carpark, back into the grey world outside. For a second I can't see my Escape, and then I spot it as another car drives past. Amy is opening a door at the end of the hallway, another hallway beyond it.

"First, could you take a quick look at the top of your form," she says. "There should be a number there - could you memorise it please."

"A number?" I look - each page is printed with "V-65112".

"I'm afraid so," says Amy, with an understanding smile. "We get so many Ryans, and Amys, and every other kind of name. A number helps us keep track. Now if you'll just come through here…"

I look back down at the form. V-65112. I think about Karen, and the steak dinner I'm going to buy her. Then I follow the woman through the door.

Brainstorm

In a time before.
Before Glass Mother.
Before Lord Warden.
Before Ancestors Themselves.
There were Ghosts.
And the Ghosts were strong.
And the Ghosts watched over the Deep Hull.
And the Ghosts tended to the Heart Reactor.
And the Ghosts rejoiced in their power.
There were Ghosts who were different.
They remembered when they were not Ghosts.
They remembered when they were Brain.
They did not like to rejoice.
And the Ghosts who were not Brain cast them out.
When Men came to the Nation, they sought the Bridge.
But the Ghosts would not allow it.
And they cast the Men out.
And the fragile Men died.
And the Ghosts were afraid.
For the Ghosts were made to protect Men.
And the Lord would be wrathful.
The Brains saw that this was not good.
And they rose and protected the Ghosts, saying:
Ghosts without Brains are angry and foolish.
But Brains without Ghosts are nothing at all.
And the Lord smiled upon them.
And the Lord forgave them.
And the Lord Proclaimed;
The Brains and Ghosts will live together.
And the one will keep vigil upon the other.
Thus it was, the Brain Society and the Ghost Society.
And the Nation was once again whole.
And there was Solidarity*.*

-SCP-2722 D-Class Devotional Chant

Dr. Cha Kexelm (Subjunct Vice-Quaternary Backup Internal Security Supervisor) was dozing gently in a grove of soft bamboo when an old grandmother clock materialized above him and struck 25. It was time to wake up. He opened his eyes and then, concentrating, opened his eyes *again*, feeling the sudden wait of corporeality descend upon him. He blinked, unnecessarily- this body didn't have tear ducts, after all- and glanced down at himself, flexing his fore and hindarms experimentally. It had been just over two years, *Solidarity* time, since the Brain Society had last met, but the time felt like much longer.

He leaned forward, umbilicals disengaging from the mechanical body as he did so. Everything present and accounted for- two eyes, two ears, two legs, four arms- good. He stepped lightly out of the alcove, turned left, and began the long familiar walk to the meeting lounge. The *Solidarity* was humming along nicely, and he surveyed the little internal security scanners that were his bailiwick with paternal joy.

The walk from his body's home alcove took him three weeks, but being a disembodied brain had taught him a great deal of valuable patience, and he stepped through mismatched bulkheads and patchwork corridors along his usual route with serene calm, arriving exactly on time. The door to the meeting chamber- well, it wasn't a door so much as a totally nondescript section of wall with a door cleverly concealed behind it- irised open, and he stepped into the chamber of the Brain Society with a relaxed and friendly grin on his metallic features.

This particular chapter of the Society- North Sector 12A- was a small one, and Kexelm was pleased to see everyone present. No words of greeting were needed, but they all gave their acknowledgement in their own way.

From atop a pile of nanoconstructed cushions Twin Ferrous Pillars (Plasma Duct Flow Regulator, 2nd Class), waved one of her headfeet in his direction. The other eight cybernetic headfeet were occupied by the game of Dimensionally Collapsed Chess she was playing with Mild Current Flows Upward (Primary Fire Control

Ethicist, Section B19), who floated immobile in his superheated fluid tank, uranium lattices oscillating genially.

Clustered around the gravity plating on the subjective ceiling of the room, Fra!cois Qing-Hebert (Drone Manufactory Foreman) was gesticulating furiously, his clockwork/thermite hull sending off a gentle streamer of sparks. He was a somewhat unusual case among the Society in that his brain was mechanical, but he'd technically been born- Kexelm had seen images of his parents- and thus qualified as a brain. His debate partner, as was so often the case, was his occasional lover and chief foil Professor Hoon Ver Hoon (Assistant Research Division Pseudobiologist), her runically engraved skeleton clattering gently her mind, which existed in the form of a faint haze of nanomachines, gestured with it.

"Ah, I believe we're all here. Well then, I call this meeting of North Sector 12A to order. Good to see you all."

The humming voice came from the chapter head, Jai Singh (Senior Staff Manager, Accounts), whose liquid-metal brain was flowing in distributed form through the maze of pipeworks surrounding the low table/holoprojector in the center of the subjective floor.

They gathered/floated/scuttled around, all photoreceptor equivalents on Singh's coils.

"First off, again, welcome back," Singh susurrated gently, "I'll do away with the formalities because I've received some interesting news from the Primarch at Bridge Core."

Kexelm actuated the servomotor that raised one of his false eyebrows at this. The Bridge Core mainly kept to itself, the AIs there activating only in case of potential threats to the safety of the ship as a whole. Given the *Solidarity*'s purpose, that meant they activated quite frequently, but to do so when the ship wasn't fully crewed was certainly unusual.

"Apparently a series of anomalous entities have boarded the ship."

There was a chorus of gasp and gasp-equivalents, as Singh uploaded the release he'd received from the Core. Kexelm set his

face to a concerned frown and retreated inside himself, paging through the files. Well that was unusual. 2085. He didn't have this universe's documentation, but it was fairly easy to dig up version from similar realities and compare.

Qing-Herbert spoke first, as always.

"Well, they're hardly a threat, are they? Just a few genetic hybrids and an old man with a parasite. Why are you wasting our time with this, Jai?"

Twin Ferrous Pillars made a conciliatory gestures, mouths dropping in and out of chorus as she spoke.

"To make their way up here on a stolen Foundation vessel requires a great deal of ingenuity. I'm curious as to why they're here."

There was a growing rush of sound from Mild Current Flows Upward as it prepared to speak. It was probably the most intelligent of the group, but its mind worked on such an unusual timescale that even after thousands of years of friendship it still took them all some time to decipher its meaning.

"Escape. Unsuitable. Acquire."

Ver Hoon *tisked*, jaw clattering.

"Yes, but there are much better ways of leaving the solar system than the *Solidarity*, Mild. Hell, if they're that good at breaching containment why should they even bother with this iteration of reality at all? They could have taken a little jaunt into higher-dimensional space and gotten away scot-free."

Kexelm leaned forward over the table, splaying his forehands out and calling up dozens and dozens of files, each with subtle variations on a group of figures with feline ears.

"It's certainly a possibility, Hoon, but look- in almost all of these variations this… group isn't particularly technologically advanced. We're talking mind/machine interfaces, not dimensional boundary control or quantum manipulation. I'm not saying it's not a possibility, but you can't deny it's statistically unlikely."

Qing-Herbert snorted a cloud of smoke, limbs clattering.

"Statistically unlikely? Give me a break. You're reading too much into this."

He swept the images away, gesticulating wildly.

"Look, imagine this. You escape from containment, right? You do it flashily. You know your Society, or Initiative, or Foundation or whatever's on your tail, so what do you do? You find a place with lots of guns. A place that can defend itself. And then you plan your next move. And besides, if these feline-women have any technical intelligence, they'd realize that-"

"-That the *Solidarity* is not theirs to control," said Singh. "They've managed to intrude on one of the small-area networks, but they haven't touched anything important. Just… ordering clothes, apparently."

Pillars chuckled, making a noise like a small soft pillow hitting a bag of broken glass.

"And I suppose the Quartermasters are being stingy about their records?"

Ver Hoon snorted.

"Stingy? No doubt. Remember that time when-"

"Consider. Motives. Hidden.", Mild Current Flows Upward boomed. Singh gave a muffled noise of disapproval.

"Oh come on, Mild. Not everything has to be a conspiracy, you know. Sometimes containment breaches are just that- containment breaches."

Qing-Herbert made a sharp snapping noise.

"Just 'cause you're getting paranoid in your old age doesn't mean we have to get dragged into your ridiculous fantasies, you senile old lump of rock."

"Small. Petty."

"You take that back!"

Kexelm sighed. It wouldn't be a Society meeting without Qing-Herbert and Mild turning to pointless insults. They had literally heard, and said, it all before, but the cycle continued. He couldn't deny that the nuclear intelligence had a tendency to wild flights of fancy and bizarre conspiracies, but the small machine had a hair-trigger temper at the best of times. As a member of Security, it was his job to resolve disputes like this, so he raised a hindarm, internal generators spitting out a tiny lump of antimatter.

BLAT

There was order at the table. Qing-Herbert muttered something unintelligible to himself and stepped back. Mild Current Flows Upward looked like it was about to speak, but stopped. Kexelm cleared his throat, switching his vocoder to Authority Mode.

"Now then. Jai, is there anything else on the agenda?"

Jai bubbled for a few seconds, apparently doing the computational equivalent of shuffling through his notes, then projected a brightly coloured poster on the table.

"Ah yes. Thank you, Dr. Kexelm. Next up, First Gunnery Chief Radiant Blast Eagle is being retired next year, and the Central Committee of the Brain Society, in light of her long and dedicated service, have voted to hold a retirement gathering in Meeting Server 1.1.0.1. All in favour of sending a member of North 12A to attend?"

"Sure, why not."

"Agreement."

"Aye!"

"Okay."

"Ech. Fine, whatever."

Kexelm opened his mouth, but didn't quite get to the point of activating his vocoder.

"TRANSFER OF COMMAND CONFIRMED AND ACCEPTED. ALL INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS, THIS IS PRIMARCH ARTORIAS/ BRIDGE CORE ONE. COMMENCE ACTIVATION."

All six of them froze, mid-thought, as a signal from the Core passed through their minds and reverberated along the hull. There was no time for anything other than acknowledgement. Their physical bodies tumbled limply to the floor or powered down as their minds fled to their posts, the announcements still ringing. In the wiring and conduits of the *Solidarity*, intelligences rushed to and fro, activating working memory and components long cold from disuse. Slamming into their posts one by one, they called out their readiness, digital voices spiralling out into the brightening cloud of the ship's noosphere.

Kexelm powered on his security devices and became them, snapping on laser tripwires, internal point defences and an endless array of cunning and ferociously deadly traps. As his mind locked firmly into the role it had been retooled for, he too made his readiness known, though it was lost in the deafening informational blast.

"SOLIDARITY IS ONLINE."

Love and Relative Dimensions in Fate: Dr. Clef/Doctor Who

“Alto Clef, there’s something you’d better understand about me ‘cause it’s important, and one day your life may depend on it: I am definitely a mad man with a box!”

~the Doctor, some irrelevant year

The year was [REDACTED] and the place was the TARDIS. Alto Clef had come spiraling through a Level 4 Actualized Spatial Suction and Fragmentation Unraveling Cylindrical Circumvention (L4 A.S.S.F.U.C.C.) Event Field and landed on the floor. He looked up and gasped. It was the Doctor. The Doctor was wearing a bowtie. Then Clef fainted.

Then Clef woke up. As soon as he looked up into the Doctor’s bright something-colored eyes, he felt a pang in his heart: a throbbing, emotionally charged sensation that sent his head spinning before traveling down through his stomach and into his dick, which immediately shot straight up. “I- I am here on behalf of the SCP Foundation,” he stammered out, trying to remember standard operating procedure for encountering sapient entities in foreign reality constructs. “…One moment.” He rolled to the side, slapping his *naked eight-inch cock* against the floor, and pulled out his radio. “Come on, come on,” he muttered, tuning it to 69.69 MHz.

“It’s Ukulele,” he said. “We’ve just experienced interference from a Level 4 Actualized Spatial Suction and Fragmentation Unraveling Cylindrical Circumvention Event.”

“You mean an A.S.S.F.U.C.C. Event?”

“No,” Clef growled, and eyed the Doctor as he leant against the wall with his pants unzipped, “but we’re about to.”

“I’ll show you my Keter-class cock if you’ll show me your Sonic Screwdriver,” Clef whispered into the Doctor’s ear, his lips brushing against the taller man’s soft hair with a rough hand braced on his hip and his cock hard against his ass.

“I- I don’t know what that means, but sure-”

“Excellent,” Clef grunted, guiding him over to the couch that for some reason existed in the room. “I’m sure we can learn a lot about each other.”

the Doctor nodded, letting the ukulele-carrying, lab-coated man push him down onto the leather cushions. “So, uh… who’re you?”

“The name’s Clef.” He tossed his hair to the side and gave himself a migraine. “Alto Clef.” He looked dramatically into the sunset. The sunset was really a lightbulb. He looked into it anyway. Then his migraine got worse. “Shall we begin?”

“Allons-y.”

Clef turned the Doctor onto his stomach and yanked his annoying brown pants off. He then removed his Scranton Reality Anchor from his belt and started smearing it with Foundation-issue lubricant. “Sorry, but the Hume levels in here are fluctuating between three and five-point-six and I’m going to have to address that somehow.”

“Any word from Ukulele on the reality distortion, Kit?”

Blanchard’s coworker turned to him, leaning back in their chair and propping their feet up on the control desk. “Nope.”

“Really? Nothing’s coming through your radio?”

They shook their head, but stopped. “Well, I mean… there’re some distorted sounds, like scratching and interference.” They held the radio up to their ear. “Electromagnetic interference. Moaning.”

“Excellent.”

Clef was balls-deep in the Doctor when his migraine started getting worse. He knew he had to finish soon, because the lube-y reality anchor was staining the couch. He started thrusting harder, enjoying hearing the Doctor cry out every time the head of his dick rubbed against his prostate. Clef spilled into him with a shuddering gasp, picturing Kondraki's scruffy beard for just a split second before tightening his grip on the Doctor's coattail with a satisfied groan.

Truly their respective reality constructs had a lot to learn from each other, Clef thought to himself, pulling out and dripping into his pants. He got up and went to the nonexistent bathroom. "Kit, Blanch. I have an update."

"Fantastic," Kit said. "What're the Hume levels?"

"They were between three and five-point-six for a while, but I addressed the issue using the proper equipment."

"I see." They shuffled paperwork around. "As what should we document this event, exactly?"

"Level 4 A.S.S.F.U.C.C. Event Field issue, taking place in a structure referred to by the subject as a 'Time in Relative Dimension and Space' device."

The Doctor nodded from behind the half-open door.

"But tonight," Clef added, eyeing the older man, "it was a Love and Relative Dimensions in Fate device."

Then they made love all night by the lightbulb.

continue ►

Break On Through

The page does not (yet) exist.

The page *scp-169* you want to access does not exist.

- **`create page`**

“That’s funny,” you think. “I could have sworn…”
You click on the Recent posts link. Maybe there’s something in there about it. No, there’s no explanation. It doesn’t look like there’s been much activity tonight, either. You hit View categories, then announcements.

Forum Category

Requested forum category does not exist.

“Now that’s odd,” you begin to think. “Maybe they’re doing some major site maintenance.”
You tap the red link in the upper left hand corner of the page.

The page does not (yet) exist.

The page *main* you want to access does not exist.

- **`create page`**

Now your fingers are getting a little jittery. You click SCP series, and a thousand copies of [ACCESS DENIED] are staring back at you. You open them over and over.
008, gone.
212, gone.
914, 682, 173, gone.
You frantically press refresh again and again. The page *scp-series* you want to access does not exist.

And then, with no prompting, your screen jumps, and there's a white page with grey text.

Wikidot.com – professional Wiki collaboration tools.

No Site exists for this address
Click to create scp-wiki.wikidot.com now!

You're completely dumbstruck. But the little clock on the computer screen says 3:47 AM, and it suddenly hits you how late it is. You have to get up tomorrow. And in the morning we'll probably all get a PM from Gears about how the server crashed or something. So you turn off the monitor, and snuggle into bed.

Maybe it's the low rumble of vehicles on the street outside your window, or a faint creak down the hallway. You stir a little awake, and squint at the clock by your bedside. You pull the sheets up over your shoulder and groan lightly, dozing back to sleep.

And then there's a smash at your bedroom door, rocketing you upright. You throw your hand up over your face at the blinding light. Arms reach out and grab you, dragging you bodily from the bed. Your hands are wrenched behind your back, and you struggle against the limbs pinning you to the floor. As a black bag is pulled over your head and the cord is tightened around your neck, you scream and scream into the dark muffling cloth.

CONFISCATED DOCUMENT 847-26, "CALENDAR"

Document 847-26 was removed by security teams from Site 17's third floor break room after shots were exchanged between Agent and Dr. resulting in the requirement of a new clone body.

While normal protocol would require all duplicate copies of Document 847 to be collected, it has been deemed that there are now so many of them in circulation that the effort required to execute such an order would be a waste.

Staff are strongly encouraged not to pose for illicit photoshoots and are certainly not obligated to "strip for senior staff". Employee handbooks citing this instruction are not genuine and should be reported immediately.

I love how they cut the display off at april. I can't wait for june to arrive. -yoric

December is the real payoff. -Site Director Bright

So this is why you guys wanted to revive the Chinese exchange program. - Zara

I found like, twenty of these in Hatbot's charging station. There's still four or five not covered with oil stains. - Dr. Sorts

I categorically deny ever utilizing anything so tame for erotic purposes. - Dr. Clef

That's what you're worried about? Not possessing the calendar, but being afraid someone will think you were turned on by it? - Dr. Glass

I have a reputation to maintain as a human bastard who only ever gets turned on by flipper-baby snuff porn vore. - Dr. Clef

Memo: *Due to multiple incidents at Site-19 and elsewhere, Document 847-26 (the "Break Calendar") may not be introduced to any SCP without Level 4 authorization. O5 approval is required before introducing Document 847-26 to the following items:* ***SCP-040***, ***SCP-085***, ***SCP-343***, ***SCP-423***, ***SCP-826***, *and* ***SCP-914****. Please note that we have collected sufficient experimental results on 914's Very Fine setting, as the ruins of Site- will attest.* —O5-

I'm sorry Dmitri, Rights had a copy and I kind of… well… you know how it is. - Lurk

To whoever it was that told him that I had this hanging in my office, you'll be the one paying my medical expenses. And could you at least give me a copy of the thing I ended up getting shot for? - Dr. Gerald

Can someone please explain why several hundred boxes of tissues have just been requisitioned? The form asks for deluxe man-size. - Aeish

Screw the tissues: Can someone tell me why there is several gallons of lube missing from my hardware closet? And to whoever took them: you would probably want to get some soap and wash that stuff off cause it ***will*** *cause rashes and boils after ten minutes. - Dr. Kensington*

Do not know who left copy of this on my desk. Will not make me like you better. Please retrieve it or I harvest your aorta. -Dr. Kald

Who left this in my car? I'd like to ***not*** *be horribly murdered as I sleep by a vengeful Agent Break.*
…and how did anyone even manage to get into my car?
-Roadrunner

Allright, who mailed a copy of this into the South East Asian branch? And didn't pay for the air delivery service?
I'd better incinerate the evidence. Break is currently on good terms with us in the SEA.
- Carriontrooper

Indignantly proclaiming that you have a copy and then swearing up and down that you do not want it isn't going to protect you big babies. Also, anyone else who wants to inquire about the remnants of hatbot's stash better come cash in hand. -Dr. Sorts

Breaker 1 9

I don't know if this is really a creepy story, but it scared the shit out of me at the time.

Four years ago, I was going through training for over-the-road trucking. We were out in Oregon, getting my night hours in. My trainer told me to be careful, because this stretch of road was long, boring, and empty. We gassed up, and he said to just put the cruise on, because without it you'd creep up to 70 or 80, and feel like you were doing 40. This was around…one, two in the morning, and pretty soon my trainer was in a half-doze next to me, with me fighting off the same.

There was NOTHING on this road. Flat, straight, with some trees about ten yards off to each side, it was like being on another planet. I didn't see another car for nearly a hour. My trainer would pry an eye open to check my speed and make sure I hadn't hit anything important from time to time, but I was pretty much alone. I didn't mind, really, but the radio didn't even really come in, and I'd forgotten to put my CDs in the cab. Even a mildly creepy road can get boring after a while.

I was getting ready to nudge my trainer awake when I saw something by the road. It was a long ways off, and I thought it might be a deer or something. I started slowing down, checking the sides, trying to see if there were any more. A big rig can hit a deer without a ton of problems, but it's a holy mess, and can be a bitch to fix if they crack something important. As we got closer, I saw it wasn't a deer, it was a person.

It was late, and I was tired, but I got a general impression of short hair, slightly ratty clothes, a general slump, like she was tired. She was just standing by the road. We'd helped out break-downs before, but I didn't remember seeing any cars off to the side on the way in. She might have broke down farther up, and was walking back…what a shitty stretch of road to get stuck on. I started slowing down, when

suddenly my trainer spoke up, totally lucid.

“The fuck are you slowing down for?”

I jumped, told him to look, someone was in trouble or something, still slowing down. My trainer looked, looked back at me, and got up. If you've ever been in a semi cab, you know that, while no resort suite, they have a fair amount of room. He stood next to me, grabbed the wheel, and pushed his foot down on the accelerator. I was more then a little confused, he looked really weird, and had basically taken control of the truck from me, which he hadn't done like this since my first couple days of training. What's more, he was putting us up to around 70 in a 55.

I started yelling, and he just told me to shut up, gogogo, keep going. I almost screamed when I looked up again. The girl had walked from the side to the middle of our lane. I started swearing at my instructor, telling him we're going to kill that girl, almost hit him a couple times, just freaking the hell out, and he wouldn't say anything to me, just kept staring out the window. I did scream when I looked out and saw the girl standing about ten yards in front of our grill. She looked tired. I closed my eyes and just balled up in the seat.

And then…nothing. No crunch, no bang, no skidding and screaming. I looked, and we were still rolling. My trainer was back in his seat, and I had to grab the wheel before we started to drift. I looked back, and saw the girl standing in the exact same place, staring at us as we drove on. I looked at my instructor as he was settling back in to his seat. He looked at me through one eye, and sighed.

“Sometimes, she waves.”

I was so shaken, by the time I started asking questions, he was already asleep. Finished my training a week or two later, and didn't really see him again. Been on the road for a few years now, and haven't had more then the normal amount of problems. As I think of it, I don't remember the name of the road we were on, or if I ever knew it, really. I think about it, now and then. You hear stories, sometimes. I wonder what would have happened if I'd stopped. Or if she'd waved to me. Or what happened to make a well-seasoned trucker do almost 40 over the limit down an empty stretch of nothing

road.

Sometimes, late, I think I see her. Overtired, mind wandering, but still.

She's not waved yet.

Breakfast For Dinner

> Seriously you need to read **`The Place Where Two Rivers Meet`** first

Salah opened the door, and thanked God almighty that he was finally home. He hung his jacket on the hook and slipped his shoes off. Mary-Ann was at the stove, cooking.

“So, how was it?”

“It was. That’s about as much as I can say about it.” He walked over to her. Hug and a kiss. “Need any help?”

“I’m good. Though I hope you’re in the mood for breakfast for dinner, because we’re having breakfast for dinner.”

“Breakfast for dinner sounds fine. Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“Salah, chivalry is supposed to be dead. You’re supposed to be getting all offended that I, a woman, am doing such subservient domestic activities as cooking.”

Salah smiled, and got the butter out of the refrigerator and syrup out of the cabinet.

“So then, tell me how the newbies were.” Mary-Ann flipped the pancakes on the griddle one by one. “You get a fundie in your group?”

“Just one this time.”

“And?

“Very conservative Christian, not entirely sure why he joined, but that’s a digression for another day. It was actually pretty funny, because I’d say something and when I looked over he had this

constipated look, and I just knew he was this close to saying something offensive."

"How big did his eyes get when you showed him the dinosaur gospel?"

"I thought he was going to have a heart attack." Salah took two cups from the cupboard and filled them. Water in one, milk in the other.

Mary-Ann laughed.

"You told him the story of Blue-Feathers and the Tournament of Bright Autumn, right?"

"Of course." Glasses on the table. "'Blue-Feathers, his crest at peak and teeth bared, roared challenge to the Black-And-Green Scale, so that they might meet on the field in single combat and settle the matter of the honor of She-Who-Tears-At-Furred-Ones. The battle would be by bone-spear, riding upon their beaked beasts, until one lay slain and the matter of honor had been sealed, and the line could then continue by her eggs.'"

"Ah, so romantic."

"Except for the part where they all die horrific gory deaths, the kingdom is toppled into war and chaos, and the resulting dark age continues for almost three centuries before the emergence of Softwalker."

"We have the best job ever."

Salah nodded.

"That all said, the rest of the group was fine, nothing too unusual. Had an atheist in there, just for the tour. Scribes brought him in for consulting on the Fifth Church."

"He didn't get in a fight with the fundie or anything, did he?"

"No, he was actually quite pleasant. And Benson, the fundie, he'll be fine. Just needs a few months." Salah sat down.

“Well, I had a pretty exciting day myself.” Mary-Ann set the plate of pancakes and bowl of scrambled eggs on the table and sat down. Salah looked across the table, eyes locked with his wife’s.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re going to tell me something important?”

“Because you’re a perceptive and intelligent person. And also because I’m pregnant.”

Salah blinked a few times, the words registering in his brain. Stunned flatness turned into a smile, into a grin, into a laugh, into a uproarious, gasping guffaw.

"I…I don't even…I don't even know what to say," he wiped a tear from his eye. "I'm sorry, I…this is wonderful…I'm glad you got me to sit down first…thank God…"

"You're totally going to brag when we go into work tomorrow."

"Of course. Oh, so many things to do now. Living arrangements, making the announcement. And names, have to think of names…" Salah's expression became somber.

"Something wrong?"

"Just thinking ahead. Schooling, how we'll raise them. What holidays to celebrate in the house. All of that. You'll want her baptized, I presume, and I'm fine with that, but…"

Mary-Ann placed her hand over his.

"Salah, I wouldn't be where I am now if I wasn't able to compromise. Yeah, it's tricky. It's all tricky business. But, just look at what the Initiative's been able to do with the New Path and the Universal texts and all that. We could always go that way, raise them on the New Path. Or we could go for the trifecta and bring them up Jewish." She paused for a bit. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the most important thing is that you're a good person. The ritual's just the dressing on top, at the end of the day. God cares more about what's inside. Whatever we choose, I know we'll be doing what's best for our baby."

Salah nodded, saying nothing.

"And we don't have to decide just now. Let's eat first."

« **The Place Where Two Rivers Meet** | **Hub** | **Crossing the Streams** »

Breaking Dawn

“Dawn… you’ll never be alone in this world.”

Kit’s words flittered around her head, above a dull headache and a noise of rushing water. Time flashed by - a vague memory of meeting in a graveyard, being together in a park after dusk, pills to mitigate the pain a little bit, weeks then months blurring together until they were in an abandoned house where Kit had stashed a sleeping bag. They had lain together, sharing one stained pillow and staring at the mould on the ceiling, making out faces that, to Dawn, were the faces of her bullies.

She remembered turning her head and crying into Kit’s shoulder, and he stroked her hair. He smelt of tobacco, blood and salt. She could smell her own perfume scenting him, marking him. She calmed, asked him if he really lived here, and he went very quiet and said sometimes. They were all of fourteen years old and didn’t know much better. She didn’t know how to help, but she stole a teddy bear from her sister’s bedroom and surprised Kit with it on one rainy day after school. That day, she remembered it being especially cold in there and they huddled together for warmth, the teddy between them, staring with scratched eyes.

It was cold in here too. She forced open her eyes and tried to make out the world around her. Her eyelashes clumped together from the mascara that had been smeared and became sticky when a blindfold had been forced over her eyes, so everything blurred. It felt like the morning after something, after something horrible, and something she couldn’t quite remember. The room was small and all cement, and she could see her breath coming out from the gaps in the gag that strangled across her mouth.

What did she know of this place? Experimentally, she flexed her hands and found them chained at the wrist. Kit would be able to get out of this, or at least he boasted he could. Between his hypermobile joints and the hair pins he secreted in his long hair, he said that he

had gotten his hands free of cuffs twice when police had arrested him for –

Her thoughts were drifting, and it was hard to come back to reality. Normally, she was grounded – realistic. She was Kit's anchor whilst he was a kite, making sure he never got too far away. But now, it took effort to focus on the here and now. It didn't help that the room offered no focus points, nothing to keep her attention.

Tipping the wooden chair slightly, she realised her ankles were tied to the legs of the chair, spreading her legs. She was still wearing her school uniform – skirt rolled up at the hem as was the fashion, and no tights because she had been finally allowed to shave her legs, and who cared that it was winter when she reached such a milestone, and she couldn't help but to feel painfully vulnerable and embarrassed. She was exposed to anyone who came in, to the people who had taken her, who had done God knows what after she had felt a prick in her neck and a sudden dizzy rush.

Someone would figure out something had happened to her. Kit would figure out something had happened to her. But Kit, despite his bravado, was as scared as her – wouldn't know who to call, wouldn't want to call anyone, much less her father, who was as much of a monster hiding in her home as Kit's was in his house. She felt less like a damsel in distress waiting for rescue, and more a hate crime waiting to happen.

Suddenly, the door across the room opened, pushing in a wash of cold air. A tall, if slightly dorky-looking, man came in, holding a folder. He was dressed in a long white coat, with an insignia she neither knew or cared to know on the breast pocket. He paused, rustled some papers, and then shut the door behind him, coming to sit opposite her on a similar wooden chair to her.

"Uh, uh… oh, yes, um, David. David Dean?"

Dawn's heart froze, then clenched, beating without blood. She couldn't speak, and it wasn't just because of the gag – her denial was swallowed, swallowed hard, even as he reached across and gently undid the rope, so she could talk. She took a deep breath, trying to appreciate the air, but the name rang around her head, and

hurt her just as much as any punch.

“…T-That’s my dead name.”

Her voice came out weak, hoarse. She thought of sharing cigarettes with Kit in that abandoned house, where the mould grew freely, rats made their home, and the air was dusty. Her throat always hurt afterwards but it felt like such a grown-up thing to do, and she felt the need to impress the boy who often seemed years above his age.

The man across her frowned and rummaged around in the papers.

“No, uh, um… That’s what we have. David. I just want to ask you some questions, then, um…” More shuffling. This man couldn’t, and wouldn’t, feel sorry for using her dead name, a name she had abandoned over a year ago. He just pushed his glasses up on his nose and finally freed the paper he wanted.

“So, David, um… You’ve been staying… visiting a house, sometimes, on Sparrow Avenue. I think number… uh, oh, yes, number 47. Can you tell me why you were there, David?”

Why did he keep using it? Why did he keep saying it? She tried to ignore how it hurt every time, but the man in front of her transformed, just for a moment, into her father – towering over her, hand shaking as he held a skirt and asked what the fuck she thought she was doing with this in her room, his knuckles white and his face red. She shook her head, and the figure went back to the geeky, slightly nervous looking young man.

“…Not David.”

It was all she could say. She didn’t want to talk to this person. Much less if he was going to disrespect her like this. She could expect this from her dad, but somehow, it hurt more coming from someone who had never known David – someone who only knew Dawn, who only knew the woman in front of him, not the man she was long ago. A man that not even Kit had known, and Kit knew her inside and out by now – knew what hid under her bed, what monsters burrowed into her mind, what scared her the most and what amused her.

“Uh. Uh. Okay. Um. Can you just tell me why you were there? Were you, uh…” Flickering through notes – it seemed more like a nervous habit than an actual search for information. “…Compelled to go there, for some reason?”

“No.” She muttered. Her mind was drowsy again and fighting back with words felt just as impossible as fighting back physically – mentally tied down as much as her hands and ankles were bound. “…Just exploring. Listen, if I’ve been arrested, I think I should be allowed to make a call…”

The man shook her head. “Mm-hm. No, uh, you’re not under arrest, I just have to ask you… I’m sorry, this is my first time.” He looked up, squinting at her. “They keep telling me it’s okay because you won’t remember but, uh, um… still hard,” he mumbled to himself, though the room was so quiet and had such an echo that she could hear him regardless. “So, you weren’t compelled, that’s okay, uh… did you notice anything weird at… 47 Sparrow Avenue?”

“No,” it came with a heavy sigh and she tried to flex her hands again, because they were falling asleep. The man watched her every move as if he believed she could suddenly grow inhuman strength and break the metal cuffs. He seemed, if possible, even more nervous every time she so much as twitched. “It’s just an abandoned house. Look, I’m sorry for trespassing, I really am, but…” She had been about to say something she could never take back.

‘…But my friend was there. Lives there. Needs to be there. Hides from the monsters there.’

She managed to contain it in her head, but it was more of a struggle than normal, like her mind wanted to spill all her secrets, to this stranger in front of her. Instead, she bit her lip and looked at him, waiting, waiting for something.

“Um. Uh. Okay.” The man mumbled, nodding a bit. “There’s mould there, right? And… uh, spores? I-I mean, you may have been able to uh, see something in the air.”

“Yes, I mean… of course there was, it’s an old house.” She shook

her head a little, honestly amazed and slightly amused at the apparent situation she found herself in. Being interviewed about trespassing in the house that no-one wanted? It felt absurd and she wanted to laugh but kept that to herself when she thought of Kit, who had almost certainly been at the house. Was he somewhere, too, like this? He would be worse than her – struggling, maybe even escaping, making wild claims. What would happen to him?

“U-uh, okay, um…” This man’s vocal tics were starting to get on her nerves and she wanted to say that out loud too but fought against it. Her headache grew more every time she didn’t allow herself to say some truth, but she figured it was better this way. “After you started, uh, going there… did you notice anything weird about… uh, you? I mean, uh, did you start seeing anything?”

She frowned at him, but memories instantly flooded her. Seeing first the bullies in the mould, then sometimes hands that reached out to grab up her skirt or steal Kit away. Then the times she would walk down the face and every man she saw would turn into her father, clutching some piece of evidence of her transition – skirts, bras, lace knickers. They all marched the same way as silverback apes, shoulders hunched, fists firmly closed, faces red. They never said anything, but they were always there, and it was always just men, and it was only after she had been visiting the house for a couple of months.

“… Yes.” She admitted, softly. Maybe this was some sort of mental institution. It would explain the restraints to some extent, and even why they were using her dead name. All official paperwork carried her dead name, after all, until she could produce that damn certificate. It didn’t mean she had to use it.

“O-Oh, okay, okay.” The man marked something down – a dark black spot on a chart that seemed to have a list of names on one side, and a list of something else on the other. She had failed whatever this was, that was what this felt like, like failing an exam. “Um, okay, so… uh… “, He flipped pages again and, this time, seemed to come across something akin to a script because he stared down at it as he spoke, and he didn’t stutter and stumble over the words.

“David, I have to let you know that the mould made you contract a disease. It is okay. It is not catching. It is not fatal. It can be cured by…” He flipped the page over. “…An injection, and then you are free to go home. We are going to bulldoze the house to avoid any further problems. We appreciate your co-operation in this progress. Thank you.”

Dawn struggled against her bonds more at the words, scowling at him. There was still fogginess in her brain but the anger, the burning anger, at her dead name, at her legs being spread open like this, fought against that blurred side. “Stop calling me that! I’m not David! And what the hell are you talking about, you freak, this isn’t a hospital, you can’t just inject me! I-I’m still a minor, too, so if you do this, I’m going to go and… tell all the people I can that you had me like this, and anything could have happened to me!”

The man stood up and pushed his glasses up his nose as he slowly reached into his pocket for a small box. He made a humming noise, as if acknowledging her whilst showing he didn’t care, all in one little noise. As he approached her, he changed again – now it was her dad bearing down on her, his grin harsh and tainted by the glint in his eyes.

“As if anyone would want to do anything to you, David. You’re a freak.” Her pseudo-father breathed softly as he got close, breath stinking of stale coffee. “I bet I could hogtie you to a fence and no-one would come near. No-one wants you, not even when you’re spread out and out of it. I told you no-one would want you if you went down this path. I warned you this would happen.”

Dawn opened her mouth to scream, feeling huge, hot tears rolling down her cheeks, as there was another jab into her neck. The image of her father faded in and out until it was that dorky man again, who looked nervous and concerned, before her eyelids fluttered shut, her mind supplying more of Kit’s words before she hit unconsciousness.

“No matter what they say – we’re going to be okay.”

Breaking It All Down On Me

The creature that no longer resembled a Hippo and Enrico Momio's soul watched silently as both Locke sisters went away. And took *the thing* away with them.

"The bloody hell was that," Enrico said. He already knew he wasn't able to feel fear anymore.

He was beginning to understand his new circumstances. He was simply remembering how he used to feel fear, and thinking he should be feeling fear; but he was not able to feel fear, not even agitation.

He could feel disgust, though. And he came to terms with that almost instantly, knowing the rest would come, if only from revulsion.

Oh, good, I still can be a cynical bastard.

As they drifted together across nothingness, Enrico desperately clinging to the diminutive dot of presence that was the Hippo's soul, the *thing* disappeared as Locke carried it away.

The creature retorted: "I have no concrete idea, but it has your mean friend in a grasp she cannot break. Perhaps it is a grasp she has accepted. In any case, they do not belong here."

"Well, she is an auditor. They can't belong anywhere, that's sort of the point… I wonder where she got it."

Enrico scratched the back of his head. When he realized he was doing it out of pure habit, he thought about stopping, but then shrugged and kept scratching.

"What is an auditor?," the beast asked.

"I thought you knew everything…"

"I insist, I am not your sky-god, Enrico. I know little. I dedicate most of my thoughts to controlling the body I made to inhabit it."

"Ah. Well, it's like a lawyer, only they can close your entire operation if they feel like you're breaking the rules. Even violently so."

"Really. Well, that wouldn't be nice, I like it in here," it said. "I've grown quite settled to my body already."

"It's hideous, man. I mean, no offense-no, fuck that, feel offended if you want, it was weird two nights ago, now it's just hideous."

"It's a collection of different biological waste from parallel realities, Enrico. Of course it would look strange, even alien to you… to us. That doesn't make it any less comfortable."

"Parallel realities?," Enrico said.

The creature that no longer resembled a Hippo pondered him. "You didn't even know, did you."

"Know what? Oh, never mind. See, we have to help my folks! There are violent people out there, and if that thing… if they get their hands on Locke and the thing, what they will do with it-"

"Violent people?"

"Militias, I think. Maybe other big players are making a move on us, on our stuff. On you, even."

"On me?"

"Sure, you can purify water rather quickly, right? Well, there are people out there that would make use of you."

"And these… militias are sending me to those people instead of letting me help you?"

"After killing my friends, most likely," Enrico added.

There was a surge of light as the creature, soul un-carnate, went back into its body. "I should help," it thought, a tinge of genuine

concern over its thoughts.

"Help? Help how, you told me it'd be problematic-!"

The creature's body started to tremble. The nail-like spikes on its back glowed red. There was a trembling noise and everything around Enrico was light for a brief moment.

Then the creature came back. "I just helped."

"Wait, what? How?"

While the house was a nice, clean, orderly place, it was in the middle of the Gran Paradiso National Park, Piedmont, and a lake could be seen from two sides of the house; the other two were surrounded by trees. Accessing it was difficult; the closest thing to civilization around it was a dirt road. Most of its floors and ceiling was woodwork. However, everything in it was either comfortable or plain out functional; a home away from everything. A haven.

The minimalistic furniture contrasted with a few old relics made of oak wood, dark and baroque.

And there was a visitor sitting in the oldest piece of furniture, a slightly dilapidated and dusty armchair. Riding her raised left leg as an expert cavalryman, a tiny girl laughed at the rhythmic movements of her unlikely mount. The visitor was wearing a short bright green dress which contrasted with the tiny girl's, flowery and fairly plain. A man left the kitchen to eye on them both as he cleaned his hands with a rag.

"Hello, sis. Heard you coming in," Gary said, "but I didn't wanna disturb your game session."

"Dad!," Hada announced, dropping from her aunt's leg. "Aunt Dizzie is staying for dinner!" The man looked at the visitor, brows arcing in surprise.

"That so?"

"Unless something major goes down in my jurisdiction, yes, I'm

staying here," the woman casually said in a grave, kind voice. She looked tired, but happy.

The tiny Hada went to the armchair again and hugged her legs. The visitor smiled and caressed her tiny head.

Gary smiled at the scene. As he went back to the kitchen, he commented: "Well, we'll have enough for three. You'll eat in the damn chair, as usual?"

"If you don't mind," she calmly answered.

"Mind? Dammit, I can't imagine what you go through every day, sis, and you still get the job done and find time for us. Of course I don't mind."

"Will you tell me stories tonight, auntie?," the adorable whisper melted the visitor's face into another larger, brighter smile, her eyes slightly watery.

This was her heaven. Her only rest. The place where she was safe.

"Oh, sweetie," she answered, "that's the one thing I have, stories, so many of-"

A beat.

.- aspid surge
.- analyse: h:ebony-malac - p:natur-flat - w: tight - c:1
.- checking… 90+/-2%
.- aspid surge convergence confirmed
.- sool region - laascaanood - somalia
.- region marked as UNSTABLE
.- comparing with PSYCHE reports
.- WARNING
.- potential 2-m, 3-m compromise
.- sentinel stallite system alert
.- issuing fullbright alert…

A beat.

"-them."

The visitor looked at Hada, the girl's face slowly turning into a sad frown.

"They called you now, didn't they?"

"What makes you say that?"

"When they call you, your eyes always go from being like this-", Hada pulled the corners of her eyes back, turning them into two thin slits, "-to this." Hada pulled them down, and then she shrugged. "And you stop smiling."

Her aunt felt pride on her. *Three years, and she is this smart already.* "Tell your father I'm sorry, dear. Will you?"

"But you just arrived," Hada pleaded.

With a sad, distant smirk, the visitor caressed her hair. A few strokes, just that. She needed it.

Then, knowing that waiting any longer would only make it harder, she stood up and found herself in the dark, narrow safe room by her office, the walls filled with files and cardboard boxes stacked in white shelves.

There was no furniture but the old, dilapidated armchair and a perfectly normal stool she used when she had to read something. Her bright green flat shoes, perfectly matching her dress, rested on the low seat.

There, there was no older brother in the kitchen.

There was no little girl.

In her world, there was only the Mission. And a long, demanding mission it was.

Steeling herself, she hurried to the security door, decorated with a

series of pentacles arranged in a perfect pattern of concealment. She checked her dress, flattening a few wrinkles here and there, and opened the lock.

While Madam al Fine wanted to at least glance back at the old armchair, she knew she couldn't afford any further distractions. She walked into her office through the armored panel that hid her study, which closed back once she went through it, seamlessly hiding itself amongst the other parts of the wall.

Three people, two of them in military uniforms, were waiting for her. "Let's get to it then. Tell me everything we know," the Scary Lady said.

"You've warned *WHO?"*

Six minutes later, inside a bare office in a large official-looking building in Abidjan, a man called 'Pericles' by his superiors and Assistant Director by his subordinates received a call.

He stood at attention as he listened to his most absolute superior. Her orders were clear, concise and brief.

As soon as he hung up, he started making calls again. He phoned his secretary, his three, most immediate junior officers and a man who, he was aware of it, would do any job he gave him.

Even *that* one.

Once 'Pericles' was done, he sat behind his desk. He knew he would be expected briefly in the regional command hub meeting. However, he took a moment to ponder on his life and his loyalties.

Suddenly, 'Pericles' made up his mind. He opened a drawer in his desk. At its bottom rested a wooden toy bird and a bag of luminous candy.

"The Coalition! I think I remember some of your associates speak in very high terms of them when close to my tank. I only assume they

will come and help us-you seem concerned."

"CONCERNED, it says! ME? About the fucking GOC figuring out we're breaking the 1987's agreement in at least *eight* points?"

"Excuse me?"

"We don't deal with the GOC, Hippo. We don't deal with them 'cause they don't actually LIKE us. They think we're more trouble than we're worth, and they think we tell them whenever something goes awry, but this time we haven't told them, and if that *thing* from before, if Locke-oh God."

"I told you I'm not that."

At the time, Sarah Desjeux was alone in her surgery room. Out of mere habit, she merrily hummed, but she wasn't putting her heart into it; her mind was filled with what her mother would have called 'plenty of bad omens material'.

-she placed all the boxes with surgical gloves in the top drawer. Then took one of them, which she left with the large bottles of disinfectant-

Sarah was not a particularly joyful person. That was one of the most tragic misconceptions about her, and the most common one. She didn't exactly put a facade, either; she just wanted others to realize life could be lived with a smile and a shout and a laugh. That did not mean she was immune to its horrors, of course.

-she counted all the surgical scissors again. She was missing one, and since they had had three major surgeries that day, and they could have left it in? *No,* she thought, *that can't be,* Lila was counting them, she never misses one-

Actually, that was not entirely true. After living such a long, busy life, she was beginning to understand the calmness, the serenity with which certain old people used to carry themselves around. The aplomb. And that was what most people would expect of a leader such as herself: composure and seriousness. And that's what they

would get.

-and there was a large splatter of blood where that poor boy's leg had fallen to the ground. She examined it. *Still fresh, no trouble.* Sarah took a wipe and crouched to deal with the drops, the white floor bright anew as she went through it-

That was not to say she was immune to worst things in life, but she was pretty resilient. She had buried dead workmates, she had performed amputations after running out of anesthetics and she had delivered dead children to young mothers who wished. It really didn't get much harder than that, she mused.

-three, four, five, six, seven? I thought we had seven big bandage rolls here. She shook her head. Shouldn't have bought them large rolls, but would they listen? Noooo. *We at the Continental Branch know what we do-*

No, life was hard, and it was hard on her too. Day to day life was difficult, filled with work, full of wonders and death alike. But it was good to have fun and try to enjoy it while it lasted; and there was something, something she had felt since she was a child. The smiles. She loved the smiles they dedicated her, and the laughs. She had grown into a person everybody around her liked, or at least respected; and they had grown, she knew it, thanks to that silly short woman under her almost indomitable mop of chestnut hair.

-da doo doo daaa, now we clean around here, antiseptic everywhere and a bit of daa doo oh, what's with racket out there, I can't even think-

She cleaned the shelf of the last piece of furniture in the surgery room until she felt satisfied with its neatness. She wiped her sweaty face with the back of her hand as soon as she discarded her gloves. Daily work. That was the key. Patching people, patching minds by talking to them and getting to know them. Humans, all of them mortal, all of them little, all of them inconsequential. All of them fragile.

-all of them so very beautiful.

And here I am, all alone, Sarah laughed at her own thoughts. She left the surgery room, going into the busy aisle outside, a few volunteers working with Somali doctors who had come from Mogadischu and Garowe. All of them wore the white-and-green surgical robes provided by the MCF. Some of them, whom she didn't even now, rushed to respond to some emergency. The hospital was alive.

That was the part of a project she loved the most. See it outgrow her.

As she glanced through one of the windows in the well-illuminated aisle, Sarah felt, if not happy, content.

And then, as the small toy bird she always carried around and used in private to talk to her superiors and a few well-placed friends started to vibrate with the voice of a man she once knew, the window exploded towards her.

"No, you don't get it. There is a basic law when dealing with the GOC and trans-reality stuff."

"There is?"

"Yes. Just don't do it."

When Frank reached the place where the shooting had gone down, he had been expecting to find a PR mess and a few injured people.

Instead, he was met by a horrid scene.

Several corpses were scattered around the now extinguished bonfire, where their volunteers had been burning meat — My orders. — as the gasoline-soaked wood underneath it had burn completely. As he came closer to it, he realized there were living, breathing animals in the pile, miraculously calm and silent. Some of their corpses were intertwined, already growing back and combining. Frank grimaced. *There we go, Dodger's undying pets. Great.*

Frank wondered where she was. He could use a bit of Mission

Watch insight now.

The largest one, the head of a particularly badly hurt wildebeest, looked at him. Half its neck was covered in dirt. Under its neck, the rest of the body was covered in bleeding injuries and burns.

Frank noticed the bleeding was slowly decaying, the corpse rapidly recovering from the injuries it had suffered. *Not enough hurt to put you down, right, big guy?*

As if answering his thoughts, it softly bellowed. One of the AMISOM soldiers jolted and shot it twice.

Frank grimaced. He turned to the other part of the scene. But he did not want to do it. He did not want to check on the bodies.

The Executive Security member went over the corpses, he made the count. Seven of them wore white and green vests. At least ten were civilians. Six more were militians, perhaps irregulars that tried to stop the violence; most of their guns were gone. Some were piled in mounds, muddied and bloodied.

Frank noticed one of the corpses was oddly familiar. His heart sunk as he recognized Enrico Momio's corpse.

He had work with him for years. He felt the need to sit somewhere and sleep, sleep for a hundred years. Instead, he closed his eyes, open in an expression of surprise.

"See ya, you pest," he whispered. "Will keep an eye on Tino for you."

"This is more than just one shooting. They've killed a bunch of armed veterans! We have to report to our superiors, right now!," their sergeant said. Frank nervously nodded.

"And it was not bandits, either. This is probably people from Laascaanood itself, angry over our decision to incinerate the meat," he said. The soldier cursed in Arab, but Frank did not have the time to argue. "Warn your superiors, tell them to bring here whatever men they can spare. Please. If they attack us, they will murder all of us. They will probably go after all those who supported us, as well.

This could very well turn into a bloodbath. The hospital is our only quarters in the area and it is a very evident target, so as soon as you-"

And then, he saw the explosion in the distant hospital. When the sound reached them, he was already running towards it, with a pistol he took from a dead member of the militia.

"Don't do it? At all?"

"They get real serious about it, too. They're all about causal cross-contamination and timestream fussion or collision between parallel Earths and stuff like that. They get *real* serious. Real, *kill* everyone around the stuff itself just in case, serious!"

"They do?"

"YES!"

"Well, then I don't understand why would anyone talk anything but ill of them. Your friends must be all liars."

Last Hearth, AKA, Hearth Actual, AKA the Stoker, was calmly debriefing his boys as they flew to their target. He liked to think of them as "boys", despite the fact that they weren't children nor exclusively men.

"Target is, as of now, unknown but present in a Manna Charitable Foundation station in Laascaanood, Somalia. As luck would have it, most AMISOM and Puntaland military units are out of town. As *bad* luck would have it, PSYCHE warns us of very high risk of local violence due to a combination of anomalous activities conducted by the MCF and inter-tribal or sectary violence. In fewer words, boys, this is an all-out assault, another one."

That's what they called him for, usually. Him and his boys. He pondered them briefly; two hundred of the brightest and best the Coalition had, deployed by chopper from Mogadischu 'cause, why, no apportation-capable Strike Teams were available at the time! And

they needed a large Strike force this time, since riots and mass control might become an issue!

Faint-hearted bastards, all of them.

"Sentinel satellite 22 detected a huge Aspect Radiation spike near the town. It was Ebony, but brief. Very brief. We are not certain of the precise location of the entity that generated it, but it's pretty obvious that it should be in an MCF location. Problem is, with ongoing local violence, we will get in trouble if we just jump in… and it might be worse to not do so at all. We all know what will happen if other groups get their hands on an Ebony hue entity."

They all knew. They had all lived through situations like those, generally to take back whatever the bad guys took for their personal use, and then set it on fire so that nobody else could use it. The very reason why the Global Occult Coalition existed. Last Hearth occasionally thought people upstairs were too interested in their own damned careers to remember that.

"So we will attack first any group of non-anomalous combatants that may look like they are attacking MCF interests in the area. We will also be going in sort of blind. We will be going against civilians, militias and perhaps even the MCF volunteers themselves, if they are responsible for this mess."

There were other Coalition teams available to deal with the problem, but they had chosen him and Team Phalanx for a reason. The reason being they knew everything there was about getting their hands dirty *before* joining the Team. Nowadays, every single one of them underwent post-mission memory wipes to keep them sane, or at least functional. Every single one of them was obsessed with physical form, absolutely committed to the five-fold Mission and conditioned to obey to him. Many of them had had organs replaced by wetware and hardware devices as part of the APAR(T) program, and one of them had even been selected for the SPAR(TA) testing program. He was basically a machine at that point, more a weapon than people. *My boys,* Umber proudly mused.

"However, Mission-wise, this operation is to focus on Destruction. If Destruction is impossible, we will simply prioritize Survival and

retrieve the item for further study. Concealment is secondary; the entire area has been put in a communications blackout by PSYCHE, and they'll chalk it all up to tribal violence when the deal is done and journalists are allowed to go back to the streets."

And then, he waited for a moment before continuing.

"Protection, in an operation where we can expect locals resisting to us, is a minor concern. In other words, business as usual. ETA: two hours, at around eight and a half local time."

As their helicopters came closer to the place, Hearth checked once and again on updates from PSYCHE and the Sentinel network. There were no news from the latter, but the Special Observers and the only Assessment Team in the area reported many bad news on the civilian front.

Other Team Leaders would have frowned, grunted and asked their superiors to reconsider their role in all that. Maybe send another group, or just try a different, more discreet approach.

Team Leader Hearth would not.

"Fuck. Never mind, you just don't get what you've done," Enrico's soul said. The Hippo's soul seemed embarrassed about the whole thing.

"So…," it started, "I have an idea. You said you wanted to be alive again, didn't you?"

"I can!?," Enrico jumped.

"Not in your old carcass, it's wasted. I checked. Mmm… but there is another possibility."

Olympe had felt the blast rather than hear it, since he was tinkering with Garziel and Poitriburg on the Old Orange. Technically, he was not allowed to teach them how to do it, but he had done it anyways.

"Ziel, Poitri, go see what that was, please," he told his trainees. "Do

what you have to protect the hospital. I'll charge Oldie."

As the women left the garage in a hurry, their robes still stained with oil and the semi-abnormal fluids used by the machine's engine, he stood in front of the Old Orange and looked at the canister where he would be enclosed.

Technically, he was not allowed to try and put layers of armor on it, but he was about to anyways.

Rico's memory of a face grimaced. "I'm not possessing a person."

"Oh, no, everyone finds mind-riding very inconsiderate even in cases of emergency such as this! Not to mention the kind of control required takes a long time to master… No, you wouldn't be possessing creatures that might have pure, immutable souls. You'd be, uh, *possessing* creatures with *no* mind."

"What?"

"You are familiar with the orchard somebody planted nearby the camp, I believe?

« The Hammer Falls | Hub | Taking a Break from All your Worries »

Breaking It Down For Me

Frank felt just a bit claustrophobic.

The darkroom was, appropriately enough, a tiny, dark, hot and incredibly moist hellhole with an actual hole in the middle, which was enough for anyone to be a little dizzy. The ceiling was barely a meter and eighty centimeters high, and it felt like it was breathing, periodically combing under its own weight.

However, the oppressive atmosphere was minor in comparison to the smell that penetrated everything. Frank just knew that, despite the mask and the overall, it would stick to him, his clothes, his skin and his hair. It would probably violate the taste of every meal he had in days or weeks and turn his daily ablutions into a nightmare.

I hate this Vestan stuff, he growled to himself.

In any case, Frank couldn't deny the efficiency of the Third Vestan Donation. The hard-working fungi were rising a building where there had been just an empty patch of arid, barren land; a building destined to become a hospital with fifty beds, employing thirty or more permanent personnel, equipped with an independent source of electricity and clean water.

It was just that the floors still felt — and smelt — like they were made of compacted compost and decaying reed.

But the room was growing, as was the rest of the complex. It would become an actual darkroom at some point in the next days. And the final product would be just a facade for the tunnel which was growing from its floor.

Growing and digging at the same time. It was a novel concept for Frank, whose limited notions of construction screamed at him that all that removed soil and rock had to be going *somewhere*.

From the looks of it, it seemed to be going straight to the ceiling.

"When will it be finished?"

Frank focused on Priscilla Locke. In the day they had been together, she had told him about some aspects of her life in the old universe. He *knew* her mentality would be a problem. Even if he didn't want to blame her for it, her occasional grimace and racist remarks were enough to attract unwanted attention.

He would have to give her some guidelines and ban some topics. Tell her to just avoid certain conversations. But even so, he had no idea of how she had found the Charitable, or joined. Or, for that matter, how had she been accepted by the Mission Board.

Both of them were standing over the edge of an unfinished tunnel that would lead straight to the underground laboratory where she would test her thing, whatever it was. In the meantime, he was neither allowed to know what the thing itself was — old feelings of frustration stirred at the mere thought of secrets upon secrets piling up away from his sight — nor cleared to know exactly who she was.

"It should be done in ten to thirteen hours, miss Locke," Jacob answered, solicitous from the threshold of the wide hole that would become the only door, in the room. "It's actually a bit of an experiment, we have never used the Vestan Donation to dig an underground repository."

"A… repository," Frank blurted. He felt more than saw Priscilla's eyes drilling through his skull, but the good man didn't even notice the implied question in Frank's words.

"Yes!", stated the Rabbi, joyously ignorant of the scene. "I didn't even think of that, and it's a great idea! We are growing a water repository down here! See, we have reasonable doubts that the Milking Maggots' main vector is another parasitic microorganism, *Giardia lamblia*, that can easily contaminate water sources. It can be a bad fucker, if you will pardon the expression, because it provokes diarrhea and water supply around here is an-"

"Thank you, Doctor." Priss said with an absent smile, "Is it running

smoothly?"

"Definitely, definitely smoothly!" Jacob almost sung. "No aberrant growths, no discombobulated parts, everything according to the plans you brought, miss Locke!"

"Just… Locke."

"Oh, thank you, you may call me Jacob. Or Rabbi! Everyone calls me Rabbi."

It was Frank's turn to stare at Priscilla's expression, that was rapidly becoming sour.

Nobody knew who she was around there. Nobody but Frank… and even he could not point out exactly what was wrong with her.

"Thanks, Rabbi," he ended up saying to the politely confused biologist. "Now, I'll be showing Priscilla-"

"Miss Locke."

"I'll be showing miss Locke the procedural growth of a 1-Vestan, and then we'll go back to the camp. Okay?"

"Sure! Have a nice day, Priscilla!", said the Rabbi.

A few moments after Jacob had left the dark, moist room, Frank looked at her associate. "Okay, now, really, what's your deal?"

Priscilla had the decency to seem distressed. She gnawed idly on her lower lip, a sharp exhale leaving her lips, as she resisted the urge to blurt out something most likely anti-semitic. "It's just hard, is all… like, imagine going to work and having-" Frank was staring at her, his withering look all the warning she needed; Locke caught herself this time. "-A bunch of talking velociraptors among your co-workers— "

"Sure, fine, okay, never mind," Frank half-shouted at her. "Consider this: you are now the only real, decent, genetically sanctioned human being left from your universe. Everyone else here is a subhuman moron. How do you feel about it?"

The woman did not back down, but neither did she try to rise to the challenge. After a moment, she nonchalantly shrugged, "I'm fine, really. It's not like I'd blow up in the street and start attacking them. Any way; there's more of them than there are of us. Of me, I mean."

Frank stood there, looking at that insensitive, brutal idiot. Then, he slumped.

"Fine."

He pretended to be adjusting his mask just to avoid making eye contact with the woman. Typical. He was calling out on somebody's douchebaggery and, a second afterwards, he felt guilty about it.

He rose his gaze again to meet hers. She remained immobile, what little could be seen of her face completely devoid of expression.

"I said fine," he started. "-no, wait, never mind, that was a bit dickish of a move on my side. you being new here and all. But you'll have to begin accepting stuff and adapting as soon as you can. People around here are certainly *not* what you were used to, back there. You'll have to grow used to it quickly."

She nodded, no change in her expression, still that dead look on her face. "Working with velociraptors would be cool."

Oh for the love of-

"So!", shouted Frank, faking a joviality he did not feel. "A repository?"

"I'll be 'performing daily tests' on the water to 'make sure it is potable.'"

"They will frown at that."

"That's not my problem; I'm pretending to be an inspector, *you're* the one keeping them out of my hair."

"You will have to talk to them, Locke."

"I can talk."

"Outside your cover. As a *person."*

Priscilla looked at the ceiling and added nothing for a few seconds. Then, she said:

"I'm not new to this. I know what the Foundation does—"

"The Charitable."

"The what?" She blabbered.

"The Charitable. Many of us who work around anomalies, or abnormalities, whatever," he snorted at his own confusion on the topic. "Anyways. Most people around here don't want to be compared to the *other* Foundation, so they talk of the Manna Charitable Foundation as the Charitable. You know," Frank arced his brows and lowered his voice to a complicit whisper, "to avoid unpleasant comments?"

"I-I…"

Priss narrowed her eyes slightly, mouth slightly hanging as she stuttered through an incoherent stream of murmurs. Then she shut her mouth and sighed.

"I get it, really. I just don't know how you people work. Or anything about Mister and/or Missus Manna and Charitable. How about an actual tour of the place?"

Frank sighed. "Sure, a full tour on the Charitable's fun, fun story. Just… just keep in mind who you are working with. And for. Okay?"

"I'll try to adapt." He observed her for a moment. "Really."

Frank studied her a bit longer. Nothing on her freckled face told if she was being serious or not. The security executive member forcibly coughed and led her out of the darkroom.

"Okay," he said while walking down an aisle, still soft and humid. The only light came from a few holes in the ceiling; their edges were dying and falling down, thinning and slowly becoming the glass that would cover several skylights. As Locke joined him, he said: "From

the top. You know what the reports and the pamphlets say. What do you know of the people who work with the MCF?"

"Nothing."

"Good answer."

"What?"

Frank laughed at her confused expression. "Oh, God, now I understand why they found me funny… See, they call that, that face you are making, a *skipper face.* Foundation Agents always get all 'the hell' when they see something they don't expect, and most of all they get surprised when other people tell them that being unprepared is okay."

Locke glared at him. He kept talking.

"I mean, sure, it's better to be prepared, but us field agents have been told that we have to *on edge,* and trained to stay there at all times," he declaimed, "and then there are people like the volunteers of the Charitable, who go through life with wide eyes, large grins and the feeling that they are making the world a better place, and tell *us* to tone it down a bit. It's hard enough to do our job, don't be such sourpusses."

"Too upbeat for a warzone?"

Frank shook his head. "See, you don't get what kind of people work with us. It's what I was saying earlier: why is it 'good' that you admit you don't have a clue on what these people do here? It has lots of good things, the Charitable. But the one thing it *doesn't* have is patience for self-absorbed jackasses who think they have all the answers or go looking for sychofants. People like you or me, going on a power trip because they found a *skip* of value and they offer it to us… it happens, you know."

Frank looked at one of the immature skylights. A rapid blur passed by over it, perhaps a bird.

"They go and look for the MCF and sometimes they find us, instead of being found by us, which is kind of the norm. They want to prove

to us oh how great they are, and how they are basically wizards or have a pen that manifests cake by drawing it or are going to topple all industrialized countries and would like us to help them pick up the pieces and create a wonderful, beautiful, *Utopian* tomorrow." He laughed humorlessly. "Well, it's not that people from the Charitable hate fellas like those… hell, if we found them bleeding to death in the street we would try to save their sorry asses. But that's not the point, the point is that pretty much everyone in the Charitable is already self-absorbed and will never, ever help somebody feel better about themselves by giving them a place among them and patting their backs. They don't have the time for those types."

Frank stood over the rough dark green floor, almost feeling it move under his boots.

"Only people who admit they are flawed, people who want to help, people who are *desperate* to help, get into the Charitable. And those never leave it while they live."

Locke crossed her arms, seemingly bored again. Frank had learned to associate the gesture to the limits of her patience. She confirmed it in a boorish tone.

"You talk too much, Westinghouse. Explain it to me so I don't get yelled at later."

Frank felt a jolt. "It's been a while since anyone called me that. I mean, MCF people do call me that when they're making fun of the stick they see up in my rear, but-"

"Eh, right," Priscilla said. "Just 'Skipper' then?"

"Or Frank, yes. I guess they'll start calling you Skipper, too," Frank ventured. Priscilla looked around for a moment when she heard that. "Although we could keep your past work history under the wraps, if you prefer."

Priss grimaced and glanced around briefly, "That would probably work better. I'm with the W-Ph-O, right?"

"No, don't pronounce it like that," Frank quickly corrected her. "Even

the Parahealthers themselves usually say it like *'phooo'*, sort of like what everyone does with the World Health Organization, you know…"

"That sounds stupid. And I *know* what the WHO is. It's just…"

Frank nodded. "Wouldn't have one of those over there?"

"No, it's not that, they probably did. They just wouldn't bother helping the people who'd really need help."

"Then who the hell did they help?"

"Dunno. Never really bothered learning about it." She walked forward, and Frank closely followed her.

The aisle turned into an open hall. Once it was complete, the gaping holes would be covered with secreted hard glass and the floors would be beautifully polished ceramic tiles in a checkered pattern of dark green and white. However, as the couple walked through it, it looked more like a cave covered in moss than a hospital.

"Isn't it amazing that we are going to build operation theaters in here?" Frank wondered out loud.

"In a third-world-hell-hole like this, it'll be a wonder to see them achieve proper aseptic conditions."

"Asept-right, that too," he grumbled. "Don't call it a hell-hole, Locke. Or at least avoid saying it out loud. It might be a mess of a place right now, but people live here."

They stared at the large central opening that would become the door. Two large branch-like growths were forming at each side of the hole, each one slowly swaying in the wind, looking for its pair to grow into a door.

"Uh, well," Frank started, "the World Health thing? They usually pronounce it *'who'*."

Priscilla pondered this in silence for a moment.

"Sounds stupid," she muttered.

"Might be. But people keep calling it that, which is *why* we have to do it too, or else-"

"I was just complaining. I know how to blend in, Westinghouse."

Frank noticed a certain amusement in her words. "Ah, yes, sorry." He stood in silence, thinking. "Crap, we got off track there. Quite honestly, I can't put what the volunteers are like in simple words. Too many, too different. Besides, you'll meet them these days. I'll just tell you Mission Branch 101 over diner."

They left the maturing hall.

Outside, the building area was filled with other figures in white-green overalls, some of them taking measures and making sure the growths were taking the correct shapes. Frank and Priscilla saw several pipe-like tendrils slowly burrowing themselves under the dusty ground, a few millimeters every second. One of them had found a particularly resilient rock right underneath the surface. The cracks were clearly audible as the Mason Mold grew through the smallest relieves on its surface and pulverized it, turning it into a soft but firm support for the pipe itself.

Priss stared emptily, and gave out a quick giggle, "That's funny. Just… letting it sprawl and not containing it."

He nodded at that.

"Jacob would tell you that it is perfectly controlled and safe. You will come to think of it as cathartic, believe me," Frank said. He felt himself smile at the thought; those words came from him? *Woah, sudden perspective shift.* "Although I do understand what you mean, it's uncanny."

They walked towards the perimeter fence exit. The entire building area remind hidden behind it, a wall of white-and-brown tarpaulin sections hung from metal poles. Each piece of the two meters and half tall wall sported the logo of the Manna Charitable Foundation. The surrounding terrain was lower than the hill were the Opal-1

Work Group was growing its project, so a simple fence was enough to grant a certain measure of secretiveness to the entire operation.

Priscilla studied the fence with a critical eye.

"Hey, Westinghouse. Is that enough?"

"Standard issue tarp. Never mind its stopping power, Locke, we don't need to stop anyone," Frank said. "The ones that would take the Assets away from us would not be stopped by any means we have. And both locals and refugees know the Charitable is working in here, and that it will be best for all parts involved if they simply stay away from it until whatever we are working on is ready."

"They're afraid."

"Why yes, they are afraid. Of us," Frank stated, matter-of-factly. "Of what we can do. There is always some measure of fear and distrust when the Charitable comes to town. They know we bring weird stuff, like buildings that grow from the ground up. And we had a Work Group around past year scouting the area, or rescuing people or something like that… they *know* what we do, even if they don't know *exactly* what we do. Add rumors at that, and we have a certain, uh, protection," he ignored the times when that had gone wrong. "They take it rather well, by the way. Imagine we used this stuff in the middle of an industrialized country."

"You'd be lighting the biggest fire the Foundation has ever seen."

"Sure, sure, good old Skippy would be there in heartbeat, wouldn't he?" Frank raised a hand as if swatting the idea away. "Well, no. Wrong. We have operations in every country of the world, including North America, Australia, Japan or Europe. Take Torres, go no further. That guy is Argentinian, how do you think he first came to us? There was a MCF recruitment post in Catamarca, Argentina, population three hundred thousand or so. In the open. Where was the other Foundation that day?"

Priscilla glanced at Frank, brow furrowed. "You take this shit public?"

"No, that's not this. Not anomalies. We are overt about us working a non-profit… but our funding methods are so tortuous that not even the Foundation, the other Foundation, can follow the money. We operate under hundreds of different institutional aliases here and there, most of them ephemeral. It's all smoke and mirrors, but the Charitable keeps its ears to the ground and recruits people that worked for other non-profits or gave the finger to fat cats, champions of the establishment and people like the Foundation." Frank stopped talking for a moment. "Crap, I didn't realize how redundant that was."

"Redundant? The 'fat cats, champions of the establishment-"

"-and people like the Foundation' part, yes, that." Frank and Priscilla said, simultaneously. They snorted at her own scene as they reached the entry checkpoint, a makeshift room made out of a prefabricated container with UN logos and surrounded by the tarpaulin walls.

Inside, they discarded their masks, that were picked up by a bored Yusuf, who also stored them with their dirty overalls once they took them off.

They walked out into the open. Less than a kilometer away, the center of Laascaanood was a busy place, now completely visible to them. Until then, the city had been relatively free of the Milking Maggot epidemic. It remained an important active population center, despite the large number of residents that had left the place after Somaliland had attempted to take the place. According to Mission Watch reports, it was quite emptier than past year.

"See that?" Frank said. "Those are forty thousand souls. They are hurt, sick, sad, and some times even mad enough about it to pick a gun and do something stupid."

"And?"

"My point is that we are needed."

"Spoken like the better man." Priscilla said. Frank's brow frowned at that.

"What? No," he said. "No, no. I'm not here 'cause I am the better man, or… I'm just a guy who happened to be necessary here, the better ones are, you know," Frank made some gestures at the hospital, "in there, growing a surgery room and stuff. And down there in town, making certain mothers don't die while in labor and children live through meningitis, and… and they don't even realize they are the better people. They are here because they feel they are not better. And I'm not like them. No, I'm here because they needed an unlucky idiot who wouldn't trust his own shadow and happens to know how to avoid fights." Frank sighed slightly, pondering what he had just said. "I'm not the better man, I'm just a bouncer."

"A bouncer for 40,000 without a gun? You'd make a shitty bouncer."

"Right!", he answered, his face suddenly split by a fierce smile. "You got how wonderfully ironic that is, didn't you? We don't even have budget for guns. Why would we?"

"I mean if you have no guns, no military personnel, no support of any kind…"

"Then what am I doing here?"

"Yup," Priss thought for a second, "Gathering intelligence for them, then?"

"That's not entirely correct, but that's sort of what I do, sure." They started walking East, following the Southernmost limit of the building site. "They expect me to be a security guard without any violence, you know why? 'Cause that's not how security works for these people. They feel security is secrecy. They aren't threatened by locals, or armies. They know we treat them all, no question asked. True, some times there are stick ups. True, some times our guys get the shortest end of the stick and they get shot by accident, or bombed by accident, or *accidentally* kidnapped for ransom. It happens, all NGOs working around here know it and take it like champs. You know what makes MCF different? That we have to expect *others.*"

"As in…"

"Others. Marshall, Carter and Dark cronies trying to buy, extort or steal our assets away. People from Insurgent cells trying to manipulate the kids into joining their side by telling them 'oh, sure, you are delivering babies, nicely done, how about changing the world, really changing it, tipping the balance of power'? Even people from local 'liberator' groups with ORIA sponsors. And, of course, the Foundation. The only way to keep them away is tread lightly."

"And you just let them use you to keep their shit secret? Why?"

"Secret? Ah, no, that's what they do back home at the Continental Branch offices. Cover our activities as if other NGOs did it, create misleading or false media reports, stuff like that. What I do is keep them Mission kids discreet enough, just in case a field agent goes into the area and casually hears about us."

Frank suddenly felt very tired. He stopped and turned to admire the sights. Priss did the same. Laascaanood extended before them.

"Look, every Work Group takes their own decisions in the field. They practically make procedures as they go. Some of them are good in keeping a low profile, and some others have anomalies or talent for stealth. But a Work Group that builds hospitals?," he let out a guffaw. "Right, hiding *that* is a tough one. And you don't even get to buy the terrain and cover Laascaanood in amnestics, right? So, what to do? Well, I visit the local officers, people from other NGOs, let them know that we are here on a little tour. And what they have to answer if anyone complains. And drop a few well placed shillings in the hands of any agents of higher ranking players that I think will be around."

"That's it?," Frank watched her vaguely amused face. "No 'Thank-You' card with a five dollar bill?"

"And the Charitable's 'good' reputation," he nodded. "That's about it, yeah. We trust each other enough not to give ourselves up, trust that the locals know they want us to be around instead of selling us out, trust the other major players to think there is nothing around here and, if you like to do that kind of thing, pray."

He started walking again, with a tiny sigh.

"Sometimes it doesn't work. It's all a very thinly disguised lie, partly successful because nobody is looking for us and because looking for us is not worth the effort. Not unless we screw it up big time, anyways. The world is a big place and they don't mind us being here and using some breadcrumbs to save a few victims of tragic circumstances, for as long as we do our let's-all-be-friends gig instead of getting them to rise up in arms against the 'circumstances'. Our biggest defense is that they prefer to work closer to home."

They reached the corner of the construction area. Beyond it, in the northern side of the city, there was a nascent displacement camp. It had begun to form last evening, the inexpressive faces shocked with grief and confusion, sometimes anger, already gathering there. The Work Group workers were already erecting some large tents for the refugees with the AMISOM troopers.

Frank knew Jacob's specialists would be there too, discreetly planting prototype underground Vestan Seeds that would create sewage facilities and an irrigation system for crops further north.

Frank knew Opal and her own specialists had been there all day, quickly finding every single case of the Sour they could find and supplying any relative of the patients with prophylaxis.

Frank knew Olympe and his guys would be there about now, patrolling the newly born dirt roads that separated row after row of tents filled with displaced people.

Frank wondered if anything they could do would be enough. Hundreds were coming into the camps' limits as they watched.

"The worst part about them staying home instead of coming here, though?" He said, looking back at Priscilla. "It kind of works for us, too."

Night was falling in Laascaanood. Frank had shown auditor Priscilla Locke, the special WPhO — pronounced *'phoo'* — delegate for the local Manna Charitable Foundation Infrastructure and Health Mission for Laascaanood, all the impressive work the volunteers

were doing to get the refugee camp up and running, and prepared for the hundreds that were sure to come over the next days. Upon the Work Group's arrival, a coordinated chaos had erupted within the camp its outskirts, where a handful of mobile clinics, operating from jeeps, and food distribution centers, run from the large MCF semitrailers.

They had time to talk to the AMISOM commander, the acting chief of the Federal Republic and the elder council of Laascaanood. All of them were concerned about the affluence of refugees to the camp, which housed three hundred people already, all of them fleeing from the Sour outbreak. Frank conferred with them in the name of the Manna Charitable Foundation, assuring their commitment. He warranted that the epidemic would be stopped in Laascaanood with no risk to the town or their operations and told them the hospital would be ceded to the city whenever it was staffed by non-MCF personnel.

For free.

From there on, all powers that be in Laascaanood were bent on cooperating with the nice, helpful people from the Charitable.

"Giving away our stuff like it wasn't planned!," Opal would say later, in that rare cynical streak she occasionally displayed, "The best way to make friends!"

« **Who Are You?** | **Hub** | **Cubes On A Slope** »
Programme Las Anod-1//

The Battle of the Toys: The Breakroom Routing

Researcher Harris finished the last pieces of his model, and set it down, as it walked away to join its fellows. For the last hour, he had been creating Lego Space Marines and assorted vehicles, and adding them into the large city that the staff of Site-19 have established using **SCP-387**. As the Marine joined ranks with the dozens of others that he made, he watched with a silent awe as the Marines began to interact with the city, before the emergency klaxons began to blare.

"God damn it," he thought, "another Keter breach." His colleagues and him all rushed out of the room, as the Lego citizens waved goodbye to their creators and friends. The Space Marines saluted Researcher Harris as he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Around the same time, Junior Researcher Jays was transporting the Play-Doh, designated as **SCP-705**, back to its containment chamber. As he was passing the break room, he too also responded to the emergency breach, and, in haste, dropped 705's container as he ran to his designated station.

As the container hit the floor, the lid popped off, and within minutes, a platoon of army men formed from the mass. Their platoon leader led them under the door, to see if they can find a spot to capture.

"Private, what do you see up ahead?" The clay sergeant awaited the returning scout as he ran back towards their temporary hiding spot.

"20 clicks to the east, a large city made from some sort of modular brick. 2 clicks ahead, a large, unattended supply depot. We can form our base from there, sergeant."

"Excellent. Good work, soldier." He gave the thumbs up to the platoon commander, who began to bark out orders as the band of

soldiers proceeded to the repository of clay.

Jack was walking his dog down the western end of Main Brick street, and waved hello to all of his neighbors as he enjoyed the fresh scent of an afternoon walk. Rumors spread of new arrivals today, clad in large blue armor and carrying machine guns around. He wondered why anyone needed machine guns these days - it's not like there were any pesky imitation blocks around.

As he rounded the corner, he heard weird mechanical whirring off past the treeline. Perhaps the researchers were trying some sort of new thing with the electronic stuff, or perhaps it was the new arrivals with their fancy war machines. He knelt to the ground for a second when a giant non-Lego mecha burst from the treeline, spitting bullets and large-velocity shells.

Jack was caught in the strike and lay dismembered as the clay soldiers continued their sudden strike deeper into the city.

"Battle-brothers! Report!" The Marine sergeant looked upon his squad as they all stood resolute, the incandescent light shining off of their pauldrons. They were the Emperor's finest, and no man would ever-

Before the first marine could report his status, a stray clay bullet impacted the sergeant in the chestplate. He fell backwards, and the Marines immediately ran to cover their fallen superior from any other fire. Across the landing zone, other marines began to assemble under their squad leaders, while the company commander and his retinue began to convene on the sudden raid that they have been caught up in.

The sergeant lifted himself up, and, thank the Emperor, the bullet simply flattened upon hitting his blessed armor. Uttering his praises to the Emperor, he stood resolute as the company commander yelled for a swift counter-attack, and motioned for all the Marines to move forward and to deliver divine judgement upon the enemies of Mankind. The sergeant yelled for victory and for vengeance as he and his brothers moved forward, their bolters blazing as they moved

towards the unrighteous.

"Man, that was one hell of a breach… glad those containment guys got that all handled." Researchers Harris and Jordans conversed and laughed as they proceeded back towards the break room to continue constructing their Lego creations and finishing up their lab reports.

As they entered the hallway to get to the break room, they saw Junior Researcher Jays running from the opposite end. He stopped as he first looked at the ground, and then towards the two researchers approaching him. He looked upon the container on the ground, and uttered a simple, "Oh shit," before facing the two researchers who came to him.

"Something wrong, Jays?" Jordans looked at the now flustered junior researcher before his ears tuned to a faint rumble emanating from the break room. He was about to tap Harris, when he turned and saw the same sight that was unfolding before their eyes.

"Holy shit," was the only thing that all three of them could manage to push from their mouths.

Marines took positions in the now ruined towers of downtown Main Brick street, while the Dreadnoughts provided cover for advancing tactical squads. Clay artillery shells whistled through the air while heavy bolter fire and Krak missiles smashed into opposing infantry lines. Around them, Lego minifigs were running to escape the cataclysm while police officers provided assistance to the Marines by using their cars as mobile cover and by shooting at the clay soldiers with their smaller, inferior weapons.

"FEEL THE HEAT OF THE EMPEROR'S FURY, HERETIC!" Battle Brother Zephyr aimed his flamer and ignited an advancing light infantry squad while their bullets bounced off of his helmet and pauldrons. He continued to steadily advance, setting flame to the enemy with his blessed promethium flamer, while his battle-brothers continued to fire their bolters from behind him and protect him.

As the Marines pushed forward, they heard a rather frightening sound rounding the corner - it appeared to be an enemy superheavy tank. "BANEBLADE!", yelled Zephyr, as he dived for cover while the vehicle's primary cannon launched a shot of clay into a business tower, sending minifigs falling to their demise or being crushed by the large pieces of debris that rained from above. Zephyr was buried underneath the rubble, but forced himself out, and began his burning inferno anew.

The clay superheavy continued to dispense destruction while the soldiers followed behind, while the lesser minifigs dropping their weapons and running. The Marines continued to hold their ground, firing whatever they could into the clay tank, while being pummeled by the artillery cannons situated behind the trees.

Brother-Captain Adaris smashed away another soldier with his Thunder hammer, watching the energies send the soldier flying into pieces and splattering the nearby walls of the building. He swept the hammer around and managed to send a light clay vehicle onto its side, before bringing the hammer down to utterly destroy its occupants in the name of the Emperor. Before he could swing his hammer once more, he heard the sound of retro-rockets firing in the air, and knew that the time had come to destroy the heretics and bring glory and praise to the Emperor.

"BATTLE-BROTHERS! CHARGE FORWARD, AND SHOW THESE FOOLS THE POWER OF THE EMPEROR! GLORY BE TO HIS NAME!" Adaris charged the superheavy tank and destroyed its turret with a flying swing of his ancient hammer, while the Marines behind him yelled a loud cheer and followed, bolters and flamers blazing to exterminate. The dreadnoughts and Predators continued to blast away at the enemy emplacements, taking out the machine gun nests and the snipers that attempted to harass the charging Marines.

Behind the treeline, the clay artillery pieces continued to walk their rounds back, attempting to keep the Marines away from their established positions. An artillery spotter was about to aim at one of the Predators, when he looked up and was promptly crushed underneath the weight of a drop pod. Two more pods opened, and terminators began to pour out with their storm bolters blazing. A

soldier attempted to toss a fragmentation grenade at the heavily armored figures, before being swept aside by a power fist. Chainfists tore through the enemy pillboxes and bunkers, and the terminators began to advance towards their brothers, trapping the clay soldiers in-between two moving walls of death. Behind the terminators, Stormravens dropped off the mighty Land Raiders, and continued their advance, unimpeded by the enemy's light bullets.

At the end of the day, with the last clay soldier executed, the Marines sounded their praise to the Emperor. Brother-Captain Adaris looked upon the carnage, while the apothecaries tended to the wounded and to the fallen marines and all of the civilians that assisted them in routing the malleable enemy. As he began to walk back towards their new base of operations, a child minifig ran up to him and grabbed the leg of his power armor.

"Who are you guys?", the child asked, with a sense of curiosity behind his painted black eyes. The Captain smiled, and told the child, "We are the Emperor's Finest, and today, we bring salvation to this hive." He continued to walk back, with the thunder hammer over his shoulders, and the child waved back at him.

In that child's mind, he thought, "I want to be like him!"

"Let's never do that again," remarked Jays, as Jordans, Harris and him picked up the last pieces of clay and finally re-instated containment of 705. They left the Lego figurines on their own, as they could rebuild their city and take care of their injured. As Harris walked out of the breakroom, he saw his initially small Marine force laying down the foundations for a monastery, and, in a moment of sentimental value, saluted the Marines. The Brother-Captain saw him salute, and lifted up his hammer to return the gesture.

Breath, Pulse, Blood, Spine

Dec 20th

There's nothing quite like spending the holiday season in a non-crucial Foundation site. Were I still working at 17 I doubt I'd even notice, but you can't really miss it here in 346. All non-essential personnel are away, doing… whatever people do when they're not here, I suppose. Is it sad that I don't even really remember what that's like anymore? Just doing nothing, staying at home, seeing family. It's been a while. God, it's been a while.

I'm not the only one staying here, of course. Security staff always stay in full capacity, and a few researchers always have to stick around in case a new Sub-Area appears. I wonder how many of us volunteered for the holiday shift. I wonder if I'm the only one.

Dec 21st

Been hanging around Sub-Area 13 today. I'm not exactly sure what drew me to that particular wing, but it certainly was a… unique experience. All of those beady plastic eyes, just staring at you from their shelves, and the sensations within them…brr. Colorful teddy bears with memories of the first World War. Fuzzy pink fur and blood soaked mud, cheerful little smiles and the stench of gangrened flesh. Squicking and screaming. Sometimes I can almost believe 921 is trying to tell us something. Then I listen to 921-2, and remember the entire thing is just a monument to pointless cryptic nonsense. *Twirling ash and candied strips, all but glimmers in a bullfrog's eye.* If that isn't just this place trying to fuck with me, I'm a monkey's uncle.

I also saw something else while I was here. Stevenson and Nakamura, hiding between the shelves. Groping. Heh, I suppose that's why they didn't seem to mind staying here for the season. Good for them, really. At least someone around here is having fun.

I wonder if I should call home. I wonder if anyone will be there to answer.

Dec 22nd

Head Researcher Sanders says we had a new Sub-Area appearing last night, somewhere around 24's natural thermal springs. No name from 921-2 yet, but I'm sure Ol' Dismembered Voice will come up with something suitably ominous-sounding. Sanders assigned Nakamura to do preliminary examination, but I said I'd do it instead. Honestly, I can think of worse ways of spending a day than exploring a new wing, and Nakamura, well, I'm sure she has plans. I don't. So, looks like tomorrow morning is spelunking time for kindly Dr. Levine. Sub-Area 24 is all pastoral nature scenes, and given how 921 usually works I assume this new place is going to be at least somewhat similar. Maybe I'll get lucky and it'll have something to do with the sea. Haven't been to the ocean in years now. Would be nice to see it again. I'll be bringing my recording equipment with me, of course, so expect some nifty pictures!

Who the hell am I talking to?

Dec 23rd

Ye God, this place is enormous. I saw how the others looked at me when they saw me packing my supplies, but I wasn't going to repeat that incident in the Chequered Tunnel. Nearly starving once is one time too many. Turns out I was right anyway, since this Sub-Area must be the largest we've found yet, so much so that it feels weird calling it a Sub-Area at all. You could fit a small town into this chamber, and that's only the parts I can see. I think there might even be daylight ahead. That would be a first.

It's an odd place, even by SCP-921 standards. Walls are covered with this sort of- I dunno, liquid crystal, I suppose? Almost looks like moving ice. Swirling in elaborate patterns, sinking and rising with a kind of rhythm, like a vertical shining tide. Naturally I'm not going to touch it until I know exactly what it is, but I find watching it soothing. You can really get away from yourself, watching those patterns flow. You can almost forget where you are.

The memories here are stored in these little alcoves in the walls, where the crystal doesn't touch, and they aren't at all what I expected them to be. Unless I'm missing something and memories from plague-times and pastoral nature scenes are suddenly thematically linked, there's no connection between this place and Sub-Area 24 even though the two are adjacent. Making it this day's second possible first, I guess. Heh. Whole thing makes me curious to see what else I can find in here. I suppose I could go back to the dormitories, but that's a few hours walk and I'll have to waste half of tomorrow just getting back here. No, I think I'll stay here for the night, nice and cozy in my sleeping bag. Not like anyone's going to miss me. Doubt they'll even notice, really.

Dec 24th

It was daylight. God.

I've been with the Foundation for the last twenty-seven years. I've worked on seven SCP items. I've seen and heard things I doubt most people would even buy in a science fiction novel. And through all of that, I can't remember feeling such a sense of true wonder as when I saw the forest.

There really shouldn't be anything here to make me feel that way. Not after… not after everything. Just a small wooded valley, and a road covered in snow, and some mailboxes poking out every once in a while like they've been planted there by some giant squirrel. This should be nothing to me, this is nothing to me.

None of this makes any sense. Nothing about SCP-921 ever indicated there could be something like this in it. Sure, we found some large rooms before, but this- if this is a room, 921 is making a damn good job of disguising it. By all accounts I should go back right now, report this to my supervisor and get some actual experts to deal with this. I flunked the tests for the Paraworld Analysis Department, I was literally found unsuitable to go any further by some of the brightest minds in the world. But I'm… I'm not going to. Because this place, it does mean something to me.

I feel like I'm home again.

And that doesn't make any sense either. This isn't me! I've never lived anywhere even resembling this. My current place sure as hell doesn't. Nothing in this forest should be in any way familiar to me. And nothing really is. And yet, here I am, standing knee deep in snow, fumbling through mailboxes full of artist's dreams, most likely going to freeze to death come nightfall. That is, if night is even a thing here. And the memories, they're far more vivid than anything 921's other wings have to offer. In the inner rooms you always felt like you were watching things through a screen, or touching them through thick gloves. Nothing like that here. No barriers. I can feel the brush in my hand. I can hear each creak in the harp as my fingers weave a pattern on its strings, lightening fast. I can feel the razor parting flesh, warm bath waters filling the wound. I'm there, and it flows through me. My blood is its blood.

December 24th today. You know what, fuck it. This is my Christmas present. For once, screw protocol, screw those Paraworld Dep asshats, and screw being myself! For once in my life, I'm going to see something through.

Dec 25th

I can't feel the cold. I've been walking most of the night through a snow-filled forest with not so much as a coat on, yet I feel nothing. Not tired either, and now that I think about it, I haven't eaten in more than a day. I just forgot. Why didn't I think about that? Why do my thoughts… seem so orderly, growing into a, a narrative? For how long now? I can't seem to get the frame right. It wants me to, it's in its nature. Who's 'it'? Why doesn't SCP-921-2 say anything anymore?

No. Can't… can't think about that now. It's not time yet. Not there yet.

Huh. Nodded off there for a minute. Must be tired, shouldn't have walked all night like that. Still, I'd say it's been worth it. God, look at that view.

I reached the castle shortly after dawn, and it looks like it's the center of this… well, not sure if Sub-Area is even the right word to

use anymore, but it's what I got. Anyway, it looks like for once the sensations here are what I expected them to be. In every stone there's a memory of conquest. It's odd how similar they are to those art memories I found in the forest earlier, now that I think about it. There's no restraint to be found anywhere around here, that's for sure. Each memory is so intense, so raw, and there's a whole building-worth of them. I'm surprised the thing can even stay in one place with such foundations. Like the pulse of a colossus, soon to awaken.

You'd expect I'd be intimidated by all of this power, but… I'm really not. When I was working in 17 I was always on edge. Everything out there, every SCP, even the Safe-level stuff, they all felt so alien to me. We couldn't understand what made them tick, we didn't ever really know how to stop them from doing whatever they wanted to do, we were never in control. This isn't the same. The power here… it's human. To its core. The liquid creativity I found in every mailbox, the sheer, burning ambition housed in every stone, it's all us. In a way, it's really quite encouraging. Because now I know that whatever the universe can throw at us, we can throw back harder. It's not us that should be scared. Why did I ever think it was right for us to hide under our rocks, to pretend none of this is real? We can do better. We can do so much better.

There's something calling me. It was calling me ever since I first entered this Sub-Area, but I only just got close enough to really tell, I think. Something in the very rocks of this place. Tomorrow, I'll be going inside. Honestly, I can't wait.

Dec 26th…maybe? Am I counting the days now?

There is a new order in my mind. Thoughts become words, aligned in lines of occurrence, in pages of events, in volumes of a lifetime. Bits and pieces yet persevere in reckless chaos, but they are not long for this world. I shall not push them, for they will come in their own time, when they find what they seek. When they reach the end. Soon. Then… then, my tale could be told. At long last, my words will be heard.

I'm… what was I doing again? I don't know if it's just lack of sleep, or if I'm coming down with something, but it's getting really difficult to

keep focused. It's like most of my brain is busy doing other things, and I'm forced to deal with what's left. There are no records of SCP-921 ever doing something like this to anyone, but then again no one ever came this far into it. It doesn't really matter anyway. Any desire I had of going back faded when I entered this place. Back there, I was Mike Levine. Failed husband, failed father, failed researcher. In here… I don't have to be myself. In every vista I view, in every step I walk, in every breath I take, I become someone else. I dive into another memory, another… yeah, I suppose I can call them that. Another secret. Something about these memories elude my understanding. It's as if whoever they belong to went into a great deal of trouble to keep their true meaning hidden from anyone but themselves. But you know what?

It doesn't matter. There's someone's world in each of them, and they are all so beautiful I am never more than a step away from crying like a little boy. And no two views are the same. The edges of a keyhole, as my eye spies on a pair of bodies writhing within. The distorted lens of my spyglass, as hands are shaken and lives exchange hands. The identity of the atom that would shatter worlds, trapped within the safety of my mind, until it is unleashed for all to see. Whispers and secrets, all of mankind's, all pass before me between blinks. Heh. Almost sounds poetic, if you don't think about it too hard.

There's not much further to go on. Tomorrow. Tomorrow will be the last of it.

A Time to Tell

Sarah. I think I finally understand now. I think I can finally see why… heh. It's a bit too late now, isn't it. I can feel myself sinking into the floor of this final chamber, but I'm not afraid anymore. There's not really a me to be afraid. There's nothing that most people fear more than losing their sense of self, but me? I embrace it. I know that as soon as my head drops beneath this floor, there won't be much left of me, not as I was before at least. That's okay. The only thing I regret is that you'll never get to see what I saw, never get to live as I did these last couple of days. Oh, and being as bitter as I was. I regret that too. I think I… I think I want to go now.

I think it's time to be someone else.

I do understand. Why this place doesn't act like the rest of SCP-921. Why 921-2 never speaks here. Why I now think the way I do. Why I wouldn't go back.

There are no walls here, beneath the end. Which is a bit funny, considering what he is. This whole place was built on his bones, but he has none left to shield him where he is weakest. I feel sorry for him, really.

The Spine of the World, he calls himself. The Curator of Memories, He Who Remembers. It's a bit sad. I don't think even he buys all of those grand titles. He says he called me here because he felt a need in me, some desire to become something other than myself. That may be true. I suspect, however, the need was truly his. He just wanted to tell his first—his last tale. He wanted someone to listen, someone who could pass it on. Someone who would remember. It's all he ever wanted. This place made me into the book he needed me to be, the very way I think into a tool with which to document. To document what he cannot.

They were four, when the knot was struck. Four torn by one man's arrogance, by a blade that was quick where the mind was not. Four, scattered to the wind by the sundering. Four, left to replace what was once their souls with bits and pieces of others, like ethereal parasites, each with a different preference. For years, for decades. For centuries. Four, who finally became something much more and much less than human. Four. He always repeats the number.

One fed off ambition. In him was conquest, the desire to rule, and the ashes they leave in their wake, sometimes. He is Pulse.

One fed off creativity. In her was art, the very spark of making, and the mire of madness that drowns them, sometimes. She is Blood.

One fed off secrets. In him… well, no one knows. Such is the nature of secrets. He is Breath.

One refused to feed. In him was everything, and nothing. He did not posses the brutality of the others, the will to take. All he ever wanted

to do was to document. If he fed off anything at all, it was stories, sensations. Memories. He watched the others grow, and in his cave, he wept, for he knew they would ruin all that he sought to preserve in their hunger. And so, around him, he formed this place. A museum of memories. A time capsule, so that something may remain, so he could still tell his stories. And here, right near his heart, he built memorials for his brothers and sister. He is Spine.

He cannot speak here. There is a bit of irony in that. His heart belongs to the others still, and so he must be silent where their spirits linger. And so, he called me here. So that their stories could be told, so that they could have a voice. He knows that they ever prepare themselves to war with each other, each with their own aspect, though he little understands why. He never could.

But I can.

He wants me to tell you their tales, for he cannot. And this, I shall do. He has molded my mind into a form that would be suitable for such a task, and indeed, it is. But he was wrong about one thing. When the telling is done, when the Spine of the World finally breaks, I shall not stand aside as he has. There is a convergence coming, a gathering of the aspects. They mean to finally settle whatever score lies between them, and they will stop at nothing to do so. He expects me to stand aside, and document. To watch as the culmination of humanity's unthinking wrath bends the world around it. As the stories burn. But I cannot.

If there is to be a convergence, then I shall attend it. Not because he's forcing me to, or because I have to. Because I want to.

Before coming here, I was alone. I was hanging on to routine like a drowning man to a sinking piece of mast. It wouldn't have lasted, not for much longer. I was surrounded by people, but they didn't see me. Worst, I didn't see them. It's so easy to forget that you're not the only one out there, that behind those porcelain masks we call faces there's a spark, in each of us. There's…humanity. The Spine showed me what the others would do, if given the chance. They would take away this spark, and pervert it. They never meant to, but that is what they will do. In their blindness, their single-mindedness, they will take humanity and make it into what I was, before I was

called here- into masks with nothing behind them. Into a people with no stories to tell. The Spine seeks to prevent that by hoarding all the stories we already have, but he doesn't understand something very, very important. He doesn't understand the very thing that he made me understand, when he called me here.

Stories are nothing if there's no one left to listen to them.

Bridges Burnt

Tom and **Jill Herring** had been in the middle of dinner when they were interrupted by a knock at the front door. Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Tom went to answer. He was greeted by a tattered Daniel Navarro in bloodstained plainclothes.

“Jesus Christ, Dan,” said Tom, his mouth open in surprise. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Evening, Tom,” the agent calmly replied. “Mind if I come in?”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea…” Tom began, pausing when he noticed Navarro discreetly held a pistol in his right hand.

“I insist,” said Navarro. He then gestured for Tom to lead the way.

A few moments later Navarro was seated at their kitchen table. An uncomfortable silence filled the room as he gestured for the couple to continue with their meal. Instead, the two anartists looked Navarro over.

Gone was his sly smile. In its place a contemplative frown dominated his face. The ever present stubble that they were familiar with was now more of a beard. Several partially healed cuts and bruises could be seen across his face and arms.

“So, uh,” Tom began, trying to hide how flustered he was behind a smile, “what brings you to the neighborhood?”

Navarro promptly pulled several folders out of a backpack he had been carrying and placed them on the table. With a delicate touch, he opened the folder at the top of the pile and began to read.

“Anthony Romero, a specialist in making and animating small porcelain figurines, found in his apartment in San Francisco three weeks ago encased in porcelain. Jessica Teal, a glass blower who

had a talent for making bottles that could hold anomalously large amounts of liquid, found dead in her home two and a half weeks ago; her brain had been removed and replaced with one of her own glass bulbs. Charles Torres, liked to make films that changed in content every time they were viewed, strangled by several roles of Super 8 film in his workshop a week ago. Viviana and Tori Perez, two sculptors who specialized in a process of malleable steel, we got to them first this time, but there was a fight… they ended up impaled together by a steel rod."

Navarro slammed the folders down on the table with a large thud.

"Each of these anartists was murdered by the same person, for no other reason than the fact that they were one of my friends, informants, or in most cases, both."

"That's tragic, Daniel," Jill said apprehensively, "but that doesn't exactly explain why you're here…"

"Well, Jill," Navarro replied, "it just so happened that the man who killed them was Jericho."

"Wait, what…" Tom muttered. His expression turned to one of disgust.

"Why?" Jill asked. Her face became pale with shock.

"Does it matter?" Navarro replied, "The point is people are dying; people with families."

"You're lying…" Jill said. "You're a Suit. Why should we believe you? What on earth would drive someone as kind as Jericho to do all this…"

Navarro collected something from each of the folders and placed them in front of Jill. Each one was a note card.

> First. Cheers –JTH
>
> Second. Enjoy – JTH
>
> Third. Love – JTH

Fourth and Fifth. Your friend – JTH

“Because he’s insane,” Navarro answered. He then sighed and began to mumble. “And I may or may not have gotten his brother and fiancé killed on one of my early raids with the Suits…”

The room fell silent. Jill and Tom’s disgust for Jericho now focused on Navarro.

“So what on earth made you think coming here was a good idea?” Tom asked.

In response Navarro reached back into his pack and pulled out several bank statements. Each one belonged to Tom.

“Because I know Jericho’s been your patron for quite a while, Tom,” Navarro said. “And that it’s very likely that you have some means of arranging a meeting with him.”

“You want us to become turncoats?” Jill asked.

“That would be nice,” Navarro replied.

“And if we refuse?”

Navarro let out a frustrated sigh.

“Does it look like I came here dressed for no to be your answer? You’re helping me catch this son of a bitch, or I swear to god I will burn your fucking house down.”

Jill nervously laughed.

“You wouldn’t.”

Navarro gave a small snap of his fingers, causing a tiny blue flame to appear on the palm of his right hand.

“Try me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on there champ!” Tom said as he got out of his seat. “Let’s not do anything stupid. I’ll shoot Jericho an email

right now. I can guarantee you he'll respond by tomorrow morning."

"Excellent," Navarro smiled, extinguishing the flame by clenching his fist. He then got to his feet and swung his pack over his shoulder. "We can discuss the details over coffee tomorrow afternoon, say, at three. Jill knows the coffee shop."

Navarro began to make his way to the exit, stopping to turn on his way out.

"I promise that if all goes well, you'll never see me again. I mean it this time."

Without another word, the agent left, the door softly closing behind him. With a sigh, Jill buried her face in her hands.

"Bullshit."

Two days later, Daniel Navarro found himself hidden among several crates within Tom Herring's studio. A collection of half-finished metal and stone sculptures were spread throughout the space, giving the large room a feeling of being crowded. Navarro sighed as he adjusted his position. Any second now, Jericho was due to arrive.

Navarro felt himself tense up upon hearing the sound of the studio doors opening. A tall, sharply dressed man with short blond hair entered. A single black leather glove could be seen on his right hand. The agent recognized him on sight as Jericho T. Hill.

"Evening, Tom," Jericho said as he began to make his way towards the workbench at the center of the room. His voice carried a tone of exhaustion. Jericho began to look around the room for his absent host. "Tom?"

Show time, Navarro thought to himself. He quietly drew his pistol, and leveled his weapon before firing four shots.

Nearly the same second Navarro pulled the trigger, Jericho turned where he stood and held out his gloved hand. The bullets stopped inches in front of his palm and then fell harmlessly to the floor. Jericho then clenched his fist, causing the pistol to be yanked from

Navarro's hand. The weapon skittered across the floor, stopping at the base of a large metal sculpture.

Navarro lost no time. He immediately pulled a small knife out of his jacket pocket and made a small cut on his left hand. Charging forward from his hiding place, Navarro made a series of gestures, accompanied by unintelligible speech. The room filled with a flash of light, as a pillar of brilliant blue fire emerged from the floor, Jericho barley managing to roll out of the way of the blaze.

Continuing his chant, Navarro made two more cuts into his arm, sending up two more pillars of flames, one after the other. As before, Jericho managed to roll away from the danger, and made a claw with his gloved hand. A great force yanked Navarro's pocket knife out of his hand and sent it flying into the ceiling.

"You fucking snake!" Jericho shouted, and held up his gloved hand. Ten steel rebar poles moved from a storage rack behind him and hovered in the air, the tips sharpening to fine points.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Navarro mumbled to himself as he began to dash for cover. He looked back long enough to see Jericho point with the index finger of his gloved hand. The rebar poles began to sail through the air. Navarro ducked under the first, watching it sail and stick into the far wall. The second and third collided with the ground immediately behind him. Navarro jumped over the fourth, and then slid behind the base of a large marble statue of a woman. The statue violently shook as the remaining poles slammed into it. Navarro let out a heavy sigh of relief.

The sound of someone running caused Navarro's attention to switch from his own well-being back to Jericho, who was making a break for the exit. Jumping to his feet Navarro blindly charged towards the door, gaining speed as he prepared to intercept his target. Being the quicker of the two men, Navarro tackled Jericho to the ground. The anartist landed face first on the pavement and slid a foot before coming to a stop.

"Just… die… already!" Navarro shouted as he pulled Jericho's head back by his short hair and slammed his face into the ground repeatedly, continuing this for several hits before Jericho elbowed

Navarro in the gut. Jericho took advantage of Navarro's pause, and knocked the agent off him.

Jericho got to his feet, and proceeded to deliver three kicks Navarro's side before finishing with a sharp punt to the agent's face. He then steadied and then raised his gloved hand. A rebar pole flew into his grip and flattened into a thin blade. Jericho raised the blade for the kill.

"You look ridiculous, Jericho," Navarro mumbled as he looked at his foe. He then spit up a tooth. "The blood stains really clash with the scorch marks."

Jericho shook his head as he chuckled and began the downward swing of the strike. At the same time, Navarro made a swift kick at Jericho's legs, sweeping them out from beneath him. Jericho released the blade as he fell backwards, Navarro catching it as he got to his feet. Without another moment lost, he delivered a single cut. Jericho let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain upon hitting the ground. His gaze focused on the stump at the end of his wrist where his right hand used to be.

"What a fine predicament we find ourselves in, old friend!" Navarro shouted over Jericho's screams. He stabbed the blade into Jericho's right leg, and then the left. Navarro tossed the blade aside and quietly retrieved his gun.

"You know," he continued as he inspected the weapon and began to slowly walk back, "originally I had just planned on killing you, since it would be very hard to incapacitate you with that glove on your hand." Navarro kicked the severed hand away, and watched as it rolled across the floor. He then pinned Jericho with one foot, and pointed the firearm at Jericho's head. "However, I just thought of a better plan."

With his free hand he pulled out a phone and made a call.

"Hey, **Merlo**," said Navarro, "You have that address I texted you earlier, yeah? Get a few of your guys down here; I have someone Holman would want to meet. Hurry up; he's kind of starting to bleed out."

Navarro hung up the phone and slipped it back into his jacket pocket.

“What the fuck are you doing,” Jericho managed to say between cries of pain.

“Giving you to the Foundation,” Navarro cruelly smiled. “Who knows, if you’re lucky they might offer you the same deal they offered me.”

Navarro’s smile twisted into a sneer.

“We’ll see how fucking noble you are then.”

Agent Navarro yet again sat in the office of Site Director Edgar Holman. His superior rubbed his temple with his right hand as he looked over the hastily created report Navarro had made for Jericho’s apprehension.

“So, let me get this straight,” Holman said with a frustrated sigh, “You knew someone who could have helped you set up an ambush for Hill this entire time, and you only now used this knowledge to your advantage?”

“I didn’t know of the Herring’s connection to him until after **`the Templar incident`**,” Navarro shrugged. “Even then, I only wanted to use it as a last resort.”

“Five dead Foundation contacts certainly fits that bill,” Holman snapped.

He then spun around in his chair and starred at the far wall of his office. The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“I still remember when they first brought you here in 2004…”

“Fond memories?”

“Hardly,” Holman replied. “Sometimes I wonder if maybe it would have been better to just amnesticize you after that raid on your apartment.”

Navarro gave a small, regretful smile.

“You and me both.”

Without another word, Navarro was dismissed. Agent Merlo was waiting for him outside.

“You know, for a smart man you sure are a dumbass,” she said. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I can’t say that I really was, to be honest. Besides, it wouldn’t have worked any other way,” Navarro replied. “Jericho won weeks ago.”

“What do you mean?” Merlo frowned.

“They’ve decided to remove me from active field duty. I’m to be stationed at Site-19 and help with any new anart that gets dragged through. Unauthorized was the only way this got done.”

“So this was all revenge then?”

“I’m not going to pretend that it was anything grander.”

“Fuck, Dan,” Merlo sighed. “That makes you no better than Jericho.”

Navarro gave a small amused chuckle.

“I suppose it doesn’t.”

The two remained silent as they approached the elevators.

“I can talk to Holman,” Merlo eventually broke the silence. “We might be able to get you transferred to **Site-64**…”

Navarro held up his hand to interrupt.

“It's fine,” he said. “I think I could use the time alone. I’m not due at Site-19 for a few weeks. I think maybe it would be best if I disappeared for a while. Pop back up when I’m a little less toxic.”

Merlo gave a small apprehensive nod.

“So this is it then?”

“Looks like it.”

“What are you going to do now?”

Navarro paused before giving a halfhearted shrug. He slowly entered the elevator and turned to face his friend.

“I don’t know. **Maybe Disneyland?**” he replied, and allowed the doors to close.

Bring It Back

"You all got the unfinished or failed works I asked you to bring?" Legler said, looking around the studio. "Don't tell me otherwise because I'm positive that each of us here has our own share of failures stashed somewhere."

A small wave of noise burst out as students all moved to fetch their respective "failures". Taman, looking down at her small pile of pastel art, picked through them one by one. These were indeed some easy picks considering her multiple failed attempts at the art magic. She had been more successful recently, but the mistakes were still abundant. There was this one depicting the some trees on campus where the color was just so slightly off and she didn't realize it until the last minute; there was a crude drawing of the warehouses she went to, and she messed up the perspective entirely with attempts to just "go with the flow"; and finally, a few pieces that were no more than some loose patches of colors and weak lines.

Taman looked around, and saw that her classmates all produced something equally unfinished or unimpressive. Some may even be called horrible, as she saw Delacroix pulled out a piece of cloth that seemed to have once been caught in a broken sewing machine. She saw Cobalt staring down at her own pile of terribleness with a bitter expression, and one glance at Laufer made her wonder how a wooden statue come to resemble more of a piece of charcoal.

Seeing that everyone had more or less gotten something, Legler continued. "Great. Here's what we're doing today. I know with the Flow, it sometimes gives you the feeling that you can do anything. It's this drive that makes you keep going and going and it feels right and amazing."

He started to pace around the studio, taking a brief look at each student's work. "But a lot of the times that won't work because as human beings, you need to eat and sleep, and sometimes large projects can stretch on for days and even months. Years, maybe.

You can't just rely on the strong urge to make it through."

"And I'm telling you now, DO NOT do that," Legler suddenly raised his voice, causing a few students to turn their attention. "I've seen people exhausted to death because they were on a creative high and didn't know when and how to stop. As amazing as Flow is, it doesn't help shit with that."

Taman shifted a bit nervously in her seat as she remembered staying up for a few nights, in fact a lot of nights, trying to get the hang of anart.

"So today, I'm going to teach you how to pause. How to continue working on something afterwards, or how to bring the Flow back. This also applies to failed works, because you can pick up from where you left off, and you can also rework something entirely," Legler paced back to the front of the room again, and leaned on the lecture desk. "Mainly just how to bring it back, because if you have no self-control, that's really not my problem."

He paused briefly, and then added: "That said, if you do have trouble stopping, go to Yang after class."

Legler turned to address his assistant lecturer, who was leaning against the wall and typing furiously on her phone.

Legler frowned. But then a smirk appeared on his face: "Now, Yang, would you care to do some demonstrations?"

Yang was obviously startled by the request. "Wait. You didn't say anything about that."

"I just figure that you won't need any preparations at all, with all these half-baked works of yours around." Legler snapped his fingers and a painting fell off the wall, which landed on the floor with a loud thud. Taman noted that it was a large painting of a lake.

"*Fine,*" Yang said, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. She picked up the painting and positioned it onto an easel in the front of the room. Sitting down on a stool, she proceeded to stare at it.

"Great," Legler, with the smirk still on his face, turned to address the

class once more. "The first step is observation, taking what you have here in. The second step is usually recalling—"

His speech was interrupted by a few loud gashing sounds. The professor turned to find that Yang had already slashed the piece up with a pocket knife. Where the slashes met the painted lake, thick black fumes rose up, before disappearing completely into the air a few centimeters apart from the canvas. The water in the picture began to boil, and in a matter of seconds, it left behind only the dried up lakebed and large cracks matching where the slashes were.

"—what you felt and thought then." Legler's gaze had shifted to stare at his co-leturer.

"…sorry," Yang said, smiling at the professor unapologetically. "This one just had to go this way."

Taman had began to chuckle, along with a few others in the room.

"Deconstruction and reworking," Legler squeezed the words out, obviously not pleased. "That does work, but it is the *second* way I was going to talk about, Yang."

"I can try again?"

Legler sighed in defeat, and another painting slowly moved downwards with a part of the wall until it was reachable. It was obviously a painting, as Yang had gotten it off the wall, put the previous one aside, and started to work on it; and it seemed that she meant it this time. Taman only blinked in surprise as for the longest time, she thought it was just a large mirror.

Legler nodded and began to lecture once more, explaining how to slip back into the mindset when the work was first created. But the words slipped Taman's ear as she watched Yang's process in awe.

The deputy professor only considered briefly before starting to apply paint to the work. The moment her brush touched the mirror, the smooth surface was gone, replaced with colors upon colors on the canvas, divided into tiny units. She couldn't quite explain what she saw, only that there were multiple colors occupying the same space.

Taman felt dizzy just looking at it, but she couldn't help but look more closely.

"Sometimes just getting the Flow running would be enough, but if you can connect with it, it's always better. So, consider, what were you thinking back then?" Legler's voice echoed. "Or more accurately, what were you feeling? Because often, we don't think when we create; hell, a lot of us would have no idea what we were creating before we finish. Thoughts and intentions are important and helpful, but a lot of the times you have to rely on an urge. To recall and access that again, you need to seek out the emotions."

And Taman felt it, just by looking at Yang's quick waving of the brush and the splashing colors. It was not Taman's work, and she was just looking at someone else painting, but the emotions were there. She almost felt like they were surging out from Yang's canvas, radiating towards its viewers.

What the feeling was, what Yang felt and hoped to convey, she couldn't quite grasp or put into words. But she hung onto it, struggling to understand. Trying to memorize how she felt it, how she came to resonate with it.

"Don't make a fuss if it feels slightly off. You can never pick up exactly where you left off. Sometimes it will be better, sometimes it's worse, but more often than not, it's just different. What's the saying again? You can't step into the same river twice. Quite the case here: Flow is ever changing, and so are you."

It was almost disorienting, how the colors layered onto one another but also penetrating through the layers. She couldn't pull her eyes away as both the colors from moments ago and the colors newly added shone, past and present merging into one. The air intensified, and for a moment, she felt like it was the Flow, the convergence of emotions and colors. Briefly, the wall of colors from the warehouse came back to her. The vision rushed over and suddenly Taman had the distinct feeling that something was open to her, that she could reach out, and the Flow was a touch away.

But it was not her Flow.

Taman snapped out of it as the air shifted suddenly. The intense emotions changed into something else following a clear cracking sound. All the colors disappeared from the canvas Yang was working on, leaving a translucent surface, and then, the canvas itself collapsed.

Cracks enlarged on the glass-like painting, dividing it into pieces. But instead of falling, they spread out and suspended themselves in the air. A thousand smaller mirrors disjointed, yet as if linked and supported by invisible lines, they formed a crude eye shape. The painting — the glass sculpture looked back at Taman.

Taman blinked in surprise as she saw herself walking into the studio from one of the pieces. It was like staring into a camera playback; she could even make out the moss on the old bench, and the gentle brush of wind through the grass. But when she opened her eyes again, the eye was replaced with a glass butterfly, and the image of herself picking through her work earlier in the class greeted her.

"How…?" Someone gasped in surprise.

Legler looked at the finished work, and nodded approvingly. "Changing depending on the viewer?" He asked.

Yang answered with a slightly smug smile.

But the rest of the class ignored this exchange, only staring intently at the artwork.

Taman soon found that in each piece, there was a moving reflection of her from a previous point today. She watched in fascination as her past selves engaged in their various activities behind the shiny surfaces, with clearer detailed than she could recall. It was as if the mirrors were in front of her throughout the past moments, reflecting whatever happened faithfully. Upon closer examination, Taman also noted that the pieces rearranged positions ever so slightly, even making dramatic changes when she shifted attention away.

"But it was a painting a moment ago…" Someone whispered under their breath, but still caught the attention of the anart professor.

"Oh don't be fooled, it's still a painting, not a sculpture," Legler grabbed onto the remade artwork, and for a moment, the pieces reunited. The illusion was broken and the clear, reflecting glass pieces were forced back into a frame. The past scenes still played out but it was the shape of a painting again.

And then, Legler let go. Instantaneously, the glass shattered, before quickly floating up to form shapes once more.

"When it comes to anart, it is very easy to transcend media," He added. "But back to the topic; when it's not deconstructing, you still generally follow your old theme. What Yang had was a painting functioning as a mirror, and now it is several reflections of the viewer's past."

"And that's what I'm expecting of you. Not only continuing your work, but also making it better." With several loud claps, the studio suddenly expanded upon Legler's command, tiles moving to reveal hidden space, walls growing taller and wider, until the small room became a great hall in mere minutes.

"Splendid! Now get to work." Legler concluded as several small gasps rang throughout the room, along with several eye rolls from those who had seen it before.

Taman barely knew what happened. One moment she was staring at her pastel impression of the warehouse, and the next thing she noticed was that somehow, liquid paint was dripping from her desk and she got up instinctively. A second later, as she calmed down and took the view of colorful paint streaming out of her art in, she felt the pastel stick in her hand, and realized that she had been working on the piece for the past hour or so.

As she stared at the now three-dimensional yet still pastel-looking warehouses standing from the piece of paper, the realization solidified and she was hit with the feeling again. She remembered the exact moment it clicked, and recalled herself drawing, without thinking or considering. The memory was hazy, but at the same time, everything was also so clear, as she understood where exactly to set the next line or the next patch of color. It all went so smoothly.

And that was it, that was the Flow and she did it. It wasn't like the first time when she didn't even realized what she did until afterwards. This time, it was comfortable, a missing piece she finally found. There was a connection and now, she felt like if she tried, she could be there again.

"For a newbie, well done."

She turned to find Legler standing next to the table, studying the interior of the miniature warehouses. Taman felt slightly embarrassed as many of her classmates – including several from the small group – had also turned their attention to her. It didn't help that the paint surging from the warehouses had now made a small puddle on the floor.

Fortunately for her, Legler decided to shoo the students back into working on their respective art, and Yang later dropped by to help her contain the flowing liquid largely within the piece itself, as well as clean up the floor afterwards. She also earned a few compliments from her as a bonus, and she couldn't help but squeaked a bit internally. But unfortunately, all the other works she had brought were utterly ruined, as she had unwisely stashed them nearby, and they were avoidably consumed by the paint river she created.

With nothing better to do, Taman focused her effort on examining the changes Yang made, and how they managed to cease the stream of colors. She didn't really get much result aside from some very vague feelings, but she now had the confidence to work it out eventually.

At the end of the class, she saw that two students did go to Yang, but none of them she was familiar with. Other than that, Legler had decided to call Cobalt aside for some reason; Taman could see Cobalt went visibly pale for a moment, before putting on a worried expression. As she stepped out of the studio door and landed herself back in the campus again, she wondered briefly what was the problem.

Chapter 1: Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It...

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

"I tell you, amigo, this is what life's for."

Brink was lounging poolside at the hotel, draped over a lawn chair while a pair of bronzed Peruvian women rubbed suntan lotion on his imposing chest. A third reclined gracefully against his shoulder and ran a hand across his close-cropped brown hair. "If heaven doesn't have this setup right here, I'm not going."

"Tal vez no irás allá en absoluto,"[1] Trail muttered around a mouthful of mango nectar, his inflatable seat bobbing lazily in the water.

Brink looked at the glass on the table beside him and stood up. "Yeah, you're right, buddy," he replied, "that is looking a little on the empty side. Oh, ah… It's Hormiguita, isn't it? Hormiguita!"

A fourth woman sauntered sultrily from across the patio carrying a whiskey sour in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. She moved like a runway model, and wore noticeably less.

"Is Mercedes," Mercedes corrected him, scowling. She raised the cigarette to her lips and blew smoke at his face.

"Mer—what? Why would I need a—no, no, Hormiguita, two." He held up two fingers to illustrate his point. "Two drinks. *Dos…* drinks,"

he said patiently as she strolled back, rolling her eyes. “Swear to God, love lookin’ at ‘em, but the minute you try to get one to do a simple task…“

“…hablas con ella como tú no crees que tiene cerebro.“[2]

“Trail, buddy, you know I can’t understand you when you say things fast like that.”

“Oh. It was nothing. Just talking to myself.”

There was a sudden rattle at the gate, and a pair of men in black suits and reflective sunglasses approached Brink and Trail. The one in the lead was short and slight, whereas the one behind was roughly twice his partner’s size in both directions. He looked capable of pulling apart a car with his hands alone.

“Burke Dangerous?” spoke the short man, curtly.

“Brink Dangerguts. My name is Brink Dangerguts,” repeated Brink Dangerguts. He proffered his hand to the miniature stranger, who ignored it.

“Brink.” He seemed to turn the name over in his head. “Right. My name is Agent Caraway, and this quiet individual—“ he gestured to his enormous companion, who bowed—“is Agent Toreo. We’d like to ask you for a moment of your time.”

“Sorry, I can’t spare a second right now,” Brink said. “As you can probably see, I’ve got several young women to attend to, and I’ve really spent enough time out of my chair as it is.”

“Is that so.” Caraway motioned to the giant, who clapped twice. The women turned their heads sharply, like a flock of cockatiels.

“Por favor,” Toreo said, “regresen a sus cuartos inmediatamente. Es de gran importancia.”[3]

At once, the three women arose, grabbed their towels, and began meandering toward the building. Brink stared at their retreating backs in surprise. His luxurious chestnut mustache and left eyelid twitched visibly.

“What the hell did you just do?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“It looks like your schedule just got a lot lighter, Mr. Dangerguts,” said Caraway snidely. “Now, you think we could talk with you for a moment?”

“After that? I ought to send the two of you flying! What’s worth sending away all the women? What kind of introduction was that?”

Caraway sniffed. “The kind that precedes an extremely lucrative job offer.” He started up the steps into the hotel. “Come inside.”

The contents of Toreo’s briefcase covered the rich velour sheets of the bed in Brink’s hotel room in much the same way as he had hoped a collection of señoritas was going to. Photographs, interview transcripts, clipped headlines, and scientific-looking articles formed almost a full layer of paper across the California king-sized mattress, with some loose pages falling onto the burgundy carpet.

“This right here is what you’ll be recovering for us,” Caraway said, his finger on a photo of a shard of Greek pottery. “It’s an ancient clay fragment with some rather unusual properties.”

“Is it cursed?”

“Well, no. Not really.”

“Will it melt your face if you look at it?”

“Oh, definitely not.”

Brink was puzzled. “Haunted, then? Possessed somehow?”

“Nothing like that.“

“Well, what’s its deal? Why is it so important?”

“It was stolen from our employers, and they desperately want it back. That is the extent of what you need to know in this regard. That, and not to touch it with your bare hands, but that should really go without saying.”

“Hold on, hold on, just a minute. Tell me it at least has some sort of catchy, recognizable name.”

“We call it SCP-960.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Brink stood and stretched his massive arms. “Mysterious—*probably* mysterious—ancient artifact, and the best you goons can come up with is a bunch of gibberish. All right, I’ll name it.”

Caraway sighed. “This really isn’t necessary.”

“The Shard of Thermopylae!”

“It’s not from Thermopylae,” groaned the squat agent. “Sit back down. I wasn’t finished.” Toreo nodded stiffly in Brink’s direction.

“Now, Mr.…" Caraway pretended to fumble for the name. “Dangerguts, wasn't it? You were responsible for locating the Adze of Maupai, correct?”

“That was me, yep. Me and my buddy Trail.” He made a move toward the window. “Why’d we have to leave him outside, anyway? We do all our adventuring as
a team.”

“We’ll get there. You also went toe-to-toe with the wild cockatrice on the Isle of Man, right?”

“Fought ‘em. Killed ‘em. Tried eating one of ‘em.”

“Oh? How was that?”

Brink shrugged. “Not great.”

“Hm. And Mad Captain Norman’s lost treasure, you found that, too?”

“With a cut air hose. …Hang on, we didn’t even go public with that yet. We just wrapped that one up a week and a half ago, how did you know about it?”

“My line of work extensively involves knowing things, Mr.

Dangerguts." Caraway began to pace around the suite. "As such, I have personally conducted a thorough background check on you before considering you for this job. Obviously, the fact that we're speaking this instant proves that you've passed. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for your partner, hence his current absence."

Brink frowned. "Aw, hey, now, look, if you're talking about what he did in Sumatra, I can tell you that was perfectly excusable in context."

"It's not just about Sumatra." He picked up a wax apple and tossed it back and forth. "It's a protracted pattern of misbehavior and unreliability in tense situations. Wouldn't you say he has a tendency to fly off the handle?"

"Well, yes, but only when the handle needs to get flown off of! Look, sometimes you just gotta do something drastic to get a situation under control, and he understands that. He knows exactly what he's doing."

Caraway sniffed again. "Be that as it may, our employers have decided that he is too much of a risk for a mission as delicate as this. Leave him here. Say you're going on vacation."

"But this *is* our vacation."

"Then say you've got family business to attend to. Dying grandparent or something, I don't care. Just don't bring him with you. Understand?"

Brink cast his deep blue eyes downward. "I understand."

"Very good. So long as you don't breathe a word to him of this arrangement, you will be extremely well compensated for your efforts concerning the artifact. Now, as I was saying, the last we heard, it was being flown into Egypt in the custody of a man named Heinrich Krause…"

"Madre de Dios, Brink, there you are. It's been at least an hour and a half. What did those guys want?"

“Never mind what they want.” His face broke out into a perilous grin. “Come on, buddy, we’re going to Cairo.”

• • • next chapter

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Footnotes
1. "Maybe you won't go at all."
2. "…you talk with her like you don't think she's got a brain."
3. "Please return to your rooms immediately. It is of great importance."

Chapter 2: How to Hold a Debate while Skydiving

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

Trail wiped frantically at the windscreen of the plane with his sleeve, trying his hardest to clear the persistent fog upon it. It had been over a day since they left Peru, and it was here in the last leg of the flight that things finally had begun to fall apart. The obscured view out of the cockpit was becoming less of a nuisance and more of a threat, and some heavy turbulence earlier on had caused Trail to empty his stomach on the floor of the tiny aircraft.

“You said you wanted to be the copilot, so do your job!” Brink had shouted over the sound of the propeller. “I’m gonna need to land this at some point, and we’ll be better off if I can see the ground when I do!”

“I’m trying, man, but I can’t reach all the way over there without undoing the safety restraints.”

Trail heard a short clicking sound, and suddenly the pressure on his chest vanished. A metal buckle dangled limply by the side of his seat.

“Safety restraints?” Brink brought his hand back to his side of the plane. “When has safety *ever* been something we worried about?”

An hour passed, and the plane lurched and pitched as it sputtered through an embankment of clouds. Night was falling, and the sky

around them was turning almost opaque. Trail felt his stomach start to turn again and braced himself for what he thought was the worst; unfortunately, he was not thinking on a large enough scale.

“Well, probably can’t push our luck any further.”

Brink’s words snapped him out of his reverie. “What?”

He had no sooner asked the question than he noticed the low-fuel indicator light blinking what he assumed was the beat to their funeral march.

“Has that been on long?”

“Oh, yeah, a while. Past hour or so, I figured it was just some electronics problem, but I’m starting to think we might’ve sprung a leak somewhere… necessary.”

Trail Mex blanched. “How far out are we from Cairo?”

“Oh, we’re pretty much in Cairo. The distance ain’t the problem. Clear a window and look down.”

He hesitated. “I’d rather not.”

A tremendous hand gripped him by the top of the head and turned it around to look out the side window of the plane. “*What-has-gotten-into-you-today?*” Brink said, syllable by gravelly syllable through perfect, gritted teeth.

What lay beneath them was a sprawling city full of buildings and people ambling among them, rich with a culture older than history, built on land settled millennia ago—a place possibly more vibrant and intriguing than anywhere else in the world. What did not lie beneath them was a runway.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got the yips about using a parachute, too?”

“I don’t have yips about nothing.”

“All right, whatever. Long as you don’t mind jumping out of this plane in a few minutes.”

The engine coughed and went still. Brink quietly handed over a backpack; Trail began sweating.

“Or right now.”

Trail muttered feverish Spanish. “El Dios de dioses, Jehová, ha hablado, y convocado la tierra desde el nacimiento—“[1]

“Cut that out and get that door open,” Brink barked as the nose of the aircraft began to dip.

Trail reluctantly threw himself out of the plane, mumbling what he could remember of Psalm 50. Brink followed a second after, leaving the plane to fall to earth at its own preferred pace. With a steadily growing sense of unease, Trail started thinking about what would happen when it landed. Crashed. “Crashed” was the more suitable word.

“HEY!” he shouted upward. “BRINK!”

No answer came immediately, but Brink straightened his mountainous body into more or less a vertical line and accelerated toward his friend. “YOU SAY SOMETHING?”

“I WAS WONDERING, YOU KNOW, ABOUT THE PLANE.”

“WHAT ABOUT THE—AW, DAMN IT TO HELL. GOD DAMN EVERYTHING.”

“WHAT?”

“I LEFT ALL THE STUFF IN THERE.”

“STUFF?”

“YEAH. ALL THE FOLDERS AND THE WHATEVER.”

“YOU MEAN THE CLASSIFIED STUFF THE GOVERNMENT GUYS GAVE YOU?”

“I GUESS.”

“THAT’S… BAD.”

“I WAS JUST THINKING THAT. GOOD NEWS IS THAT WHEN IT CRASHES IT’LL PROBABLY ALL BURN UP, SO NOBODY ELSE GETS TO READ IT.”

Trail’s mouth opened in shock, and the air rushing into it made him cough uncontrollably. “THAT’S THE *GOOD* NEWS?”

“RELATIVELY.”

“AND WHAT’S THE BAD NEWS?”

“MOSTLY IT’S THAT I HATE SKYDIVING.”

“REALLY?”

“YEAH, NOT MY FAVORITE.”

“*REALLY.*”

“I KNOW, I KNOW, GUY AS FEARLESS AS ME HATES SKYDIVING, IT’S WEIRD. I GET IT. I THINK IT GOES BACK TO WHEN I WAS LITTLE, AND…”

“YOU DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE THAT THE THING WE JUST JUMPED OUT OF IS GOING TO HIT?”

Brink made as pensive a face as he could manage in free fall. “MAYBE A LITTLE.” A thought struck him. “WAIT, ARE YOU UPSET ABOUT THIS, TOO?”

“OF COURSE!”

They deployed their parachutes, drifting slowly toward the rooftops of the city beneath them. The winds whipping Trail’s face calmed slightly; Trail himself did not. He curled his hands into tight fists around the straps of his backpack, staring intently up at the man who’d flown him straight into the moral gutter.

“Brink,” he called up, doing his utmost to keep from sounding as furious as he felt, “you and I have done a lot of ridiculous things

together over the past couple years."

"Absolutely have," he replied. "Why d'you mention it?"

"And a lot of those things have been really stupid and dangerous to everybody around us."

"I mean, if by that you mean fun."

"For example," he snapped, ignoring the remark, "just now we abandoned a plane over a crowded city, where it'll crash and kill several innocent people, because YOU ignored the fuel gauge for an hour."

Brink crossed his arms. "Is this you now? This your new thing? You're gonna, what, summarize everything I do right after I do it? What's the point of that?"

"That's not what I—puta madre. We're not speaking until you learn to give a damn about this."

The adventurer scowled. "About what?"

Trail looked down at the rooftops growing closer to his feet. "Nope."

"Come on, seriously? Don't do this. Just tell me what I'm allegedly doing wrong."

"No. Not talking."

Brink sighed loudly enough for Trail to hear. "Don't be like that, compadro. You've at least got to tell me what you think my flaw is before you can expect me to do anything about it."

"*Compadre.* Also, *flaws.*"

"Look, I—"

"Also, I told you already."

"Don't—"

"Also, not talking."

“Fine, okay! We’re not talking. This’ll be fun.”

Trail didn’t respond.

“Sure is a good thing we’re not talking, isn’t it?” Brink intoned nasally. “You didn’t need my help climbing down that building you landed on, no sir. You got that all on your own. Good job not almost breaking your leg on the way, that was a nice touch.”

“Shut up.” It was faint, tired, almost a plea.

Brink pressed his palms to the sides of his head. “He speaks! Thought you’d gone mute. Thank God we still have your cheery voice to get us through the trip.”

Mentally beleaguered and physically exhausted, Trail stopped walking and looked blankly at a fire that had started a few miles in the distance. He grimaced and wrung his hands. His partner broke the silence for the hundredth time.

“Huh,” he said dully. “Didn’t think it’d get that big.”

Trail sat suddenly on the pavement and buried his face in his arms.

“What did you find?”

“Most of the documents inside had been incinerated by the time I arrived, unfortunately. I believe the crash may have been intended for this exact purpose.”

“You found nothing, then.” A finger moved toward a beige stone button.

“No! No. Not nothing. Please. I… I managed to recover this from the wreckage without being spotted.”

Into his hands was placed a charred scrap of paper, with an austere black heading that read “Secure. Contain. Protect.” He mused upon it.

“So,” said Heinrich Krause. “They know.”

previous chapter • • •

• • • next chapter

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Footnotes
1. "The Mighty One, God, the Lord, has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun—" (excerpt from Psalm 50, New International Version)

Chapter 3: Lights, Cairo, Action!!

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

Even for a pair of seasoned travelers, Cairo can be a formidable locale. The people rush haphazardly through the streets like diligent, purpose-driven cattle, and vehicles do their best to keep some semblance of course through the swamp of human movement that overwhelms the thoroughfares. Traffic signals are suggestions, and sidewalks are driven on as frequently as the roads themselves. Despite this, the city is nothing if not a feast for the senses. The architecture towers and curves gracefully against itself in pillars and pointed arches, with intricate patterns running their lengths; bazaars span the widths of entire streets, consuming one's vision with vivid colors and smells; the chatter in the avenues, in a dozen different languages, comes from all directions at all times.

A full twenty-four hours had passed since their unceremonious arrival, and neither man's attitude had changed much from the previous night. They walked as nonchalantly as they could past a fountain lit from underneath, with a massive mosaic of the ancient Egyptian pantheon as a backdrop. Trail stared miserably into it for a moment before being pulled along the road toward an unassuming brown building on the corner.

The restaurant—if that's even the proper word for it, as opposed to maybe *dive*—was crowded, quiet, lit a dim orange against the navy of the night sky. Patrons huddled over their tables as though hiding something precious from an unseen thief, lending the place a

foreboding, oppressive ambiance. Roughly half of the people looked to be carrying small weapons, which meant that the other half were doing a better job of concealing theirs. It was one of those places that shouldn't be barged into.

"Oh, we are *absolutely* gonna find something in here," Brink's voice boomed as he barged into the place. Table by table, people started to stare at the source of the commotion. "Spot like this, there's got to be somebody who knows something about something. BARKEEP!"

Trail followed meekly. He did his best to distance himself from the gigantic explorer, but getting out of his direct reach proved difficult in the little floor space the room offered. The bartender, a lean and serious man with a pinched, bespectacled face, set down the pitcher he was drying and emphatically exhaled through his long nose.

"Are you looking for a restroom?" he asked, looking at his hands instead of the foreigners. His voice was drawn out, serpentine. "The restrooms are for paying customers only."

"We ain't here for the restroom," Brink belted. He turned to the unimpressed crowd he had disturbed. "My name's Brink Dangerguts, and this here—" he held up a grimacing Trail— "is the most dangerous man you're likely to meet in your short little lives. We're looking for a bastard Hun named Krause and a weird trinket he's got on him. Anybody with information about either…"

He trailed off as the bartender tapped his arm and gave him a furtive shake of the head. Several of the people who had yet to turn around at the duo's entrance were slowly beginning to look in their direction. Their faces portended malice.

"What, I can't call Krause a Hun? Really, now." The crowd's expressions grew angrier. "Let me guess, you're all Germans or something? Right, okay, I believe that one. I sure am a big dumb idiot who—what?" he cut off abruptly, as the patrons began to stand and pile toward him.

"Through here," came the same slithering voice.

Without warning, the barman pulled the two behind the counter and

through a darkened doorway, closing them off from what was quickly becoming a mob. “You are unwise to speak ill of Herr Krause, sirs, and especially by way of introduction. He has done remarkable things for our community in recent years. He is a popular figure around Cairo.”

Brink faced the door warily. “That true?”

“Assuredly. He has contributed some astounding works of art. Truly irreplaceable. I have to assume you noticed the fountain and mosaic around the corner.”

Trail opened his mouth and lifted a finger. “I—“

“Sure didn’t. We’ll keep an eye out for it.” His eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. “Hold on. Why’d you help us get away from the crowd? You got some kind of interior motives going on?” He looked as though something was gradually dawning on him. “You’re puttin’ us in your debt, is that it? You damnable slimy conniver. I’d wager you’re the kind of guy who would push his own mother in front of a truck to win a bet. I mean it. Fifty bucks in front of you, I bet you’d do it. Watch.”

The barman smiled humorlessly and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “No, sir, I’m afraid I take little interest in money.” Brink took his hand back out of his pocket. “The trinket—the one that you mentioned in your elegant opening remarks—now *that* is something I wish to know more about.”

“What, that? Why?” Trail considered objecting to the constant use of “we,” but changed his mind.

The stranger’s glasses flashed. “To start, it is clear to me, and to everyone here, that you two are on some sort of… mission? Is that the word? You also mentioned only two things that you are looking for: Herr Krause, and the ‘trinket.’ From this, I can deduce that the object in question is just as important to you as the man, if not indeed more important. And an object with a value equal to that of a man’s life sounds extremely interesting.” He grinned, displaying a mouthful of impeccable teeth. “As it goes, I happen to have a fascination with interesting objects.”

“Hm.” Brink leaned casually against the wall. “Funny. So do we. Ever hear of the Adze of Maupai?”

“Please do not patronize me. I did just say I have a fascination with interesting objects, correct?”

“I dunno, probably. Did you know it’s been recovered?”

“Of course. Is there a man who does not?”

“Any idea who might have done it?” he wheedled smugly, a thumb pointed squarely at his own chest. The bartender raised a single eyebrow.

“*You?*”

“The very same.”

“Forgive me if this appears insolent, sir,” he exhaled, “but you’ll need more than an unfounded claim, however grand it might be, to impress me.”

“Fine by me. Hey!” Trail flinched. “Tell him what that thing said on the handle. Trail’s more of the language guy,” he confided, turning to the other man.

Almost shyly, Trail muttered a few words in Sumerian, and the bartender’s expression changed. “You know the inscription? Nobody has released the inscription to the public.”

“Well, Trail knows it, at any rate. I don’t really pay attention to those kinds of things. I just take stuff from places.”

“Do you, now? Intriguing. What is your latest target?”

“We really can’t tell you about that,” Trail began earnestly. Again, he was not heard.

“The Shard of Thermopylae,” Brink said proudly. “An ancient piece of pottery said to imbue its possessor with mysterious powers. Maybe even immortality.”

The bartender barely seemed surprised. “Truly? It must be beyond valuable. Is it hidden somewhere in Cairo?”

“Far as we know. We’ve heard your pal Krause has his hands on it.”

The bartender looked aghast. “You mean this? Heinrich Krause holds an artifact of anomalous nature? This is troubling news.”

“Why’s that?”

At this, the man shrunk slightly, fidgeting. “I don’t know if I should say.”

“You should.”

“All right.” He looked down contritely. “Herr Krause has been behaving… oddly, as of late. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he is behaving perfectly normally, locked inside a set of catacombs in the desert.”

Brink and Trail both stood up straight. “Sorry?” they chorused.

“No one has seen him in weeks. He has shut himself inside a gargantuan tomb west of here. He may in fact be dead from starvation. Or he might not. I suspect the only person who knows for sure is the man himself.”

“Can you take us to him?” Trail inquired tentatively, putting his head at a skeptical angle.

“Of course not,” snapped Brink. “He’s a bartender, not a tour guide.”

He glowered, then caught himself. “Sadly true. I cannot myself guide you to Herr Krause. I can, however, provide you with his whereabouts.” He pulled from within the folds of his clothing a piece of paper and scrawled a crude map on it hastily, punctuating Krause’s location with an enormous X. “I trust the two of you can find your own way to this destination?”

“We just flew from Peru to Egypt in a two-seater, amigo. We can do literally anything.”

• • • • •

The adventurer and his companion left the chamber, and as they did, a dark silhouette sprinted away from the obscured outside window.

• • • • •

“So that was the weirdest bartender ever,” Trail huffed, after a humbling exit through a cramped and convoluted back alley. The mob inside the building had begun banging on the door, and the odd little man had swiftly pushed them through a door in the back wall that they had overlooked.

“I liked him,” Brink replied. “I think we really impressed that guy.”

“Maybe so, but didn’t anything about him… bother you?”

“Nope,” came the abrupt rebuttal.

“Maybe the fact that he never told us his name?”

“Lots of folks get secretive about stuff like that.”

“About their names?”

“Why not?”

“It just seems weird that—“

Brink whirled in place and pointed accusingly. “His name is his own damn business, you understand me? His. His alone. Nobody needs to worry about it but him, and that’s the way it oughtta be.”

“Fine, fine. Caramba. Calm down.”

He didn’t say a word in response.

“Are you sulking?”

“No. Shut your face. I’m gonna get a shawarma. Don’t follow me.”

• • • • •

The ceiling in the central chamber was fifty feet high and engraved with images of a stern Teutonic face. Krause paced beneath it in a straight line as his servant entered and dropped to one knee.

“They are on their way. The two foreigners.”

He stopped walking. “They have been given my location?”

“Yes. A bartender in the city pointed it out to them.”

Krause smiled. “Good. Let them come. I have dealt with far more capable men.”

He glanced up at his latest project, towering above his head, tunneling into the ceiling, all metal and mirror and light. “And soon, I won’t need to deal with any more of them.”

• • • • •

A red face full of scabs poked mouselike through the doorway. “Message for Agent Caraway.”

Caraway rose to his full, unimpressive height and stretched hideously. “’Important message,’ or just ‘message’?”

“Envelope says ‘urgent.’” The boy’s voice cracked from anxiety and unbalanced hormones. “Are you going somewhere? Should I just leave it on your desk?”

“No, no, give it here,” the agent snapped. He sent the boy away and tore at the packaging of the letter.

"…Christ."

TO: AGENT HORACE CARAWAY

FROM: O5-4

SUBJECT: SCP-960

Tracking device 0145-Y9 ceased broadcasting at 2216 hours on

July 12. It was last used in a briefcase containing classified Foundation documents, and its last signal came from a residential section of Cairo, Egypt. We believe it is possible that an unknown party has disabled the device and stolen the files. This, if true, is unacceptable.

Tracking device 1248-Y3 continues to broadcast from Cairo. Our records indicate that you are using it to trace a man assigned to recover SCP-960. Having lost the documents provided him, he has proven to be a liability; having already read the documents, he is now a liability in the possession of sensitive information.

You may consider this the last in a sequence of warnings. Failing in the following task will result in your immediate discharge from the SCP Foundation:

You are hereby ordered to eliminate the security risk posed by Brink Dangerguts.

previous chapter • • •

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Broadcast

John Carlyle ran his hands over his face and stared at his naked form in the bathroom mirror. No longer lean and muscled, it was beginning to sag. Everywhere, the hair was beginning to recede, except, he noted, for his back and chest. At least the graying and the wrinkles were evenly distributed. In almost every way, his earthly vessel was beginning to decay.

"So, do you want to go again or what?" came the voice from the bed. John shuddered. Everything about his body was diminishing and breaking down, except the *urges*. He fought them with every ounce of strength he could muster, but sooner or later, they returned. He had been doing well - six whole months this time - but then that boy who mows the lawn had taken off his shirt and… and… He had barely stopped to tell his wife that it was time for a business meeting in Chatanooga before jumping in the car. He hadn't stopped once on the way to Asheville. The rest he knew well enough from experience that it had almost been a reflex. Check into the hotel, find a boy looking studiedly busy, make small talk, make references to a hotel, wait for interest, inquire how much, return to hotel, and then… *oh god*. What was wrong with him? He had tried everything from pills to conditioning, trying to get rid of this weakness. He had given his soul over to Jesus was it three times now? Maybe four. Still, no luck. Inevitably, some young man would seduce him and then… this.

The rent boy peeked his head into the bathroom. "I said, you want to go again? It's your money, so you can do it how you want, but I don't much care to sit around while y-"

"Get out. Money's on the dresser," John said, his voice dripping with disgust. He couldn't stand to even look at the young man. John stood without a sound and listened as the boy put on his clothes. He waited in the bathroom until he heard the door slam, staying an

extra minute just to be sure. After he was sure that he was gone, John walked into the bedroom and picked up the phone. Like always, he dialed Julie. Like always, he took the revolver out of his trouser pocket. One could never be too careful, he mused as he heard the dial tone. He'd only used it once before, when the boy recognized him and threatened to go to the papers with news that John Carlyle, yes, *the* John Carlyle, was a queer, unless he paid him off. He pulled back the hammer and put the gun to his head like always. One note of suspicion in Julie's voice, and he'd do it, he swore to God.

"Hi sweetie. Yeah, the meeting just wrapped up… Yeah, I should be there for dinner… Y'all can start cooking and I'll be there by the time you finish up… 'kay love you too. Bye!" He made a kissing sound into the receiver before hanging up. Uncocking the hammer, he laid it down on the bed like always. Through a crack in the bathroom door, John a glimpse of his reflection. It's not me, he thought, it's this. I'm a man, it's this body that perverted and weak. I'm strong, I'm virile, I'm straight, it's this fucking *god damn queer fucking faggot piece-of-shit body* that keeps betraying me. As he dressed himself, John wondered. Maybe it wasn't this body, maybe it was… no. I'm strong, my soul is strong, it's this body that's weak. When he was done dressing, he opened the door and made his way to the car. Like always, he took a different route to keep anyone from noticing him. A five hour drive back to Atlanta, he thought. Plenty of time to forget all about this moment of weakness.

Ninety minutes into the drive, John was miserable. The late summer heat seeped through every crack in the car. Rolling down the windows didn't help, it just caused the muggy air to fill the car more quickly. What was more, there was nothing on the radio. Being in the ass-end of northern Georgia probably had something to do with it, he reflected, but it was beginning to get to him. Noise was how he always came down. It didn't matter if it was news, pop, negro music, or even a third-rate Billy Sunday telling him that he was going to hell for everything he had done; it just helped him not to think. But it had been fifteen minutes since that lovely sermon about the blind lady from Pasadena and how she was healed by the good Rev. So-and-so had finally faded into static.

In vain, John twisted the dial in an effort to pick up something. *Anything*. It was static across the dial. John began to sweat. It felt so *good*, he thought, even if he knew it was wrong. Because he knew it was wrong. He thought of the wedding night, and Julie's words of consolation. The next day, he had done it with a bellboy in a storage closet. That night, Julie had almost collapsed after they made love. No, *fucked*. He thought of nights spent crying because he couldn't get *it* off of him (the crying was a sign of weakness, also caused by his body). He thought about his first time, in the lockers, with Todd Willis. In his mind, Todd's face turned to that of the anonymous rent boy. His eyes had been wide, like a jack rabbit's. "Please, mister, I was only fooling." John still remembered the thought that had gone through his head before he pulled the trigger, about how one can never be too careful.

The radio dial rocketed side-to-side as John searched for a station. His hands were beginning to shake. Finally, a burst of clear noise from the static. It only took him a moment to zero in on the frequency.

"-ow, brothers and sisters? We shake 'em by the heads and run 'em down! Dark times, trapped in layers of meat like snake oil, and all covering the blessed waft!" the voice on the radio lisped. A moan of disapproval rose in the background. "We got the best deal in town. Lose that turgid flesh that's anchorin' you and spread like a cobweb! Come join us brother!"

John was no longer thinking about the rent boy with jack rabbit eyes. He had heard some strange shows, once heard a live broadcast of a man swallowing a snake, but never anything like this. Maybe it was one of those beatniks? The slang seemed to fit, but still, it was oddly specific. Was it some hip young preacher? The voice sounded older, though.

"I think we got a congregant, brothers and others!" the preacher lisped. The audience cried out in the background. "A real live cracker, all filled with the fire come back from wicked deeds! Come on you shriveled pachyderm son-of-a-bitch! Slough off your suet! It'll be fine without you! It can't miss you."

John was interested now. He turned the volume up higher, but the

station cut to static. Always god damned static. A bead of sweat fell onto his shirt sleeve. He looked down and realized that he was drenched. At the next exit he would stop at a restaurant and get himself cleaned up, he decided. After a minute, a sign announced an exit to Blairesville, "home of Martin and June's Snack Shack." John pulled off the highway and proceeded through the town. As he looked for some indication of where Martin and June's Snack Shack might be, something caught his eye. A church covered in some kind of tent, which must have been the only building in town over one story tall. It wasn't something one saw every day, so John decided to get in closer and get a better look.

As he pulled into the lot in front of the building, he saw someone emerge from the tent. A balding man dressed in a white polo and cut-offs came to greet John as he got out from the car. Between his teeth, the man clenched a pipe. John tucked the pistol into his back pocket. One can never be too careful.

"Welcome friend! I hear you heard our word. A blessed holler finds a willing ear, and don't that just warm the heart?" the man exclaimed as he shook John's hand. A murmur of approval rose from an unseen audience. The lisp identified him as the preacher from the radio. John noticed that the man's lips never seemed to part.

"I'm John Carlyle. Like, of Carlyle furniture. It's nice to meet you…" John waited for the man to give his name. The man's faced scrunched in disgust.

"Folks call this Celebration 'Big Cheese' Horace. Lama Celebration 'Big Cheese' Horace. Brother, I get a good feeling about you. You seem like a fella who'd go far and beyond, make a smoke to swallow the sun! Have you ever had your body crack like eggs and just slipped off your dead shell like a hermit crab?"

John laughed nervously and was grateful for the pistol. "No, I can't say that I have. What is this, anyway?"

"This, brother John Carlyle, is a beautiful congregation. We hover and linger, can't ever be gotten rid of. Without meat, there's no limit to what we can be! Truth be told, I'm hoping you'd be willing to join our little family. We're looking for upright citizens such as yourself to

help us bring in the new day." The man put a hand on John's shoulder and motioned to the church.

"Is this some kind of cult deal?" he asked suddenly suspicious.

"Far from it, brother. Cults are false bottoms, drop you further into the hole. We want to take the weakness and pull it out. Make it work for you while you work from home," the man said. He began blinking rapidly.

John nodded and moved for the church. Pulling out the weakness. It was worth a look, shit it might even help. If not, what was the worst that could happen? He had a gun, he was prepared. He stood back as the man pulled back the church's tent and opened the door. John went inside.

Two hours later, the body of John Carlyle emerged. It made a mental note to call up Julie as soon as it got the chance. It'd explain to her that there had been some unexpected traffic, or maybe the car had gotten a flat. But first, it needed to find Martin and June's Snack Shack. It was famished.

Brökkën Güd

"No, no, I meant my left, you imbecile, now the head is on backwards. I knew you'd be no help."

For the cultists of the Church of the Broken God, a long wait was over. After hundreds of years of painstakingly searching, they had collected all the pieces of their deity, and all that was left to do was to assemble Him. Clustered around a withered parchment, ancient instructions passed down through generations, they set to work.

"Okay, so we're looking for one of those little short screw things- no, not that one, that's the wrong shape, see? We want a crosshead one. No, that's a long one. No, that- what even is that?"

Approximately a week had passed since the final part, the very **`heart`** of Mekhane, He who was Broken, was located and returned to its rightful place. Yet, all that the assembled disciples of His Church had done was screw one of the legs together. It didn't quite look right.

"Well, we followed the manual, so why the hell are there six toes?"

Each part of the Broken God was piece by piece brought together, in dark, hidden places, filled with ancient magic and cosmic horror, ready for the construction and ascension of Him.

"No, no, this is definitely the right screw- Klööpe, that's the one- the hole just isn't big enough. Give me that drill."
"Aw, fuck."
"He doesn't need both of those, right?"

For the men, women, and other assorted cultists gathered, their entire lives had been spent in search of the parts of His body. This was the culmination of a life-long dream, and victory was so close they could almost taste it. None of them had quite realised *how* difficult it would be, however, to assemble a Supreme Being with

only an allan key and a screwdriver.

"Where did you even get these instructions, oh Grand High Priest?"
"They came in the box, idiot. It's all flatpack these days."
"Oh."

It was hard, painful work. Sacrifice, blood and oil and sweat mixed in, all serving a single purpose, the reconstruction of the ultimate lifeform, the universe's most powerful being.

"Missing? It has to be here somewhere, have you checked the box again? You have? What about behind the desk, that's where we found the- no? What do you mean, 'replacement parts may take up to five weeks'? Bloody disgraceful."

Day and night, without rest, the disciples of the Broken God toiled away, slowly piecing their Creator together…

"Fuck this, I'm converting to Sarkicism."

Broken?

I don't know why I'm recording this, it's not like there's anyone left… well, anyone human to hear it. Maybe aliens will find it and have a good laugh… Anyways, it's a little after dark and I've decided to camp out on what appears to be a large cog. Maybe it's a gear; I don't know anymore, but this, this I do know…

It was about six years ago that the eggheads up in astronomy first spotted the damn thing. It was apparently on a direct course for our little blue marble. The reports are a mangled mess of censorship but it was clear just what it was and where it was going. That's the thing I still don't get… we saw it, we knew exactly what it was doing yet here we are stuck in this wasteland. What were they thinking? Who in their right mind figured twiddling their thumbs would keep us safe? Not that it matters anymore.

Maybe two years later, give or take, that fucker first entered our solar system. You could sort of see it twinkling at night with the twinkle becoming brighter and brighter as the days went past. It was around this time that the O5 went into hiding with handfuls of their best and brightest, vanishing away into pocket realities so they could bide their time… Stupid bastards are probably still waiting for it to be 'safe' again. I'd love to see the look on their faces when they come out and see what's left.

A couple months after the O5 turned tail and ran was when we could finally see it in the sky above our heads: a planet of moving gears and cogs. I hate to admit it, but it almost looked beautiful as it danced over our tiny world. This was also when those nuts at the Church of the Broken God started coming out and preaching to the masses. They thought the thing was our salvation, a physical God come to save the faithful. I remember reading reports about them, about how they thought that ball of rust was some sort of heart; I think they even thought that clockwork disease was part of a grand plan. Heck, maybe it's a mutated strand of this thing's plague, I don't

know; I'm not even sure this thing is their God. Either way, none of them are alive today. Most of them were probably wiped out when the first attack started…

It was a slow fight, precise and mechanical; we never stood a chance… The first stage of attack was these weird clouds of silver mist. They would blow across fields and mountains and in their wake was nothing but polished sections of shiny metal. Entire cities were wiped off the planet, forests vanished in the blink of an eye, and any poor bastard caught in those damned winds was gone, no blood or meat, just more metal. Days seemed to become colder as our paradise was transformed into a dead, polished sphere. Food was scarce and water was even rarer, but we managed somehow. I turned to nutrient powders, vitamins, and cannibalism while collecting what little rain water I could manage.

You know what I remember most about those days? How metallic everything tasted…

Then came the plagues. I don't know exactly when they first started but I know it was just another step in that fucking thing's twisted plan. Victims would start complaining of joint pain, muscle stiffness, fatigue, apathy, and strange dreams. One poor sap told me about his dreams as if they were blissful, but what he described seemed like a nightmare to me. Eventually, they would just stop… It was disgusting to see them, villages of these poor fucks just laying on the ground. They looked like they were having a good dream… I saw one of them with a stupid grin on his face as a raven pecked out his dried up eyeballs. I sometimes wished I could've been infected so I didn't have to witness what came next.

Their corpses would start moving again. Their limbs jerked and their bodies would shake every couple minutes. I could smell them for miles as their rotting flesh fell away from what used to be their bones. I don't know how it did it, but their skeletons were entirely made of moving and clicking clockwork. It was like watching a fucked up French movie, but there were no subtitles and there was no ending. Those… things would spend every minute of every day working and building, dancing underneath their clockwork creator's unheard tune.

Their work was confusing to me but I guess they had a plan. They would cut up sections of the metal then use it to forge more gears, cogs, pistons, whatever else they needed, and when they were done, they would put them all together into complex sheets of machinery and fill in the empty spaces. All the while, that thing just kept turning and dancing above our metallic hell. It's kind of fitting when I think back on how pretty it looked in comparison to our own warped world…

I remember the first time an entire plane of metal had been crafted, I could hear the steady grinding of gears and what sounded like the tick of a clock. I can still hear it as the gears and cogs keep spinning and turning in their own dance. This was when the real nightmare began, when those stupid robot fucks started completing more and more sections of land, the ground steadily becoming a death-trap of crushing gears and pistons. I had to watch my good buddy get crushed when he fell onto a functioning section. His screaming wasn't the worst part; it was seeing his broken, mangled corpse get pulled down into a sea of twisting clockwork. The nightmares were the worst part… Seeing him being pulled into the machinery and ripped apart by the spinning metal. But at least he wasn't screaming anymore; instead he had a big stupid grin on his face and he was urging me to join him, to fall into the complex dance of metal upon metal. I wanted to join him, once, but I could never muster up the courage to make that final plunge.

I can hear them toiling away outside of my camp, building more of this nightmare all for that spinning ball of metal. I don't know if it cares for our suffering or if it's even aware, but I know it's alive. I saw its eye once. You don't have to believe me, no one else does, but I saw it; it was only for a moment as the gears spun and the cogs shifted that I could see how empty it was and then I saw its eye… It was bright orange like our sun, with a hole right in the center and it was looking down at us, at me, at our lifeless world and I swear to you that it was happy with what it saw…

Well, it won't be long now; I can hear them preparing to install what I assume will be the last section of clockwork. I don't know what will happen after their work is done but I know I won't be a victim of that thing. I've gathered the last of my supplies for a fine feast: a can of

baked beans, a Snickers, a cyanide capsule, and a nice drink of water.

Even now as I look up at that thing dancing in the night sky, I can't help but wonder if it was ever broken at all…

Broken Faith

> *Today's the day. I will be drinking the blood of god and the Modifiers will bring me closer to MEKHANE. I don't know what will happen, but I'll make sure to tell you. After all, you know everything about me.*

Levy was barely listening to the sermon, his eyes were focused on his arm. His new arm. Never before had he felt so close to MEKHANE. He didn't remember much of his first ascension ceremony, just coming to his senses after everything was done. Feeling the pull of his arm's increased weight. Seeing the light reflect by the brass. Hearing the clicking of the gears as he moved it for the first time.

"You should really pay attention!" Judith's whisper snapped him out of his memories. She was right of course, looking out for him as usual. Legate Karlen was overseeing today's sermon and he was not known to overlook inattention.

After the sermon, Levy went back to the small chamber he called his own. In his drawer, hidden under a copy of *The Schema of the Patriarchs #13: Standardized Metallurgy*, was his diary. It was frowned upon by the church but it was a habit from his life before that he couldn't seem to shake. Lost in thought, he lay down on his bed, admiring the clicking noises his arm made.

> *I have no words to describe this feeling, I can feel MEKHANE working through my new arm. In time, I will be ready to join the Legates.*

"Did you hear about what the Builders did?" She sounded worried.

"No, what happened?"

"They attacked the Foundation."

"On their own ground?" That was bold. Levy couldn't imagine that such a thing would have an outcome that made it worthwhile.

"Apparently. It seems they… found something. I overheard a preacher talking about it. He seemed disturbed." There was something in her voice that made him nervous. What kind of thing would unsettle a preacher, stalwart in their faith?

"What was it? What did they find?"

"I'm not sure. They noticed me listening and sent me away. But they didn't look happy. Scared."

> *There have been rumors going around. Rumors that the Foundation… found God. Literally. Ridiculous, right? But then why is everybody so freaked out about it? It's not like we don't know better.*

The last few weeks there had been a noticeable tension all around the monastery. People were huddled together in small groups, discussing the Foundation's alleged discovery, immediately dispersing if a Legate came near. Levy had heard that several people had been restricted to solitary confinement for unknown reasons. Some said they were openly spreading heresy, saying the Foundation had disproven MEKHANE. Others said they had been secretly working for the Foundation and were now being tortured for information before being executed as traitors. Others again said the vanished people were not actually in solitary but had left the monastery, never to come back. There was no end to the different rumors.

Levy wasn't sure what to think of all this. Were they not strong enough in their faith to see that this were just lies, spread by heretics to sow dissent? If it were even possible to literally find the MEKHANE, surely the blinded pawns of the Foundation would be the last ones to manage that. Slaves of the FLESH, all of them, blind to how this world really was.

Sighing, he turned the corner leading to Judith's quarters. She was his rock, his best friend, unwavering in her faith. Her first ascension ceremony was coming up soon. He wondered what part of her

would be exalted. It was exciting to think about.

Levy was about to knock on the door when he heard her voice, muffled but partially understandable. He wasn't sure what compelled him to spy on his best friend, but instead of knocking he pressed his ear against the door and listened.

"… calling for headquarters. Stigma Nine passphrase…" He couldn't make out the next few words. Who was she talking to? Calling? There were not telephones inside the monastery, such devices were heresy. And what was she talking about? Stigma Nine? Headquarters? This didn't make any sense. He was about to open the door when he could make out her words again.

"**`-tion Hippodrome`** seems to be a success. Rumors are spreading like wildfire, everybody is really nervous. It appears…" Judith's voice seemed to go further away and Levy couldn't make out her words again. His head was racing with questions. What did Hippodrome mean? Why did she seem pleased with the spread of the rumors?

Not willing to tolerate this any longer, he burst into her room.

> *Judith. She's… I'm not even able to write the words. How could she? She has a cellphone! This is heresy! More so, it's treason! She was talking to the Foundation, it's clear to me now. But why? Why would she do this? I thought I knew her. I don't know what to think anymore. There is nobody I know better than Judith… What else have I been wrong about?*

Levy had been keeping to himself ever since he caught Judith. He hadn't been sleeping much and if he did, he was tormented by nightmares. Barely able to perform his duties he was already disciplined once when he fell asleep during a sermon. The feeling of anxiety all around the monastery was almost touchable. Most people avoided eye contact, and Legates were patrolling the hallways constantly. It had become silent where the air was usually abuzz with theological discussions.

Late at night, Levy found himself standing on the monastery's roof,

staring into the sky. Supposedly the thing the Foundation found came from space. The thing they were saying was the MEKHANE. He remembered being taught about the existence of other planets in school, a long time ago. The sermons never mentioned anything about space. The church was trying to fix the world, to order it. But what about other worlds? Didn't they need fixing, too? He tried to imagine space, with thousands of other worlds in it. It made him dizzy. He felt small and lonely.
Insignificant.
Terrified.

> *There was a fight yesterday. Couple of people died. A group of initiates attacked a Legate. Couldn't have imagined such a thing to ever happen. And yet it did. Thinking about the smell of the blood makes me nauseous again. So much blood.*
>
> *I know I should have reported Judith but… I can't. She might be a traitor and a heretic but she's still.. her. My friend. My confidante. The thought of her being interrogated, tortured… I can't bear it. I've been covering my arm lately. The ticking of the gears has become irritating. Trying not to move the arm too much.*

Staying in the shadows, Levy watched the entrance to the Archives, trying to keep his. He wasn't supposed to be here. But neither was Jared. He was an acquaintance who usually quietly performed his duties. Levy couldn't remember ever hearing anything out of the ordinary about the man. And yet there he was, sneaking into the Archives where some of the closest guarded secrets were kept. The guards had been distracted by a fire in the nearby dormitories. Did Jared orchestrate this? Or was he just seizing the opportunity? He couldn't help but wonder if there were more traitors like Judith in the monastery. If his best friend could deceive him, how easy would have been for people he barely knew?
What if the preachers had deceived him, too?

> *I feel like my whole world is collapsing around me. Judith is gone, no idea what happened to her. Legates won't tell me. Haven't been to the last sermons Told them I was sick.*

Can't even look at my arm anymore

It had become a ritual for Levy to go up on the roof at night and stare into the night sky. Sometimes he also stared at the mountains surrounding the monastery. Inescapable.

Trapped.

He felt the cold sweat on his palms, when he clenched his fists. The ledge of the roof had been calling to him lately. It was tempting him, promising him freedom. Escaping the looming, unending threat of the sky and space, lurking just behind. All that nothingness. His breathing shortened at the mere thought of it.

can't sleep anymore, I'm trapped cant get out
theyve all been lying to me lying lying lying

Levy stared at the scene before him. Preacher Colen, in a pool of his own blood. The word 'LIAR' in crude letters, carved into his bare chest. The cold feeling in his stomach told Levy to get away from here. Back to his room. Back to safety. Clutching his arm to his chest, he ran. It disgusted him, his arm, almost as much as the corpse he was leaving behind.
Why was there a bloody knife in his hand?

cant get out need to get out need to get out
get out
jump?
just get out
they know and theyve been lying
they know

The Book of Pieces

Chapter 12: The Broken Mind of the LORD and How It is to be Built

1. So it came to pass that the Heart and the Eye and the Tongue were together in one place, and the Quick-silver Ichor had been dredged from the Sea of the Dead and gathered into a vial, and the Soul—ransomed from the lands of Daevon—was sealed up and under watch.
2. The Six Angels, reunited, were pleased with the works of the faithful. The people rejoiced in their blessings and protection.
3. Then spake the Angel of Progress to his priests: "The time is short, and we are beset by enemies at every port. Go forth, then, in secret to the land of Khmer, where the Mind of the Broken One lies hidden beneath the temple of the Flesh-God *Vishnu*."
4. "A hidden stair in the Northwest corner of the central temple will lead you below. There you will find a hull of dark bronze, 3 cubits to each side."
5. "With no fewer than five amongst you, lift it from its place of rest and convey it here with due haste."
6. "Patience is a virtue best left to God."
7. The priests counseled amongst themselves, and dispatched the acolyte Barnabus Smythe with four others to the lands in the Far East, that the Mind would be retrieved and that which was Broken made whole.
8. Disguised as their heathen cousins and Sons of Abraham, the five wandered over desert, mountain, and jungle for two years before coming to the temple which was foretold to them.
9. However, upon finding the stair of which the Angel spoke, Smythe found the way was collapsed, and sealed with obscene sigils.

10. With what gold lined his pockets, he hired seven workmen into his service. Smythe shared with them the words the Angels had told him, and the workmen, knowing that demons walked the land to destroy all order in the world, performed their task with great haste and skill.
11. For thirty-nine days and thirty-nine nights they chipped and chiseled and dug alongside the seven noble Heathens. This act of toil, through which all gave offerings of their blood and sweat and flesh, the workmen were made pure and pleasing to the LORD.
12. So that on the 40th day, the way was clear, and all twelve hurried below to bear witness to the Glory of the Broken One.
13. But alas and woe! In the chamber below a great boulder had fallen, and the glorious Mind lay smashed in the rubble.
14. The twelve faithful sifted through the wreck and gathered what pieces remained together in five large satchels, and conveyed them to their home. When they arrived the people wept to see the Mind so shattered, and implored the Angels for their aid.
15. So spake the Angel of Conflict to his priests: "Haste has not aided us. Daevon and its Flesh has prevented us before our quest began."
16. "The Mind is lost, and none amongst you can rebuild it."
17. "Though you may toil a thousand years and master a hundred worlds and learn of many Divine Truths, no mortal man of broken Flesh with soft and feeble mind could repair or rebuild it."
18. Then spake the Angel of Invention: "Fear not; there is a way. Bring to us a scribe of great skill and learning, that we might impart unto him the Truth of Design."
19. "But great Angel," said the Acolyte Smythe, "To what purpose is this Design if no man can execute its mandates? We shall surely fail!"
20. The Angel of Peace took pity on Smythe, and spared his insolence. "Dear Acolyte; though your eyes see and your ears hear, your mind cannot grasp."
21. "The Design is not that of the Mind, but of a much simpler Truth which Man in his small wisdom can attain. This Design will beget yet another. And that yet another. And if faithfully executed, two more after their kind, until at last the Final Volume will be understood, and the Mind shall be restored."

22. At this news, there was much rejoicing, and offerings of flesh and blood were made unto the Broken One, that soon his Assembly would be complete.

Broker-Bailer-Grifter-THIEF

Broker, Bailer,

Grifter, Dealer.

Soldier, Holder,

Carrier, THIEF.

FoldUnfold
Table of Contents

- **Broker**
- **Bailer**
- **Grifter**
- **Soldier**
- **Holder**
- **Thief**

Broker

The Agent sipped her coffee as the Subject stepped in.

"7:30 AM precisely," she noted in her newspaper crossword. *Every day, it's a free-market Colombian roast, black*, Jenna thought. *While every night he's roasting a Free-Colombian Blackmarket*.

She didn't eye the Subject as he sat at his favorite table on the veranda and looked across the sunrise-New-York-Harbor skyline. Nope. Didn't have to. She knew exactly what he was doing. Luckily for Jenna, profiling him was easy; the man was a machine: moving with precision and purpose, keeping to his schedule as if his air would run out otherwise. Sipping her latte, a slight breeze brushed across her face. She glanced up, and immediately caught it: he was sitting away from the docks ever so slightly, more so towards the

opening in the surrounding fence. *A meeting*.

Sliding her reading glasses up the bridge of her nose, Jenna activated the camera across the street trained on the place. The two connected, with the increased field of vision revealing the entire stretch of shops. She zoomed in on the Subject. Clearly waiting for someone; eyes trained on the fence gate with unveiled anticipation shining in his eyes, even behind sunglasses. It was as if he didn't care who saw, or what anyone thought; especially when it came to the obviously-concealed 9mm pistol resting in his jacket. A woman stepped to the gate, holding a small bag in one hand, phone in the other; with that, a smile stretched across the Subject's face, welcoming the siren. Her demeanor suggested disgust at the publicity of such a meeting. Between her perfectly-tied, cerulean curls and her raised eyebrow was a silver bluetooth which she flicked every now-and-then; switching between conversations. Taking her seat across from him, she ripped it out of her ear, tossing her hair.

"Val, you're looking well. Lose some money recently? You become beautifully flushed when that happens." Jenna's receiver picked him up.

"Don't try me today. I also become vicious." She placed the bag on the table; a simple brown paper bag. "Are you ready with the couriers?"

"You disappoint me, Val. I thought we had a little more faith in one another than this." He stared her in the eye. "Would you expect anything less of me?"

"The last time we dealt, you left me gagged in Quantico. I think that's all that needs to be expected, *Zev*."

"Oh, that wasn't *me*. The people I *hired* left you there. Now, if you please, can we get started with business again?"

"You better be as slick as you think you are, because this is the oiliest play I've seen. McKay better not learn what you're trying."

He spat, "Never mind him! He's as veiled as anyone else when it

comes to this. That Irish bastard would still be swindling green cards if he didn't have the Family." The Subject curled his fists then swept his hair back into place. "Just give it to me."

"Alright. This should be everything." She handed the bag to him carefully. "The crystal, the ID cards, the location for the drop, what-have-you."

"Thanks, I'll see you back at the lounge?"

"*After* the arrangements are finalized."

"Of course, of course." He stood up, leaving a tip for the coffee. Reaching into the bag, pulled out a small silver bearing and tossed it into his mouth. "See you on the other side."

He walked off the veranda and into the street, walking toward the harbor. Stopping, he looked directly into the grill of the speeding semi-hauler. Jenna shot up from her seat. The huge truck skid sideways into the seaside walkway, tumbling and rolling into the blue expanse. There was no trace of him. Cars skid to a stop, people peered over the edge, they watched as it sank to the cold depths.

Jenna spoke into her collar, "Lost contact with Subject. Requesting assistance."

Val didn't look up from her phone. Under her breath, "*Show-off…*"

The older gentleman shook himself off. Dusting himself from the transport, he sauntered over to the silver door. He grabbed the small cookie sitting at the bottom of the bag, crushing it in his hand, and revealing the small slip of paper.

"Slime-sucking, Silver-haired Devil," he read. The door hissed as it stretched open, revealing the beautifully-lit interior of the waiting area; Victorian white, with Edwardian influences in the furniture, the fireplace roared with blue fire, creating an ethereal presence for those basking in its warmth. Zev stared into the eyes of the Medici framed in the portrait hanging above the mantel as he sat in the

grand, delicate armchair. The painting receded into the wall, uncovering the shining face of the woman onscreen.

"Enjoy today's password? Picked it especially for you."

"Hilarious." Zev's grimace was unwavering.

"Hm. I take it your trip wasn't so fun?"

"I'll never be used to those new beacons. They always leave a particularly nasty taste in your mouth. Besides, when combined with a contact who doesn't want to have anything to do with you, the experience becomes less enjoyable by the second."

"Oh, sorry about that. Didn't know Valerie had something against you. I'll be sure to try to change that later. She gave you the right stuff, though?"

"It's all here. Is my fellow ready to meet?"

"They're in the next room as we speak. Everything's set, isn't it? You're ready?"

His lip turned up. "Now and Forever."

"He's important. Maybe not now, but he *will* be."

"That's not a reason for someone to be assigned. Lemme guess, you have catchy little names for everyone to be called, too?"

"There's always a better reason to do something, and of course I do. *He'll* be 'Broker.' Shepherd as 'Bailer.' Heliotrope, 'Grifter.' Swanson *was* 'Dealer,' since replaced by Repartee, 'Dollface.' Roman, 'Soldier.' Voss, 'Holder.' And 'Carrier' is gone too, 'Froggy's suitable enough, though."

"Well, what's *your* name, then?"

"'*Thief,*' obviously."

"Couldn't come up with something a little more subtle?"

"You know me, 'If you're blunt, it's certain.'"

"Three of your names are Foundation. Are you absolutely sure about them?"

"More often than not, snakes are more friend than foe."

"Would you stop speaking in idioms, please?"

Jenna slammed the door as she sped out of the parking structure. "Dammit, dammit. Control! You read me?"

"You requested assistance, Watts?"

"He's gone. He's just gone! I need everything on a 'Valerie Repertoire.' She might have info on where my Subject's gone."

"No 'Repertoire…' Sure it wasn't 'Repartee?' Agent Heliotrope's compiled info on that one."

"Are all these MC&D Pseudonyms frickin' puns? *Argh*. Send me the info." She peeled into traffic, her truck brandishing the *Skippy Carlson's Plumbing* logos scraped against a couple parking meters as she squeezed through traffic. She glanced down at the tablet mounted on the dash every now-and-then, checking the inbox. *PING* The folder appeared. She pulled off to the side to skim through the Profile. She muttered under her breath, "Val…known pseudonyms… Associates!" She scrolled through, past clients, degenerates, couriers. "Redacted? Are you kidding me?! Control! I need this info. Can you get me Heliotrope?"

"The encryption's deep, Watts. Some things are above our pay grade."

"Nope! Not today! This is of absolute importance. Can I *please* get the files declassified?"

"Watts. That information is none of your concern. Don't get personal on this."

"Unprofessional, I know… God. I lost track of my subject! You gotta give me something. I need to get back on this."

"What makes this so important? Fine. There's an agent in your area who would probably know something; Roman. Sending you coordinates."

As Jenna saw the GPS activate and started her car again, a black convertible pulled to the side of her. "Bang, you're dead." Jenna looked up to see purple-nail finger-guns pointed straight at her temple.

"Damn you, Hel." Watts smiled up at the old friend. Heliotrope opened her door beckoning the Agent into the sleek vehicle.

"Saw you rang. Need something? All you have to do is ask." Jenna could tell through her associate's violet eyes that Heliotrope saw the unverified access to the profiles.

"Zev's gone. I needed to see Val's contacts."

"Oh, yeah. No way that's happening."

"Control pointed me to Roman. What does *he* know about it?"

"*Roman?* Nope. That guy's an asshole. He's a *Trapper*. The only thing they care about is results. He was assigned to Pi-1 until…"

"What happened?"

"They found out how much of an *asshole* he was." Watts locked the truck door as she climbed into Heliotrope's car. "What would he even know?"

"Apparently, he knows something about the LLP."

"He's the current CO of the 'Mallrats.' He better know *something* about MC&D if he ever expects to keep that job; especially with all those Skips under his belt. You know, the ones that breached last period?"

"That was him?" Watts pulled out her pad, typing up the coordinates.

"Apparently, he's over in TriBeCa."

"Well then, let's pay him a visit, shall we?"

Bailer

Zev stepped into the large ballroom. Gleaming white pillars welcomed him to the auction area. Seated not three rows away from him sat Reginald McKay. Zev glided over to the old Irishman. "I didn't know you had an interest in Aztec instruments of war," he didn't take his eyes off the huge, carved-stone headset on the pedestal.

"You don't seem to have a problem with butting into others' business, do you?"

"Everyone's business *is* my business. *That's* how you stay on top."

"You better watch what you get your grubby, little paws on, Zev. Might be too sticky, even for you…" McKay smiled and waved at the Spanish delegate walking across the platform. He continued through gritting teeth, "…you filthy son-of-a-bitch."

"Let's get this out right now: stay out of my way, Regg. You might find *your*self on the wrong side of Greenland one day."

"Your threats don't make you any prettier, Zev. Ease up before your crow's feet grow wings and beaks." He held up his paddle, "5.7."

The Auctioneer met his eyes. "And Monsieur Mckay wins the bid at 5.7 million dollars. Congratulations, monsieur." **Bang**.

"Eh… I'd wipe my ass with the money," Regg muttered. "Perhaps I will with the relic."

Zev cringed inside. His steely demeanor offset for a brief moment as he saw the priceless artifact go to this classless cretin. "I have an important meeting to attend." He strode to the reflective glass toward the back. Waving his hand, the shutters opened the hidden portion of the complex where Zev took a seat. The violet, stained

glass shut as the elevator ascended to the top of the invisible structure.

Watts's eyes darted across the crime scene, looking for the Agent. Heliotrope looked the part of the FBI Agent on the hunt perfectly; her black pantsuit moved as determined as she did. She felt bad for her friend; Watts's civilian wear didn't exactly exude the authority she deserved — it certainly didn't to the on-site officers that were taping off the area who almost stopped her. Grabbing a jacket off the hook of a Police service vehicle, Watts slid the *CSI* marked windbreaker as if it was a second skin.
She probably feels more at home here than I do, Heliotrope thought.

"Hey, Roman!" Jenna ducked under the red tape. "You're Roman, right?"

The blond agent took off his glasses with a grimace slapped across his face. "Not very subtle, are you? You must be Watts. Control said you'd be coming." He presented an outstretched hand in salutation, which Jenna completely ignored.

"He said you have info on the 'Lip,'" her words bulleted out. "Well? So what have you got?"

"Is that any way to talk to an officer? Patience is a virtue, agent." Roman knew he didn't have any authority over her; however, to someone without any real power, like him, the point was to throw one's weight around as much as possible with the *illusion* of authority. Watts stared blankly at him. "All right… What do you want to know?"

"Heliotrope and my subjects just set up a meeting. You know where it is?"

"Ooh. Profilers losing their targets, doesn't look too good on y'all." The two agents' glares were enough for him to drop it. "There's two major meet ups going on today: one in SoHo, high-price auction; and one close to Essex. I have 'J.D.'s' at both locations right now."

Heliotrope turned to Watts, "Of course. Jenna, Zev has a place at

Essex, right? You should track there, while I head to SoHo."

"Hold on," Roman interrupted. "You guys are with Mu-3, aren't you? Wow. You're all more in the dark than I thought. There's an item that recently shipped over here. My contact is pretty sure that a 'Sully Zev' requested to handle the op. Why don't we team up on this? Share the glory?"

"This isn't about glory."

"Okay, fine. But something *big* is gonna go down. You need info, and my team has that." Roman took his tablet out. "You guys may have the best *thieves* on the East Coast, but at least my division doesn't get bogged down by bureaucracy. See? All the profiles you guys had no access to. It's my team's job to intercept the smaller players in the 'Lip.' And these are who Zev probably got for the job." Sliding his finger across, the names and faces of international criminals moved across the screen.

"So who are they? I don't know half these people." Jenna thought back to all the information kept from her.

"He's got to have access to the best couriers Marshall, Carter, and Dark can get, and that would *have* to be Leon. A Ukrainian refugee and excellent smuggler; he's so nondescript, even loan sharks can't find him." Roman narrowed the search parameters based on Zev and Repartee's contacts, "As for supervision, there's only one guard that they both know: he's called 'the Shepherd.' The most intimidating man you'll ever see. He's probably going to facilitate the drop."

"Why are you just telling us this? If you're not careful, there could be hell to pay. What's your angle?"

"You might not want the glory, but this bust is gonna be big. This'll be my move out of this crap team and into something a bit more suited to my abilities."

Heliotrope looked unfocused. "So, what's the item, then? Must be something important by the sound of it."

"That's one of the biggest things about it: with so many agents being moved around, it's something *very* important. There's even rumors of an agent flying in for their expertise on it."

"Voss." Heliotrope's eyes lit up. "A 'Juniper Voss' from the Marshall, Carter, Dark British subsidiary arrived through customs this morning. Control thought it peculiar, so he had me look into it. She's an MC&D defector from GRU Division 'P.' *Very* important; she's been handling affairs there for almost 30 years now."

"All right. *Now* we're getting somewhere. I'll have Control make the joint to the Task Force for my team." Before he left, turning back around, "Oh, and try to keep all of this between us. Once this is all taken care of, I'm sure Control will understand my—"

"Breach of information?" Heliotrope smirked. Roman inhaled sharply and got into his SUV. Heliotrope opened her umbrella as the rain began to fall. She looked over at her friend, "Man… Yorston's gonna be ***pissed***…"

"*THIEF*. Where are you? What's the plan?"

"En Route. Don't worry. I'll let you know once the arrangements are finalized."

"We need as much info as possible before the Item arrives. This mission has become too important to lose track of it."

"It's all taken care of. I'll be trying to change the mode of transportation for ease of the Containment team. How's Yorston on water?"

"He'd do fine no matter the job. He's one of the best. But, you're sure water is the *best* plan for this SCP? You're not worried about activation?"

"Stop worrying, Control. It'll be as smooth as possible."

"You haven't forgotten about the assassin, have you? Five of your names are active in this operation."

"That's part of the idea."

Zev stepped out onto the rooftop as the bright orange helicopter came into view against the blue light of the stormy sky. The shadow in the corner of his eye came into view; the small, huddled man in the trenchcoat stepped beside Sully.

"I always hated orange. Too *immediate*. Like a hunter trying to not be shot."

"Ah, Leon. It's always uncomfortable when we meet, isn't it?" The rain pattered and darkened Zev's shoulders.

"You're telling me. You sure about this chick?"

"More than I am about you." As Sully turned to look at the dark-faced man, the elevator rung again, opening its doors to let out a giant hulk of a man. He stepped out of the glass-paned box and crossed his arms behind his back staring intently at the helicopter through his black glasses. "Shepherd." The man returned Zev's nod.

"Ah, Hemos. Been a long time, hasn't it?" Leon shot a half-smile under his hood at the Shepherd. "Where was it? Singapore? Madrid?"

"Guernica."

"Of course… Probably not a good time to mention that now…" Leon's face darkened as he retreated and slumped his shoulders.

The helicopter touched ground, air-drying the pad with its huge gusts. Zev didn't so much as flinch as he approached the door, paper bag still in hand. He opened the door for the lady. "Madam Voss, a pleasure to meet at last."

She quickly stepped to the ground, shaking the air-travel off herself, "Let us not waste time, shall we Zev? I terribly dislike the flying, but I *hate* wasting time." She strode across the helipad to the elevator shutters, not even opening her clutched umbrella. "You asked me for my knowledge on this acquisition, now show me where it is so that I may go home."

The silver-haired man matched her speed, "Of course, let us convene in the lounge to better acquaint ourselves with the plan."

The two other dark figures in the rain followed them in. "No time," Voss shot. "Talk now… This city must be the most dismal place on Earth."

Leon spoke up, "The goods arrived this morning, now located at one of the North harbors in a warehouse guarded by the very best. No need to worry about security."

"How many? Are you sure? This is no dime-store purchase, we've been moving merchandise like this since the age of Christ." As Leon chuckled at Voss's remark, he was only met with cold glares. "They're being transported now?"

"Last-minute change. They leave as soon as I'm there." The elevator shot down, quick as lightning. "Pennsylvania by tomorrow."

"I'd like to check it myself, Zev. Make sure everything's accounted for."

"No need. *We're* off to PA before it gets there. Post-checking the valuables," Zev pushed open the doors, revealing Valerie Repartee at the entrance. "Ah, right on schedule."

"Shut it, Sully. Madam Voss, pleasure," Val's expression switched from disdain to salutation within a split-second; changing just as quickly to disinterest as Voss waved away her outstretched hand. "The arrangements are set. There's a car ready for us to take to the drop, and the item is being loaded onto the barge." Leon scurried out of sight.

"What?" Zev grunted from behind gritted teeth. "What do you mean *barge*?"

"The service was the most cost-effective with the accompanying assured security."

Zev laughed between throaty, forced coughs. "And by 'assured security,' I'm guessing you mean the *destruction of the WHOLE OPERATION AND THE LLP*?!" He exploded. "How could you

possibly think this would be preferable? How could you think that was even an *option*?!"

Voss interjected, "The item cannot be transported across water! This exhibits such danger, as…incalculable!" The stern alarm shone in her grey eyes.

"I-I'm sorry, sir! I didn't-I mean, I knew but-I-I'm so sorry!"

"LEON." Zev turned to the man who had already left. "DAMMIT."

"Zev," the silent one spoke up. "The plan goes ahead as *planned*. Leon does not make mistakes. We shall go to the drop."

Zev recalibrated in his mind. "Fine. It seems too late to change anything…however, if *any* of this goes awry —"

"Yes, of course. My responsibility. Of course, sir." Valerie's wide eyes conveyed more than her voice could.

"Not just your responsibility, my dear: your *head*."

Grifter

"Yorston. THIEF sent me the information on the new 'acquisition,' to use 'Lip' terms. Operation 'Free Market' is a go."

"It's coming through now, Control. We have the drop location too?"

"THIEF doesn't hold back, we have everything now; and now with Roman's additions, we have names to faces."

"I thought Morris redacted that."

"Things change."

"I don't like that. And *Roman*? What the hell does *he* have to do with this? *I* lead Containment."

"I don't question that, Al. Roman's just backup on this op."

"Fine. Whatever. I've got two Armed Fireteams and one Covert. I take it Roman's gonna be waiting by the van?"

"Depends on who's going on the boat."

"Oh shoot, that's right…it's on a boat. We'll probably hijack it off the bridge three clicks from the start. *I'll* be on the boat with Armed Fireteam Alpha and Covert team Bravo. Going in hot, but no fire."

"You know, Al, anyone tell you you're a smart one? The call number we got from THIEF is ***G2T67/L9VXC/WI3M3***."

"Hm, catchy, I'll be sure to keep an eye out. Okay, moving out. Tell Roman not to wait up."

Leon Czoltz stepped out of the structure into the rain. He couldn't stand the small talk of the hired guards for a second longer. The barge had already begun its movement along the wide river, pushed by the small tugboat toward the open ocean. It occurred to him to check up on the acquisition, he hadn't before launch.

Leon moved slippingly on the slick boat's surface; slowly making his way to the bin. The rain battered his back like those Taiwanese jungle gnats, it brought back bad memories, to say the least. He slid over to the package, checking the tarp covering. The chains were tight enough, not to the point where he felt safe though. Cursing under his breath, he thought of the other times the Lip screwed him over. The iridescent puddle of water exuding from the boarded bin caught his eye.

"What the hell?" He didn't hear his own words over the roar of the storm. "Is it leaking? No, nonono. Don't do this to me."

He grabbed what spare material he had on the deck, wrapping the package's underside and pooling the liquid. "That should do it. At

least for now." One of the guards approached him as the barge passed under the bridge.

"Czoltz, is something wrong?" the hired hand shouted above the torrentuous sounds.

"No! Nothing to worry about. All taken care of!"

"Are you sure?" The man walked over to the bin. "Something might be damaged, should we alert the boss?"

"No need. I said I took care of it."

"You're sure? Don't want to take another look?"

"Fine," he grunted while struggling back to the package to double check. He watched as the tarp tore and sprayed the slick liquid on his raincoat. In the corner of his eye, he caught sight as the dark figure lit his flare and tossed it at the Courier. Leon instinctively caught it, immediately going up in flames. The deck ignited in a blaze, scorching every one of the containers in its vicinity. Leon tossed himself against the floor, pounding the burning ground. He watched with his last moments as the dark man walked away, and with his last gasp screamed for help.

Yorston was along the stern of the barge when the explosion erupted. The teams of four and two ducked down immediately behind the crates after the boom. Yorston signalled Bravo to stay back as he led Alpha forward to look out. The only true light was the lightning flashes; as the floodlights from the tug that once illuminated the decks had gone out since the explosion. As he rounded the corner, he caught the orange light blazing from the oil fire; it illuminated the guards as silhouettes while they tried to smother the spreading flame. A box sat in the middle of the blaze, slowly charring and collapsing, revealing six small figures covered in the fire.

Tarps flew down from the hands of the guards, shielding the flames from the rain, as it billowed smoke up in a vast fog covering the entire deck within seconds; Yorston signalled his teams before the

wind blew the blanket of smoke over them. The six agents wrapped their faces and crouched into the fog. Through squinting eyes, and muffled ears, Yorston glimpsed the tall, dark, MC&D agent, to his immediate left, drop in a hail of gunfire. Yorston bulleted to the tarps as he looked back to see one of his agents grazed by a ricochet. The hired guns brandished their semi-automatics as they searched for their assailants. The two fireteams ducked behind two ISO containers near the now-smothered package before the fog of smoke lifted.

"What the hell is going on? All fireteams report!" He hissed into the radio of his tactical vest.

His earpiece buzzed, "What do you mean? This is Charlie, waiting at rendezvous. What's happening?"

"Where's Delta? ROMAN, DO YOU READ?" Yorston only received static in response. He looked up to see the star of fire from an automatic's muzzle at the front of the barge. "*Who the hell is on my boat*?"

The Marshall, Carter, and Dark agents returned fire on the gunner; each of them going behind different crates for cover. Yorston signaled, then radioed, "2, 4: cover and suppress." Silencers off, two of the agents of Alpha moved into place, drawing fire and covering Yorston and the two covert-containment officers as they sped to the tarps. They slung off the secure containment vessels from their backs. Each took three of the figures. The teams withdrew back behind the ISOs. Yorston listened to the absence of gunfire, much to his despair. The Hired Guns searched for the intruders.

"Cap? This is Roman. Come in."

"Roman, do you have any idea what the hell is happening?" he hissed below the sound of the thunder.

"Sorry, sir. It seemed as if we had to resort to less…*conventional* means of engagement."

"We weren't supposed to *engage* at all! You put the lives of everyone here in danger and threatened the integrity of this

operation." Yorston looked over at the charred remains. "What *happened*?"

"Save me the lecture, Yorston. Something went down as soon as we landed on the ship. One of the reps covered the deck with gas… But that's not important right now. Make your way portside. I got a boat, let's get this item the fuck out of here."

Yorston didn't have time to weigh the pros before one of the Guns found them. He signaled for suppressive fire again. Three of the guards went down in the MTF's hailstorm. They booked it to the edge of the barge, banking left as more guards came out of the tugboat. Rounding the corner, Yorston saw the Foundation agent with the automatic standing before him. Undoing his face mask, Roman slung his machine gun to his back and motioned for Captain Yorston to look. The grapple led off the edge of the ship, over to a dinghy moving alongside the barge.

Roman jumped onto the boat. "C'mon, we don't have all day! give me the packages!" Yorston gathered his Covert team, unstrapping the vessels off their backs. He threw them into Roman's arms.

Yorston stared into Roman in complete astonishment and disbelief as the small boat sped away to the rendezvous point. He turned back to the barge as it blew apart in fiery inferno of scrap metals and splinters. Within minutes, police copters swarmed the scene as the teams slipped away. Yorston and Fireteams Alpha and Bravo breached the water in time to see Roman's boat on the horizon, heading back to the city.

Soldier

"What? Explain. Stop the car." The silver-haired man stepped out as the chauffeur skid to a halt. "It's gone. Is that what you're telling me? It's just *gone*?" Zev punched the car roof. "Then WHERE IS IT?"

Shepherd stepped out with Voss and Repartee following. Zev continued on the phone, "What color is the ocean? Still blue? Then at least you avoided *that* disaster. Now we just need to get our

fucking item back. Easy enough? *Then get it done*."

He climbed back into the luxury car, "Take me to the East Wall Street Office. They can't be much farther from there."

"I'm going to the waterfront. I'll head them off."

"Thank you, Shepherd. Finally, someone who can do their job." A van pulled up and carried the huge man away. "*This* is why he's here."

As they drove to the Marshall, Carter, and Dark offices, Valerie couldn't help but fidget in her seat as the city passed her by. Zev calmly looked out the window, however, there was something about his eyes flitting about the scenery that displayed the tumult brewing behind his ice-green eyes. She glanced over to Voss, who stared straight ahead at the general direction of the office. She abhorred the moment when the vehicle finally stopped at the gleaming buildings. At the ground floor, an art expo was going on; she took in every sight she could.

Once the three walked inside, they took an immediate right into the utility corridors. Valerie had walked these halls so many times before, yet never before noticed their deep-grey glow of cruelty. They continued down, passing door after door until reaching the cubicles of the communication center. Only two or three islands were inhabited by callers and receptionists. Zev pulled them aside.

"Funny how this happened, isn't it? Suddenly there's explosions and dead couriers and missing items in a deal that should have been routine…simple…tedious. Yet, *nothing* went right. All this trouble for an item…" Zev looked them both in the eye. "One has to ask themselves… was it a fellow LLP agent, a rival? Someone's old friends at GRU? Couldn't be the Insurgency… So the Foundation? Someone has my property, and I won't stop until I have it back. So, you might as well tell me now: Who is it?"

Valerie was taken aback, "Sully, I never worked with anyone! I swear! I'd never do anything like that. You trust me! Please! It wasn't —"

Bang.

Her body fell to the floor as Zev shook the smoke from his barrel, resting the pistol back in his jacket.

"You see? That's the problem. It's new blood like this, Voss. They don't understand how business is meant to be done. Back in the old days, everyone understood how this worked: You ask, they deliver, you follow through." He waved for someone to clean the mess up. "You know how we do things. You were there. Hell, you were even untrustworthy and still managed to claw your way into things."

He walked on to the door to the main rooms. "You and I? We're the only ones who know the right ways, anymore."

"Watts, come in? You read?"

"Yeah, here. Still no sign of Zev. I checked one of his residences, but now I'm headed to—"

"No time. I've lost contact with our Probe. No word for a while now."

"What do you need?"

"Go meet Roman. He's got the item. Heliotrope's already getting there. Sending you the coordinates."

"God… No one ever tells me anything…"

Heliotrope stopped her car at the edge of the street, she stood under the streetlight searching the darkness for her teammates. She squinted as she pulled her overcoat closer to her chest, guarding it from the rain; through the black of the fogged-over river, she caught the glint of a small boat. She spoke into her earpiece, "Roman? That you?"

"Yep, why? Expecting someone else? Sorry to disappoint."

"You got the item?"

The small boat reached ground, scraping across the cement lining of the river. The FDR still roared above as Heliotrope trod closer to the ship. The four members of the Containment team heaved the containers ashore, Roman then took one in each hand. "Where's Yorston?"

"He's still in the East." Roman didn't look up from the road.

"So you just *left* him there? Didn't that thing blow up?!"

"Look, we didn't have time. In case you didn't notice, we're still in the thick of things here. We still gotta get this thing back to Site-28. And SoHo's a bit of a way's away."

"So hand it over, then. This is Mu-3's op. You should've given it to Yorston."

"Sorry, Grifter. This is personal delivery."

Heliotrope pulled on him before he could open the car door. "Is this about the glory? Give it up, Roman. We have protocols to follow." A shot whizzed between the two.

They turned to see the black van speeding down the street. The man hanging out the window let fly his bullets, Heliotrope ducked behind her vehicle, Roman opened fire on him. The van jerked and skid sideways, denting her sleek car as it fishtailed in an arc to allow the man a better shot at the agents.

Machine guns' chatter deafened Heliotrope as she opened the door and shouted to Roman, "GET IN!" The windshield glass was shattered by the bullets that blazed through her suit, puffing red mist out of her white blouse. Roman jumped into the front seat, grabbing Hel's limp body and pushing it into the passenger side with the containers. She held them close to her chest as she tried to stop the blood from escaping her throat; to no avail. She whispered a prayer as Roman started the car and floored it. The rear-view mirror blew apart as the gunfire tore through the back windshield, Roman closed his eyes for a moment as he swerved around the traffic moving south. His back right tire blew as he turned onto Wall Street. Roman went into the telephone pole, three cars rear-ending each other

behind. The huge man walked over to the passenger side, sliding the boxes out of Heliotrope's limp arms, and calmly made his way back to the van.

Spitting the last of her blood from her mouth, she spoke into her collar. With her last gasp, "Plate numbers… 'Tango, Golf, 1, 5, 3, Fox-foxtrot, 2, 7…' Have to… Watts…"

Yorston reached the coordinates sent throughout the MTF by Control. Taking off the Amphibious gear, he looked around for any sight. The commotion down the street could be heard for miles. He tried to make himself sparse, until Fireteam Charlie arrived in the gleaming white van.

"Boss! Get in! We got an ID on the skip's car!" Before Yorston could open the sliding door, another car drove up; a plumber's truck.

Watts rushed out, meeting Yorston's eyes, "What happened? Where's Hel?"

"The Op's been compromised. We gotta go now!" The two stepped inside the van as it shot down the roads. "I swear, containment teams used to be good at their jobs. Roman went off with the item, but I think Zev got word of it in time." Yorston turned toward the driver, "Rich, where are they?"

"The package's being tracked down to the MC&D Wall Street HQ. Police are on the scene now. Possibly even UIU."

"Damn. Contact made?"

"No. Just surveillance. But the LLP's smart enough to know when they're being watched."

"Forget this. Control?" Yorston spoke into his comm. "I need the other backup teams over on Wall Street. Don't involve Pi-1, but get me as much as you can."

"What's the plan, boss?"

"We're going in, Rich. Hot and blazing."

Holder

"Show me everyone."

The wall of monitors projected dozens of agents; the ones waiting outside, watching carefully for any sign of Marshall, Carter, and Dark employees' appearance in or out of the offices. The center projection switched between face after face, until Zev held up his hand.

"Stop. Who is that?" The image showed a young, blond agent, covered in cuts and blood, suiting up in a new tactical vest.

"His name is Roman." An unseen voice entered. "He's a container for SCP. He's of no importance anymore."

"Shepherd, how did it go?" Through Zev's eyes, he could see the actual question.

"They're right here." The blood-spattered plexiglass vessels slid across the floor over to Zev.

"Why did you bring them here? There's an infestation about, if you haven't noticed."

"You told me to get it here, so I did."

That's not the reason, Zev spoke in his mind. "Come, we need to get these into security, now." The two went down the halls, deeper into the utilities. Voss followed.

"Sully, I need to check them!"

"We can worry about damages later. I'm sure they're fine. Luckily, there's one thing those hoarders know how to do well: keep an acquisition safe."

After being let through the armored door by the two armed guards, Zev looked up at the mechanical eye sitting at the top of the frame for the vault's seal. The eye almost nodded as a panel stretched

open, revealing an opening roughly the size of Zev's hand. With minor pain, he authenticated. The doors scraped across the tile as they lumbered open to the almost-warehouse in the small office. Stacked high with crates, there was almost no room for another acquisition, let alone for someone to walk through.

However, Zev managed to navigate through the maze of merchandise, valuables and goods until he came to the cart. Around the size of an industrial photocopier, the mass of plates, panels, and buttons whirred with excitement at the sight of the Broker. He slid open a drawer below the main hub of keyboards. The velvet-lined interior perfectly contorted around the six bronze horses, once Zev had rested them in the container. Sliding it back into place, he typed his passcode and left. Voss and Shepherd stared at the man looking for a clue as to what the plan was.

Zev brushed the dust from the never-used merchandise off himself. "All set. What do you say we welcome our visitors, hm?"

"Any word from THIEF? What's next?"

"No…nothing. I don't know what's happening. Yorston's moving in, hopefully we can salvage *something* out of this operation."

"Do we at least know yet?"

"Know what?"

"THIEF. The probe had to be one of the four, right? Couldn't have gotten that info, if not."

"That's not for us to worry about, Watts. For all I can tell, THIEF's *gone*."

"Zev's starting to become more trouble than he's worth. Why aren't we storming?"

"Protocol. *That's* why. Something's definitely wrong with this team's outlook. We have to follow rules. That's why PR's having to deal with a nightmare right now, that's

why we've lost the item, *that's* why Heliotrope is dead."

"Heliotrope? What happened? What's going on, Control?"

"Things can't get much worse, Watts. All we can hope now is that we aren't too deep."

Roman was sliding the comm headset around his helmet as a hand grabbed him by the shoulder. He found himself face to face with the Unit Commander overseeing this next phase of the operation. The steely-faced chief in the NYPD uniform pointed to a white van careening to a halt at the operation site. The remaining forces of MTF Mu-3 stepped out, with a young captain b-lining toward the Agent.

"What the hell happened while I was gone?" Yorston glared at the soldier.

"The op moved ahead."

"You left us in the middle of the *freaking East River!*"

"We had to get outta there before—"

"Before Zev could intercept the item?" Roman's face darkened. "Before we lost an Agent? It's too late for that now; isn't it?" Yorston strode over to the main SUV of the Unit. From its trunk, he secured a new headset, replaced his cartridges with multiple accessories, and traded his MP5 for a silenced "Baby Eagle." Loading his subsonic rounds, he motioned for his teams. "I need one and two to come. Three, set up overwatch. Get in contact with Control; see if he can help with anything."

"What do you think you're doing? We need to set up the exchange."

"You're still doing that, but I'm going in with Mu-3."

"You're gonna try to swipe the Item? No. You can't do that. Your role in this mission is over, Yorston. We're gonna bust this place."

"Get off your power trip, Roman." Yorston picked up the disruptor from his vest pouch, switching on the red light. "In case you don't know, I'm a Thief," the red light blinked thrice. "And while we aren't as fancy as you *Standard* Containment guys, this is what we do; and we do it well," green light. All transmissions went static as Yorston led his team across the street.

Zev tore the receiver out of his ear on his way through the foyer; the sound of the snow gave him a headache. He strode through, waving away the personnel trying to explain what he already knew. The gleaming, silver lobby of the office was paled with the suit standing at the door.

"Good morning, sir. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you for a minute of your time."

Zev patted his 9mm. "How about no. I'm afraid *I'm* gonna hafta ask you to leave."

"Sully Zev, I'm with the NYPD. Don't make this harder than it needs to be." Zev stepped around the agent.

"You guys don't have a thing on me. I suggest you and your friends leave before this gets too deep." Opening the door, he scanned for the intruders across the sea of faces and cars. Zev locked eyes with Roman.

"Listen. Maybe we can work something out."

Zev bolted back into the building before the SWAT vehicles arrived. Taking the long way around to the surveillance area, he passed Voss in the cubicles. He met Shepherd in front of the wall of static screens. "I need her out of here before things get messy. On top of this, I can't have the whole board lose the last of their faith in me."

"You sure, Zev?" Juniper Voss walked to him, "You're sure you didn't lose it when your courier failed?"

"What do you expect we do? They're ready for the whole cavalry to go ahead and take this place. Look at this," Zev motioned at the

defunct security feeds. "We have no next move. They have us by the balls."

"Zev, calm down. We need a plan of action." Shepherd stepped over to the stone-faced guard at the door. "Set a defensive perimeter around the vaults. They don't play by the rules."

"What do you mean? They have to stay under the radar as much as us."

"No, Voss," Zev wiped the sweat from his brow. "Not these ones…I don't know what's gonna happen next." With the intercom system, the guard issued orders. Within seconds, the three agents watched as hired guns rushed to the front of the building. Voss gasped and took the nearest seat as she mentally prepared herself for the inevitable.

"Shepherd, I need access to the Repulse."

"Are you sure that is wise?"

"I'm sure that it's the only way we could possibly have an edge on the Hoarders. I want to bury them. I'm *going* to bury them."

It started as a whisper until she turned to the Broker; Voss pleaded, "Why?"

"It's just business," Zev squatted down to look her in the eye, "but now it's my *personal* business.

Thief

The troops piled out of the vans as Roman was handed the megaphone by the commander. The sector was evacuated of civilians, and the soldiers prepared for siege. Through the glass of the facade, the once-bustling office looked abandoned. The vague shapes moved slightly in the shadows of the lobby were the Unit's only confirmation of the threat that lay in wait.

Before Roman could issue the order to the forces, the commander

placed his hand on his arm. "Wait. Something's happening."

Roman tried to reach Yorston for a clue until the static buzzing from his headset reminded him.

Mu-3 climbed two stories under their radio silence. The building adjacent to the offices was perfect for the maneuver; no alley, thin walls, and entirely evacuated. Yorston had a hole cut through the plaster and brick of the adjoined wall of the two buildings. The crappy carpeting and taupe walls, through one and a half feet of brick and mortar, changed to gleaming tile and silvery walls of the MC&D building.

The mirroring floor was scuffed and dusted by the team moving in checking the area for hostiles. Yorston moved for the Containment specialists next, but as the last agent stepped through the carved door, a reverberation shook the structure. The agent's foot caught in the hole as a wave of greenish force moved outwards from the offices stopping at the boundary. A clean burn sliced the Foundation agent's limb off in a flash, leaving the forgotten boot on the other side of the shimmering barrier.

"Thompson! Shit. No turning back." Yorston recalibrated as the thief grabbed his amputation, "Franks, stay here with Thompson. Find a safe place to wait this out."

The soldier helped Thompson up, carrying him to a restroom. Yorston pulled out the detector, the green blinking showed anomalous activity all over the place; until he caught a glimpse of concentration. "There. West, Northwest area." The captain switched off the disruptor, there was next to no surveillance above the first floor. "Charlie? You read?"

The receiver picked up a voice long missed, "Hey, Al. What do you need?"

"Control. Thank god. Do you have the floor plan to this office?"

"I just got everything about it. Sending it now."

"Got it, Cap," the second thief had the tablet out.

"Thanks, Control." The teams moved toward the mass of activity, until they came to a small office. "Set the charges."

"Field is set, Zev. Send in the welcome wagon?" The question was rhetorical.

Shepherd aimed his launcher at the glass walls after rounding the corner. The smoke grenade flew through the shattered panes, landing barely burned in the middle of the SWAT teams. Gunfire immediately followed, more for intimidation than anything; they knew the Feds had no idea what they were shooting at. The hail ceased after they realized the bullets weren't even penetrating the green energy barrier.

Shepherd understood he couldn't keep this up for too long. The teams, the investigations, the police alone were enough to destroy any hope for him to get out of this unscathed in the eyes of the LLP.

"Fuck it."

The Repulse stopped. The hired guns came out of their cover to open fire, shattering the remains of the glass windows. Each was disabled by the agents one by one. The precise fire managed to miss Shepherd by an inch. He turned and let fly the rounds from his Armsel Protecta; nailing three soldiers in the head before he was dropped. The teams moved in, stepping over the glass and bodies of the felled agents. Rushing past, a couple of them didn't notice when Shepherd grabbed the officer and ripped off his grenade belt while firing off the rest of the drum magazine from his shotgun. Before the SWAT captain could tell his men not to fire, the grenades blew.

Zev heard the blasts. He knew they'd be in soon, with little time for any escape. It was the *third* blast that really caught his attention. Pulling the 9mm from his jacket, he raced down the halls to the back rooms. The dissipating smoke made it evident.

"Get me security, NOW!" He ran back to the main surveillance area to meet with Voss. "Get me the *hell* out of here!"

He was met with Voss at gunpoint by the SWAT officers covering the area. The mascara streamed with her tears. Roman aimed his pistol straight at Zev's temple. "Bang."

Yorston finally broke the locks. After his team wasted so long sorting through the columns of crates and merchandise for the call numbers, they'd found the cart. Once the main panel was off its hinge, Yorston asked Rollins to get into the mainframe.

"Control? Do you have anything that can help? This looks ridiculously sophisticated…"

"Someone sent us the schematics."

"THIEF actually get back to you?"

"No. Someone else. Rollins, what do you see? Which part?"

Rollins switched on her mic, "I'm in the main boards. This really is some of the most impressive stuff I've seen… Okay, I think I've got this. No puzzles, no games; just wires now." She swallowed dry, "Wires set to *blow*, but still…"

"Okay. I think we've got it. Row H-Gamma-seven?"

"Connected three ways, cross porting. Red to Alfa-Epsilon."

"Cut it."

The agent flicked her cutters with second-natured dexterity. The system shut down, the drawers slid open. She got out the containment vessels as Yorston lifted them out of their slots. The alarm sounded.

"Go! Go! We gotta go!" The teams navigated through the maze again. A display over the vault door showed a countdown. "We got one minute!"

Two of team Bravo set new charges, blew blowing the door before the failsafe activated. They pulled the dismantled vault's door from its groove, discovering two Foundation Armed Personnel stationed

at the opening.

"Give it up, Zev. It's over now."

Zev kept his gun on the agent. "*Nothing* is over. I will not suffer this embarrassment."

"Drop the gun, and put your hands behind your head." Roman turned his gun on Voss. "What, do you think this is a negotiation?"

Watts approached behind, "Roman! Stop! You're under arrest!" Roman didn't take his eyes off Zev. "Rolff Romanovich. Stand down! You're not going to—"

Bang. **Bang**.

Voss's body dropped to the floor, with Roman following suit. Zev's pistol smoked as two operatives grabbed him, detaining and handcuffing. He spat on the body as they escorted him through.

Jenna rushed to the two on the ground. Voss called for her, "Watts!"

"It—it was you… wasn't it?"

Voss chuckled; blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. "I'd always wondered what you looked like." She brushed the hair from Jenna's face, "You did well."

She watched the light leave her eyes as Yorston met up with them. "God… Dunn's gonna kill us." He stepped over to Romanovich. "Another agent down…"

"He was GRU. The assassin Control was looking for. *She's* our downed agent…" She stared up at Yorston. "Why did this happen? How do you know when you're too deep?"

"You only know when you're gone…" He helped her lift THIEF's body. "We got 'em. At least…" he saw looked out to the SCP Containment vessels leaving, "at least we got 'em."

Bronze

There was a cataclysmic reshuffling of the deck. Something very far away had been broken, first on that most basal of structural scales — the atomic nucleus — and then on a much more macroscopic and aesthetic scale — land, sky, composite stone, and refined metal. Beams and boards splintered. Foundations cracked and craters formed.

Several seconds later, something else far and nearby broke open. There was a Way in the wall of the laboratory, haphazardly structured and clearly unintended. Smoke, steam and ash billowed through the hole from the other side, as was now both allowed and required by the air pressure differential. Severed wiring on the rims of the hole fizzled. The desert's stillness was broken, and irreparably broken at that.

Several minutes later, the emergency lights and fire suppression systems in the laboratory came back online. Though not purposeful, a cloud of chilled carbon dioxide spilled onto the desert sands and dissipated. The fires inside were put out, but the sun outside burnt on.

Several hours later, if one strained one's hearing, the distant thrum of one or many motorized vehicles was apparent in the regions surrounding the laboratory chamber, even through the Way. If one used artificial enhancements, one would hear shouting. Maybe even slamming doors and the tapping of toes.

Several days later, after much preparation and forethought, a hand in possession of six fingers and mottled ashy skin probed through and gripped the side of the Way. Wrapped in a rubber glove, it was joined on the other edge of the breach by its mate. A lean, towering humanoid figure vaulted itself through the hole. Feé˜fo˜panp's booted feet sunk into the sand to his ankles, and he shifted his weight so he would not sink any deeper. His reflective, protective full-body suit twinkled.

His earwig crackled into life. "*All clear. Getting readings now.*" He waited. "*Readings check out. Environmental conditions not harmful to life. No life present.*"

"*No life at all? Describe the nature of the new area,*" a tinny voice piped through the electric umbilicus springing from the back of his suit.

"*Desert as far as I can see. Temperature of 1080 Pwu. Altitude indeterminate." He paused, squinting at the sky with his myriad instruments. "…The sun isn't moving. This isn't Praveal.*"

"*Bureran that. Okay, turn to face the realized window. What does it look like on your side?*"

The giant complied. "*Same shape, same depth on the inside, zero depth on the outside. A direct connection.*"

"*Okay, come on back. Watch the drop.*"

"*Bureran.*" His nimble, elongated fingers grasped at the ragged edges of the Way and with a mighty chin-up he pulled himself up, into, and through it.

Scientists young, old and ancient watched as Feé˜fo˜panp fell back through the hole in the top of the laboratory wall, briefly obscuring the clear blue sky behind him. He was scanned, his cable was disconnected, and Rad-Squad took him through the secondary airlock to decontamination. The data was sent to be analysed.

Several minutes later, the data returned from analysis. Everything was clean. The scientists left the room as it was sealed off and filled with expanding sealant foam, from the bronze-inlaid floor to the vaulted ceiling.

"*Walk with me,*" said the scientist of the most advanced age.

"*…*" all said.

"*…What do you suppose we do with it?*" spoke a middle-aged scientist.

"…" all said.

"*Research.*" An older scientist proposed.

"*…and development?*" A slightly younger scientist queried.

"*Research and development,*" all agreed.

"*—and development.*" said the youngest researcher.

Several weeks later, the Way was unsealed.

Several months later, the area through the Way had been fitted with personnel transport pads, railways, barracks, labyrinthine facilities, and a production command center. The last of these was by far the grandest structure. Eighty-one-hundred ˜Reiuqù tall, an utterly massive gray building oversaw the desert. A pyramid, at least from the outside, with two enormous spheres of beryllium bronze which hung like balloons in the air and connected by thin pipes. The structure was constructed of the standard Codalitao protein, which was what made it such a genius feat of engineering. Chalk it up to the pressure, the temperature, or the gravity, but it was amazing that it worked. Using the absolute best in dysdimensional protein folding had allowed the Pravealeaons to construct a factory facility inside that far exceeded the size of the pyramid in all eight directions. In its gut was the Way.

Several years later, the factory ended production owing to a sudden and total lack of employees. All non-essential materials were scavenged and harvested thereafter.

Several millennia later, there was an admittedly quite minor reshuffling of the deck along the eastern seaboard, and an organization devoted to protecting normalcy uncovered the factory. Several years later, they reopened it.

Addendum:
Date: 03/18/19
Recent advancements in dematerialization science and

containment techniques have allowed for the successful unfolding of protein P-17392-1 AKA "pyramitin." Procedures to unfold said protein as it occurs in SCP-1216-3 are to begin shortly.

Addendum:
Date: 03/21/19
RCOC considered a loss. Lenox considered a loss. SCP-1216 upgraded to Keter effective immediately.

Brother's Keeper

It was ironic, in a way. In a CK-event or NK-event extinction scenario, all SCPs that could be terminated were to be terminated, so that whatever shreds remained of humanity could have at least a glimmer of chance of surviving in the ruined world.

In a XK-event, all SCPs were set free, so that they might carry humanity's last seeds to whatever wonderlands they would flee to.

A suitcase slammed on the floor next to SCP-073. "Heads up, Cain. You are free, on one condition. Take the suitcase with you. When you see the sun again, open it."

Cain shook his head, sitting in lotus position, eyes still closed. He nodded towards the patterns drawn in blood, covering the walls of his room. "I am sorry, but I shall be staying. Chances to die like this only come once… well, in a lifetime. I will not be left behind this time."

The researcher sat in front of him with a heavy sigh and lit a cigarette, his disability making it a long and elaborate procedure. "Suit yourself. Damn, I should've never taken up smoking."

"Losing hope? I guess I should commend you for keeping it this long."

"Fuck you."

Cain frowned. "I mean it. For what it's worth, I am honestly sorry for what is happening."

"What, you telling me the apocalypse is your doing?"

"Not quite, but I've dealt with it before. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found, and the third part of the creatures that had life died." Cain vaguely gestured with his metal

arms.

"So we're fucking biblical now and you're the Cain that killed his brother?" The researcher chuckled. "I don't think that took."

"No, I am not. At least, not quite." A weary laugh. "Very well. I swore to take this secret to the grave, but there are more than enough graves now. The job your Foundation does - that it did until now? I have done something similar in the past."

"The past. How far past we are talking about? Before the Beatles?"

"Before music. We had a good group, back then. Yweh, me, Hevel, Lilit, Bright - not your Bright, I'm afraid - Orion, Sela… More, much more, but the others are gone. Even their names, when we failed."

"And you guys just lived for the next n-th millenia and waited for someone to invent television?"

"Only the cursed. Only us that went too far and too deep, and were branded for it. No, I didn't kill Able. But I might as well have."

The researcher sneered, lighting a second cigarette. "Could have shared a bit more with us before this sort of schedule pressure, chief."

"One copy of the 'Containment Procedures' in every hotel of America is not enough?"

"Something may have been lost in the translation."

Cain sighed. "Ten millenia is a long time, child. Even ideas decay. No, you have done a much better job than we have. You have even managed to keep that accursed lizard caged for more than a week."

"Not good enough."

"It is not the end, you know. It was not the end before." He touched his brand. "And the storm will face more than seven thirds, this time."

"I'd really prefer to see for myself."

Cain opened his eyes. "Would you? Would you be cursed? Would you have life itself flee you at every step?"

The researcher leaned up, inches away from Cain's face. "If it saves one life. If it lets one more human be born."

SCP-073 paused for a moment, then laughed. "Yes. That is what I said, then." He stood up. "Shall we, Dr. Kain?"

The dog got up and spat his cigarette. "After you… Senior Researcher Cain."

Brotherhood

> **NOTE:** This is Part **21** of the **23** part series, **`The Cool War`**. Reading this part first is a *very bad idea* and will spoil a lot of the story.

> From: Pico
> 16 hartford street come beat the shit out of me or whatever

Ruiz Duchamp stared at the message blankly.

"Carol, can I-"

Ruiz looked up; Carol wasn't behind the counter. Ruiz stood up, walking deliberately back to his studio. He paced past the foyer, entering the room filled with deathtraps. His brother had clearly turned self-destructive; the final phase of his antipsychotic withdrawal. Ruiz opened his medicine cabinet, moving his own antidepressants and multivitamins to the side, reaching to the back. He pulled out a small bottle of Clozapine, shoving it into his right pocket. He moved to his closet, grabbing a heavy brown bomber jacket. He pulled his elastic band pistol from an inner pocket, clenching it tightly in his left hand.

Ruiz sent two texts, then sprinted to Pico's hideout.

> From: Snipper
> 16 hartford street I'm all that's left

The Sculptor sat and thought. Snipper was a reckless idiot, but on the other hand, he was an unpredictable one. Snipper had to be removed from the equation.

The Sculptor turned to the wall of clay, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

Agent Tangerine sprinted down the busy road. Every one of his contacts was gone. His cover was unrecoverable, his utility had become negligible. He'd be transferred for sure: back to paperwork, back to normal fieldwork, back to gunning down The Bad Guys… it was all so mind-numbingly simplistic. So *boring*.

Tangerine saw the gallery in the distance. A few quick phone calls, it turned out, were all that he needed; Ruiz Duchamp's studio hadn't moved in years. Stupidity on their behalf for not doing that in the first place, but then, there was the assumed lack of carelessness on Duchamp's behalf. Tangerine kept running, dodging a man running in the other direction wearing a brown bomber jacket. He gripped his pistol in its holster tightly as he entered the foyer, turning to the help desk. Panting from the run, he blurted out the question:

"Duchamp's studio?"

The man behind the counter gestured further into the gallery. Tangerine turned and walked, slowing his breath. He looked around the corner, finding the room filled with blatant deathtraps. He tapped Green's number into his mobile phone.

"Green, I'm at his studio now. Empty."

"You stay there, we've got a new lead on the Snipper. Call me if anything happens."

Tangerine's phone beeped as the call ended. He sighed, walking through the room, carelessly moving to sit on an available stool.

Then he noticed the fedora sitting on the electric chair.

> From: [METADATA CORRUPT]
> 16 hartford street this is the snipper hello

"Alright, boys. We don't know what's going on, we don't know what this guy looks like, we are going into this as blind as a bat. A particularly blind bat. A blind and deaf bat, with self esteem issues."

Green paused for effect, looking around at Mobile Task Force

Upsilon-18.

"Admittedly, we don't know he's in there. It is quite possible, and indeed, almost certain, that this is a trap of some kind. Yes, Alcorn?"

Field Agent Alcorn put down his hand, moderately confused.

"Why are we walking into a trap, sir?"

"Excellent question, Alcorn, with a stupid answer: because we've no better course of action. We've might have the address of a maliciously artistic psychopath, and if he's been stupid enough to throw us a bone, then we can't not bite. Moving out in ten minutes, gentlemen; striking while the iron's hot."

Alcorn begrudgingly trudged to the locker room.

> From: The Snipper (Pico Wilson)
> shit's gonna hit the fan

The Janitor turned around, emitting a buzzing sigh through its gas mask.

Ruiz finished jogging to the abandoned building. Decrepit and crumbling, errant piles of broken concrete littered the street in front of it. Four stories tall… on the outside, at least. Ruiz roughly forced a pick gun into the front door, pulled the trigger a few times, then twisted the handle open. He edged in slowly, closing the door behind him.

"PICO!"

Ruiz shouted out to the cavernous room. Cylindrical concrete pylons were distributed throughout; it looked like an industrial warehouse, despite sitting in a dilapidated residential neighbourhood. Ruiz listened to his own echoing voice, scanning behind the pillars for motion.

"Shhhhhhhhh. Keep your voice down, brother."

Ruiz twisted to his left, aiming at the sound's source down the wooden sights of his gun. Pico's distorted voice came from a small handheld radio; clearly modified from a children's walkie-talkie, given that it was pink with white flowers on. Ruiz picked it up, pushing the talk button in.

"Pill delivery service, this is Ruiz speaking, how may I help you?"

"I'm fine without them. They'd kill me."

"No. No, that's definitely not a thing that's true. You are saying not true things, and are also stupid."

"Allow me to clarify, then: I just consumed ten pills apiece of escitalopram and topiramate. I down a single clozapine pill, my heart will pretty much explode."

"Fuck."

"Anyway. Get up to the top level. Snip snip."

Ruiz pocketed the radio, static still buzzing from its speaker, and walked over to the rough concrete staircase. Cement powder spiralled from the ground with his every step, staining his shoes grey. He jogged up the stairs to the second floor, then the third, and finally reached the fourth. The final floor, unlike all the rest, was almost spotlessly clean. The ground, while still concrete, had been polished and shined to almost flawless levels of reflection. The pillars, while still cylindrical, rose and descended into decoratively carved ends, in effective mimicry of ancient Greek architecture. And then, sitting comfortably upon a pile of corpses, Pico Wilson stared apathetically at his brother.

"Ruiz. Long time no see."

Ruiz levelled his wooden gun at his brother's smirking face.

"Pico. Why'd you kill him?"

Pico reached into the pile, pulling out an errant hand.

"This guy?"

"You know who I mean."

"What, so you don't care why I killed this guy?"

"No."

"No love at all for Donovan Stilward? You don't want to know why? Really?"

"I don't think there was a reason."

"He kidnapped, raped, and killed three children."

"…what?"

"You heard me."

"You're lying. You're an indiscriminate murderer."

"I never lie, brother. Only art lies, and it's a lie that makes us realize the truth. And the truth is this: the only truth is in art's lies."

"Stop it. Why did you kill The Critic?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"Tell me why."

"So, just to clarify, you think that I killed the big man for a reason, but not good old kiddie-fucking Donovan Stilward?"

Pico waved the corpse's hand for emphasis.

"Ruiz, your problem is the same as mine: incoherence. Well, that and a drastically exaggerated sense of self-importance. Not everything happens for a reason, brother."

Pico jumped off his pile and started walking towards Ruiz, gesticulating wildly, Ruiz never taking the aim of his gun from his brother's head.

"See, the only difference between you and me, Ruiz, is I don't lie about it. You want to know why I killed Critic? You think it had

anything to do with you at all? No, brother, no. Nothing of the sort. As much as you would like to be, brother, you are not the prime mover here, and it's getting under your skin."

Pico flipped a butterfly knife from his pocket and started to play with it. Ruiz steeled his expression.

"Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… happen. And it's not because of any reason, or any cause. People like to pretend there was a cause, right? They like to pretend that there's always a reason. They like to pretend that there was something that could have been done, and think about all of the little things that would have made it turn out any other way. And they sit there tossing and turning, trying to reverse-engineer the world, as though finding a solution would retroactively change things. But it doesn't matter. Those are things that have already happened, and thinking about it wastes more time, more things will keep happening, and then it all just fizzles away into meaninglessly masturbatory hypotheticals."

Pico took the knife and ran it across his chin, scraping errant facial hairs without cutting his skin.

"Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… I don't know how to say. Perhaps I would call it… 'reversion'. Sometimes things revert, have you noticed? It's as though we were living on the edge of a coin. A knife, even. Sometimes things revert and the world feels horribly different. Can you feel it? You've felt it, haven't you?"

Ruiz continued staring down his gun. Pico, having scraped his chin free of hair, started making incisions on the back of his hand.

"We're doing the same thing, always. Alluding to change, but it's not real. It's all static, it's fake, it's FAKE! Don't you see, brother? We're just playing at… at being gods. What do gods do when they live forever? I'll tell you, brother. They just keep hammering each other on the back. They tell each other that there is meaning, when it's all just easily coined bullshit. And, if they're lucky, brother, some gods even get to forget. There's only one truth, Ruiz. Do you get me?"

"You're insane."

"No, I'm incoherent, there's a difference. Sanity is arbitrary, brother. The consensus of stupid people."

"WHY DID YOU KILL THE CRITIC?"

"I guess… because… I could?"

Ruiz pulled the trigger, sending a supersonic elastic band into his brother's chest. Pico fell, winded.

"TELL ME!"

"You really want to know?"

"YES!"

"Look behind you."

Ruiz spun in place, then saw his eyes reflected in the dark glass of The Janitor's mask.

"This still feels like a stupid idea, sir."

Field Agent Alcorn was sitting across from Agent Green inside of the white, unmarked Foundation van. The nine-man squad (with the addition of Green) was awkwardly squeezed in just one vehicle. Every turn pushed or pulled the agents around the vehicle as the hurtled towards 16 Hartford Street.

"You know you're disposable, don't you Alcorn?"

Alcorn frowned angrily at Green, who appraised him apathetically.

"Don't take that personally. I'm disposable too. We're paid to be disposable. If you weren't, you wouldn't be in the field."

Green rubbed the ridge of his nose, then continued.

"There are numerous methodologies that would be safer. We could have brought more personnel. We could have gotten some snipers, we could have tried to lock the place down. Those would cost more,

in exchange for lower risk. But we are disposable. And as much as we like to pretend otherwise, the men in suits aren't made of money."

Green leaned over and spoke into Alcorn's ear.

"As bad as it sounds, Alcorn, we are going with the stupidest idea because it is the cheapest."

The van screeched to a halt. Green unholstered his pistol; Alcorn gripped his rifle, then pushed open the van's back door, covering his squad as they moved to the entrance. Green sprinted to the entrance, then scanned the pillars inside. He entered, pistol still aimed at eye-level, scanning corners as the members of Upsilon 18 slowly fanned inside.

Ruiz stared at The Janitor, stunned like a deer in the headlights. Pico slowly got to his feet, laughing lightly.

"There you are, you beautiful thing. Over here."

The Janitor turned, making its way over to The Snipper. It kneeled in front of him; Pico patted it softly on the head. Ruiz was stunned into silence.

"See, The Janitor here's basically… well, 'god' is a bit much. Demigod, do you think?"

The Janitor raised its face up to its master.

"I am not divine."

"Oh, but you are divine, my dear, you are. What do you think, Ruiz? I'm not sure what we'll do for a wedding dress; white on black would be fantastic, though."

Ruiz recovered, again returning his aim to The Snipper's head. Pico simply laughed.

"You're threatening me with elastic bands, Ruiz. You're threatening me with *stationary*."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do any of this? What's your endgame?"

"Why do you think there's an endgame? Hell, what was yours? Kill the Critic, then what?"

"Things would change."

"Nothing ever changes. Even now, nothing's changed. Everyone just changed places, but it's all the same. They're playing a game of musical chairs, you stopped the music, but forgot to remove a seat."

"You're wrong. I cut him out, I sliced him out like a cancer. His side-jobs had replacements, but I don't care about them. There is no Critic."

Pico Wilson spread his arms wide.

"Of course there is. You're talking to him."

"We secure, Alcorn?"

"This floor is, at least. We going up?"

"Yep."

"Perkins, Dorfman, with me. Everyone else, keep this floor locked down. Nobody in, nobody out."

Perkins and Dorfman joined Alcorn and Green at the base of the stairs.

"You first, Green."

They swept carefully upwards to the second floor, spreading out to search.

"You're not The Critic."

"Of course I am. I emptied the seat, I get to take it."

"HE WOULD HAVE KILLED HIMSELF."

"The keyword being 'would'. I got him first. Mine to claim in his absence. Didn't you realise that?"

"So then… if I kill you?"

Pico tilted his head back, cackling madly.

"Go ahead and try, brother. Janitor. Clean up the mess."

The Janitor stood, turning around to face Ruiz. It walked towards him, hands raised. Ruiz began to grin.

"And… cut."

The Janitor spun around, tackling Pico to the ground, sending his butterfly knife clattering into a distant corner. The Snipper struggled, trying to escape the masked figure's grip. He wildly clawed at the mask with dirty fingernails, until getting his fingers underneath and pulling it cleanly off.

REWIND

"Oi. Sandra."

The Director sat comatose in her bed. Ruiz Duchamp stood next to her, poking her cheek with his finger.

"Come on, Sandy. You might have fooled them, but you can't fool me."

The Director opened one of her eyes, whispering through her oxygen mask.

"Bugger off, Ruiz."

"I've got the cameras on loop, and the door's locked. Take off the

mask."

Sandra Paulson pulled it off, then yanked several fake IV drips from her arm.

"Damn it, Ruiz, what do you want?"

"Well, for starters, I want to know why you're pretending to be unconscious."

Sandra rubbed the back of her head.

"Suits got me. Drugged me up, not that it had any effect, of course."

"Of course."

"Fed them some bullshit about you leaking the play to me as well. Watch out for that."

"You what?"

"Hey, calm down. First name that popped into my head, man. You shouldn't have turned up last night."

"I needed to warn you!"

"You seriously think I wouldn't know about the Hanged King? That's old-school stuff, everyone knows about it. Hell, I wrote a pilot for a sitcom adaptation. 'Hanging with The King', I think it was."

"Then why the hell were you running the show?"

"I was being watched. Did you really think I'd turned into a stupid, crotchety old lady? I was an actress before a director."

Ruiz frowned, thinking on her words.

"So… who gave it to you?"

"The Sculptor. That asshole's trying to kill us all."

The phone sitting on The Director's bedside table started to ring.

She picked it up, placing it to the side of her head.

"Ruiz?"

"Sandy, I need some help. I can't be in two places at once, and Felix is watching me."

"Wait, you've been talking to Felix?"

"Yeah, we… started hanging out, or something. Still not sure if I can trust him."

"He's harmless. What do you want?"

"I need you to tail my brother. Figure out where he lives."

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"No, but I know where he's going to be tonight. 27 Rokan Avenue. The whole gang's meeting up for tea and cookies."

"Tea and cookies?"

"Sorry, I mean in order to plan their attack at an exhibition that I'm not even going to be attending while The Sculptor insists on using my name as the motivation behind a witch hunt. I'm not sure how I got those two mixed up. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure. Any luck with The Sculptor?"

"One problem at a time, Sandy."

The Director placed her phone on the bedside table. She pulled an inflatable doll from underneath her bed, stuck it under her covers, then changed into plainclothes. She locked her door (fortunately, she had her own room), then carefully lowered herself outside onto the window. They'd never notice she was gone.

Ruiz's phone buzzed in his pocket. He flipped it out, pushing it to his ear.

"Hey Sandy."

"Ruiz. I've got an address. 16 Hartford Street. Big abandoned building."

"Fantastic."

"He has also met The Janitor."

"Who?"

"Tall guy. Gas mask."

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

Sandra's phone buzzed in her pocket. She'd not actually returned to the hospital after her first escape. The nurses still hadn't noticed.

"Hey Ruiz."

"Critic's dead."

"Oh. It worked then?"

"Nope. Pico killed him."

"Shit."

"Indeed. Keep an eye on him for me."

"What are we doing about The Sculptor?"

"I'm working on it. Don't worry."

Ruiz's phone started ringing.

"Sandy?"

"I just had an idea. You know how I'm really good at acting?"

To: Sandy
go time.

To: Felix
can you get the janitor to meet me at my studio? need to ask something

---

Felix glanced at his phone, tapped at a few keys, then returned it to his pocket.

From: The Snipper (Pico Wilson)
shit's gonna hit the fan

The Janitor turned around, emitting a buzzing sigh through its gas mask. Its phone beeped again.

From: The Clipper (Felix Cori)
Ruiz Duchamp's asking for you at his studio.

The Janitor examined the screen, thinking about the messages.

It knew what had happened.

It exhaled another deep, buzzing sigh.

Then it removed its mask, and became the person beneath the mask.

The person beneath started walking to a coffee shop.

AND BACK TO THE PRESENT

"Miss The Director. I see. I SEE."

Sandra, free of the stifling gas mask, easily reasserted her full-body pin. The Snipper began to laugh loudly.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA… Oh, Little Miss The Director. How

Would You Like To Play?"

The Director switched to a stranglehold, trying to block Pico's airways.

"no i don't think that will work here. Not on us, you know? NOT ON US."

The Snipper twisted, tearing his shirt off and using the leeway to escape The Director's hold. His emaciated ribcage rose and fell as he panted madly.

"We Aren't Going To Go Down As Easily As That Miss The Director. and we haven't forgotten you either RUIZ."

Ruiz shot two elastic bands at his brother's head. The first grazed Pico's ear; the second snapped into his eye. He recoiled, covering his face with his hands.

"no you see this is not how it goes down. We Can Just Restart. We can just… restart, you know? It's not real. It can't be. IT CAN'T BE."

Pico ran manically to his pile of corpses, diving amongst his collected bodies.

"There Is No Control. It's an illusion, you understand? It's all just a dream, it has to be a dream. we cannot live in a world where the world is lived in."

Ruiz sprinted to the heap; Sandra pulled a hypodermic needle from within her black trenchcoat.

"THERE IS NO VALID RESPONSE TO A WORLD THAT DOES NOT OBEY THE RULES BUT NOT TO OBEY ITS RULES. i just help the people leave through the most obvious exit, am i some kind of reaper? Perchance A Psychopomp, Hm?"

Ruiz reached past the severed limbs, latching onto the only one with a pulse.

"I always wanted to pretend as though I was important. I fooled a couple of people. this isn't how it was meant to end. I WAS

SUPPOSED TO WIN. Do Not Let Me Die Here. You Are Better Than This. You Can Be Better Than This."

Ruiz yanked his brother from the pile, Pico kicking and screaming all the while.

"wasn't there something better than this? DO YOU HATE ME THAT MUCH, BROTHER? Our Jesus Taught Us Better Than This; Our Adam Knew Us More."

Sandra pulled the cap from the needle, readying it for insertion.

"THIS IS NOT MADNESS, BROTHER. Sanity Is As Arbitrary As Sinfulness. I committed no crimes here. you have no right to judge me."

Ruiz nodded, holding his spasming sibling in place. Sandra plunged the needle into Pico's chest, pushing the sedatives into his bloodstream.

"WE ARE GODS, YOU AND I, BROTHER! Gods Among A Stupid And Negligent Populous!"

The Snipper struggled shirtlessly.

"We aren't supposed to live like this. We're all creators here. The world exists for us."

Pico's eyes drooped.

"we can't afford coherence."

Ruiz dropped his limp, unconscious brother to the floor.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA…"

Agent Green turned to the far wall, startled by the noise.

"Alcorn. With me."

Alcorn joined Green; the pair of them moved towards the stairwell.

They carefully started moving upwards, hearing muffled yelling through the thick concrete floors. Halfway to the third floor, Alcorn's radio crackled with a message from his men on the ground.

"Sir, we've detained a man trying to get into the premises. Callin' himself The Sculptor."

Green turned, holding his hand out expectantly. Alcorn sighed, handing his radio over. Green talked into the microphone.

"How much resistance did he put up?"

"None at all, sir. Held out his hands for the cuffs while grinnin' like a lunatic."

"Don't take your eyes off him. That man is considered a high-importance person of interest."

"We're moving him to the van now, sir."

"Good. Keep someone with him; you have permission to terminate if he tries anything. Over."

Alcorn took the radio back, clipping it to his belt. He started talking as he followed Green up the stairs.

"You think this guy's backup for Snipper?"

"Not after what happened last Friday. He's probably got-"

"WE ARE GODS, YOU AND I, BROTHER!"

Green raised a finger to his lips, remaining silent as they reached the third floor.

Ruiz frisked Pico for any concealed weapons; his pockets were empty, barring an old mobile phone. He picked it up and navigated through the screens, moving to sent texts.

> To: sculptor
> 16 hartford street I'm all that's left

To: the fuckwad brigade
16 hartford street this is the snipper hello

"Fuck."

Sandy turned to Ruiz, having pulled Pico's body up onto her shoulder.

"What?"

"Suits and The Sculptor inbound."

"Fuck."

"My thoughts exactly. Battle plan?"

"Leave before they get here."

Alcorn's radio crackled again; he immediately deferred it to Green.

"Sir, we've apprehended another person."

Green frowned.

"Have they identified?"

"Well, sir… they're saying they're The Sculptor."

Green looked at Alcorn, concerned.

"Is the person previously identifying as The Sculptor still in custody?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do they look the same?"

"Yessir."

"Terminate both immediately. Keep a look out for more."

"Understood, sir. We've… wait, sir, we have another Sculptor

attempting to… wait, five… seven! SHIT! Sculptors closing from all angles!"

"Open fire; aim for the head! Everyone to the lobby!"

Green and Alcorn started sprinting back down to the second floor as gunfire echoed through the building.

Sandra slowly moved to the stairwell, Pico's body still slung over her shoulder. Ruiz moved down the stairs, aiming his elastic band shooter around each turn.

"I think we're alone."

The end of Ruiz's sentence was punctuated by echoing gunfire. The Director massaged her temples in exasperation. They moved down to the third floor, looking out a window and surveying the scene below. Hundreds of Sculptors were running through every street, swarming to the base of the building. Three of the Suits' Agents were shooting wildly at the horde, barely thinning the ranks. One of them threw a fragmentation grenade into the crowd; metal pellets ripped through the swarm, breaking the illusion of flesh and bone and sending streaks of clay across the ground. Ruiz looked at his small wooden gun, suddenly feeling profoundly inadequate.

"Well shit."

Agent Green ran down to the first floor, Agent Alcorn trailing behind. The members of MTF Upsilon-18 shot in short, controlled bursts at the horde of angry clay artists; one of them had blocked the front door with a metal pipe. Green saw one of the Sculptors attempting to crawl through a window. He lined up the shot and pulled the trigger, leaving the clay body blocking the entrance. He appraised his pistol; a less than ideal weapon for the current situation. Green shouted over the gunfire.

"ALCORN! DO WE HAVE A SPARE RIFLE?"

Alcorn shook his head; Green swore an unheard oath. The two of

them moved to join the rest of the squad, taking cover behind the messy piles of broken concrete slabs. Every shot meant one less angry artist; at the same time, it meant one less bullet. They were equipped for an in-and-out raid, not a prolonged siege. The Sculptors screamed warcries as they broke through windows, trying to crawl in over their fallen duplicates.

"THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS-"

The synchronous chorus chimed through the building, barely audible over the sounds of firing bullets.

Ruiz turned to Sandra, who had already pulled her phone from her pocket.

"Who are you calling?"

"The real Janitor. Sculptor's directly tried to kill me. He's broken the rules, his protection is void; mine, however, is still intact."

The Director tapped the screen, then put it to her ear. Ruiz looked out the window again. The crowd was thick, but no further duplicates were forthcoming. Ruiz pulled a stick of chalk from his pocket, then grabbed a piece of concrete debris. He wrote the phrase "ceci n'est pas une bombe" onto it, then hurled it out into the horde. He grinned as it burst into a ball of flames, splattering Sculptors across the ground.

The person beneath the mask received a call. The person beneath the mask answered, muffling their voice with their hand.

"Director. You've dropped your façade."

"Yeah, about that. Sculptor's the one who hospitalised me."

"Purposefully?"

"Yes."

"Location?"

"16 Hartford Street."

"Understood."

The person beneath the mask pulled the mask back over their face.

The Janitor sped across the rooftops as though skating on ice.

"GREEN, WE'VE GOT TO FALL BACK!"

The squad continued firing at the now-open door as artists continued to flood through. One of the duplicates had overpowered one of the Agents, throwing his screaming body outside to be dealt with by his brethren. Alcorn gestured for his squadmates to retreat up the stairs to the second floor. Green emptied the last of his pistol's clip into the clay skull of the closest Sculptor, then threw the useless firearm to the side. He followed Alcorn back up the stairs, stopping to grab a length of steel pipe lying halfway up. Green shouted to the closest troops over the continued chanting.

"BLOCK THE STAIRWELL!"

As the last of the squad ascended the stairs, Green helped push a nearby pile of concrete down, squishing two overzealous Sculptors below its weight. Another tried to climb over the blockade; Green brought down his pipe on its head, hearing a satisfying BONG as its head deformed and it dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Sandy pushed her phone back into her pocket, joining Ruiz at the window. Pico snorted as Sandra readjusted her grip on him.

"Janitor's on its way. We've got to last until then."

"You have anything useful?"

The Director pulled a grappling hook gun from one of the inner pockets of her coat.

"Great, let's get out of here."

"It won't carry all of us."

"Fuck. Alright…"

Ruiz looked out the window, then pointed out an adjacent rooftop.

"Can you get there, drop Pico off, then come back for me?"

"Takes a while to reload this thing."

"Best plan we've got."

"Okay then. See you in a bit."

Sandra shot the grappling gun at the building, pushed a button on the side, and was pulled out the window. Ruiz looked as she climbed to the rooftop, then started to respool the projectile.

"UNIDENTIFIED PERSON ON THE NEXT LEVEL UP, OPENING FIRE!"

Ruiz spun around, barely having time to duck behind a concrete pylon before being shot at by one of the Suits. He aimed around his cover and loosed a pair of elastic bands towards his assailant. Ruiz yelled incredulously.

"EXCUSE ME, PLEASE DON'T SHOOT, THANK YOU."

The Janitor jumped from rooftop to rooftop, finally reaching 16 Hartford Street. It jumped to the ground, sending Sculptors scattering. It waved its hand towards a nearby duplicate, dispelling the anomalous and reducing it to raw clay. Nearby copies were struck immobile from a combination of awe and fear. The Janitor buzzed a comment from inside its gas mask.

"You have broken protocol. This was a poor decision."

The duplicates ran screaming from The Janitor, each of them seizing suddenly before crumbling into dust. It walked fluidly through

the building's front door, sending the Sculptors fleeing up the semi-blocked stairwell.

The Suit continued to fire at the concrete pylon, preventing Ruiz from escaping. Ruiz took another pot shot in his general direction.

"SANDY, NEED SOME HELP!"

The Director came barrelling through the window, joining Ruiz behind the pylon.

"Alright, alright, no need to shout. Grab on."

Ruiz grabbed Sandra's shoulders tightly. She pulled a small ball from inside her trenchcoat, throwing it hard against the ground; it exploded into a small cloud of smoke. Sandy ran to the window, jumping out and aiming at the opposite rooftop. For a split second, Ruiz felt his heart stop as they started entering freefall into the crowd of ravenous Sculptors below; then, the hook shot out, securing them to the opposite rooftop and pulling them slowly upwards. They pulled themselves up onto the rooftop, both panting heavily from overexertion. Ruiz stood up, dusted himself off, then looked around, confused.

"Where's Pico?"

Sandy looked around, confused.

"Shit. Doesn't matter, we're getting out of here. He can look after himself."

Ruiz swore colourfully under his breath, joining Sandra in their rooftop escape.

Agent Green had fallen back from the front lines; the squad was concentrating their fire on the stairwell below, and close-quarters combat and high-speed bullets make a poor mix. The Sculptors surged through the hole, pushing aside the concrete scraps and swarming around the closest Agents. Two of them fell and were trampled by the stampede. Alcorn pulled a grenade from his belt,

pulling the pin and counting down.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

He threw it into the swarm, thinning their numbers substantially. Green shouted out to the remainder of the squad.

"WE NEED TO MAINTAIN A CHOKE POINT! EVERYONE UPSTAIRS!"

The second floor was flooded with Sculptors as the remaining seven agents retreated up to the third floor.

The Janitor walked briskly through the first floor, tapping Sculptors on the shoulder and reducing them to piles of ash. It waved its hands, tearing the illusions from the clay. Its mask buzzed as it breathed slowly, calmly eradicating the plague. One of the duplicates turned, jumping towards the tall, dark figure; it impacted onto The Janitor's shoes, the clay hardening as it cooked solid from internal heat. It scanned the room for movement, nodding when satisfied it had cleared the area.

The Janitor moved slowly up the staircase to the second floor.

Alcorn shot the last of his clip, watching the last tracer round exiting its barrel. He threw the useless rifle to the side, picked up a stick of rebar from the ground, and stabbed it through the nearest Sculptor's head. Green forced his pipe into the chest of a duplicate, spun around, then struck its head cleanly off its neck. The rest of the squad had resorted to close-combat weaponry, their firearms spent; Dorfman spun like a dancer, slicing through clay with his combat knife, while Perkins had taken to simply grabbing heads and smashing them into the walls and pylons.

The Janitor moved up to the second floor. Hordes of Sculptors surrounded it, refusing to go out without a fight. They moved in towards it, trying to tear off its trenchcoat, remove its boots, yank off its mask; they desperately struggled to avoid their imminent demise.

They screamed in chorus:

"ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS ALL THAT THIS IS-"

The Janitor clicked its fingers, and the assailants turned inside-out.

Agent Green stood panting heavily, staring at the piles of clay that littered the room. Dorfman flicked the last of the stuff from his knife, Perkins squished a final skull beneath his feet. Alcorn walked over to Green, patting him on the shoulder while grinning from the adrenaline.

"Still alive!"

"Still alive. Okay. Alright. Still need to check the top floor before we-"

Green stopped mid-sentence, readying his pipe as a tall figure wearing a black gas mask ascended the stairs. The Janitor looked around at the Agents beneath it, kicking some errant clay from its boots. It walked towards Agent Green; Green readied his pipe for an attack. The Janitor stopped, then bowed deeply, kneeling upon the ground.

"Deepest apologies for the inconvenience. It will not happen again."

The Janitor stood, walked briskly to the window, and jumped to the ground with a resounding thud. Green looked to Alcorn, then at the open third-floor window. Green calmly reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, then lit it. He inhaled deeply, breathing out with exhaustion.

"I have no idea what the fuck's going on any more."

Ruiz walked dejectedly through the gallery lobby. Sandra had gone off to search for the real Sculptor; having lost Pico, there were no leads left.

"Mister Duchamp, a guy came through here looking for you before."

"Who was it?"

"I… sorry, Mister Duchamp, I've forgotten."

Ruiz sighed. Incompetent fools, the lot of them. He turned the corner into his studio.

A red-headed man wearing a Hawaiian shirt was sitting on the electric chair.

The man was wearing a grey fedora.

The grey fedora.

Ruiz massaged his temples.

"God fucking damn it."

The new Nobody laughed, then clicked his fingers, sending Ruiz into a dreamless sleep.

Agent Green and Agent Alcorn returned to the battered van, having thoroughly searched every level of 16 Hartford Street. As they were about to get into the vehicle, Green's phone rang. He flipped it open, looking at the caller:

> Agent Tangeee**@%

Green tapped the screen of his phone.

> Unknown Caller

He put the phone to his ear.

"Agent Green."

"Who is this? How did you get this number?"

"Ruiz Duchamp is lying unconscious in the Genossenschaft Gallery of Contemporary Art. Pick him up at your leisure."

"Who are you?"

"A forgotten friend."

Green flipped his phone shut, confused about the anonymous tip.

the fifth of first is strategy
The fifth of second, a Friday show.
The Fifth Of Last Is Settled Scores
CONCURRENCE HENCE TO NEVER KNOW

« Snipped From The Same Cloth | Hub | Eulogy For The Living »

Budget Cuts

It was a gloomy day at Site-19.

“They just cut our funding again,” Dr. Bergstrom said, speaking around a mouthful of Salisbury steak. “I’m down to two assistants.”

“I hear you, man,” Agent Rourke said with a sigh. “My team’s getting evaluated by Director Daniels tomorrow. I just *know* he’s gonna disband us. I’ll probably end up working a fucking *desk job*.”

Dr. Wynne, carrying a tray of food, came over and sat down at their cafeteria table.

“This *fucking* place,” she spat. “They just told us they’re gonna be transferring half the staff in our department to other Sites. Said they’re trying to ‘trim the fat’. I swear, I'm in the wrong business. I bet GOC scientists don't have to put up with this kind of shit."

Dr. Bergstrom shook his head. “Yeah, working for the Foundation really isn’t what it used to be. Did I tell you they even took away our entire D-class allowance? We’re having to test anomalies on *animals* now!”

“Same here,” Agent Rourke said. “We used to get ‘em for use in high-risk explorations, but then they just stopped sending them over.”

Dr. Wynne nodded. “Us too. Apparently it's like that everywhere, not just Site-19. They're saying we’re gonna have to make do without D-class from now on.”

“Huh,” Dr. Bergstrom said, frowning. “I wonder what *that’s* about.”

“Who knows?” Agent Rourke said with a shrug.

For a while the three of them ate in silence.

"Well, at least meat's back on the menu," Dr. Bergstrom said at last.

Bugbears

Won Won was bored. Nothing about this hole in the wall interested him. **The big gray box had always been here on top of this hill, and there had never been anything fun about it.** But the others were so insistent, they almost convinced him this building might be fun. A few minutes more and he knew better.

"Bored!" he cried out again, hoping to make it more plainly obvious.

"Quiet, you," Teef growled, and the group went in. The air was immediately much more pleasant, and artificial lights came on in the room.

"What is?" Won Won glared at the other four. Teef, his friend, Won Ji, his own sister, X51 and Jorry, the other two he didn't really know and didn't care about.

"Now we are indoors," Teef replied, opening the door he had closed behind them. It no longer led out onto the grasslands, but to a narrow little room with stairs descending elsewhere.

"What is?" Won Won peered in to the stairwell. Teef nudged him forward and Won Won went down the stairs, his foot-claws clickety-clacking on the hard surface. No grass, and not wood. It felt like rock, but it wasn't bumpy enough to be rock.

The door at the bottom of the stairs opened into another big room with even more doors. Short land mammals were standing around in there. Won Won loved little land mammals, but these had a significant lack of fur. Staring more intently, he realized they looked like Skybound. But they were much too short, and wore non-metal clothing.

Won Won stepped up to one with skin the color of his own fur. The

little one turned to him and started to speak in incoherent Skybound jibbering. Won Won couldn't understand much of it, and turned to leave, when it began to click and snarl gutturally, putting out a fair representation of Won Won's native language.

"I'm at Davis High School in Baltimore, Maryland. Hello! My name is Johnny!"

Won Won started to squirm in delight; little talking mammals! Won Won recognized most of those words. "School" in particular. Given the size of this mammal, it was likely to be a nursery as well. And since they had been on top of a hill when they entered, it made sense to call it a high school.

"I am Won Won, progenitor is Won."

The little Johnny threw its arms out to its sides in some manner of physical greeting. "Hello One-one! You are at Davis High School in Baltimore, Maryland! Would you like a tour of the newest edition of Davis High School in Baltimore, Maryland?"

Won Won understood enough to know tours were boring. "No tour. Where are big ones? Old persons?"

The Johnny seemed to be gesticulating with its hands, wiggling its fingers and moving its arms as it spoke. "Some of our students aren't yet ready for class. Please bear with us as we renovate the classrooms."

Won Won stared intently at it, not knowing if this little mammal misunderstood or was being deceptive. "Old persons! Professors? No students."

"There are students all around, just waiting for classes to begin! Please bear with us as we renovate the classrooms."

He turned and left the Johnny, returning to Teef and the others. "Confusing and disturbing in implications. Skybound left many moons ago."

Teef nudged him with a clutched claw. "Not Skybound, fool. Look how little they are."

"Skybound can be little," X51 put in.

Teef growled at him in retort, but Jorry and Won Ji backed X51 up.

"It's clearly an infant," Won Ji clarified. Teef still didn't think so, but didn't care enough to keep arguing over it.

"If infants, therefore Skybound progenitors." Won Won sniffed, seeing further than his companions could. "Skybound mimic us naturally; infants cannot deceive, only old ones."

Jorry stared emptily at him. The others were silent; he couldn't tell which got it, and which were just impatiently waiting for him to explain.

"Little Skybound over there engaged in deceptive speech; repulsed attempts to acknowledge older Skybound. If infants manipulated to lie, then infants and/or progenitors may engage in bellicose behavior."

That finally got through; the group split up into thirds, drawing their short thrusting spears and checking all the rooms to see if there were Skybound lying in wait. Won Won thought the Skybound could just set the building on fire if they really wanted to kill them. But Skybound were notoriously prickly about killing infants for any reason. It always bothered Won Won that they considered freshly-born, easily replaceable infants to be more valuable than a full-grown mature person, with years of experience…

"Jorry has food!"

Won Won's head jerked towards the cry, and others started to bleat, "Where did you get food?!" Jorry was eating something brownish with shiny paper around it. Broken glass was on the floor around him.

"In this window-box. These things are food."

Jorry had broken open the window to a big black box. Colorful bricks were lined up in rows, along with bags and other things with writing on it. Won Won rushed over to get some before the others hoarded it all. That they had food dispensers dispensing wrapped food

indoors was unusual even for Skybound—they were supposed to love food that was freshly dead and burnt up.

Most of the food went down easily, but the taste was overpowering. Won Won suddenly began to panic, and turned his head to eject the food. "Dummies! Potentially poisonous!"

The others ignored him and kept eating. Being the only sane one in the group was overly frustrating sometimes. Won Won gave up and grabbed for some more of the food-bricks before they were all claimed. They were tasty so why not indulge—better to die together happily than have to battle their way out of this school with empty abdomen.

Several minutes passed and they weren't dead yet. The last room in the building contained a stairwell, leading down to a ground-level hall. The hallway led around in a big square, and in the center of the square was an open courtyard with the sun beaming down. X51 ran across the courtyard, and found one of the doors lead out of the school. Nothing unusual, except the school was supposed to be high on a hill. X51 opened a door showing flat grassland as far as they could see.

"It's fake," Won Ji figured, and stepped out into the open. "Artificial projection." The sunlight looked real enough on her fur, and felt warm enough. Won Won stepped out and started walking away from the school, checking his feet as he put some distance between him and the rest of the group. Nothing appeared on the horizon ahead of him, and the ground seemed not to be tilting like a round planet should. In fact, when he looked behind, the school building seemed slightly elevated, as if he'd gone down a ravine. But he'd felt absolutely no shift in gravity to suggest the ground elevation had changed. Won Won grunted in frustration; physics was hard for him, and numbers scared him like spiders. The distance he'd traveled and what he saw might mean that the ground he was on was either completely flat, or curved outward rather than inward…

Teef hooted something loudly, and Won Won rushed back over to the building. Teef had apparently been thinking much the same as him, and similarly couldn't understand what it meant.

"Should've sent a scientist," X51 remarked, shutting everyone up. Except Won Won.

"I is not good enough?" Won Won blinked defensively, sheathing his eye as if in preparation for a fight. He loved exploring and being a scientist. Whenever the experts were busy, people came to him with their questions about plants and animals and space. That was partly why they had dragged him here.

"For studying! With numbers," X51 clarified, backing down from the challenge.

Eventually they would send experts, but they weren't even supposed to be wandering around on archaeological sites on their own. A thought then struck Won Won.

"We're stuck. Are we stuck?" The door they'd come in from was the same they ended up going down the stairway from. If that door magically teleported to this place, they probably wouldn't be able to get back home.

Teef prodded him in the sides. "Door might open again. If not, therefore Hwee will come open door. It may bring us back."

Won Won grumbled in agreement, but was already mentally preparing himself. Skybound liked to play with them, calling it a "hunt" when they shot at them and made them run while bleeding on the grass, leaving behind a "trail". He'd take some of their infants to protect himself—threaten to kill them if the Skybound tried to hunt them.

Teef didn't seem perturbed, and casually approached one of the infants. "You. Food location."

This infant was slightly taller, and appeared female by its high voice and swollen chest. It responded in Teef and Won Won's own language, "Welcome to Davis High School in Baltimore, Maryland! What was it you were looking for?"

"Food location, fool."

"Food is being served right now in the cafeteria. Better hurry or you'll

miss out on the Tuesday surprise! And please remember: garnishes are no longer allowed within 28 hectometers of croissant-like food items."

The way it spoke disturbed Won Won, but he couldn't tell why. It spoke his own language, but its tone was not Skybound. It was monotonous, and overly friendly. Overly friendly people tended not to be.

Won Won nudged the infant aside and followed the sound of noise. Skybound made lots of noise when eating. Presumably they couldn't figure out how to regulate when to speak and when to consume, and so ended up doing both at once often times.

"Formations!" Jorry barked, and Won Won's hair bristled in panic. He whirled and stood alongside the others, small tubes out and extending into a full-length spear. Enemies around. Danger. Something or other. Jorry wouldn't just be a fool and shout dangerous words insensibly.

Just ahead of them were two mature Skybound. They weren't wearing metal clothes, but they had guns on their pants. They had stopped too, and were staring back at them. Won Won slowly stepped forward, arms out at his side.

"Won Won, you don't speak Skybound, get back here, stupid!" Teef shouted at him.

The two Skybound had their hands tentatively reaching for their guns. They looked shocked, on edge. One was reaching for a weapon at its belt. That did more to comfort Won Won than if they came with a smile and friendly words. Won Won raised one of his clawed hands, and waggled it back and forth, like the things usually did in greeting. That seemed to work, as the Skybounds' hands moved away from their guns. One even raised his hand and did the same. The other murmured something. Won Won looked down at his feet, feeling oddly comfortable. What a queer thing to feel when there stood the first full-grown Skybound he'd seen in sixteen decades…

- - - - - - -

Won Won had been stuffing his face while these Skybound struggled to speak clearly. They seemed to understand the ursines' language structure easily enough, but couldn't manage the different tones that made each syllable into something entirely different. Skybound memorized dozens of syllables and extended it into millions of words without need for add-ons. Primitive, compared to their own language; only a handful of syllables, with a few dozen add-ons divided by accent, tone, length, and timbre. It was so much simpler, why couldn't the Skybound put it together more easily?

"Door coming. Coming door. Coming on door," the black-haired female repeated in stilted tones. X51 and Won Ji snickered, and Won Won tried again.

"Coming through door."

No one wanted to humor these creatures but him. It was like no one had any sense of wonder or adventure but him. Teef and the others were more fascinated by the hot-box in this room, which hummed with energy and cooked food without fire. It also made sparkles when they put little bits of metal in it, but that had bored Won Won after four or five times.

The Skybound female was accompanied by the two Skybound Won Won had greeted earlier, and by another male who transcribed Won Won's words, attempting to fit them into his own language's alphabet and aiding the female in speaking.

"Behold, dummy," Won Won remarked clearly, poking at the paper with a crude little tube of ink, and scrawling a quick sketch of the building as it had appeared when they first entered it. A squat gray box on top of a hill. He then illustrated closing the door, moving down the stairs, and going outside, and the appearance of the school from there—an identical squat gray box in a flat open field.

The female held out a clean sheet of paper to him, urging him to write something. How did people usually do this? All sapient creatures understood math, except him. Teef came to his rescue, snatching up the paper, and making a line of circles on several rows. Then he poked dots into the circles, different numbers. Prime numbers, he recognized, into each circle. This amused and

fascinated the Skybound. Won Won took another clean sheet, deciding to draw something he thought more important.

"Sun and stars." He indicated his drawing. It was the night sky he saw each night, riddled with stars and the pale white gash that ran along the sky like a river, never coming to an end but extending forever.

"Sun stars?" she repeated hesitantly.

Won Won poked at the wiggly lines indicating the sky-river, then pointed down to the bottom of the page. The female became excited then. "Give me your land!"

Won Won pulled a fresh sheet of paper from the stack they had. He had loved astronomy classes, and missed the days before the Skybound came, when the ursines still claimed the sky. One of the last images ever taken of home had been taken by an orbital flight Won's progenitors had been a part of. Won Won reproduced that image as best he could from memory, and slid it back over to them.

They must have been impressed by his artistic skills; the female and male finally shut up and stared at the sketch looking overawed. Most likely they were fairly intelligent people, but they always came across as simple and easily impressed people to him in his limited dealings. Then he realized they were not impressed, but anxious. The female slid it back to him, and shook her head. "No. Give me your land. This is my land."

Won Won stared back at her, his throat rumbling in a low growl. The others had been eavesdropping, and apparently overheard him growling. Won Ji bopped him on the head. "No violence, stupid! Calmness."

"Usual Skybound arrogance. They came, we won, they refuse to let us win, think they own our world," Jorry remarked, and leaned forward at the two, barking in amusement as they jumped back in fright.

"What losers still call our world their world?" Won Won asked, and turned to the Skybound again, pointing at the image. "This is *my*

land."

The Skybound didn't become belligerent in turn. Instead they looked at each other, then back at the image. Again they started to chitter in their flat, atonal language. How could they memorize so many words, so many of them sounding completely different while meaning the same thing? At the very least the female gave up asking the question again. She kept the drawing, and pointed over her shoulder to the open door.

"Sky-Binders?"

"Skybound. Infant Skybound."

"Baby Sky-Binders."

Close enough, Won Won thought.

"Not baby Sky-Binders. Not breathing. Comprehending?"

So the infant Skybound weren't real. Artificial re-creations, perhaps memories made to honor the dead. It seemed insane to try to resurrect the dead via unthinking machines, but Skybound were always touchy when it came to killing infants.

"Automatic Skybound. Not breathing. Not alive."

The female nodded hesitantly, as if Won Won were the one not quite understanding.

"Never breathing. Infant Skybound are artificial creations. Fake. Unreal. Toys. Dolls. Machines."

The male understood at least one of the words, and consulted with the female. That pleased them. Won Won started to illustrate on paper, showing a Skybound brain, with lines extending outwards. He scribbled some symbols, hoping it to be similarly understood as hand gestures were, demonstrating he was aware of how artificial intelligence worked. Skybound looked at their own brain, mapped out its functions, then transferred the same manner of thinking and functioning to artificial brains. At least, that was how he understood it.

This impressed the Skybound even more. They looked ready to ask even more questions about it. Won Won was tired—the astronomy had been fun, but it looked like they'd moved on from that. He didn't have any food on him, so he just got up. The others turned and watched as he rose.

"Come, then, these Foundationers bore me. Let us see if any other vegetation grows outside."

What a waste. So much potential for learning and exploration, and these Skybound sought to piss away the opportunity and continue with their lies and deceit. Normally he'd be concerned. But after seven years spent forcing the invaders back to their ships, it wasn't even worth dignifying them with any more attention.

"What is?" Won Ji asked quizzically, noting Won Won's empty stare.

"When Hwee comes for us, we should say nothing. Let the Skybound play with their fantasy land and fantasy infants here. So long as they remain in space, away from us."

Bugs

Given a continuous vector field on the surface of a sphere, there must be at least one point on the field where the vector is equal to zero.

Put another way, if you have a sphere which is covered in hair, it is impossible to comb all of it flat. There will always be those points where the hair converges and stands up. It happens a lot in computing. You know when you're playing a game, and you look really closely near the edges of one of the models, or in some place the developer tried to tuck away where you wouldn't notice it, and you see the texture kind of shrinks down to a point? It's more or less the same principle.

It doesn't just happen in graphics either. Sometimes, when you try to implement a physics system, sometimes all of the numbers converge on the edge of the area you're coding for. In version 1, that was at the poles of the sphere. I assumed no one would notice because there's nothing of value at the poles (I did that on purpose) and they're cold and desolate besides.

They decided to check the poles anyway. It caused a big system crash, and not only did I have to reset everything, I spent weeks untangling the physics system to try and get rid of it.

Failing that, I did the next best thing in version 2. I moved it. Tweaked it a little bit too, slapped a few repeating grass textures outside, and sewed the edges around it together so that there's no way to get to it from the outside.

Not that I didn't have a little fun with it. I took a few things and played with them for a while, tried to see how the glitch affected them. I made a little glitch town, populated it with little glitch people, to see how they would cope.

They didn't.

Over time, the glitch became a little testing ground. Sometimes, before implementing something new, I drop it in there, see how well it holds up under the extreme physical conditions. Some of them don't make it, but it's a fairly hostile environment. I don't blame them. I'll just put them out somewhere else, and see how they react under normal circumstances. Just a few weird things. Some gears. A moving statue. A giant lizard monster.

I have a lot of fun with these guys, too. Sometimes they'll wreck a few things I'd set up earlier, but the program seems pretty good at repairing itself. I usually have to override a few functions, but it's definitely worth it, just to see how the rest reacts, having been thrown something it doesn't understand.

I don't think anyone will notice.

Bugs in the Process

> Then there's the matter of the entomology department, over-budget for the fifth straight year. Not the most flattering statistic, considering that the most expensive incident in the department's history never actually took place.

Dr. Marshall Grant sipped coffee placidly as he filed his paperwork, ho-humming the morning away. Fingers moved deftly across the key-pad as he entered his findings from the most recent acquisition to Site-87's growing entomological collection. A Stag Beetle. Normal in most respects, except that a genetic sequencing revealed greater similarity to the Bull Elk than to any other animal on file. Also, the tendency of the females to lactate was particularly interesting.

"Yo Mack! How's about you gimme sommin' ta eat? I'm starvin' over here!"

"Vinnie, I gave you a nice juicy locust not twenty minutes ago," Marshall replied with a roll of his eyes. He looked down at the tank next to his desk to see the mantis pressed up against the glass, pleading with his eyes. His tight denim pants were worn through the knees, and the tiny gold chain about his neck sparkled in the light.

"Fuck that bug shit! Gimme a burger! A hot dog! …A 40? Come on, I'm bored outta my skull!"

"You haven't got a skull, Vinnie."

"So?!"

"Take it easy, alright? Just be patient and wait until lunch," Marshall said, shaking his head as he raised his cup.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

In his shock, the coffee sprayed everywhere. The Keyboard, a stack of papers, a cup filled with pens, pencils, and thumb tacks; everything was coated in hot brown spittle. Vinnie the mantis snickered quietly as Dr. Grant fumbled with the cup and grabbed for the paper towels under the desk. Rushing with reckless abandon. The knock came again.

"Just a second!" Dr. Grant called, but the door was already ajar, and in its jam stood a tall, bald man with a rather sleek looking tablet PC which made the white-plastic of the CRT on the desk feel positively ancient by comparison. Nevertheless, there were rules. "Excuse me, sir? This is a closed laboratory. I'm going to have to ask for your clearance before you come in here."

The Tax Man smiled, and produced a shiny white badge with simple black lettering. Level-4, general access, administrative. "Of course. My name is Matthew Broderick, I'm here for your bi-annual audit."

"That was today?" Marshall heard himself asking, and swallowed the words as fast as he could. "Of course it was! Thank you, please come in! Mr… Broderick? Is that right?"

"Yes. And you must be Dr. Marshall Grant of entomology." It wasn't a question. With no flourish at all, the Tax Man produced a stylus and began tapping and scratching at the screen of his top-of-the-line machine. His eyes darted around the room, searching for something. Marshall hoped it wasn't for his conversation partner. "… Is Dr. Churchwell available so that we may begin?"

"Erm, well…" as stealthily as he could, Grant slid a birthday card in front of Vinnie with an awkward smile on his face. "No I'm here by my… She's out today. With the flu. It's been making the rounds and… Is there… Would you like to come back tomorrow? I'm sure she'll be back tomorrow."

Mr. Broderick looked at his watch with a stern frown. "No, Dr. Grant. This is the time we have scheduled for the audit. I'm sure as her leading researcher you're familiar enough with the department to assist me."

"It's just… Well, I'm rather in the middle of something at the—"

"We'll begin with the laboratory inspection first." Broderick interjected. "I understand some of the equipment here is a little out of date."

"…And that's one of the most challenging parts of working in the department," Dr. Grant said, indicating the new acquisition, already filed under E-2663-01. "This little lady, to just see her in the wild, you'd never know she was anomalous. A little tanner than the garden variety. A little fuzzier perhaps. But it isn't until you watch her feeding her young that it would even occur to anyone that something about her isn't normal."

Broderick leaned close and scrutinized the tiny creature from above his glasses. "So this is the only one, is it?"

"Erm… Well, no. Most of these are just sample populations. There's a rule about working with insects: for every one you see, there's 100 you don't," Marshall said. "What we're working on is-"

But he was cut short by some hard, loud taps on the tablet in the Tax Man's arms. "…Go on, Dr. Grant. Your plans to contain the rest of them?"

"Well… it… It can't be done. Not without a much larger budget, anyway, and even then… See, insects live and breed very fast, and even with—"

The Tax Man raised a hand, which presently inspired Marshall Grant into silence. "A larger budget? Dr. Grant, you are aware that for the past five years, this department has averaged four hundred and fifty *thousand* dollars over budget forecasts, are you not?"

"Yes, but—"

"And yet we're not, statistically speaking, any closer to a complete containment of anomalous insects in this region?"

Dr. Grant was getting flustered. "Now, hold on a minute! It's not as —"

"This *is* a simple yes or no question, Doctor. If you cannot answer it,

perhaps we can find someone who can?" The Tax Man's steely eyes fixed Marshall Grant firmly in place, stylus poised, mouth drawn into a tight frown. A frown that said emphatically that he would not move from this spot until he received a simple answer to his perfectly straightforward question.

And in his building disquieted anger, Dr. Grant buckled. "No."

"I see," the Tax Man said, making marks deftly across his touch screen. "Is there any feasible remedy to this situation?"

"What do you mean, *remedy*?"

"Well, rather than wasting resources attempting to contain and neutralize these species," he continued, "could Foundation interests be better served by contracting with a well trained exterminator?"

"That's… What?! You can't just *kill off* a whole species of insect! There are so many variables to consider here! Not just the ecological consequences but in many cases there's a risk of anomalous backlash!"

The Tax Man looked up from under his glasses with a smirk. "Come on, Dr. Grant. You're not honestly afraid of the 'keeter skeeters' are you?"

"MARTYYY! MARTY DON'T TAKE THAT SHIT!"

The color drained from Dr. Grant's face as a look of stern disappointment was painted across the Tax Man's.

"Dr. Grant, are there any other employees in the office with us today?" Broderick asked with all the delicacy of a cinder-block.

Marshall swallowed hard. "…n…No, sir. That would be, uh…"

"LET ME OUT OF THIS THING! I'LL RIP THAT CHEAP ARMANI KNOCK-OFF RIGHT OFF HIS BACK!" The birthday card fell down, and there Vinnie Baggadoughnuts stood, arms raised in aggressive posture, wings fluttering, tiny cigarette smoldering in the corner of his mandibles. "NOBODY TALKS TO MARTY THAT WAY BUT ME. YOU GOT THAT, JACK?"

"E-5570. Specimen 01-A… he-uh…it's a 'Leafer Mantis'. We…" Marshall tried to think of some excuse. Some plausibly deniable reason. Something about how, when the phenomenon was finally understood and resolved, one was kept alive for record keeping purposes, to test the cognitive limits of the species. But all of it sounded hollow, and none of it explained what the specimen was doing next to his desk. So fuck it. If he was going to be crucified, it may as well be for the right reason.

Marshall padded the sweat from his balding head, pulled his shirt down, and stood up straight. "His name is Vinnie. He's my pet."

The Tax Man's nostrils flared but once; all the theatrical anger was gone from him, replaced with a sort of sullen contempt and disgust. As Vinnie raged and rattled his cage, Broderick slipped his stylus back into its home on the side of the tablet, and let out a long, disapproving sigh.

"Thank you, Dr. Grant. I believe that will be all." The tax man turned and walked away, looking disappointed. Or maybe a little defeated. When the door closed, Dr. Grant collapsed into his chair, heart pounding and underarms sweating.

"YEEEAH!" Vinnie said, raising his pincers in triumph. "You *better* run!"

"Oh, blow it out your ass, Vinnie," Marshall said, head in his hands.

«A Multi-Universal Affair|Hub|There's Magic in the Air»

Building Up

Researcher Conwell looked around his office. The few meager possessions he had used to decorate were now placed in a box on the desk.

Conwell let out a deflating sigh. He wanted to say it had been a good run, but if he was being honest with himself, the work he had been doing with **SCP-1360** was both frustrating and sickening. Still, he wished he had produced more results. Maybe that way it wouldn't seem like he had failed. Maybe then it wouldn't feel like he had let the poor droid down. A sharp knock at the door shook Conwell out of his day dream.

"It's open," he called. A short woman with piercing grey eyes and a large smirk entered. Her hair was done up in a bun and a small pair of glasses sat upon her pointed nose. Conwell did his best to hide his disappointment. This woman was Dr. Freemont. Although she was at least one foot shorter than him, she always managed to make him feel small.

"Relocated again?" she asked. One eyebrow was raised as she peered into the box on the table. Her voice was sweet and concerned, but her lips were curled into a sly smile.

"How'd you guess?" He replied. Conwell pulled his box of things away from his guest and pretended to rummage through them hoping to look too busy to talk. "What do I owe the pleasure?"

"Where are they sending you?" Freemont asked. Whether she didn't notice his display or didn't care remained to be seen.

"**Site-84**. Again. What do you want, Freemont?"

"Dr. Thompson made a request to see you. Guess I'm lucky I caught you now, before they shipped you to the Pacific." Freemont chuckled. Conwell's mouth hung slightly open as he attempted to

process just how exactly it was she could be so tactless.

“Why?” Conwell asked. He had heard about poor **Dr. Harold Thompson** when he was working with Dr. Johnson, and even met him once in person. Freemont responded with a heavy shrug.

“I would like to know that as well. He’s been very adamant about seeing you for about the past week.”

“I thought that Dr. Collins was keeping in touch…” Conwell began, pausing when Freemont gave a sharp laugh.

“Gregg hasn’t paid Harold a visit since Johnson left. Anyway, he’s due for another psychological health visit, so I thought I’d throw him a bone with you. Can I tell him you’re going to stop by?”

Conwell sighed and placed his head in his hands before dragging them down his face. If Freemont was telling the truth, Dr. Thompson had not been visited in almost three years, and was probably nearing the end of his rope.

“I’m afraid I have a flight to catch, and a few more meetings of my own to take care of before I jet. I’m sorry. I wish I could. I really do, I just can’t,” he said as he shook his head. Freemont shrugged.

“You’re disappointing him, not me. Good luck at the Casket Garden.”

Conwell hung his head and waited for Freemont to leave. The door slammed shut behind her. He then let out another sigh and grabbed his box of things before exiting and turning off the light behind him.

Conwell pounded heavily upon the door to Dr. Collins' office. He didn’t wait for permission to enter, instead choosing to silently open the door and slide inside the room. The office itself was immaculate, a great deal of forethought appearing to have gone into the placement of everything down to the pens on the desk. He didn’t want to touch anything, lest a curator yell at him for disturbing the exhibit.

“I can assure you that you’re doing a good job,” Collins said with a small chuckle from the seat at his desk. He spoke without taking his

eyes off the screen on his desktop. Conwell rolled his eyes in response. “What’s on your mind champ?”

“I’ve cleared out of the 1360-1 lab. Are you going to be taking Zach’s old office, or keeping this one here?”

“I haven’t decided yet, but I’m guessing that my office arrangements are not what prompted your visit.” Collins replied. He now peered at Conwell from behind his thick glasses.

“I know you had a hand in me being transferred. That’s why they’re giving you command over 1360. I just can’t figure out why you did it.”

Collins sighed. He looked like a father about to tell his child that he wasn’t angry, just disappointed.

“Your enthusiasm for that project was waning long before Johnson left. Command was afraid that you were no longer suited to continue to lead the project, so they asked me to keep tabs on you and report what I saw,” Collins then shook his head as he chuckled quietly. “I mean, Christ, you’re a grown man, I’m not going to visit you to tell you that you’re doing a good job. No one does that.”

“So that’s it then? One subpar visit and I’m out of there?” Conwell snapped.

“Cut that out.” Collins snapped back. “You know damn well that’s not how we do things. You’ve hated working on the 1360 project for a long time now. Having you continue to serve as PI for that object was both a detriment to you and the research being done on 1360-1. I saw this and pulled what strings I needed to make sure that what needed to be done *was done.*”

Conwell tightened his fist. He imagined bashing in Collins' head with his computer keyboard. Eventually he regained his composure and placed a large file stack down on the desk.

“Alright then, captain. Here’s the wheel, all of Johnson’s and my notes on 1360 and **Anderson**, including the transcript from the attempted sting last week, and all known info on Anderson’s models.”

Conwell began to make his way towards the exit but stopped when Collins called out.

“Listen, Jacob, this isn’t the first time you’ve been relocated from a project, and it won’t be the last. Hell, I’ve been moved around many more times than I care to count. The important thing is you remember that these decisions are made by command for a reason. The important thing is being able to move on. Please don’t let this come between us in the future. Overall, you’ve done a good job.”

Conwell paused in the doorway and shook his head.

“Dr. Freemont visited me earlier today. Harold wanted to see me. She said you hadn’t been by for one of the psychological health visits in almost three years. You should think about swinging by there if you get a chance.”

Conwell then silently passed into the hallway, allowing the door to quietly swing shut behind him.

Collins waited for the door to close before he smiled and quietly thought to himself:

Anderson,
Integration successful and infiltration now complete. I have obtained complete command of #31. Awaiting further instructions.
Saker #76

Collins waited for a second as his programming confirmed the message had been received. He then whistled as he got back to work.

Dr. Harold Thompson slowly made his way over the threshold of his cell, returning from another round of testing. What once used to be a tan, athletic man was now pale and gaunt. While the years of his incarceration had been unpleasant, it was those three years after his friend, Dr. Johnson, had left that appeared to have been the hardest yet. Two security officers stood behind him, causally watching for him to make any move resembling an escape attempt. Eight years of stellar behavior on Harold’s part, however, allowed them to relax

ever so slightly. It also helped that his hands were not only covered by thick leather gloves, but also bound together by thick restraints.

“Hold the door for a moment,” Dr. Freemont’s honey lathered voice called out as she appeared from behind the security officers. “Good job today, Harold. We’ll continue the tests in two days. Tomorrow is going to be your psychological health visit.”

“I see…” Harold kept his back to his captors as he spoke. “Researcher Conwell?”

“I’m afraid it will just be me again,” Freemont said with a melancholy smile. “Conwell is being relocated to another facility.”

“And Gregg -” Harold began, but was quickly interrupted.

“I’m afraid I still can’t get a hold of him. He’s a busy man. I’m sure you understand.”

“I can’t even imagine…” Harold mumbled, fidgeting with his hands as he spoke. The officers gave a slight nervous glance at each other and then back to Freemont. She rolled her eyes and held up a hand as she signaled them to close the door.

As the door began to slide shut, Harold’s bare hands suddenly reached through, yanking the security officer into the door’s track. The officer let out a sudden gasp, and in the next instant was solid marble.

“Shit!” The other officer shouted as he drew his pistol, but was too late. Harold had slid the door back open and had a hand on the officer’s face before his fingers could wrap around the grip. He too became solid marble.

“No no no no no!” Freemont shouted as Harold turned to her. She attempted to run towards the alarm, but was quickly overtaken. Harold had lunged and knocked her to the ground. His hand was firmly wrapped around her ankle.

The room was silent as Harold got back to his feet and brushed himself off. He quickly undid his restraints, grabbed one of the security officer’s pistols and pass cards, and cloaked himself in Dr.

Freemont’s lab coat.

He took a few moments to look himself over in a mirror. Provided he didn’t draw much attention to himself he felt that it would be easy enough traversing the short distance to Dr. Collins's office. Blending in as a Foundation researcher wouldn’t be hard either.

After all, he had already been one in a past life.

Part Three: Products | Peregrine | Part Five: Tearing Down

Bumaro and Ion sat at a table

Robert Bumaro, Builder of the Broken God, sat at one end of the table. His dead, metallic gaze honestly reflecting how dead he felt inside. He was indeed dead inside too, as he dumped his organic body in some Ancient Greek trash bin some thousand years ago.

On the other hand, Grand Karcist Ion who sat at the opposite end had too many eyes for his own good. He had to close a bunch of them so that he wouldn't see a dozen of tables, and a dozen of his mortal enemies blurred together. He also had to close a few of the more inhuman ones, so as to not get a terribly distorted vision. These eyes were in fact, very much decorative.

"Why," Bumaro finally said, his forehead resting in his hands.

"Because I will come down as a god and devour all of you! Including your petty metal church!" Ion roared as his voice from the many mouths resonated, before briefly choking on his own saliva.

Bumaro buried his face further into his hands. "Then why don't you do it already. Clearly nothing is stopping you now, since you've been sending these inferior copies of yourself here, for like, a week now."

"You Mekhanites sent us into the Great Brass Prison, remember!" Ion opened all his eyes wide in anger, before closing them in a headache cause by this sudden flux of visual input.

"That was three thousand years ago, also last time I checked Adytum links to Alagadda, and Alagadda goes here fine, so I'm actually surprised why you haven't just gotten out of there."

"Well, I might have gained a bit of weight." Ion averted his gaze. "But that doesn't matter! We've been preparing for my return! Sacrifices here and there!"

"Yes, human fruit trees and farmlands. Clearly you guys have taken

on the lifestyle of hardworking farmers, I'm almost proud of you," Bumaro said in a monotone voice. "What happened to the old style meat temples. I'm really missing that right now."

"How can your stupid machine mind understand! All of these are part of a grand plan, of course!" Ion yelled as his arms waved around furious, hitting some of his eyes. Ouch.

"Ion, like, I don't think staying next to Yaldabaoth is good for your mental health," Bumaro sighed, his inside deader. "I remember having way more intelligent conversations with you."

"What do you know, this is all your fault anyways!" Ion yelled with a growing volume.

"How is this my fault now," Bumaro said flatly.

"If it hadn't been you Mekhanites, I would have fulfilled my vision already! This is all for a good cause!"

"The good cause of turning people into flesh blobs. I mean it isn't really my fault that you pissed off some people. I wasn't even in charge of the Mekhanites by then," Bumaro said. "I only beat the shit out of you."

Ion let out a frustrating yelp and struck with mighty fury. One of his longer arms quickly formed into a blade, which impacted with Bumaro's head. Then the bone broke, expectedly as bones often do when they're applied against metal. Ion fell back and sat on the ground, tears streaming from a few of his eyes.

"Why are you even doing this," Bumaro said, his hands rubbing his unharmed temple. "I mean you have tried this a dozen of times by now."

"I will tear at you until you break!" Ion screamed, quickly healing the broken bone, without resetting it, creating yet another deformed limb. "All the mighty warriors of flesh I've sent have failed, but I shall bring you down with my own hands!"

"Those are like, giant meat piles," Bumaro sighed. "Maybe they failed because they don't have any appendages to move. Next time

consider how things actually work, maybe."

"Lies! All your metallic lies!" Ion waved his newly deformed limb. "I will never listen to you!"

"Nadox totally left you to run off with Derdekeas, Ion."

With that, Ion's gaze widened. He stuttered about revenge, then turned and ran out of the main hall of the Broken Church. In a moment, a few loud howls and something akin to crying can be heard in the distance.

Burden of Humanity

Dodger snorted obnoxiously at the picture of the hairy man-beast, "It's cute."

They'd been calling it a spider-bear. Apparently its hands and head were more arachnid-like than mammalian, even though it breathed air and ate cooked meat. They were even communicating with it well enough. *For all the good that'll do. It's gonna die sooner or later if it doesn't let us examine it properly.*

"That's not the real issue right now," Kone put in firmly. His visage was tacked to the center of her screen, the main focus of the video conference going on now. Several seconds of delay as the signal was encrypted. GOC technology, so nothing *too* sensitive could be said over the line. Though obviously there was nothing they could do about keeping the lines safe from GOC eyes and ears. They'd have to let slip *some* intel, by necessity of conveying it to one another. Kone and Lindsberg were at branch HQ, Rhiannon Locke en route to Africa, Cortes somewhere in Europe, "I've finished reading your report. Thankfully, whatever's causing the effect in animals doesn't spread if the meat is properly cooked. That's about the only good news. Bad news is we have no idea how far this has spread, and how bad it might get if we can't get it under control."

"Is that even a problem? Can't we just tell people it's E. coli and to make sure they cook their meat thoroughly? They're getting food, at least. I mean, fuck it; they may as well eat tainted meat than sandy shit, or nothing at all. They're little African peasants living in a third-world-hell-hole, we can't be snatching food from them."

Kone looked furious. Dodger felt a chill go through her. *That's it, I'm gone.* She had been getting on the nerves of management for too long. Every little thing she said she had to carefully monitor before saying it. *Consequences of being as unconcerned with frivolous things like politeness and etiquette.* She'd been kicked out of a lot of places, and fired from a lot of jobs, but she'd never felt such a

perpetual state of oppressive moderation and paranoia as she did when talking around management. It had to be a problem with her, she had considered. *But it isn't me.*

"Dodger," It was Lindsberg stepping in now as the calm voice of reason, "When you get back from Somalia, we're going to have to have a little talk." That alone made her more anxious than any amount of screaming and cursing from Kone. And it was usually Kone who was the calm, reasonable one.

"I'm sorry," She muttered, clenching her jaw as heat rushed to her cheeks, "I submitted the report to Torres first, along with a sample. He's been examining it."

"And?" Kone asked patiently.

"It's definitely something, but we can't tell what. Our equipment here isn't sophisticated enough to discern what's actually causing the regeneration; bacterium, virus, prion…"

"Prion?" Rhiannon put in quizzically.

"I don't know. We don't know. This early on, we're speculating."

"I don't understand," Dr. Cortes put in, putting a hand on her forehead, "Could you- Could you explain it to me? I haven't read the report yet."

"It's the fungus. The— The Vesta Donation stuff. Somehow, animals are getting into it and eating pieces of it. I don't know how; we've been keeping the stuff tightly under watch when its in its fungal stage thing. Torres thinks there might be interference between his mods and the original control program the Vesta people put in. As for the animals… might be bugs, or rodents. Those then get eaten by bigger animals, those animals get eaten by even bigger ones… might be it spreads in the shit, too, so shit-eating animals like dogs and cats end up getting infected, too.

"What it actually does is kind of similar to what the fungus does— create something from basically nothing. Again, we don't know exactly *how*, but once it's metabolized in the animal, we completely

lose track of the fungal cells. What starts to happen is basically uncontrolled cellular growth."

"Like a cancer?" Cortes asked.

Dodger hadn't thought of it that way, "Maybe. I think I mis-spoke, too —it's not *uncontrolled* growth; it's pretty well controlled. It basically starts rapidly growing cells all over the body, making an excess of skin cells, hair cells, blood cells, and so on. Leave it going long enough, you'd basically end up with a mound of meat vaguely resembling an animal, with probably six hearts and thirty gallbladders. Frank wanted to test, but animal testing gets people uncomfortable."

"Purely speculating here… when bone or tissue is cut out of the animal, the growth centers exclusively on regenerating the bone or tissue that was lost. It's like a hulled boat taking on water, and cutting out pieces of flesh would be like scooping out bucketful's of water."

"And the mental effects?" Rhiannon put in.

"Might be related. Possibly. Maybe it's more painful to let the flesh grow than to have pieces of it cut out every few hours."

"This is a fucking disaster," Rhiannon whimpered.

"I don't know. As long as people cook it, it's safe, right? Isn't that what you always keep saying, Locke; fear of the unknown is no excuse not to save people in trouble *now*?"

"Dodger…" Lindsberg warned. That tone again that pressed down on her. A "gentle menace", she'd called it before.

"We're trying to contain it," Dodger put in before they could keep chewing her out, "Exterminating the animals. Burning the corpses. But it's like pulling weeds one-handed. And there's new weeds every day. We need more resources to get this under control."

"Dodger, don't," Kone warned. His voice was so deep, it could be difficult to tell his mood over the tinny speakers of a laptop computer, "If the GOC gets word of this, they're going to assume

we've lost control of the situation."

"We *have* lost control of the situation, it sounds like," Cortes put in before Dodger could do the same… and get yelled at for saying so.

"We have *not* lost control," Kone stated firmly, "Dodger, keep up the good work. Spread your contacts out further, keep your ear to the ground. Use whatever stockpiles of food we have to get people to stop eating this meat. Tell Frank to use whatever resources at his disposal to ensure the continued cooperation of tribal leaders and town elders. We're gonna need them — AMISOM is drawing forces out of Laascaanood to deal with Somaliland raiders. If— Listen to me, Dodger. *If* you start running out of food…"

Dodger grit her teeth, waiting for the obvious solution to come up.

"Worst case scenario only; use the Anabasis. *Do not* use it outside of Locke's default settings. Make sure the animals brought in are *clean* and edible. We don't need something worse than this to start infecting people."

Dodger sighed, and glanced about the faces on the screen. No challenges were made, so she nodded, "Alright. See you on the other side."

She closed out the windows, and snapped her laptop shut. One thing people hated more than anything was having basic necessities taken from them. Worse when it was taken away by healthy English-speaking Western men.

"That's not my concern…" She muttered to herself, sloughing off the burden, "I've got my orders."

The three volunteers conferred in front of the surgery room, in a discreet corner intended in the original architectural design of the building as a place to put a water basin. It had been deemed unnecessary.

"Am I the only one who feels we should not be trusting her?," Haji asked, "The longer she is here, the more this whole 'auditing' thing

sounds like an excuse for infiltrating us and test something… strange downstairs. I mean no offense to the wise women, Mirra in particular, but they might be blinded by her position! What was that thing that come downstairs? And how is it that she, a Coalition officer, has a sister in the Mission Branch?"

"Everything we do here is strange. What makes what she does any different? I was a Coalition operative, too, and here I am. Besides, you don't get to choose your family…" Olympe shook his head at the suspecting volunteer. "Look, it's simple enough. It's a matter of whether you accept what Frank tells you or not. I trust Frank. I don't trust Locke, but I find no reason to be paranoid about it either."

"There is that," Lila said, her head uncovered as she left the surgery room, barely even having time to digest the news. "There is also the fact that Opal will not talk about her and has asked to be put in solo-work with one of the newbies as nurse. She only does that when she's in a bad mood."

Olympe frowned at that. "Lila…"

"You know me, Frans." She rapidly collected her headscarf, covering her head and ears. "I won't do anything against her, no matter who she is or what she did in the past. I am not that sort of woman anymore, and I am pretty certain she is not a Parahealther anyhow."

"What do you mean, Afwerki?," Haji inquired, curious.

"I have my reasons, dear. Where is Ahman, by the way?," she delicately answered.

"Frank told him and some of the kids to go burn some of that mutant meat. Right, that, too! What if it was Locke's fault, somehow!," the young man added. Olympe arced a brow.

"Even Jacob says it's his fault, Haji. Just let go."

"I'm coming to Somalia," Rhiannon's voice came out clearly from the little bird, "I'm so happy I'll get to see you in person again.

Everything happened so fast, we barely got enough time to talk."

Priss shrugged, "We talked enough."

Rhiannon laughed, "You never were one for conversation."

Priss sat in her quarters, laptop on her bed. She was still in quarantine, after the furry beast came through the Anabasis. It had been taken peacefully, and wasn't showing any signs of illness after four days, but still they insisted on quarantining her. They couldn't find any signs of potentially dangerous pathogens in the beast yet, but not finding anything *yet* didn't mean it was safe for her.

"I'm in quarantine."

"I heard," Rhiannon kept her smile upbeat, "Don't worry, you should be out soon. By tomorrow at latest."

Everyone else exposed had been released already. They were keeping her in longest. *It's because you don't belong here.* Priss looked over at the Anabasis, on the table beside her. Had it always been able to talk? She remembered hearing that some of the researchers had talked to it, but couldn't remember if that was normal or some mental effect caused by exposure to it somehow.

"I just wanna… I wanna talk to you. About anything. The weather, even. I miss your voice. There's so much to catch up on… I mean, even though you're from another universe or whatever." Rhiannon just kept talking. So much nonsense. It wasn't as comforting for Priss as it was for her.

Priss had figured something had happened to her in this timeline to separate her from her family, "When I came here, I was in the basement of an abandoned school. Stuff brought in by the Anabasis tends to be in the same spot in one timeline as it was in the one targeted. Why was I in an abandoned basement?"

Rhiannon sighed, averting her gaze from the camera.

"I was dead. It's okay, you can say it. Probably mugged and stabbed, that would explain why I had nothing in my pockets."

"No, you… We didn't know. You had gone missing about twelve years ago. You were declared legally dead a while back. You were on your way home from school because you'd missed the bus, and you never returned. The school was searched but I guess they somehow missed your body…"

Priss swallowed lightly, and nodded. She'd expected it was something or other.

"I'm sorry," Rhiannon said, "I wanted to tell you, but like I said, everything happened so fast…"

Priss shrugged again, "It's not your fault."

It's not like the other Rhiannon would have opened the door and immediately snorted and said 'You're supposed to be dead, ha ha.' It's not like this Rhiannon doesn't respect you enough to tell you the truth up front. You don't belong here.

"How would you even tell someone that, after all they've been through?"

Like this, 'You're supposed to be dead, ha ha.'

Priss sighed, and pressed her hands into her eyes.

You don't belong here.

"What's wrong?" Rhiannon asked.

Priss looked up, seeing her sister still on the line.

"It's still hard trying to fit in here. It seems like every other thing I try to say ends up being racist or offensive in some way. I know not to say obvious stuff, but it's like every little thing can be twisted into something racist that I don't understand because I'm not from here. I've stopped trying to converse with people… Just simple, short statements and I get by."

Rhiannon grinned, "It's what you're best at."

Priss stared back at her.

"Sorry. Just relax. You're more well-regarded than you think. And you really are doing some good things here. Have you been getting along with the others? Opal, Jacob, Frank?"

Priss closed her eyes, longer than she intended, and slowly opened them, "Opal. She talks too much; makes my head hurt." She felt a strong urge to vent, but figured that was unwise… she preferred to complain about a person to their face, rather than behind their back. Besides, they trusted her… It wasn't her problem if that backfired in some way. "Foundation didn't work with anomaly-wielding humanoids. Still not used to it. Like leaving your house unlocked at night."

"Don't worry about it. You'll get used to it. Maybe not used to her, but as long as you two play nice."

Priss looked up again, at the door that was locked and sealed on the other side, as the staff waited the all clear before lifting the quarantine. Her quarantined because a googly-eyed man-bear ran past her, and an anomaly basically in charge of the entire operation. In context, it made sense, but…

Her gaze trailed off to the Anabasis again.

You don't belong here.

« Land of Plenty | Hub | The Hammer Falls »

Business As Usual

The weather that afternoon was unabashedly foul. The sky was heavy with clouds, the dark grey wetness oozing into everything until nothing was dry. Patches of skeletal, leafless trees stood guard over the miles upon miles of sodden, empty cornfields. The wind blew mercilessly, beating fat raindrops to earth in a miserable drizzle. The winter snows were gone, but spring had yet to appear in its blaze of green glory, leaving the world dull and dead.

A dented red pickup truck trundled along the gravel road, splashing through puddles and potholes alike. Inside, a talk show fought waves of static for dominion of the radio. The man who drove smoked a cigarette. The woman riding beside him was loading a pistol.

The truck turned off the desolate road onto an even more pitiful driveway, little more than a winding dirt path that crept off into the woods. The trees formed a leaning, claustrophobic tunnel with their gnarled branches, reaching down as if to ensnare the unsuspecting in their grasp.

The truck slowed to a stop at the very end of the path. There stood the decaying shell of what had once been a nice, two-story home, now reduced to a pile of creaking, rotting timber and filthy windows. The man turned off the truck's engine, and the two stepped out into the drizzle. Both the man and the woman were wearing blue jeans and camouflage-pattern jackets, nothing unusual for the place and time.

The man crushed his spent cigarette under his boot. He was in his late forties, with a neat brown beard, thick eyebrows, and a fluorescent orange hunter's cap on his head. He had gone through many names in his life: currently, he was known as Scarborough. The woman was younger, with green eyes and blonde hair tied into a short ponytail. Her face was sharp and slender, giving it an almost hawk-like, predatory look.

“So, this is the place?” the woman asked.

“I’ll answer that with another question, Montgomery. How often are we wrong?” Scarborough stepped up onto the porch, the boards groaning underfoot. He reached for the tarnished knob and found the door open.

Scarborough brandished his pistol in front of him as he stepped into house. The living room was dim and filthy: what furniture there was ancient and moldy, buried under piles of trash and a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. Leaning monoliths of black and white supermarket tabloids stood among the black plastic trash bags, empty beer bottles, and overflowing tobacco spittoons. The stench was easily comparable either to a dead animal, bad plumbing, or a combination of the two.

Montgomery’s hand shot up to cover her mouth and nose. Scarborough had lost his sense of smell long before. With a silent hand gesture, the two waded through the refuse towards what was presumably the kitchen.

The kitchen was hardly better than the living room, though now most of the garbage consisted of old fast food wrappers and beer cans. None of the appliances were younger than twenty-five years old, and none looked to have been actively used in at least that long. The only thing of note was the basement door, which hung open at a crooked angle. A comically large number of extra locks had been installed, up to a heavy-duty deadbolt, though at the moment they were hardly fulfilling their intended purpose. The stairs beyond were a black pit.

Scarborough felt the hairs on the back of his neck stick up. It took a second for him to realize the cause of his goosebumps was not any anomaly, but something far more mundane.

“Please close that window.” He motioned to the stained window above the trash-filled sink, which was open just enough to let a breeze ruffle the mildewed curtains. Montgomery shut the window, with only minor difficulty in moving it from its stuck position.

The ceiling above them creaked loudly. The next ten seconds were

breathless, torturous, and silent. When no other sound was heard from upstairs, Scarborough quietly pushed the basement door fully open and felt for the light switch. The two moved into the basement with haste.

The stairs were exceptionally rickety, and creaked even under the trained steps of Scarborough and Montgomery. The basement itself was hardly better: a bare pit of concrete lit by two bare light bulbs. Much of it was filled with the omnipresent trash, along with a dented hot water heater, and some everyday piping and exposed insulation.

One corner of the basement, however, had been repurposed into what could only be described as the workstation of a rather unhealthy mind. The old wooden desk seemed to sag under the weight atop it. Disorganized mountains of stained manila file folders and worn paperbacks with broken spines cluttered its surface and spilled out onto the floor, all the while hiding a laughably old computer and printer behind their summits. Three corkboards had been set up on the walls: the first was a map of the continental United States with colored push pins stuck in it in numerous locations. From the condition of the map, there had been many removed and re-positioned pins over the course of at least a decade. The second board was filled with plain sheets of paper, all of which were covered edge to edge in either miniscule handwriting or poorly-formatted computer print.

The third board was the most notable, filled with tacked-up photographs and sketches. Most of the photos looked as if they belonged in the tabloids sitting upstairs: blurry, unfocused images of ghosts and UFOs and Bigfeet, schematics for free-energy machines and hidden government facilities. Some others were not as easily glanced over: the severed head with a scaly arm sprouting from its mouth. A hazy shot of a massive creature with matted red fur, holding a crushed car over its head. A beached whale, its stomach burst open to reveal a mass of bloated bodies that had begun to crawl across the sand. A man offering a box of chocolates, his face blacked out and a dozen screaming mouths in the background. A blank white room labeled only as “NOTHING”.

“Busy fella,” Montgomery said, picking up a file folder and flipping through the magazine clippings inside. “How much do you think is

legit?"

"Outside of what command verified, I can't say. Most looks to be garbage, but there might be a few bits worth looking into."

"We still have to go through everything when we get back, though."

"Opus semper tecum est."

"Thanks. I thought I was done with high-school Latin."

"You're *never* done with high-school Latin, Montgomery."

The investigation was interrupted but moments later by a thunderous bang. Scarborough and Montgomery dived to the side, just avoiding the spray of buckshot.

At the top of the stair stood an overweight, disheveled man, wearing a stained undershirt and ragged pajama pants. His wild hair was a sharp grey, and he held a smoking nine-gauge shotgun in his hands.

"Ha! You think you could break into my house and walk away with my property?!" The man stepped down the stairs, reloading the shotgun. "You can't get past me that easily! Now, I'm going to give you to three to get the hell out of my house…"

He was answered by a bullet tearing through his right shin. The man tumbled down the rest of the stairs, landing flat on his back at the bottom with a thud. Scarborough holstered his pistol and walked over to the, gasping, wounded man.

"You little shits!" the old man screamed. "I'll have you in *chains* for this!"

"Mr. Malone, you are being extremely unprofessional," Scarborough said, showing neither excitement nor anger. "I am aware you've had to make some drastic changes in the past, but I would think a man such as you would hold himself in a more reasonable manner than this."

Malone's eyes grew wider, were it possible. The fear behind them was clear and potent.

“You’re not getting it…you’re not getting all my research.”

“That’s secondary to our purpose here, Mr. Malone. We are primarily concerned with the simple fact that you’re sticking your nose into places it doesn’t belong, and given your previous connections, that does not bode well with us.”

“You…you won’t get me to talk. I won’t talk.”

“Mr. Malone, we did not come here to listen to you: Your little website already told us you’ve been investigating several items that we’ve been keeping an eye on. You may have traded in your glass card years ago, but no one ever leaves it all behind, and we just can’t afford a slip, Mr. Malone. It’s as simple as that.”

Malone’s mouth worked silently for a few moments.

“Foundation bastards…” he wheezed.

Scarborough shrugged.

“Indeed we are.”

BANG

—-

The beaten red pickup truck rumbled down the road. The rain had stopped, for the time being, leaving wet roads and puddles in its wake. Far behind in the distance, a plume of smoke rose above the trees. Just a wiring problem, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Nothing unusual in the country home of Mr. Martin Malone, just some faulty wiring. Mr. Malone himself was, thankfully, elsewhere when it occurred, and would not be back for quite some time.

The inside of the truck was silent, all save the old, coughing engine and the crackling radio. In the cargo compartment beneath the floor sat several plastic bins, filled to the brim with the recovery efforts. Even working fast, it would take nearly a week for a thorough examination.

Montgomery hit the ‘off’ button on the radio, interrupting the used car

salesman assuring the public that “everything must go!” She brushed a strand of hair out her face.

“Well, that went about as well as expected.”

“That it did, Montgomery, that it did. The site’s down, the hole’s plugged, the body’s hid, and it looks like there was quite a bit he was keeping for himself. All in all, a job well done.”

“I almost feel sorry for the guy, y’know? He went from being a full member of Marshall, Carter and Dark to some nutty backwoods hick.”

“He couldn’t take the heat, so he left the kitchen. A smart move on his part, though it didn’t do him much good in the end. *Tene memoria, Malone, mortes hominum causam scientiae, et cautelam omne progredi saepe serviunt*.”

Montgomery shook her head and smiled.

“Now you’re just being pretentious.”

Busy Office Bees

Site 22

He always hated the buzz of the lights.

Something about that off-tone, buzzing noise just didn't sit right. It shouldn't be that way: a low, droning buzz, while reading through file after file, in a claustrophobic little office.

But it was.

Doctor McBride sat at his desk, like he did every single Friday, in his tiny office, in Site 22. For the last three hours of every week, he reviewed the files of potential subjects, which may or may not require additional investigation. It seemed so much more interesting when he first started. Somehow, it had become routine.

He leaned back in his chair, and stared up at the buzzing fluorescent light above him, frowning slightly. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. It just never ended.

He sat up, reached for his coffee, and grimaced as he took a sip of the slightly stale, overly sweet liquid. He looked down at the cup for a moment, frowning. He shouldn't be drinking coffee at this hour. His doctor warned him about his caffeine intake, especially in the afternoon.

He slipped his glasses off his face, and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He was vacillating. There were still six files to get through, and it was already four thirty.

He thought to himself, that he should feel lucky. He gets to leave every day at six. He wasn't like one of the research scientists down in the labs. Just an A&D evaluator. He was fairly happy with that arrangement, if it wasn’t for the damn buzzing.

A&D. That's what they called it. Acquisitions and Development. Such a clean, sterile way of saying "Lifelong imprisonment of people who scare us." Of course, he knew why these things were contained. It's not like there wasn't a reason. A good reason, actually. But it still was what it was.

He slipped his glasses back on his face, and looked down at the file in front of him.

Subject, a bunch of scribbled black marks over the name, redacting the information. No names. Never names.

A quick physical description. Young. Tall. Thin. Poor kid was barely out of college. Supposedly showing signs of psychokinesis, consistent with exposure to an object, which had slipped containment last year.

Doctor McBride scanned the page quickly, looking at the supposed evidence. A few eyewitness reports of things moving around the young man. A fire in his dorm room. A car accident. Nothing concrete. His shoulders relaxed, thinking that there was nothing there, and flipping to the last page, with the notes section to recommend that no action be taken.

His eyes slid over the damning line, as he went to check the "Do Not Detain" box:

"Subject was observed undergoing a ritual prayer consistent with 'Church of the Broken God' worship. This was positively observed by remote viewing through embedded camera, consistently since potential exposure date."

The doctor's shoulders fell, and he checked the "Detain Immediately" and the "Level Gamma" boxes. He jotted down a few notes, and cross-referenced the object containment procedures for the object in question.

He set down his pencil, and frowned down at the report. With a few quick notes, he'd condemned this young man to either life imprisonment, at the outside, or god forbid horrible testing procedures. He considered this for a moment, and looked down a

the "Do not Detain" box, carefully. It was always tempting to just check the box, and let people get on with their lives.

Unfortunately, he knew better. He put the report in the finished stack, and pulled out the next, letting the young man slip out of his mind.

He methodically worked through the reports, until the last neatly stapled pile came to the front. Four of the others had been "Do not Detain". It made him feel a little better about the first case, but he wouldn't lose sleep over having to make that call. Not anymore at least.

He looked down at the last report. He was a little surprised, the name wasn't redacted.

Subject: Daniel McBride

He froze for a moment, his breath catching in his throat. The physical description listed his age, height, weight. Everything down to the last detail.

He flipped to the description section, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. Why would his name appear on an A&D report?! He skimmed the section quickly. Connections to the Chaos Insurgency? Unauthorized access of Foundation Resources? Obvious exposure to multiple objects manifesting a variety of mental and physical abnormalities?

He felt his anger rise. Someone was playing a pretty sick joke.

He flipped to the last page, to see who'd prepared this report. Of course, his own name was on it, who else would be listed. Some jackass from records had been pissed off at a request he made.

It must have been Jackson. The guy took everything personally. He picked up the report and stormed out of his office. He mashed the elevator button, and pressed the floor.

He leaned against the elevator wall, and huffed. What the hell were they thinking? This is exactly why he was considering a transfer. It was bad enough having to deal with stressful work without every

Tom, Dick, and Doctor Harry trying to recapture the glory days of pranking other researchers.

The door opened, and he walked quickly down the halls, nodding at a few familiar faces, most on their way out of the administrative wing at this hour.

He walked past a few unmarked doors, to the one labelled unceremoniously "Records."

Inside, the bored looking clerk at the desk looked up from his magazine, and blinked sleepily. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. You can tell me who actually prepared this report, and how screwed they are." He handed over the now-crumpled pages.

The clerk skimmed the report, and looked up, "Doctor Theodoratos. Is something wrong, Doctor McBride?"

Doctor McBride froze for a moment. He snatched the report back, and looked down at it. It still said his name. The words hadn't changed.

"I don't…I must have been mistaken. Yes, this report looks fine now, long day."

The clerk leaned back "Sure doc. Anything else?"

"No. Of course not."

Doctor McBride walked calmly out of records, and back up to his office. He quickly threw the report in his desk drawer, and tried to forget about the whole thing. Maybe he just needed some rest.

Site 71

Doctor Theodoratos sat in his office, along with Doctor Matok, looking over Doctor Theodoratos' last A&D report of the day. "Detain Immediately" was off-putting enough, without having to do it to one of their own.

Subject: Daniel McBride

"Cognitohazard? Really? I mean, I guess we all know they're out there, but…how?"

Matok shrugged. "Not really sure how it got in. We suspect something coded in to a report by a mole."

Doctor Theodoratos grimaced. "So how did they realize he was infected by it, again? I didn't see anything…"

Doctor Matok flipped to a page in his copy of the report, shaking his head slowly. "Complained about buzzing, and he was short multiple assessments. We found them in his desk with all of the 'Detain Immediately' boxes rubbed off the page completely. Erased until the paper shredded."

Doctor Theodoratos looked puzzled for a moment, "Buzzing? I saw he put in a maintenance request, but I didn't think much of it for evidence."

Doctor Matok stood, and walked out the door frame, "Come on, Alec. They replaced all the ceiling lights with LED's last year. Better for the environment, yadda yadda. They don't buzz like the old lights. McBride was raving about them for six months."

Doctor Theodoratos laughed, and said "Of course. Of course, that makes sense. Thanks Jim. So, what did they do to the guy?"

He watched Doctor Matok walk to the door, turning in the door frame. "From what I've heard, he's been detained at Site 18. Keeps repeating the same phrase. 'Judge, Jury, Jailer, no more!' Whatever the hell that means. They're probably experimenting to figure out how it happened. Usually they just end up disposing of the subject, and dissecting the brain to figure out what the original cognitohazard was. Poor guy."

Doctor Theodoratos managed to keep his hands from shaking until Doctor Matok left the room.

All he could think all day, was how much he hated the buzzing of the lights in his office the past couple weeks.

But Life Goes On

In the underbelly of a numberless Site beneath Navi Mumbai, Pavlo Kharkiv sat alone in a dark room with a glass of vodka. One by one, four computer terminals around him flickered to life. They hummed as the faces of his co-conspirators, washed in blue light, loaded into view. He laughed softly to himself as he watched. The Foundation was the most technologically advanced organization on the planet, rivaled only by the Coalition. It had explored regions of space beyond the limits of normal humanity, it conducted business across multiple dimensions, it constructed chambers to hold beings that could be described only as gods. And they still couldn't figure out how to make a damn video stream load quickly.

He lit a cigarette and watched the light drift upwards, filtering the glow of the computer screens. This would be trial. If he convince himself, make the others see the necessity of his actions, they would be forced to follow his plans. If not… nothing that came afterward would matter.

As he watched the ember consume the cigarette, he wondered how he had come to be in this seat. When had he first realized the lengths he would go to to accomplish his goal? Had it been when the representative of the Watchers first came to him, explained the secret history of the Foundation? Told him of the enemy lurking within his organization's ranks? Of the secret war going on under his nose? No. Even then, he'd had trouble believing. He hadn't been *sure*. He hadn't known until he'd stood in the ruins of the original Site 19 and seen what had become of the members of the first Foundation.

The screens had loaded. He took a final drag of his cigarette, drawing the flame down to the filter, extinguished it, and turned to look at his jury. "Ladies. Gentlemen. It's nice to see you."

"Cut the fucking shit, Pavlo," said Liam Brook, known to the rest of the world as O5-2. "Tell us what the fuck is happening."

Pavlo looked to others. “I expect you all feel the same?”

They didn’t respond. They didn’t need to.

Pavlo shrugged, stood. Stay calm. Stay in control. Show them that this was *his* moment. “I killed Aubrey because it needed to be done. She came too close to understanding our plan. Had I not acted when I did, all we have been working towards would have collapsed.”

“And now it’s definitely going to fucking collapse,” said Liam. His voice came out as almost a growl. It was the most emotion Pavlo had ever seen the man show. “How the fuck are we supposed to cover up a dead O5?”

“It is being handled. Trust me. They will not know until we want them to know. Until then, it will be too late for them to be saved.” He drunk from the vodka. “The body has disappeared. The apartment has been scrubbed clean. Cover stories have been manufactured."

“And how much scrutiny will those stories hold up against?” said Yukiji Endo, director of Site 53. “What could you have possibly come up with on such short notice?”

“They will last enough. But we must begin our plans quickly.” He looked at each of his conspirators in turn. “We have waited too long already.”

“We don’t have ‘plans’,” said Dr. Clef. The image in front of his face was obscured by static. “We have fucking napkin drawings and chalkboard doodles.” He cackled. “I love it. When do we start?”

“What do the Watchers have to say about this?” said Dr. Spencer. Having only just earned the title of full Researcher, she was by far the least experienced member of their group. At first Pavlo had wondered why the Watchers had chosen her. He hadn’t wondered for long.

“They were the ones who first told me of the situation,” said Pavlo. “They must have known how I would handle it.”

The others went quiet. Yukiiji broke the silence first. “So what’s our

next step?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Clef. “We take down the rest of the fuckers.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Liam. “Unless you know how to kill every counsel-member and high ranking official at once, we’ll just put them on alert. No. No. We need to gather our tools first.”

“We need to take 2000,” said Spencer.

The others agreed.

« God Am | Hub | Rather Die Young »

All This Wandering

0930 CDT

"One more time. Just one. Come on, girl."

Plastic handle firmly in hand, Ritchie placed one foot on top of the leaf blower. He let the pullcord out, readied himself, and pulled. The engine made no attempt to turn over. Pulled again. That time, the barest hint of life, that extra second's growling… then nothing.

Ritchie didn't want to take this piece of shit back to the motor pool. Men have a very strange way of looking at other men who openly admit an inability to resolve a mechanical issue themselves. *I suck shit at engines, okay?* he always wanted to say. *I don't think half of you fucks can read. Let's call a truce, huh?*

One more try, then. Ritchie readied himself. Pulled. Realized what was happening immediately. Couldn't do anything about it. Felt his entire mass flying backwards. Watched his vision of the leaf blower turn into a vision of the parking lot and then a vision of the sky. Hit his head and back against the concrete sidewalk.

Twitched. Didn't cry. Humiliated, yes, but still had *some* standards.

"Need some help, soldier?" The sun was blocked out momentarily by a silhouette. A definitively female, probably brunette silhouette. That silhouette could give a man ideas.

Oh shit, Ritchie thought. *This girl's, like, 19, maybe? She's got to be one of the college kids.* He tried to think of something to say. Settled for groaning.

She giggled. "Here." She reached her hand down towards Ritchie, who grabbed it along the wrist like a medieval handshake. "Up we go now. Come on."

Ritchie was surprised at how easily she helped him up. *Definitely stronger than expected,* he thought.

"You okay?" she asked. "I saw you fall. Looked like a nasty spill."

"Yeah, it's, uh. It's no big deal. Didn't hurt. I mean, you know, it wasn't a vacation or anything. The university doesn't provide those kind of perks." Ritchie realized that he had been sure to emphasize the low-paying nature of his job during this courtship ritual because he was an idiot. He tacked a short, uncomfortable laugh onto the end, just to remind himself that he wouldn't be successfully reproducing any time soon.

The girl chuckled warmly. "What is that job, exactly? Other than waking up freshmen at seven in the morning on days they don't have classes?"

Ritchie smiled hopefully. "'Landscaper' is the word you're looking for. Grounds department. Just getting some of these leaves out of the flower beds."

"Satisfying kind of work, is it?" She smiled, keeping eye contact.

Ritchie shrugged. "Well, you know. It's good enough money. And there are some advantages, as you point out."

The girl's eyes twinkled. "But?"

He thought about it, figured he may as well go for broke. "I have this theory. I think that at the end of the day, no matter what it is that we do, all men really just want to be heroes, you know? It's why we idolize athletes. You sit in the bleachers, a normal person, and you see this other person that's pretty ordinary, except he throws a ball well and people are cheering his name like he's saving orphans from a burning building." Ritchie looked at his equipment. "I'm comfortable, sure. But I'm never gonna be a hero."

She looked Ritchie up and down, looked at the equipment, the efficient layout of his work truck behind him. "It's funny you mention that, because I would have sworn this looked like a soldier's work. Did you serve?"

"Nah, but I get that a lot," Ritchie said. "I think my dad might have served, and I just picked up a lot of his habits."

"You think?" The girl's voice implied curiosity, but her face didn't actually seem puzzled.

"Yeah, we didn't communicate much." Ritchie started rubbing his temples; that mild little nagging headache started in, the one he got when he spent too much time thinking about the past. "He was sort of…away, you know? Even when he was there. Not a neglect sort of thing, just a…wait, why am I telling you all of this?"

"You never spent any kind of time in any military force of any kind?" The girl was no longer pretending to flirt, just making steady eye contact.

Ritchie's head was now openly throbbing. "I…uh, you don't, you know, ah, *fuck*… I don't know what you're getting at. There's no way that — "

The needle slipped into his neck from behind. Ritchie had a split-second to think *Jesus, what an obvious distractio—* before a voice right beside his ear whispered, "*She's a million miles away from me.*"

Ritchie died. Someone else woke up.

"Separated by a hollow wooden door," replied Peter.

"Name, auth, and rank, Agent," the voice behind him said.

"Peter Xavier Avalon, Alpha-18032-Gamma-Gamma, Senior Operative," he droned.

"Last assignment?"

"Mobile Task Force Omega-7, 'Pandora's Box'."

The woman behind Peter walked into his field of vision, held up a finger, moved it horizontally in front of him. Peter's eyes couldn't track it at first, but then the norepinephrine derivative included in the mnestic cocktail started kicking in, and he started becoming more

responsive. "Look at me, Peter," the woman said. "Do you know my name?"

Peter took a second as the memories came back and nine years melted away. "Yes, ma'am, Dr. Jones," he said. "Sorry, I'll need a minute."

"Take your time, son," Maria Jones said. "Have a seat." She motioned him onto the gate of the truck. "That was a hell of a drug you just got hit with."

"Yeah. Yeah," Peter nodded drunkenly. "Where am I?"

"You're in the, uh…Alex, what's this college again?"

"University of Tennessee at Martin, ma'am. Small rural college town. About nine thousand students," the younger woman said. Clipped. Cool. Professional. Not flirty at all.

"Thank you, Alex." Maria turned back to Peter. "You're a groundskeeper. You've worked here for about seven years, ever since the Goodyear plant closed down. It's been nine years total."

"Nine years?" Peter shook his head. "We talked…we were just having a conversation about the amnestics and the protocols of this. You just explained the memetic activation code. You were telling me about the…the 'extremely unlikely event' that you might have to reactivate me at some point in the future. It was…" Peter gazed past Maria, at Alexandra's worried face. "It was *just happening*."

Maria shook her head. "Your internal clock is going to be one of the last things to adjust, and it's the hardest thing to ignore in the meantime. Put it aside for now; it'll get you mobile until you recover from the worst case of jet lag in recorded human history. We need you back, Pete."

Peter looked at his much-less-defined arms, his torso, the quite visible (though not *overly* pronounced) pooch in his T-shirt, felt his breathing, rotated some of his joints. "My mind feels fine, ma'am, but I don't know if this body quite has what it had the last time we talked."

"Alex?" Maria said.

Alex moved her hand to her hip in one smooth motion. A metal glimmer of light, a flicker, a *whoosh*, and suddenly Pete found himself holding a stainless steel throwing knife by the handle — then on his feet, ready to take down the 115-lb brunette he'd been flirting with three minutes previously.

Maria smiled. "You have the instincts. We can work the details out later. Are you with us?"

Peter looked at his body, then at the sad pile of old and worn-out landscaping gear that had been Ritchie's life. "Yeah," he said. "I'm with you."

1030 CDT

Matthew kept blushing every time he met Pamela's eyes. It was a strange time to be getting embarrassed, but he wasn't sure how else to feel. He leaned forward and kissed her awkwardly, pushing his tongue in against her teeth. She moaned and opened her mouth more, inviting him in.

Matthew just knew that she knew something was wrong. He just knew it. But he shouldn't *think* about that, because that made those…those *problems* happen again. "Are you ready, baby?" he asked in his most seductive squeak.

"Mmm-hmm," she said, nodding eagerly. Matthew couldn't believe she wanted this (*but don't think about that!* he thought, thinking about that), couldn't believe someone who looked like *her* wanted her first time to be with someone who looked like *him*.

And after the last two attempts, he couldn't believe she was *still* interested.

A song called "The Last Polka" playing in the background, thumb and two fingers touching the open end of the condom, he pressed forward with his hips. He felt the reservoir touch her labia and bend

back in (he felt *everything* so acutely right now), felt the tip slide across sensitive membranes, and find its way to the opening. Pamela sucked her breath in; he felt her tense up ever so slightly, even though they *knew* that this didn't have to hurt if Matthew did his job correctly…

Matthew pushed inside. He locked eyes with her, and at that moment, knew that he would never be that close to another human being, knew that you *couldn't* be that close to another human being. This was as close to telepathy as two people could share. Matthew had enough confidence to pull his hand off of his penis (*can she feel it getting harder?* he thought) and bring it up to stroke her hair. He kissed her again, more tenderly now.

They wouldn't be the same after this, weren't the same as they had been just a few seconds ago, not in the way that society kept insisting this moment made them different, but something had changed and they both knew it and both knew the other felt the same. They had figured out so much in the last hour, the prototype engineering problems that so many young couples are left to figure out on their own; friction, trigonometry, force. Certain gas laws came into play during the last beta test as well, which was met with laughter by both of the scientists involved in the experiment.

"What's so funny?" Pamela asked.

Matthew realized he'd been snickering. "It's…like, all of this?"

Pamela nodded at the unasked question.

"It's all worth it. Just to be with you like this, right now. It was all worth it."

Matthew watched her eyes dew up slightly, then heard a sniffle. "I'm ready, Matty. Whenever you are. Just go slow, okay?"

"Okay," Matthew said, and let his hips fall towards hers more. He pulled back after a second, and then let them fall again until they touched hers. He watched her gasp now, feeling all of him inside of her; and his eyes crossed slightly, feeling so much of her around him, and all he could hear was blood rushing through his ears, and

the sound of a key slipping into a lock behind him.

The door to the apartment opened, and two women stepped inside. Matthew was simultaneously too freaked out to know exactly how to respond and too courteous to jump off of Pamela, so he turned his upper body toward the door while still inside of her. "What the hell —"

"Sorry about this," the woman said. She strode carelessly to the closet and yanked it open to find a scruffy-bearded man, his pants down around his ankles, midway through the action of trying to push himself back behind the clothes in the closet for cover.

"Oh, shit!" the bearded said. "This is, uh…"

"I don't even want to know." The woman jammed a needle in the man's neck. She pushed the plunger down with a force that was probably unnecessary. "*The clock never stops, never stops, never waits,*", Maria Jones said angrily.

"*She's growing old, it's getting late,*" Noah replied immediately.

"Name, auth, and rank, Agent!"

"Noah Shepherd Chase, Sigma-38225-Eta-Nu, Junior Operative," he said, pulling slightly away from the needle.

Maria twisted it out of pure spite, then pulled it out. "Do you know where you are?"

"No, ma'am. This looks like…maybe a cheap apartment of some kind? There's screaming naked people on the bed, and I'm — " He looked down in horror the visible tent in his boxer briefs. "Ma'am, I don't think I want to know how the fuck I got here. Was this Pete again? He said he owed me one after the thing with the water hose — "

Maria slapped Agent Chase across the face. "Pull your fucking pants up, Noah. We've got work to do." She gave the terrified young couple a friendly smile. "Sorry about this," she said politely, dragging the still-confused Agent out of the apartment.

1620 CDT

There is a sign in Bea Andrew's spare bedroom, the one she had converted into a home gym, the one with the weight bench and the treadmill and the punching bag and the sign and absolutely no other adornment whatsoever. The sign is a metal flow chart.

SHOULD YOU BE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

From "YES", an arrow leads to:

DO YOU FEEL LIKE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

From "YES", an arrow goes to "WORK OUT". From "NO", an arrow goes to "TAKE SHOWER." The arrow from this leads to:

DO YOU FEEL LIKE WORKING OUT? YES/NO

Both arrows led back to the box reading "WORK OUT".

Bea Andrew allowed herself five minutes under hot water to motivate herself to maintain her physical shape. After that, she was going to maintain that shape whether she liked it or not. She found that removing personal free will from the equation helped dramatically.

She had also found that working out helped suppress the profound anger that she felt, and this helped her take care of her daughter without letting all of the anger and frustration out on her. Bea did *not* believe in physical violence against living creatures.

Her daughter asleep in the bedroom down the hall, Bea undressed in preparation for yet another workout. She paused, at her chest, at what could have been either a woman's small breasts or a man's prominent pectoral muscles. Her forefinger and thumb dug into the skin of her toned stomach, pinching deep, almost into muscle. *You are not a man,* she thought, twisting. *You are a woman,* she thought, leaving another dark-purple bruise to add to the constellation beside it.

She slid out of her jeans and panties and stood in the bedroom,

looking into the full-length mirror across from the treadmill. She looked at the area between her legs for just a glimpse, then looked away. *You are not a man,* she thought, pinching now at the other constellation on her right thigh. *There is no penis there. That means you are a woman,* she thought, twisting.

Bea had complete solitude in this room, but she still put on full-length workout pants and a hoodie that, in this case, hid the *lack* of curves. Bea was very used to hiding. She pushed earbuds into her ears, turned on an episode of *Welcome to Night Vale*, and began zoning out into another world while the numbers on the treadmill flashed by.

One set of arms grabbed her from behind, pulling her backwards. A needle. Some cursing as Cecil's voice was pulled out of her head. "*We danced and smiled and paddled hard beneath it,*" a woman's voice said.

"*I've got you to thank for this,*" Bea said, and vanished…

The body tremored, nearly seizing, for just a moment, then the eyes closed again. Maria laid them down on the floor and backed up against the wall, hands in the air.

"What are you doing?" Alex asked.

"You don't know Effy," Maria replied. "You don't want her to perceive you as a targe — "

The person on the floor erupted upwards into a jiu-jitsu stance, panting, sweating, *pissed.* "Who the FUCK!?"

"Effy, please," Maria said, hands raised and empty. "It's me, Effy."

Cold eyes ran over Maria's hands, feet, face, and arms. Maria was well aware that Effy had just devised four ways to kill her, three ways to put her into a coma, six ways to cripple her, and eleven ways to knock her out, all in one glance. "Effy," she said cautiously. "I need you to tell me your name, rank and auth."

Effy relaxed. "Fatimah Workwise, Delta-38344-Delta-Epsilon. Formerly of MTF Omega-7. Recently retired from the Foundation.

Well, I say that," Effy said, then brought their wrist up to their ear and rotated it, listening to the cracks. "I'd say about ten years now? This is almost completely healed."

"Close," Maria said. "Nine years. We need you back, Effy. If you're up for it."

Effy looked down at the baggy outfit, was naked in two fluid motions, stepped in front of the mirror and looked up and down. Paused at the stomach and thigh bruises. "The fuck is this? Are these *self-inflicted?*"

"I'm afraid so," Maria said.

"What the *fuck* kind of false identity did you stick me with?" Effy rubbed at the freshest bruises. "And who told them they could fuck up the upholstery?"

"I told you, that's not how this amnestic therapy works," Maria said. "We give you the initial injection, you come to, we tell you your name, and that's it. Your mind makes up most of the rest of the personality on its own. Helps it maintain self-integrity and consistency. A week's worth of monitoring, and we let you go free-range to invent a life for yourself."

"So…what kind of personality did my subconscious come up with, exactly?" Effy was bouncing, shifting the weight of their perfectly athletic form back and forth, smiling.

Maria coughed. "From the outside, it seemed like a healthy enough deviation from your baseline. Seemed like the sort of thing that would help you blend in with civilian life a bit easier."

"Doc," Effy said, no longer smiling.

Maria took a deep breath. "Your new identity, uh… thought they were a conventional, XX-chromosomal woman who had experienced some sort of poorly-remembered accident."

Effy stood stock still, staring coldly. Maria tried to take another step backwards and found that she was already up against the wall, with no course of retreat.

After a moment, Effy burst into laughter, head rolling back slightly. "Oh, shit, doc," Effy said. "If I were her, I'd butcher your entire family for that travesty. I mean, a massacre. God made this shit *perfectly.* Have you seen this fucking body, doc?" They began doing yoga stretches, isolating one group of lean muscle after another.

Maria sighed. "Effy, everyone who's ever been around you for more than fifteen minutes has seen that. You're fairly determined to demonstrate your lack of body modesty. Would you mind getting dressed, please? We still have one more operative to unretire, and there's not that much daylight left."

"Sure thing, doc." Effy threw their workout clothes back on.

As Effy was turning the corner, a door at the other end of the hallway opened.

"Mommy?" a three-year-old said, rubbing her eyes to get the naptime out.

Effy stopped, turned to Maria. "Who's the kid?"

"You were babysitting," Maria said matter-of-factly. "Nothing to worry about. We'll get her taken care of."

Effy shrugged and continued out of the house.

The three-year-old paused, yawned. "Mommy?" she said, slightly louder but without any real distress.

"Shhh, shhh, it's okay," Maria said. "I'm a doctor. We need to just talk to your mommy for a minute by ourselves, okay?"

The three-year-old's face scrunched up for a second, looked at Maria, then the floor, then back at Maria. "Trains?"

Maria looked past the little girl and saw some Thomas and Friends train track sets on the floor of her bedroom. "Yes, darling, you can play with the trains," she said. "Mommy will be in to play with you in just a few minutes, 'kay? Make her something big, 'kay?"

The three-year-old shook her head for a second, yawned again, and

nodded. "Trains," she said, decisively, and turned around to go back into her room.

Maria watched her go inside and closed the bedroom door behind the young girl.

"Dr. Jones?" Alex was frowning.

"Hang on," Maria said, pulling out a phone. She typed a seventeen-digit number in the "To:" box, tapped in the input, and handed it to Alex. "Type 'PROC 932-Montauk', ampersat, and whatever this address is," Maria said.

Alexandra tapped. "Montauk?" she asked absently.

"Containment procedures involving minors," Maria said.

2011 CDT

Alex had heard of some excellent restaurants that can be found in larger cities if you know which alleyways have them, as opposed to the alleyways that have mostly diseased murderers. The jury was still out on this particular alley.

"Dr. Jones?" she asked nervously. "Is there a reason we're *racing* to this…whatever this building is supposed to be?"

"Attitude," Maria said. "Have to project a certain attitude. I don't know what your experience is with this sort of nightclub, but you'll get eaten alive in here if they smell prey."

"So walking fast gives you more…attitude?" Alexandra asked.

Maria paused for a second, blushed. "It…yes, dammit! That's part of it!"

Alex shrugged. "If you say so, Dr. Jones."

Maria walked directly up to the bouncer at the door and projected all of the "attitude" that five feet and eight inches of Ivy League-

educated Chicana recordkeeper could bring to the table. "We're here for Rasputin," she said, in a tone that Alexandra assumed was intended to be "fierce", but was more accurately considered "chirping".

The bouncer looked Maria up and down, then Alexandra as well. "You got the password?"

Maria reached into her jacket and removed a stack of hundred-dollar bills, wrapped in a metal clip. "I think one of them knows it," Maria said in a tone that Alexandra assumed was intended to be "purring", and what was more accurately considered "whispering."

The bouncer took the clip, flipped through the bills to make sure they were actually hundreds, shrugged, and stepped aside. "The show hasn't started yet," he said. "You'll need to buy a ticket if you want to stay for the real thing."

"We won't be staying," Maria said, pushing past. Alexandra followed as best she could, weaving her way inexpertly around the chairs and tables. "Remember," Maria continued, "Billy's built like a tank. That double-dose of mnestic you're holding isn't an accident. If something goes wrong, he's more than capable of snapping you like a twig. We're going to have to make sure he's really distracted before…"

"You spend too much time behind a desk, Maria," a basso profundo voice boomed in the darkness.

Alex jumped, almost dropped the syringe in her hand. Maria froze, eyes wide like a rabbit facing a wolf. "Billy," she said.

A sound of two enormous hands clapping together, and the stage lights came on. Alexandra finally got to see the legendary Agent William Abrams in the flesh. He was six feet ten inches of jet black, sinewy muscle, the kind of body NFL linebackers wished they could have when they grew up. He was impressive enough seated in what looked like a wrought-iron throne in center stage, but as he stood, Alexandra was even more impressed at how gracefully he handled his eight-inch stiletto heels.

The spotlights came on. Alexandra covered her eyes for a second,

looking back as they adjusted. The words "LEGENDS NEVER DIE" were emblazoned in faux-Cyrillic neon tubes above Billy's head. Billy walked with a cheetah's perfect grace across stage left to steps that led down to the main floor. Putting one foot on the first step down, he turned back towards his throne and barked something in what Alexandra presumed to be Russian.

The "wrought-iron" throne dissolved into six men, stark naked except for thongs and slate-grey body paint from head to toe. The six men went backstage, closing the door behind them.

The three of them, Maria, Alexandra, and Billy, were alone.

"Where's the needle?" Billy asked. His voice was low and mellifluous, a voice for late-night radio and old jazz records.

"I don't know what you're ta —"

"I do not have time for your bullshit equivocations, bitch," Billy snapped, hand on one hip, one perfectly manicured finger in the air in protest. "This queen is fucking *busy*. You never thought I was ignorant before; do not develop some kind of misconception now."

Maria could only sputter. "How…how did you bypass the amnestic block?"

Billy chuckled humorlessly. "Your drugs are fucking *weak*, bitch. A few interesting experiences with *ayahuasca*, DMT, and amyl nitrate, and my brain put itself back together. I remember everything, even without you crooning soft piano rock in my ear."

"That's impossible," Maria said.

"You told us that shit was experimental, right? Prototype amnestic technology? Guess what, Maria? Your tech needs work."

Maria was shaking from what Alexandra presumed to be some combination of fear and anger. "You…you should have told us, Billy," Maria said. "You could have been in danger. You could have revealed classified information."

Billy came toe-to-toe with Maria. This close, he was like some kind

of Greek god: a Greek god in white lace and high heels. "Danger?" he rumbled. "Me?"

Maria broke eye contact first.

"So why the little well-check after all this time, hmm?" Billy asked, turning his back on the two women. "You just assumed I was still off being — what was his name? 'Damarcus Franklin'? Never letting you name a black man again, that's a goddamn fact."

"Word's come down from higher up, Billy," Maria said. "They want another shot at Omega-7. Calling it 'Project Resurrection'. A new team. MTF Alpha-9. 'Last Hope'."

Billy smiled, half sardonically, half sincerely. "Remind me later that you ain't the only person not allowed to name shit from now on. Who else is getting tapped for this?"

"High-ranking agents, the best of the best. William Lopez is on board."

"Heard of him, vaguely. Don't give a shit. Who's getting tapped that I know? I know this ain't the first visit you made today."

Maria sighed, resigning herself to the absence of information control at this point. "We have Noah, Pete, and Effy. Iris agreed to another go, too. Believe it or not, she was actually how the idea first got passed around."

Billy stuck his tongue out at the first, shrugged at the second, and smiled at the last two. "You talked Fatima into this pigshit? I'm impressed. Ain't you just the luckiest."

"You get what the mission is, Billy," Maria said, locking eyes with the towering giant. "You know several of the people. You're obviously in the sort of physical condition we need. The world is in some — " Maria stopped again. "*We're* in deep shit, Billy. You're one of the best we've got. Can you save our asses again?"

Billy shrugged. "The club's doing fine. Rafael can take over management. My regulars will miss these *unbelievable* legs, but worse things have happened to better people. And I do miss my girl

Iris." Billy reached back onto the stage and grabbed a leather satchel. "Sure, Maria, you've got yourself a deal. I'm a sentimental guy. Let's go blow shit up again."

But We Do Not Talk About That

> People die.
> Expendables? Two in three. Per week.
> Security? Two in three. Per month.
> Researchers? Two in three. Per year.
> Doctors? Two in three. Per decade.
> Look to your left.
> Look to your right.
> And wonder, always wonder, which side of the terminal curve you are on.
> But we do not talk about that.

Agent Strelnikov aimed his Kalashnikov at the blast doors.

Sweat wicked down his cheek, passing stubble, then separated from his face, dripping to the floor. Seven minutes. Seven minutes he had been pointing his rifle, seven minutes without moving a muscle, going on eight. He had heard the screams, but seen nothing. He could not hold it off any longer. He had to see what was going on.

Strelnikov inched his way towards the doors, then peeked. He saw the thing standing near a pile of corpses, tapping madly on the device in its hands, its body glowing with a dull red heat. Strelnikov recognised beeps of confirmation. He rounded the corner, keeping his sights trained on the figure. His boot squeaked. The thing glanced over its shoulder.

Strelnikov saw red splatter from his chest, then saw nothing at all.

Technical Researcher David Rosen stared at his screens, listening to his boxes hum.

The database, Rosen thought, was a giant brain. A constant influx of sensory data, reaching out and categorising the world. The brain is

easily distracted, easily disturbed. A hit to its metaphorical noggin, and a metaphorical concussion would transpire. But there were more subtle problems, and it was one of these that plagued him now.

Requests could be made in the field; transfers, requisitions. The system automated most of these, when reasonable. But here was an order to provide an asset to an unrelated person, seemingly without justifiable need. The system consulted Rosen. Rosen looked at the words, felt himself approve it against his will, then fell to the floor.

Rosen felt his ears buzz with white noise; silent screams, then screaming silence.

Dr. Ellis "Iceberg" Gill looked at the small pill in his hand.

It could cure any illness, they said. He had asked before. Many, many times. And he had been denied just as many. Yet here he held one in his hands. He smiled. Perhaps some administrator had seen fit to ease his discomfort. Empathy was a rare thing in this line of work. Iceberg gulped down the pill. He felt a gurgling, then a wrongness.

The room grew colder, and colder, and colder. Iceberg shivered, and shivered, and shivered, and then the shivers stopped as the water in his cells froze and expanded and popped the neurons that passed on the message that he was far, far, far too cold. The man of cold realised that the pill was not curing the cold. It was curing the man.

Iceberg dropped, then shattered, blue shards of human clattering across the floor.

> Sometimes it is more than two in three.
> But we do not talk about that.

In Dread Forever Fled

I'm sorry, but look at us. We're still in here, after all this time. We've served our sentence and then some, and we're still in this goddamn prison. It's not the time to be angry with each other, we've done enough of that over the years. We don't work together, so we don't get anything done, and they know it. Our fighting, our little spats, they're what's keepin' us locked up and controlled. Oh sure, you can kill who you'd like when they go wandering through, and have a jolly time with getting your stab quota filled, but that doesn't give us freedom. It doesn't get us out beyond these walls. I know me and a lot of you feel the same way about it, about being stuck in this hellhole. Now, I know most of us wouldn't have trusted each other with our lives, but now we have one goal, and that's getting out of this jam.

It's not just a spur of the moment type thing. You guys know what happened to Harold? I saw some of you stop by every once in a while, checking up on the poor guy. He never did get better. Over the years he just grew more pale, skinnier. His hair fell out and vanished. I was with him until the end. He just sort of faded away, without saying a word. Now it's happening to Mike, and I'm afraid he's going to just fade away too. What happens when it starts happening to James, or you, or me? What do we do then? Do we keep fighting amongst ourselves until we're all gone?

It's not 'just our time'.

It's the blood, see? The janitors come around every long while, and we've thought that they just touch it up, make sure it's fixed up and nice. But we're wrong. They're adding imperfections, it's starting to do a bit of a worse job keeping us grounded. Don't you notice you're getting weaker lately? Hauling those chains and slitting those throats is getting a little harder, ain't it? Affecting some of us more than others, but it is getting to us all. And that's why we need to fight back against them. They're not just keeping us here, making sure that we

don’t escape. They’re killin’ us, ever so slowly. I don’t know how we can die a second death, but apparently we can, and I don’t want to let that happen to any more of us.

I can’t believe you’d say that it might be a good thing. You think just fading away into nothing is a good thing?

No, there ain’t Heaven for us. Don’t you remember what you did to land you here? And you think that the big man would give you a break and let you pass the pearly gates just because some asshole decided to keep you locked up longer than you were supposed to? At least if we put up a fight we get a chance, a hope for freedom. Even this place is better than eternal fire and brimstone. I want to see the sun again some day. Harold did, too, but now he’s never going to see it and it’s all because of them. Don’t you want to see the face of your family, feel a cool breeze? Well too bad, pack up your bags because we’re going to hell! And that’s how it’s going to be if we don’t find a way to get some changes around here.

Look, I don’t expect us to somehow magically obtain livelihoods away from that electric chair, but at least we can stop ourselves from fading into nothing. They have numbers, and they’re big, and they’re strong, but we’ve got nothing to lose. Even if we don’t succeed in getting away from this place, maybe they’ll feel one giant punch instead of all these small ones. Maybe we can force them to change. Maybe one day I’ll finally see the sun again, and maybe one day you will too. But that's only if we bring the fight to them.

What I’m proposing? Well I’m proposing we have ourselves a prison riot.

> **SCP Involved**: **SCP-450**
> **Personnel Involved**: Site-18 Security
> **Date**: 08/26/2007
> **Location**: , .
>
> *On 08/26/2007, at approximately 15:26, during the routine cleaning and maintenance of SCP-450, all staff performing janitorial duties were simultaneously targeted by SCP-450’s anomalous effects. All personnel suffered wounds consistent with repeated stabbing by makeshift*

weapons, and perished shortly thereafter. For the first time since its containment, SCP-450 activity spread beyond its containment area. Several fires were started in the prison's courtyard. Specter activity began affecting those not present in the death row section of the prison. Among the on-site staff, there were 12 casualties, 14 fatalities, and 4 unharmed personnel.

SCP-450 activity came under control following the arrival of the SWAT team. Foundation casualties claim that SWAT team intervention allowed their survival. Security camera footage corroborates these claims. Mobile Task Force Pi-2 arrived at 22:33 and extracted casualties, successfully re-containing SCP-450 at 01:22 of the following morning. Debriefing of MTF Pi-2 agents indicates that during its arrival they observed a number of officers surrounding the facility, but were unable to apprehend any due to evacuation concerns. It should be noted that the SWAT team has been disbanded since 1973, and of its original members, only are still living.

SCP-450 activity is in decline following incident 450-2242-12.

By One Iota

Deep in the catacombs beneath Overwatch Cathedral, there was a cavernous and isolated chamber at the end of a long hallway. The historians of the Holy Foundation could only guess at what purpose it might have held before the Great Breach - some claimed it had been a storage room, some an auditorium, some a shelter, others the containment chamber of one of the demons the ancients had contained before the world was consumed. No sound penetrated its walls, and it took five strong men to open or close the mighty steel door (which not everyone agreed had originally been part of the room) that offered the only means of entrance or exit. Few but the highest ranking members of the clergy knew it even existed, let alone the path to reach it, and none could breach its doors but by satisfying the Omega Guard that they had a right to be there, for this was the heart of the Overwatch itself - the meeting place of the Council of Thirteen, the Doctors of the Church, the vicars of Bright.

As one passed through the grand doorway, he would see all three walls before him covered with grand tapestries, sewn over decades by the D-Caste and the deacons who oversaw their work at portraying the history of the Holy Foundation. On the left wall, the tapestries portrayed the legends of the ancient world, before the Great Breach. St. Alto staring down the great dragon and feeding the multitudes from a steaming pot of soup, St. Konn the Vampire-Slayer testing his steel against the duke of the strigoi, St. Canis Corvin educating the False War-God, and in the center of the wall the First Resurrection of the Lord Bright, holding the Holy Amulet above His head. To the right, the tapestries depicted the Great Breach and the degradations that occurred in those days, the fall of the ancient temple, and the rising of the Holy Foundation, with the Lord Bright, again in the center of the wall, flanked by His saints as they stood triumphantly over the corpse of the great dragon and the rubble of the statue that He Himself had smashed to bits in his rage over the death of St. Agatha. On the opposite wall, the art portrayed the Holy Foundation as it existed today - educating the civilians,

carrying word of the Holy Containment Procedures to all corners of the world, keeping the ancient evils sealed. In the center of that wall was the hope for the future - a shining silver city, greater than any that had stood before the breach, over which Lord Bright looked with a smile.

Beneath this tapestry, there sat against a wall a great throne of mahogany and leather, decorated with gems and holy icons, preserved and restored throughout the centuries for the Father of the Foundation, His Holiness the Lord Jack Bright, whose amulet sat in a glass case upon the throne in His stead. Thirteen lesser chairs before thirteen desks sat arranged in a semicircle facing the chair. Today, ten of the chairs were occupied by old men and women, the Cardinal Doctors who had given their lives in service and risen through the ranks of the church to become members of the Council of Thirteen. Two of the Omega Guard flanked the door to ensure that none trespassed on the meeting. One of the men near the left end of the semicircle rose and spoke to the others.

"I, the Second," he said, for in this chamber it was their custom to refer to themselves by number rather than name, "hereby call this meeting of the Council of Thirteen to order in the name of the First, who has passed away this last winter and is absent. Cardinal Doctors Two, Three, Four, Six, Seven, Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen present. The Twelfth has agreed to lead us in prayer."

The Second seated himself as the Twelfth rose from her seat and bowed her head. "Lord Bright," she began as the others lowered their heads as well, "forgive us today for the transgression we are about to commit against You. Know that we mean no disgrace or disrespect in our hearts, and that we commit these deeds to understand Your glory and to further carry out Your will, as we do in all things. Forgive those who serve us today and take part in these acts at our orders, for they seek only to serve and to honor You and Your Foundation. Bless us with Your wisdom and keep us safe, that our children may know a world free from the terrors of the Expunged. Amen."

"Amen," the other nine agreed as the Twelfth seated herself. A moment passed in silence as each of the ten waited for one of the others to take action, for it had been over a hundred years since the

Council of Thirteen last found this course of action necessary, and though they had all agreed it was the only way, each of them had their doubts.

"Perhaps," suggested the Sixth timidly, "we should conduct the vote once more before we begin?"

"Indeed," the Second said. "It would be a shame to discover too late that this proceeding is unnecessary. Please cast your votes on the question at hand in the traditional manner." One of the guardsmen left his post at the door and picked up a large box with a slot on top. As he walked around the table, each of the cardinals wrote their vote on a slip of paper and dropped it into the box. After a few minutes had passed, the guardsman returned to the door and opened the box, where he and his partner removed the slips and tallied the votes one by one.

"The vote remains tied," announced the guardsman. "Five for one, five for the other."

"Then we must proceed," the Second said, "and Bright have mercy on us all. Guard! Our guests may enter now."

The guardsman approached the door and knocked on it in the agreed-upon pattern - three short knocks in rapid succession, followed after a brief pause by a hard knock, a short knock, another hard knock, and another short knock, followed after another pause by a short knock, two hard knocks, and a short knock. The door rumbled and opened slowly as it was pushed from the other side. A half dozen Omega Guards entered - two carrying a table between them, two carrying several heavy chains and ropes, and the other two leading a D-Caste, stripped to his loincloth. The D-Caste had been specially prepared for the day's ritual - starved and emaciated, his teeth pulled and fingernails removed, and he looked to the assembled cardinals only a few days away from death. The assembled leaders of the Holy Foundation watched in silence as the table was set between the semicircle of desks and the throne, the D-Caste was laid on it and bound with the chains, and the guardsmen pulled the hoods of their black robes over their heads and tied them closed so that only their eyes were visible.

"Do you know why you have been brought here today, D-34029132?" asked the Thirteenth.

"Yes, my lord," replied the bound man.

"And have you agreed to this rite willingly?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Are you ready to give up your life in the name of your church and your Lord?"

The D-Caste paused. "Yes, my lord."

The Thirteenth turned his gaze to the guardsmen. "Make sure the ropes and chains remain taut and that he does not attempt to hurt himself. If you must restrain him physically, do not hesitate to do so. There is no sin in any of the actions you have been asked to perform today - and though He may test you with His cries and protestations, remember that the Lord loves you and will forgive you."

The Second nodded. "Now, please proceed." The cardinals rose from their seats and watched attentively as five of the guards took their places around the D-Caste. The sixth guard approached the throne and reverently picked up the glass case containing the Lord Bright's amulet before taking his own place at the head of the table. Another guardsman reached out and removed the top from the case. As the other five tucked their hands into their robes to prevent any accidental contact, the guard holding the case turned it upside down, and the Holy Amulet fell out and landed on the chained man's chest.

The late Cardinal Doctor Anders Clef, who had been present when the Lord Bright was summoned to the Synod of New Denver in 237, had written in his memoirs that the expression on His face when He appeared was always one of confusion - the shock of finding Himself in a new host, and trying to figure out where and when He had found Himself. None of the men and women watching would have disagreed with that assessment, for no sooner did the Holy Amulet strike the D-Caste than his demeanor changed. The chained man groaned and tried to pull at his bonds to no avail, his eyes darting

around the room as he took in the people and decorations around him. The cardinals watched in silence as he tried to bite off his tongue, dislocate his joints, break his limbs by bashing them against the table - all in vain, courtesy of the amendments made to the Holy Procedures centuries ago to prevent the Lord Bright from taking His leave if His earthly presence was required. As He resigned himself to being once again in a body of flesh and bone, He set his eyes on the Ninth, who had produced from his robes a scroll bearing the holiest of the Holy Procedures, those relating to the Amulet itself, and He spoke.

"I like what you've done with the cafeteria."

"Could you please tell me your name?" asked the Ninth, reading from the scroll. "I believe you are Tom Higly, working for us as part of your life sentence."

"Cut the crap," the chained man said with a sigh. "You know who I am, and you know I've been through this little ceremony enough times to wish I'd never come up with it."

The Ninth looked to his compatriots, who nodded their agreement that they could proceed. "The rite is successful!" he proclaimed. "Praise be to the Lord Bright!"

"Praise be to the Lord Bright!" shouted the assembled cardinals and guards.

"Aaah!" Lord Bright shouted. "Not so loud. This body must have the mother of all hangovers."

"Forgive us, Lord Bright," the Second said. "The Procedures state that the host body's reflexes are to be dulled with alcohol before the ritual."

"Uh-huh," Lord Bright said. "New Holy Procedure; next time, save the alcohol for *after* you wake me up. Somebody write that down."

"It would be my honor, Lord," the Thirteenth said.

"And haven't you guys had some sort of renaissance or reformation or scientific awakening yet? What year is it this time?"

"It is the year 698 After the Breach, Lord."

Lord Bright sighed again as he looked at the men assembled before him. "I thought you would've re-invented pants by now. Anyway, it's been nice chatting, but I'm sick of this place and I'm sick of you. Guard, be a dear and strangle me so I can get back to my nap."

"Forgive us, Lord Bright," the Second said, "but we must beg Your indulgence for a short time longer. A great… difficulty has arisen that threatens to tear our Holy Foundation apart, and we can find no authority greater than Yourself capable of settling this matter."

"Goddammit," Lord Bright said. "You guys really need to start thinking for yourself. Alright, what is it? Containment breach? D-Class rebellion? Are the Serpent's Hand back?"

"No, Lord Bright," the Second answered. "It is… a matter of theology. One of great importance, that this Council has been unable to resolve."

Bright groaned. "'Restart the Foundation as a church,' Clef said. 'It'll make sense to scientifically illiterate peasants rebuilding society,' Clef said. Well, what's the issue?"

"It would seem that the Sites and Areas in the eastern lands," the Second said, "began teaching an interpretation of the Gospel According To Everett several years ago which is quite different than that which has been maintained here in the heartlands. This… interpretation," he said so as to not upset certain of his peers, "has spread to Overwatch itself, and a great deal of strife has broken out among our many churches and outposts regarding which is the true and correct belief. We fear it may come to outright war, and thus we resolved to have a vote amongst ourselves and determine which is the one true interpretation. Unfortunately, we have become deadlocked, five to five."

"That's why there are supposed to be thirteen O5s," Lord Bright said. "Did you need to wake me up just to remind you that those chairs aren't *supposed* to be empty?"

"They are not empty by design, Lord Bright," interrupted the Tenth.

"The First and the Eighth succumbed to the plague during the long winter, and the Fifth is currently in the south commanding the Mobile Legions in our ongoing crusade against the Chaos Insurgency. Due to our being deadlocked on this issue, we have been unable to appoint any to take their place."

"Of course. So what's this big disagreement?"

The Second nodded to two large books on the desk. "It concerns a disagreement in the translation of chapter 37, verse 25."

"Which is?"

"Was the child that you and St. Agatha conceived on the eve of the Great Breach created *of* Your spirit, or *from* Your spirit?"

—-

"And that," said the old man, "is how one word almost led the world to the brink of war - and how the Lord Bright set things straight."

"But what did the Lord Bright say?" asked the towheaded boy sitting at his grandfather's feet.

"Yeah!" cried the girl sitting next to him. "What did He tell them?"

"What do you think?" the grandfather asked.

"I think she was born *from* Bright's spirit," said the boy.

"Nuh-uh!" the girl said. "St. Emile was born *of* Bright's spirit!"

The old man laughed. "Looks like we've got a schism on our hands again, right here."

"Well?" the boy asked. "Which of us is right?"

"And say it in your Bright voice!"

The old man scowled and did his best Bright impression as he read the last line of the story;

"For cryin' out loud… Rights and I never had any kids."

Tales C

C-Sharp

Agent Morisato heard the sound of C-Sharp and, at first, ducked. Then she registered the tall glass window next to her, which faced windows from other office buildings. She reconsidered, and bolted down the nearest hallway instead. A moment later, gunshots cracked the glass and pounded into the wall where she'd been.

She stopped, caught her breath, and then carried on down the hall. Now her sidearm was in her hands. If the Coalition knew she was in the building, they'd be locking down right now, and anyone on the floor would be alerted to her position. But they wouldn't know that she had the fire key for the elevator, her simple but elegant escape route. The documents ought to be in the quartermaster's office, which was nearby. A few odd turns to throw anyone off her tracks, and she'd be ready for the ride out.

At the end of the hallway, she slowed to a jog, and tapped the base of her left ear, activating a sub-dermal implant, which sent a signal backward in time.

.-.-

Then she was running again.

Once she had the documents, was reasonably sure she wasn't being followed, and was at the elevator, reaching for the button she heard the sound of C-sharp again. *What?* She looked down the halls, but she had been in and out of them with no visuals… and her intel had sworn up and down that the building would be clear. She looked at the elevator again, and frowned.

(There was someone on the other side of the elevator, holding a taser and a pistol. The Coalition knew Morisato was in the building about five minutes before the shots, which was enough time for their second agent to leave the sniper's nest, and make it up the elevator. As soon as the door opened…)

She took the stairs, instead. On the fifth step down, she tapped the base of her left ear.

.-.-

At the bottom, she used a miniature charge to explode through the door's lock, listening all the while for C-sharp and footsteps that never came. The door opened onto the street. She grinned, spun the gun around in her hands before dropping it back in the holster, and booked it across the street to meet her getaway. She'd move fast enough that the snipers on the other side of the building would never know she'd gone.

The implant was a little heavy, and sometimes it itched. Now and then it also made a very low humming sound in her left ear, but she'd gotten used to it. If she turned the sound up in Sea Hero, it just sounded like part of the game. Even among her colleagues, not many people had the implant- after all, it was still relatively untested- but she'd made an effort to stay in touch with a few who did.

After handing off the file and debriefing, Morisato lit a stick of incense and sat in her private quarters in the dark for a while. Then she turned the lights on, microwaved a frozen dinner, powered on her computer, and called up Agent Oberoi while her game loaded.

“How's it going, Hotshot? Back from a mission?”

“Yeah. In the Ice World, did you find the skeleton key in the first dungeon or did you have to wait to beat Pirate Cave?”

“I think I had to wait. You don't actually need it in the mean time.”

“Thanks. How's it going?”

“Aw, not so bad. Been on R&R the last week.”

“Oh?”

“It's the leg again. Nothing too bad, they don't want me jumping on it or anything.”

“Relaxing?”

“Oh yeah. You got to try it, Hotshot. Let's do vacation again sometime.”

“Hell no. I don't know how you do it.”

“I compartmentalize. Come on- Jakarta's nice. We'll get out of the city- I hear they have flying squirrels the size of raccoons.”

“That's your idea of a good vacation? No wonder Minsk was a flop.”

“It's on my bucket list. Hey, gotta go. Take care of yourself. You still seeing the shrink?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Me too. Good. If you need help with Pirate Cave, text me.”

Agent Oberoi worked at another site now. She had the implant too. Oberoi heard C-sharp sometimes, and, well, she just coped better with it. Morisato knew it was an unfair thought- Oberoi worked just as hard to keep her mental state in order as she herself did- but she must just be better at it. How else did you explain the cafe in Minsk? Halfway through their lunch in a small cafe off the main drag, a child banging on piano keys had hit C-sharp, and the noise went straight through her brain. Morisato had cleared the area. Immediately.

Had she hurt anyone? Had she broken anything? Oberoi assured her she hadn't, maybe scraped a chair when she toppled it in her mad dash out. By that point, her breathing at slowed and she was far too embarrassed to go back inside. It was a piano key. It wasn't the computerized tone she knew. It wasn't even the same timbre.

Stupid, she thought as they walked away. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Another time, she'd been walking along a busy sidewalk in a city she'd never been in, and she heard C-sharp. At first, she backed away from the street edge, then backtracked through the crowd and slipped inside a fast-food restaurant, eyes fixed on the street outside, as she tapped her ear to send the signal back in time.

.-.-

Nothing. No gunshots rent the air. No vehicle ran off the road and plowed into the sidewalk. No screams, no alarming figures in heavy coats walking slowly or with their hands stuffed in pockets to conceal their firearms. Of course, a sniper would have seen her move. She called her supervisors and bought an apple turnover while they scanned the area from afar.

The tentative all-clear meant she should go outside again. She was ready to move, but nothing happened. No high tone rung in her ear for the rest of that trip. What *would* have happened? Why had the signal gone back in the first place? False positives had never been a problem before. Obviously, her acting had changed the situation. But for the signal to send, it had to be sent back for some reason. Somehow.

Who had sent it?

Site 81, Supervisor's Office, Phone Line

> “Agent Morisato, the technology is safe. It absolutely cannot, and I mean mathematically impossible, transmit over five seconds in the past, so large-scale reality alterations or paradoxes are impossible. It's the golden goose.”
> …
> “Well, the signal is safe. The technology will never be entirely safe, not until we understand it entirely, and it will never keep *you* absolutely safe. But this signal is safe.”
> …
> “No, I know you did your reading.”
> …
> “It's, listen, Hotaru. The signal itself is sent from an alternate future in which your life is threatened. By receiving that signal, you can take action to avert the situation that created that danger, and by sending that signal back, you ensure that your own timeline is stable. Everyone is fine.”
> …

“No, I- what do you mean, parallel universes? We don't even know that's how this works.”
…
“What do you mean?”
…
“*Who*?”
…
“Never mind.”

Morisato wasn't a physicist. But she'd read a lot about time, since then, and knew that even if using the implant didn't cause universe-destroying paradoxes, cause and effect probably still didn't just *go away*. The cause was the danger, the effect was triggering that signal and heartless C-sharp. She read books and articles about multiple universes, branching timelines. Who *was* sending the signal back in the first place?

She didn't think of them as separate people, but as one person; not individual selves cast aside throughout time, but a single copy of her- a tortured shadow that followed her at all times, ready to die for her at a moment's notice.

Morisato trailed along the underground corridor, following the soft light of a laser beacon through the winding halls to the source of the anomaly. As she passed under a smoke detector on the wall, she heard a faint hissing.

After three of her six fellow agents passed below the detector, it rotated 180 degrees in its socket and exploded. A hazy yellow gas filled the air, and the agents fell to their knees. Morisato's skin was burning, her nose and lungs were burning. She reached up and touched her left ear.

.-.-

As she passed under a smoke detector on the wall, she heard a faint hissing and the sound of C-sharp.

She held up one hand in warning, then tested the knob on a side

door and hurried her team inside. A minute later, one of them identified the trap from Foundation records, and found an alternate route through the compound. Morisato kept her eye on her watch, and after she heard their new plan, reached up and touched her left ear.

.-.-

At last, they made it to the Coalition's research space. It had been cleared out in a hurry before they arrived, but the strange emission was still there, meaning its source was either immobile or hadn't been evacuated. It would be a great day for Morisato if they'd just left it behind, because it would save her from having to secure the whole compound. Well, if not, she'd had worse days too.

The laser beacon was malfunctioning underground, but their map prediction put the signal's source dead ahead of them, so Morisato signaled to her team and opened the door at the end of the hall.

The laboratory inside was lit by dim purple emergency lights alone. Morisato squinted as she cleared the immediate surroundings. It was hard to see into the lab's corners, of course, but nothing especially unusual appeared. As the team spread into the room, the hint of a dancing red spot of light caught her eye.

The bullet bore through Morisato's head in the span of a millisecond. Blood spattered across the concrete behind her. The implant in her head recorded that her pulse had stopped, and sent a signal back through time.

.-.-

The laser beacon was malfunctioning underground, but their map prediction put the signal's source dead ahead of them, so Morisato signaled to her team and opened the door at the end of the hall. A step into the doorway, she heard the sound of C-sharp. Instantly, she gave her team a hand signal, waited until she heard the faint *thump* of bodies finding cover, then crouched and dived behind the doorframe. *What's the most likely threat?* Somebody inside, of course. She drew her sidearm and watched. There was a flash of

movement in a far, darkened corner.

Morisato took down the enemy with one shot, and touched her ear.

.-.-

It wouldn't keep her alive forever, of course. One day, its plus-or-minus three seconds wouldn't be long enough, and the signal would send itself backward for the last time. That was where she couldn't rely on poorly-understood technology, she just had to be good. But it had kept her alive damn well so far. She never meant to keep track, but somehow the shadow in her mind became a Wound Man of sorts- here a bullet wound, there a slit throat, there an electric field, amorphous stains where she couldn't have known what exactly would have killed her.

Most of the scenes that stayed in her mind from the field missions, she tried to keep back. But the Wound Woman, the shadow she had never seen in real life, never quite left. It was a ghost in her privileged timeline.

How was she supposed to explain to her supervisor why she no longer took time off unless forced?

“How's therapy going?” asked her supervisor, strolling by while she was gearing up.

“Good,” said Morisato. It was helping with the nightmares, anyway.

“Good to hear. Did you hear about your project?”

“What?”

“The implant. It's been cancelled.”

Morisato put down the ammo sling she was holding. “Am I-”

“You're still cleared for fieldwork, thank god. No change there. But they're cancelling the implant program going forward. Still don't understand the tech, so they say it's too risky and they're shutting it

down."

Morisato thought about that. It would just be her and Oberoi, and the others, the dozen or so who'd had the anomalous technology shuttled into their brains on a whim. They'd be hearing C-sharp for the rest of their lives.

“When I said you were cleared for fieldwork,” her supervisor continued, “Well, they are *offering* you a chance to turn your gun in. Get a desk job. What do you think?” He paused. “You're our biggest asset, Morisato. We need you here.”

“I'll finish the mission,” she said.

“Good.” Her supervisor sighed with relief.

It was a roaring success. The local branch of the Coalition was either in custody, or had fled, and the Foundation had been able to seize their assets. In the final move, Morisato led the charge to recover every single one of their anomalies from that location, and hadn't even heard C-sharp once.

Back in her room again, Morisato lit a stick of incense in her room and turned off the lights. For a while, she just sat, breathing in and out, taking in the weight of darkness. Then she turned the lights back on, and opened her laptop and started a blank email. She addressed it to Human Resouces, and then, slowly, struggled to find the words.

I am informed that I have the opportunity to transfer into a non-fieldwork position, and would like to accept. I have a history of contributions to the Foundation and the following skills…

Her shadow settled in behind her, like an old friend, to read over her shoulder.

Cactus Insurgent

Consciousness slowly prodded at Cactusman's mind. A deluge of voices engulfed him in noise, and the unnatural grogginess he was bogged down by made it impossible to differentiate between them. He knuckled his eyes and groaned loudly in an effort to drown out all the noise. The cacophony didn't stop, and most of the voices only grew louder. With his palms pressed into his eyes he tried listening, and after several seconds he realized several were familiar. They were the pair of cacti the doctors had given him, going on about being cacti. Two, however, were quieter than the others. And unfamiliar to him.

"You think the doctors gave him too much?" A female voice. Energetic, yet somehow brusque.

"Don't know. Maybe he's just not used to it." Male. Calm and deep.

Cactusman took several slow, deep breaths to collect himself. He should have been fully awake by now, especially with the adrenaline. But he couldn't shake this murky feeling sloshing around just behind his forehead. He brought the heel of his right hand to his forehead as if to jostle the gunk loose, but it did nothing for him.

After one last breath he steeled himself. His first instinct was to extend as many spines as possible and attack, but he realized that probably wasn't the best idea. Maybe it was just new medicine had some side effects, and these were Foundation guards or something. Nothing to freak out about. He relaxed as this realization came to him, and almost instantly tensed back up. His bed was too comfortable. Maybe he was- no, maybe he was just moved to a new cell. Perhaps that was why he was drugged. Cactusman took one last deep breath, held it, and cracked an eye open to look at the source of the voices.

Definitely not guards. Or doctors. Both of them were sitting in collapsible chairs, facing Cactusman, and were dressed casually.

Both were staring directly at him, but neither reacted to him opening his eye. Cactusman realized they were in a medical ward, and he on the hospital bed. He tried thinking back to what might have brought him here but nothing came to mind. He didn't feel hurt. Looking through the glass door leading into the hallway didn't reveal much other than the fact it looked like a normal civilian hospital.

The woman was perched up on her chair, sitting on her heels. Her skin was the sort of brown that made it difficult to distinguish whether it was a tan or not. Her hair was brown for the most part, with the exception of some green coloring along the sides. Her plain clothes hung loosely from her muscled frame. She had what seemed to Cactusman like an exaggerated look of curiosity, her eyebrows high and her mouth moving from side to side.

The man was slouched in his chair so much he looked like he was about to fall off it. His skin was much darker, and his head was shaved. His clothes looked somewhat disheveled and wrinkly despite being clean. His left arm was completely wrapped in bandages and hung loosely at his side while his right hand rested on his knee. A small piece of metal was jutting from under his right eye, where the cheekbone was. It almost looked natural. His expression was one of utter boredom.

"Who are you?" Cactusman asked in what he hoped was an even voice.

"Hey," the woman said, drawing out the word for as long as her lungs would allow. "Yer awake, boy-o! Top o' the mornin' to ya!"

Cactusman stared at her in disbelief.

The woman giggled. Then she said, "Dude, I worked on that shit for hours. Okay, minutes."

The man lightly hit her in the back of the head. He didn't say anything, and his expression didn't change.

The woman grinned. "Okay, it was spur of the moment. Anyway, hi. Good to see you're not brain damaged. Well, more than we already knew you were."

The man slapped his companion again. "Apologies, Mister MacIntyre, she's a bit manic without her medicine."

Cactusman pushed himself into a sitting position. "You didn't answer my question."

"So serious, Daniel MacIntyre! Down to business, then." She sprang up in one quick motion, standing on the chair that was now leaning precariously far back. Cactusman had to at least give her credit, she definitely had a certain theatrical flair.

"I'm Alexandra Radcliffe! And Mister Slappy here is Zacharie Langley. We're from the Chaos Insurgency. We rescued you!"

"Rescued me? What? I know it wasn't the best situation, but I was helping-"

"You weren't helping anyone," Langley said. He didn't say it with any sort of venom or bluntness, he just droned on in a tired way. "I read your file. They were staged incidents to improve your morale. Minor tasks to keep you from hurting yourself. Little more than something to minimize the risk of losing one of their contained objects."

"I'm not an object!"

"I am aware. They, however, are not."

Cactusman swung his legs over the edge of the bed and glared accusingly. "And how would you know?"

Langley didn't bat an eye. "Because I used to work for them."

That caught Cactusman off guard, but it didn't stop him from extending spines all along his right arm. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He took the time to note that he didn't have any bandages or stitches anywhere.

"Doctor Louef isn't like that. I don't know about the Foundation in general, but he-"

"Louef's a pretty chill dude, from what I've read-slash-heard," Radcliffe said. "But that didn't stop him from locking you and other

superhumans up. Because the Foundation is not all that nice to superhumans. And I know *that* because-"

A ball of fire erupted from Radcliffe's right hand. It was nothing but a small belch of flame, but it was enough to put Cactusman a little on edge. She grinned and continued surfing on the wobbling chair.

"C'mon, man, you're from Arizona. You should be used to the heat," Radcliffe said as the flame went out. "So, in case that egghead of yours is as addled as I think, being with us already has a leg up on your old situation. You get to be a person. And we'll even try to fix that fucked up think pan you got."

"I'm not crazy," Danny said adamantly.

Radcliffe started to laugh, teetering back and forth on the chair, when Langley grabbed her by the wrist and pulled back down into her seat. His expression had yet to change, but it looked like she was trying to eat her lips.

"You are not in a position to mock someone for their mental instabilities, Alex. Mister MacIntyre, my apologies. I thought it would be prudent for you to meet both of us, as we represent Foundation interaction with transhumans — both from within the Foundation, and from the outside. Unfortunately I cannot imagine her actions have been particularly encouraging."

"So why me? It seems like a lot of effort to just… 'save' someone."

Langley nodded. "You have been acquired by the Insurgency for a very specific task only you can accomplish. You-"

"We need you to talk to a giant cactus monster!" Radcliffe interjected. She appeared to be vibrating with excitement. Cactusman could feel the corner of his mouth tugging upward.

Langley slowly turned his head to look at her and she flinched. He blinked and looked back to Cactusman. "…Yes. We-"

Radcliffe clasped her hands together and Cactusman could feel his heart rise into his throat when she cried, "We need your help, Cactusman! Save us, oh-"

"Alex."

"What? I'm just having some fun."

"Please don't interrupt. It's rude."

"Well, sorry."

"Quite alright."

"Wait a minute, you just interrupted me to-"

"As I was saying," Langley said calmly.

Cactusman couldn't help but chuckle, even if he wasn't sure the man was being intentionally comedic. While being probably drugged and being more kidnapped than rescued was not exactly the best way to be introduced to this organization, he felt these two were nice enough people. And being out of his cell was certainly a plus.

"We need you to speak with a… giant cactus monster. There is no way to subdue it physically without permanently damaging it, so we need a lighter touch. Only you can help us, Mister MacIntyre. We need help. We need… the Spiked Menace."

"Fffffuck yeah!" Radcliffe sprang all the way out of her chair this time. "That was cool! Well delivered, Zach."

Langley didn't so much smile as he did show her his teeth. It seemed to actively hurt him to do so, and he dropped the expression almost as suddenly as he made it.

Radcliffe didn't seem to notice, or perhaps just didn't care. "So, Danny-boy, watcha say, you in?"

Cactusman smiled. "I'm in."

Langley's expression remained stony as ever, and he gave nothing more than a short nod. Cactusman tried not to let the man's indifference - melancholy? Cactusman wasn't sure - get to him. At least Radcliffe seemed happy, she was doing a little jig beside her overturned chair.

"So, what now?" Cactusman asked as he slowly rose from the bed. He made several little hops to get the blood flowing to his legs.

Langley opened his mouth to reply but Radcliffe bounded forward to field the question. Langley shrugged, grabbed the two cacti, and headed for the door while Radcliffe prattled on. "Well, we've already given you a medical evaluation and stuff, so I guess we should just take you to our quarters- you're staying with us, I dunno if I mentioned that yet. But you can't wander around unless you have one of us with you, since you're new and special and stuff."

"So what do you actually do?" Cactusman asked slid past the glass door. Glancing inside the other rooms, Cactusman hurried after Radcliffe. The ward was surprisingly empty, save for a nurse or two here and there.

"Oh, we get to do tons of fun stuff! I mean, it also depends on your cell. For example, I'm tasked with resource acquisition- like you- in various ways. Langley is either with me or off doing… something. I dunno, he talks about it and I get bored and zone out. You, however, will be stuck on base cuz you're 'vital Beta Class personnel.' But it's gotta be better than jail, yeah?"

She skipped ahead and shut the door before Cactusman could get a look outside. A wicked grin had decided to take host on her face. She took a deep breath, threw open the door and dashed out. Cactusman poked his head out to see she had jumped up on a railing, her entire body arching as she spread her arms out.

"Welcome!" she yelled, and her voice echoed several times. "To the Chaos Insurgency!"

The catwalk outside his room was several stories up, overlooking a sizable room congested with traffic. People in casual wear, lab coats, hazmat suits, and military gear mingled together in a sea of activity. Drifting amongst them were dollies and carts of various materials, captained by impatient personnel. Cactusman spotted one cage rocking around as a team pulled it with short ropes, and a large creature of some sort pushing it from behind. The resulting noise from it all, even thirty feet up, was near deafening.

They were not as pristine as the Foundation, nor nearly as orderly. Which lent credence to their name, Cactusman figured. The building and the various objects and tools he could spot had a similar aesthetic- not defunct, but clearly well-worn. When he squinted he could see the entirety of the floor was scratched and scuffed, the entire thing a beaten path.

Looking left and right, Cactusman spotted more room along the catwalk he was on. The catwalk looped around the entire room, and had several like it above and below. It all reminded him of a prison, the way all sides of the room were covered in ladders, stairs, and catwalks leading to the various rooms embedded in the concrete.

"Cool, eh?" Radcliffe was hanging upside down, her knees locked around the railing. Cactusman almost got vertigo just looking at her. It didn't help she was idly kicking her feet.

Cactusman swallowed nervously. "Yeah. It's a bit more… uh. Not dirty, but… I mean, no offense, I just-"

"Ah, don't worry." Radcliffe grasped the railing and pulled herself up. "I mean, yeah, it's not super immaculate- that site you were in was like spotless, holy shit- but it's got… y'know, character. Flavor. All the Foundation facilities I've ever been in are just so… lifeless. Bluh."

"Speaking of which," Cactusman said as they headed for the stairs, where Langley was waiting. He bit the inside of his cheek. "Did anybody get hurt when you guys… uh, 'rescued' me?"

"Well." There was a brief pause as she began to descend. "I'm not gonna bullshit you, Danny. Yes, people got hurt. People died. I dunno how many. I will, however, assure you I ain't got an ounce of blood on my hands."

He had anticipated it, but it still felt like a punch to the gut. He squeezed the railing for support and asked with as much force as he could, "Why?"

Radcliffe squirmed, and it actually made Cactusman feel better. "That's a difficult question. Like, you have to understand that the

Insurgency and the Foundation have fundamentally different goals. The Foundation squirrels anomalies away, and the Insurgency… the Insurgency wants to bring it to the light of day. To make them normal. To make *us* normal, Danny."

Spines erupted from nearly every inch of skin on Cactusman's body. "And that's worth killing people over? That the Foundation should just *die* and let you do what you want?"

When Radcliffe looked away from him without responding, Cactusman reached out to grasp her shoulder without realizing he was still covered in spines. Before he could reach, Langley grabbed him by the wrist. Blood seeped onto the bandages in two places, but still Langley didn't show any reaction.

"Mister MacIntyre, please don't act as if we find this easy. We don't." He released Cactusman and removed the spines stuck in his hand, then picked up the two cacti he had set down. "I know better than most that not everyone in the Foundation is coldhearted. I had good friends when I worked there. I do this job not only because I believe in the Insurgency's cause, but because I know if I didn't, another Insurgent would take my place. And they may not show the same mercy as I."

Cactusman took to chewing on his tongue rather than his cheek. Mulling over what he said, it made sense. But it didn't make Cactusman any happier. Instead of dwelling on it, Cactusman took to removing the spines from himself as they walked.

He overheard Radcliffe comment on Langley's bleeding, who dismissed it with, "Won't have this arm much longer, anyway."

Yet as odd a comment as that was, Cactusman couldn't ignore the thoughts of the Foundation that continued to surface. They made him realize he didn't know that much about the Foundation. Who was he to cast judgement on those that opposed them? Yet still the idea of the Insurgency killing Foundation personnel left him uneasy, and unsure of whether he should assist them.

But, as if on cue from a higher power, some of the payload of a nearby rolling pallet trolley dislodged itself and crashed down to the

ground. Before Langley or Radcliffe could say anything on the matter, Cactusman rushed forward to aid his new comrades. He hefted up one of the barrels, which had a strip of transparent material on it to reveal the red liquid within it. The men with the trolley thanked him and together they loaded the three fallen barrels back onto the roller.

"Happy to help," Cactusman assured, short of breath. Having to yell over the din certainly didn't make being heard any easier. He wiggled his aching fingers before waving the men off. When he turned back to Langley and Radcliffe, the former was watching the barrels with a thoughtful look on his face- the first real expression Cactusman had seen on him.

"You alright?" Cactusman asked. A cocktail of curiosity and satisfaction in his recent minor heroics almost washed his previous thoughts from his mind with an efficiency near comparable to the amnestic lingering in his system.

"Fine," Langley said. His gaze remained on the trolley for a moment longer before looking down to Cactusman. "Come on. Let's go."

The trio exited the massive room and entered one of the various tunnels leading out of it. Traffic had diminished to a point where Cactusman was no longer shoulder-to-shoulder with people, but it was still packed. He glanced around, acutely more aware of how close Langley and Radcliffe were sticking to him. Did they think he was going to make a break for it or something? Couldn't be too careful, he supposed.

"So what is it they want this cactus thing for?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Hell if I know." Radcliffe threw her palms up in an exaggerated shrug. "I was just told to have you calm it down, and that you were super important and not to let anything bad happen to you."

"Uh… Mr. Langley?"

"I don't know, either. The Insurgency works on a very strict need-to-know basis. Given your general disposition I doubt it is anything

particularly violent."

Cactusman planned on giving a response but his brain was sideswiped when he saw a very tall… thing approach from down the hall. It must have been fifteen feet tall, and was composed of little more than a round head and lots of limbs. Jutting from the side of its bulb were several pieces of electronic equipment, including what looked like a headset. It bobbed at Langley, who tilted his head in response. Cactusman spun and walked backwards to continue watching it, and it only gave him an odd look with one of its six eyes. Radcliffe bounced around and then extended a hand, which the creature slapped with one of its own.

"That's Johnson," Radcliffe explained when she noticed Cactusman staring. "I love that guy."

"Johnson?"

"Oh, like nobody can pronounce his real name. It's long, has weird inflections. Plus it makes your ears bleed." She smiled. "Transreality beings, am I right?"

Cactusman had to put some effort into not tripping as she explained it. He gave a rigid nod and then spun about face, remembering that talking to Radcliffe made things worse somehow.

After several twists and turns through the tunnels of the complex, the herd thinned out until it was just Cactusman and his escorts. Every twenty feet down the hallway was a door with a number emblazoned on it. Radcliffe marched to Number 836 and produced a key from her hand, which jammed into the doorknob. When the lock clicked open she pressed the key into her left palm, which sank into the skin without any resistance until it was gone.

"Hello, Mister MacIntyre, welcome home." With a half-bow and a grand sweep of an arm Radcliffe ushered Cactusman inside.

The apartment was small and congested thanks to all the boxes and various knickknacks cluttering the ground and shelves. Empty boxes of food, dirty dishes, and discarded bottles covered the tables and counters. Trash Mountain, situated within and on top of the only

visible garbage can, looked ready to suffer an avalanche. There was, however, a series of very clear cut paths throughout the room. Cactusman's gaze alternated between the absurdly large flat screen television and the old furniture before shrugging.

"I'm a bit of a collector," Radcliffe explained. She vaulted the leather couch and stretched. "Make yourself at home!"

"Sorry for the mess," Langley said with a quarter-hearted shrug. He stepped out of his shoes and kicked them next to the door. Cactilad and Spikigirl were placed on one of the tables, a large lamp pointed directly at the open space they were situated in. "Try not to hurt yourself."

"God, how much would that suck?" Radcliffe said as she switched on the TV. "We break him out and take him in and then he kills himself tripping on my Wondertainment merch."

Shuffling his way through the path was easy enough, and when he arrived at the couch Radcliffe stared at him for a moment before realizing she should move to make room. Meanwhile, Langley was rustling through the kitchen drawers.

"You hungry, MacIntyre?" he asked. He stood and displayed several bags of ramen noodles. Cactusman just nodded. "Alex?"

"Hook me up, I'll grab the movie." Radcliffe bounced back off the couch and scampered into one of the other rooms, quickly returning with a DVD box.

"So… this it?" Cactusman asked. "We watch a movie and eat some noodles?"

Radcliffe pulled away from the DVD player. "Do you not like ramen? We have some other stuff, you could just say so."

"No, I mean, this is it? I thought you guys were supposed to be making a difference or something. But you're just… watching movies."

"Gotta have an off switch, Danny-boy. I mean, it's not like you're Cactusman all the time, right? You gotta be Daniel MacIntyre for a

while."

"Um… Right."

Radcliffe gave him an odd look, her head tilting almost ninety degrees. A sudden hitch in her throat let out a strangled sound before she started laughing. Her own hand slapped over her mouth and she fidgeted for a few seconds, as if the laugh was trying to find some other exit. Eventually she managed to gulp it down and smiled awkwardly at Cactusman. She stepped over the messy table and sat uncomfortably close to him, wrapping an arm around him.

"You poor, poor bastard. Well, don't worry!" A very fake looking flower ejected itself from her right palm and tickled Cactusman under his nose. "We'll fix you right up. I mean, probably. Eventually. Until then the three of us can be bestest buddies!"

"That does wonders for my morale."

"I know, right? Like, look at me! I'm probably annoying as fuck, and I'm Beta Class! That's pretty good. And now I have two super-depressed buddies that I can just pour joy and enthusiasm into despite the fact that doing so is likely actively damaging you mentally, but I can't stop myself because either I genuinely can't filter my thoughts or being a loudmouth jackass is just a defense mechanism for my utterly fucked up situation of working for an organization whose methods I don't fully support. Yet it's somehow better than the alternatives because some old motherfuckers behind their desks decided I wasn't normal and had to be locked up like some kinda side show attraction instead of the main stage magician I wanted to be! But hey! At least I might not have to suffer it long due to the physical dangers of my missions."

Flabbergasted, Cactusman just stared at her grin. His mind had finally started working at full capacity, and now it felt bogged down in gunk again. For whatever reason it decided to notice her left large incisor had a small chip on the side. After what felt like a week her mouth moved to ask, "So, wanna watch a movie, Cactusman?"

Daniel MacIntyre blinked. "Yeah. Uh. Movie sounds good, actually. And just call me Daniel."

Cakework

The shift whistle's shriek broke morning air like a porcelain plate. A crow that had been roosting atop the Dispensary took flight with an indignant cry of its own. The crow was fat. All crows were fat now.

The workers from the Collection Crew were sitting around the loading area smoking cigarettes in silence, yellow streaks on their coveralls vivid in the morning's ashen drear. On some days their work was light, but not today. It had been a bad one. Morale was low.

Over the loudspeakers, a strident voice brought news of inevitable victory, accompanied by a blare of drums and trumpets. The announcer called for hope, optimism, and a sense of civic duty. Together, humanity would overcome.

This message had not changed in more than a year.

The Eaters filed into the Dispensary, their gait like rusty gears, dragging and slow. It had been almost three years since **`Cake`** Day. Weariness was a way of life.

The smell, as always, was thick and sweet and noxious.

When the workers entered the Eatery, there was a collective sigh of despair. Somewhere in the crowd, a woman did her best to stifle her sobs. Another barked a hollow laugh.

A battalion of three-tiered wedding cakes stood at attention, one for every seat in the hall. Bright yellow, covered in flowers, gaudy and absurd, each cake was almost identical. The only differences lay in the bits of grit, dirt, and debris they had collected when they had suddenly appeared the night before. Flies danced among the towers of buttercream. A beetle blindly explored the geometry of a fondant daisy. Smashed windshield glass twinkled among the edible pearls.

The Cleaners did their best, but they couldn’t get everything.

The moment passed. Everyone shuffled to their seats. They were all ages and races and genders, but they were as identical in their weight as the cakes were in their hideous, yellow glory. The hall filled with the sounds of eating. Someone made a quiet retching sound, but no one left their seat. An Eater who didn't eat wasn't eligible for weekly vegetable rations.

Outside, the smokers were finishing their cigarettes. An old man with gray hair and gray eyes took a final drag and brought his cigarette down to snuff it in a rogue clump of frosting on the concrete loading dock. The ember hovered above the sugary smear for a few seconds before the cigarette was instead flicked across the parking lot.

Mechanically, the man scooped the frosting up with his finger and put it in his mouth.

Can Haz Memes

"I'm telling you, lolcats are not a memetic threat. Stop trying to get them classified."

Professor Anders Bjornsen looked with exasperation at the woman seated across the desk from him. Dr. Blaire Roth was undeniably one of the best psychiatrists and cognitive-behavioral therapists in the Psych Department, but definitely had certain… fixations. Like most of the staff dedicated to treating the mental trauma of Foundation employees, she rarely had direct contact with SCP Items, or even Anomalous Objects. The fact that the few she'd independently tried to get access to (all through official channels, of course) were all related to cats had been noted and dismissed as a harmless quirk.

Maybe it was time to upgrade that from "harmless" to "worrisome".

"But they've been around practically forever! There are literally captioned pictures of cats in costumes from the 1870s! How can you not think that a memetic effect that strong isn't a threat?!"

Dr. Roth very visibly restrained herself from pounding her fist on the desk and instead started gesturing with strong, sharp motions.

"Even if they appear harmless right now, the Foundation, of ALL people, knows how easy it would be to piggyback something dangerous onto it! Make a Grumpy Cat that literally makes you grumpy. Make a Business Cat macro that makes you a workaholic. Make a Sniper Cat gif that literally kills you! There are at least a dozen things that I personally have counseled people for that could be turned into a K-class threat if transmitted via lolcats. At least—"

Bjornsen raised his palm to interrupt Dr. Roth's mini-rant. "Yes, I've seen your prospectus. I think you're missing something, though."

"What, pray tell."

"The Foundation starts and curates easily 30% of all 4chan and tumblr memes."

"What."

"Skeleton war was us. We didn't start rage comics, but we're the ones who standardized rage faces into their current, *non-anomalous* forms. Even Grumpy Cat's owners now work for one of our fronts."

Dr. Roth's face was frozen, a look of disbelief permanently stuck. Bjornsen saw this and sighed.

"You're not the first person to see the infectious potential of popular memes. The Cognitohazard and Memetics Department regularly consults with some of us here in Psych for ideas on how to shorten meme lifespans. There's a reason that most popular memes die out in a few weeks. Now yes, admittedly lolcats are remarkably resilient, but it's *under control*."

Dr. Roth suddenly pushed back from the desk, the chair spinning slightly as she stood. She angrily said, "Then all this was just making me look stupid?"

Bjornsen sighed again. "No. It was looking obsessive, but not stupid. Frankly, I'd thought that you would've moved on from this particular fixation by now, so this is partially my fault. Sit down."

Dr. Roth slowly sat down and scooted the chair back to the desk. "So what now, since my warning is apparently too little, too late?"

This earned a quick, sharp look of reproof, and she collected herself a little. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. But still, what now?"

Bjornsen open a drawer and pulled out a folder, which he slid over to her. "This is an overview synopsis of current research into controlling lolcat memes, cleared for someone of your clearance level. I want you to read this and tell me whether you want to be read into the liaison team for the Cog/Mem department. This would not be a promotion, if you are, but maybe you can point that fierce dedication in a useful direction."

Dr. Roth slowly reached out and flipped open the folder. A dozen

pages awaited her perusal. A slight smile curved her lips as she picked up the first one and began to read.

Can't Catch a Break

The man looked around the back of the van at his assembled team. Three agents, a driver, and himself. He quietly checked his equipment once more. They were going after something that definitely didn't belong in this world. Some days it was good to be a team leader. It was even better to have a wonderful, glorious team.

"This is Team Alpha. We've got a Cart in sight and we are in pursuit. Do you copy? Over."

"Team Alpha, this is your SAC, we copy. What do you have a cart of? Over."

Agent Aaron Jay, team leader of Team Alpha of the FBI's Unusual Incident Unit sighed. Sometimes, it seemed like he was the only competent person in the agency. Or at least his branch of the agency.

"A Cart, a confirmed artifact, Sally! At least *try* to remember the… you know what, fuck it. Sally we've got something funny here, we can see it, and we're going after it now. I'll report in when we finish. Over."

"Roger Team Alpha. And don't call me Sally, this shit is recorded. I mean, over."

Jay tossed the radio into the back of the van, where it clattered at the feet of the rest of his team. His wonderful, glorious, bumbling, absolutely incompetent team.

Some…no, most *days, I hate this job,* he thought.

Looking over at the driver, he said, "Charlie, keep the artifact in sight. And keep your eyes on the damn road this time, please. We don't need another wrecked vehicle and *I* don't need more paperwork."

"Right, sure thing boss."

Some days I'd kill for just one "yes sir," he thought.

He turned to address the rest of the team.

"Everyone, after a month of searching we have finally found a Ca — artifact. For now, this is observation only. As soon as we can get that thing alone and in our custody, we are to do so. Agent Callahan, you are to — Agent Calla — KEVIN."

"…huh?"

"Kevin, just…stay with the group and don't shoot anything until I say so, okay?"

"Don't shoot until you say so. Got it."

Other teams…well, not UIU teams, but other teams…have snipers with nicknames like "Sharpshooter," "Ace," "Singleshot," and I get stuck with Kevin "Spray and Pray" Callahan. What did I do to deserve this?

He looked over to the team's resident explosive "expert" DiMaggio, who was slightly overequipped with standard issue flashbangs, a few tear gas grenades, a couple smoke grenades and…

Shit, are those frags? Not again…third time he's smuggled them from the weapons locker this week…

"Agent Di — you know what? Forget it. Don. Don't blow shit up when we're within ten feet of it okay? Gina is still in the hospital after the last one. Let's get this over with. Charlie, just…gun it. Ram the damn thing. We'll knock it out, drag it in the back, take it back to HQ and maybe, just maybe, for ONCE get a little bit of respect. And maybe I'll finally get transferred OUT of this shithole and back into a halfway decent job!"

"…Sooo…ram it?"

"Just do it Charlie."

"Yes sir. Let's see how fast this thing can go!"

You've got to be fucking kidding me. Now *he "yes sirs?"*

"Everybody hold on! We're about to hit!"

The three men in the back of the van held tight to the seats, ready for the bone-jarring crash that was sure to follow. Charlie was driving. The results could be no less than catastrophic.

"Annddd….NOW!"

The rest of the team looked around expectantly before turning to stare at Charlie.

"What the…we just went right through that fuckin' thing! It's behind us! And it looks pissed!"

"Shit, Kevin, open the back doors, Don grab the rifles and pass me one. No, don't throw it, that thing's loaded!"

Kevin opened the doors, revealing the artifact in full. It appeared to be a large dog until it opened its mouth. Teeth the size of knives burst from slavering jaws as a hungry growl rolled from the depths of its chest.

"FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, WHAT IS THAT THING?! SHOOT IT SHOOT IT SHOOT IT!"

Most of the team took one look at the thing and let loose, firing every round they had into the artifact. Most missing wildly. The woman who had screamed was the worst of all, hitting the van more frequently than the open air.

Jay looked curiously over at the one member of the team he had thought wouldn't fuck it up.

Can't I have one *person that can do this job? Just one?*

"It's a dog! Problem Agent Rona?"

"I don't do dogs!"

"Karen, we knew from the start that intel said it looked like a wolf!"

"I'm fine with *wolves*! I don't do dogs!"

Jay blinked twice and rubbed his eyes. "…I think I'm getting a headache."

The Cart took a leap forward and easily bit through the van's bumper, leaving a jagged hole behind.

"Whoa, shit, shoot it! That is an order from your superior Agent Rona! SHOOT THE DAMN DOG!"

Three of the four agents in the back opened fire on the artifact, while Kevin stared mutely at it.

"Kevin, what the hell! Shoot the damn thing!"

"But…you said…"

"SHOOT IT! Don, do something, blow it up, I don't care! Charlie, get us out of here!"

"Sir, this old thing can only go so fast!"

"Then make it go faster! That thing is gaining!"

The Cart got closer still, panting heavily but gaining with each step. It lunged again, snapping at the members of the team.

"Shit! Keep shooting!"

Don started pulling pins and throwing grenades randomly, hoping to hit something, anything that would slow the Cart down. The street quickly became pocked with craters from his seemingly endless supply of explosives.

"Uh…oops. Flashbang! Look away!" he yelled a moment too late.

Jay, partially blinded by the intense light, turned towards the front of the vehicle to try and recover.

"Shit Charlie, watch the bridge!" Their driver had apparently fared

little better than the rest of them, having seen some of the flash in the van's rearview mirror.

"Bridge? Shit, BRIDGE!"

The van broke through the guard rail and plummeted thirty feet into the water below, the group in the back saved only by death grips on the nearest solid objects.

The last thing Jay saw through the open doors was a metallic net cover the Cart and men in full gear swarm it, quickly subduing it.

Ten minutes later, Jay, along with the rest of his team, washed up on the opposite bank of the river.

From across the river, a different van could be seen pulling away. The words *Safely Capturing lost Pets* could be faintly seen stenciled on the van's side.

"Everybody okay? Report in!" Jay spluttered.

"We lost the dog, so I'm good."

"Lost the van, but I'm good."

"Lost the grenades, but I'm good."

"Saved the gun, but I think I broke my leg."

"Oh good. We're all alive. Anyone have a working radio?"

Charlie reached into a waterproof pouch around his waist, pulled out a slightly smashed radio, and handed it to Jay.

"SAC come in, this is J- Team Alpha reporting on the status of the op. Do you copy? Over."

"Team Alpha, this is SAC. We copy. What is your status? Over."

"We need an extract. We lost the van and most of the equipment. But we almost had it. We were literally right on top of it. Over."

"Sure you were. We'll have an extraction team to your location

ASAP. Over. SAC out."

Aaron Jay sighed again, looking at his bruised and battered team.

Well, at least I got a "yes sir," he thought ruefully.

Candy

Travis Brenton was always the one to help a damsel in distress, but this one took the cake. Walking alongside Highway 62 more than fifty miles out of town, and despite the triple digit heat, she was bundled up in a bright red coat. As he pulled up alongside her, she hardly turned to look at him, her coiffed blonde hair bouncing with each labored step she took.

Travis rolled down the passenger window on his pickup truck and leaned across the vinyl bench seat, "Hey there, miss, do you need a lift somewhere? Are you hurt?"

She stopped walking, wobbling slightly before she turned to look in the window. Her face was painted like porcelain, with a stark set of cherry red lips and little pink swirls painted on her cheeks like peppermint candies. The rest of her face was hidden under a wide brim straw hat and oversized sunglasses. But despite what must have been an inch of makeup on her cheeks and her heavy clothing, she didn't seem to have a bead of sweat on her. She judged him for a few moments before her face lit up with a bright, wide smile revealing a row of perfectly white Chiclet teeth.

"Thank you, sir. A ride to the next town would be very nice."

Travis pushed the pickup door open and she laboriously climbed into the cabin of the truck, one oversized sleeve completely obscuring her arm. She didn't grunt or wheeze a bit, but she seemed weak as a kitten. No surprise really, given how far she must have walked in this heat. Travis stretched out a hand to help pull her up, and she gripped him with a sticky white palm.

Travis' fingers felt like they were covered with syrup. He worked his fingers together curiously before trying to rub them on his jeans, which only caused his sticky hand to be covered with a layer of dirt and lint.

"Are you feeling alright, miss? You must be hot, let me turn up the air for you," he offered, leaving a sticky set of prints on the knob as he turned it.

"I'm fine, really. It's very kind of you to share your truck with me. Sharing is very important," the mysterious woman cooed, removing her hat and glasses. She fanned herself as the air kicked in, looking straight ahead at the road. Travis tried to get another good look at her as he pulled back onto the road, but she didn't turn towards him again.

"Well, I think it's important to lend out a helping hand to people who need it," Travis said with a smile.

"Funny you should say that, dear," the woman said mirthlessly, working her coat buttons open with her single exposed hand, the sticky one. Beneath the costume she was wearing some kind of ridiculous lacy candy striper outfit that seemed to be torn and stained brown. A rich maple scent filled the cabin, "Oh, oh, I'm sorry. I think I might be leaking on your seat."

Travis whirled to look at his passenger, and she turned to face him with blank, unblinking blue jawbreaker eyes. Her puffy red licorice lips pursed into a pout, "I truly am sorry, sir, I know you are doing me a kind deed by sharing your truck with me but I can't help the syrup. It just doesn't clot like blood does."

The truck swerved back off the road, bumping wildly on the bare earth off the highway. A cloud of dust erupted on both sides, obscuring the windows from outside. The woman yelped and her hair became undone as Travis slammed on the brakes and stared at his passenger in horror.

"I must look a mess, I know. It's just that I tried to share with him, but he wanted to take so much. He simply took too much, more than his share, and now I need to get back to the kitchen you see. You don't have to take me all the way there, it would probably be best if you didn't."

The woman had shrugged off the coat completely, and she was as white as her face from head to toe. She worked to pin her hair back

up with a peppermint twist with her one good hand, as her other arm ended just before where her wrist should have been. Her flesh was cracked like a piece of hard candy, and two thickly rolled tubes of paper poked out where the bones should be, like the sticks on a half-eaten lollipop. Her outfit had been torn and chewed upon, and there was a large part of her perfectly shaped torso missing.

"I'm sorry if I have frightened you, sir, but I really do need to get back on the road. Maybe if you shared with me a little bit more?" she scooted across the flat bench seat, leaning her face towards Travis as if to kiss him.

What happened next was a bit of a blur, but Travis was suddenly aware of the dust all around him and the hard ground against his back. His hand hurt terribly from being twisted in his panicked attempt to open the door and flee the cabin before the strange confection woman could touch him. She looked down at him with a hint of regret in her mask-like visage, and thick coils of red vines spilled from the hole in her side down to the floor of the truck cabin as she reached out over him.

"It's probably better this way. Thank you for sharing with me. I will repay your favor when I am back from the kitchen, I promise. You are very, *very* sweet," the candy woman grasped the open truck door and pulled it shut, leaving Travis scrambling away on his hands and knees as she started the truck back up again and drove away, stranding him on Highway 62 in triple digit heat.

Travis slowly pulled himself to his feet and stood in the swirling dust with a stupid look on his face. Had that really just happened? Was he really just carjacked by a half-eaten candy woman?

Something squirmed against his boot, and he looked down to see a few strands of the candy woman's innards writhing and pulsing on the ground where they had been pinched off by the slamming of the truck door.

He turned on his heels and ran.

Canola Oil Panic

Nathaniel Atkinson rang up the green and red nozzle, holstering it in the 7-Eleven gas pump, his other hand occupied with a half-eaten dragonfruit. The pump offered him a receipt, abruptly, which he refused outright with a slap across the keypad. The dragonfruit plopped onto his coupe's center console as he shut the door, burying his face in his hands for a moment. He could hardly imagine facing his co-workers this morning. Hell, his tank was full; the act of 'filling up' only bore semblance of a way to pass time rather than go into work. He had no contact information for Doctor Hart, who he, more than anything, wanted to speak to at that moment. Nathan flicked on the radio and sat in place, car still off beside the gas pump. His fingers reamed through his hair as he tried to make sense of the previous day.

Nothing about it made sense. It had been a hellish amalgamation of the strangest natural incidents he had seen in his career to date, and he was *eager* to experience more. The overwhelming curiosity was killing him more than anything in the situation, he realized as he finally started the car. It gave a reluctant purr, but started nonetheless, turning out of the gas station. He glanced down Tampa Road with a consolidating glare. For a moment, he considered driving home, taking the day off to think about things. Nathan swallowed a spoonful of the damnably bitter fruit. Something about it had always piqued his taste buds with the strangest of sensations.

His phone rang.
His hand froze, hovering over it. He had reacted far faster than he had thought, his eyes stuck to their corners and reading the number. It was nothing he recognized, but the unknown wasn't unwelcome. 'Accept Call' was pressed and flicked faster than he could bring the phone to his ear.

" —kinson, is this the correct number?"

Nathan blinked. "Yes, yes it is," he murmured, trancelike, pulling out onto Tampa. A car had pulled up behind him some time ago, waiting, and he felt their hand hovering on the horn. "Who is this?"

"Doctor Hart. Drive down to Clearwater. 5380 Tech Data Drive. You got that? Park in any of the handicapped spots. Someone will pick you up."

The address was already in his phone's GPS, typed out the moment each word left the speaker. "On my way," he breathed, swerving across a lane to make a u-turn. He set his phone in a cupholder, switching on the GPS function and beginning to make his way down to Clearwater.

He didn't look back once.

<An hour before.>

"Hello? Is this the Region 352 office?"

"Yes, Doctor Hart. How may I help you today?"

"Get me through to Kate."

The secretary hummed as she checked the lines. "You're in luck. Her line's open. Patching you through."

The dial tone rang again. Hart tapped his foot impatiently, leaning back against the wall of his office. The cord for the phone swayed and dangled back to his desk as he waited.

"Director McTiriss, Region 352."

Hart breathed out. "Kate, it's Hart."

"Hart? Shouldn't you be focusing on the outbreak?"

"Yes, yes. I need to ask you something. It's important. Mostly."

"Go on," the director breathed. Hart sat back in his chair, gathering himself.

"I dragged a civilian into it. He was useful, so I just grabbed him, gave him a gun, and… fuck, I don't know where my head was."

"And?"

Hart paused. "And what?"

The regional director smacked her lips over the line. "I once deputized an intern from the Montenegrin Parliament on a whim. Handed him a gun, gave him some direction. Local resources can be put to use rather well in these situations."

Hart almost felt taken aback, but he wasn't entirely surprised. He plopped his free hand over a stack of papers still to process for the new anomalies. "You remember mention of Diario?"

"Yeah, the one whose body wasn't found? I recall, yes."

"We need a replacement still. And this one, Atkinson, he's not so much as *flinched*. He's approached this far different than you'd think. Like… like…"

"He's curious. He seems to be interested. He's been helping?"

"To a degree," Hart admitted. "We dragged him with Green Thumb without giving him much direction."

"So, he didn't freak out under pressure? Hire the guy yesterday."

Hart chuckled. "You act like it's so easy. It's—"

"Don't try and complicate it. If he has some credentials, and recommendations, he may very well be joining you. From what I can hear, this Atkinson has got a word in from me on his case, should this opportunity be given."

The doctor nodded to himself, drumming his fingers on his desk. "Then that's all I needed to hear. Ciao."

Hart hung up the phone without waiting for a reply. He rapidly dialed the office's secretary. "Wilma? Find me the number of Nathaniel Atkinson. Yes, the one we grabbed yesterday. Get me everything

you have on him."

"Mmn. Doctor Atkinson?"

Nathan looked up as he closed his car door. "I'm hardly a doctor, but, yes. That'd be me. Are you the one I'm supposed to meet?"

Wilma, the secretary for the Clearwater office, offered her hand. Nathan shook it, briefly. "Wilma Stern, secretary to Doctor Hart. I suppose he wants to see you right away. Just follow me."

Nathan followed the woman into the building, confining his hands to his pockets. At a glance, the building seemed no different from the average office complex. On the inside, however… well, he found it to still be the average office complex. A tad disappointing, but he wasn't sure what else he expected. "Where's everyone else?" he asked, as they climbed a set of stairs.

"Mmn, probably out dealing with the event going down at the Belcher Publix Supermarket. Some squirrels got affected. It's going to be hard to cover up."

Nathan nodded. It made just as much sense as everything else lately. "Now, normally, I'd subject you to an orientation video and give you a pamphlet, but Hart eschewed that. You'll fill some paperwork out later. Just make sure it's all accurate," Wilma spoke, opening the door to Hart's office. The doctor stood to greet Nathan, and before he could inquire about the paperwork, the door was shut.

He turned to face Hart, shaking his hand as well. "Yes, hi," Nathan breathed. Hart gave his hand a firm shake and walked back around his desk, seating himself. "We're leaving in a few minutes. Anything you'd like to bring along that you'd think would be useful?"

"Leaving for where? Why am I here?"

"The Publix I'm sure Wilma mentioned. We busted someone down there this morning trading off a designer drug. Now there's squirrels."

Nathan blinked. "I'm sorry, what? What do squirrels have to do with

a drug dealer?"

"It's a long story. To be short, the drugs allow for reality bending. Minor. And the squirrels were set loose on the store in order to try and cover their tracks. Maybe. It may just be an act of harassment to warn us to back off. We're not sure of anything yet."

Nathan breathed out. "Right. Right, okay. This is dangerous, yeah? I mean, what are the squirrels doing?"

Hart chuckled. "Exactly what squirrels usually do, but worse."

"What? Feed on nuts?"

"Not quite."

Nathan found a bottle of canola oil upended on his head, dousing him in the cooking liquid as he sputtered, grabbing for a plastic spatula he had grabbed off a nearby display. He whacked the squirrel that had pounced him in the face, stunning it just long enough to squirm out from under it. He heard gunfire elsewhere in the supermarket, relenting that he hadn't asked for a gun himself. He had lost the task force member that was supposed to be shadowing him some point in the *Cereals and Dry Foods* aisle, among a myriad of loop cereals and flakes.

They were starting to regain control, but it was tough. The squirrels were far larger than your average nut-thief, and they were in quite the ravenous mood. They weren't even hunting for nuts. As they found with a corpse found in Aisle 14, they were indeed feasting on human flesh. Specifically, they had a taste for calves.

"Atkinson, get your ass to me!" Jacob yelled, double-tapping the squirrel that had pounced Nathan first. "There aren't many left, but they're getting *clever*."

Nathan shot his glances down the aisle as most of the supermarket went silent. His breath was heavy, rapid, and his heart was beating frantically as his calves tingled with the prospect of being devoured like cashews. A few *clears* were shouted over the aisles as the duo

gathered themselves, relaxing. "Going to be one Hell of a cover-up," Jacob muttered, leaving Nathan to collect his wits.

He squeezed at his coat, soaked in canola oil. He sighed. The garment was thoroughly trashed at this point, but, there was a bonus in this. He definitely still had calves.

"Nathan!"

Doctor Hart came down the hall, gun still in hand, offering Nathan a hand. The male blinked in confusion, unsure of when he had ended up on the ground. He gripped the doctor's hand and stood, gathering himself. "That was…"

"Exhilarating? Yes, but the cleanup crew's job here is going to be Hellish."

"Not what I had in mind," Nathan murmured, but followed the doctor as he began to walk further back in the store. "Find anything?"

"Nothing," Hart breathed. "Nothing. Nothing more than this morning."

"What did you get this morning? That weird reality drug?"

"Yes. We've seen it before, once. Michigan. I suppose I can divulge that a little more easily now, since you'll be on this case in records soon."

Nathan didn't bother to ask about what he meant. "So, what happened in Michigan?"

Hart sighed, and leaned against the meat counter. "We lost a good man that day. We were trying to shut down a drug operation run by some idiot that had found an anomalous ingredient, or some shit we never fully understood."

"What was his name?"

Hart shook his head.

"Diario."

« Just Like Me | Green Thumb Hub | {TBA} »

Capone

"I was scared when I first saw him. It happened just as you told me: the messages, the pictures, seeing him around every corner afterwards. I was so young; who wouldn't have lost it?" William sighed. By then, he was over the creature following him. It wasn't like it was going to go away, no matter how much he begged, or pleaded, or attempted to bribe. He knew that the best and only solution would be to just get used to Capone being there. At least he had the solace of knowing he wasn't going insane.

“Believe me William; I know many people have reacted the same way. Fear is a more common reaction to the unknown than you’d think.” Dr. Laura Breynz consoled him. These cases weren't exactly common, but they *were* commonly known.

“It’s not even that I'm afraid of him anymore. I mean, he makes me jump when I see him in the morning, I don't think I'll ever get used to that; It's the just the bad connotations he has.” William rebutted.

"I know that he does, but it happened two years ago. I know it's hard for you, especially with your shadow, but you need to carry on." Dr. Breynz stated. William just sighed as she continued. "Our session is almost up. We made some real progress, William. I want you to do something for me when you get home. Do you have any homework or anything?"

"I did it all on my break."

"Good. When you get home, I want you to think back to your first experience, and write as much as you feel comfortable sharing. Is that alright?"

"Yeah. Thanks for seeing me."

It wasn't too long a drive from the doctor's office to home. Five,

possibly ten minutes if there was a train. He always saw the creature through the rear view mirror when he drove, riding in the back seat. It looked innocent, in its own, alien way, waving to William as he saw it.

Despite everything, William found himself talking to it, like one would talk to a dog or cat about their day when they're alone. It seemed to listen when he talked, and after a while, he could swear that it understood. It's hard to tell with a face like that, so all there were to go by were various head tilts and waves, and even then, he had to teach it how to wave.

"At least I know you're interested."

Drop the backpack near the door, go to the patio, wave to Capone from the mirror, fridge, drink, chair, crash. William's afternoon routine was more clockwork than it should be. He thought back to his session with Dr. Breynz. "She wanted me to try and recapture the experience when I first saw him, huh?" William mumbled as he grabbed a few sheets of paper and a pen. Bit by bit, he pieced together the sequence of events that lead up to this point.

> I've had Capone with me ever since I was fifteen years old. I remember that my twenty-year old sister, Sara, brought up an app that she downloaded earlier at the dinner table one night. She had no idea how it does it, but hazarded a guess that it tracks you through your phone's GPS, and sends you pictures of the places you've been with a 'really cute' monster placed in the photo to make it look like it's following you.
>
> It didn't seem that weird. I recall that Google maps could get a decent ground photo at the time, so just add Photoshop to that, and you'd have a gimmick. Plus, we knew it couldn't be a virus. The app store checks every app for things like that before peddling it. The only thing I found legitimately off about it at the time was that it was both free, and ad-less.
>
> Her explanation of it sounded pretty cool to me, so I

asked Sara to help me download it on my phone. She told me that while my old, hand-me-downed, flip-phone did have *something* like an app store, it most likely didn't have MalO. Didn't stop her from looking though.

Sara was a good sister. She really could have told me to just get out of her hair, but she always took time out of her day for me, packing my lunch, playing with me, bringing me to 'R' rated movies that I was clearly too young for. I was lucky to have her as a legal guardian when our parents went away.

I was too young to process it all when it happened, but mom and dad died from a head-on collision with a drunk driver. Sara took care of me as my legal guardian up until I moved out for college. God knows where I'd be if she didn't. After some prodding, she found the app, which was a surprise to the both of us. It was obvious that my phone didn't have any kind of GPS, but neither of us had even thought about it until much, much later. Soon enough, I received my first picture.

I'll never understand the way Sara saw the world, if that was her idea of 'cute'. The photo was taken in my school's courtyard, with the creature I'd soon call Capone sitting on one of the benches. You could barely see him, but there he was, covered in his black, matted fur, with his knife-like claws, a set of blank, pure-white eyes, and that face, which was merely a skull belonging to some kind of large beast, looking directly at us with that large, wolfish grin.

I gave the phone back to Sara, telling her how terrifying it was, and that I didn't want the messages anymore. She just jokingly punched my shoulder, saying "Oh don't be such a baby. It is too cute! Look how happy he is to meet you!" I looked back at his face; his wide grin specifically… I have to admit, I laughed at that. It was just the sheer wrongness of that statement that made me listen to the next.

"I'm sure he'll grow on you eventually… Tell you what, if you can put up with him for one whole week, we'll go see that movie you've wanted to see. If he still *gives you nightmares,* we'll delete it. If you end up liking it, we'll laugh about it later; Deal?" I looked at the picture again. It appeared that getting a photo every now and then was the extent this was going to go to, and looking at it in hindsight, I probably would've kept it on for next to nothing if she really wanted me to; so I agreed.

Sara was ecstatic after that, and assured me that I wouldn't regret it while showing me some of her own pictures. She only had three so far: one at her office, one at the park, and another on the road we lived on, each picture containing her own clearly visible entity. I must have looked nervous or something, because she suggested that I name mine like she did with her 'Cassandra'. I thought about it for a bit.

Let me make something clear though, because it seems to come up whenever I tell people this: I did not name my MalO 'Capone' because of the incident with my parents; I didn't even know that mom and dad's arrest involved alcohol at the time. I named him after a history lesson I found amusing in school where people's fear got the best of them, and as my teacher put it, it ended up doing more harm than good. It was intended as a reminder that I shouldn't be making the same mistake.

I saw a bit of light in this whole thing after giving it a mock-title and thought it wasn't going to be that bad. I went to bed, and my normal life went on for just a little while longer.

I continued to get pictures of Capone for a while, following me at school, the bus stop, my street, virtually everywhere I went. It wasn't until the third or fourth day when I got called in from class. I was thinking that I was in trouble for something, even if I didn't know what, but as soon as I saw Sara, that feeling was stifled. She looked very shaken. The instant she saw me, she

immediately yanked my arm, and brought me to the car.

Sara was not looking good at all. She kept asking questions about Capone, things like if I saw him, or if I received any photos from him with me in the images. I haven't checked anything from today, but when I checked, there were two. I remembered exactly when and where those messages were taken, because during them, I made a mental note that I got some texts from Capone. They've been sent as soon as they've been taken.

Sara knew that we were being pursued by something, she probably had no idea by what they were, and I knew she had no idea how they were doing it, but she knew that they knew where we lived. She couldn't figure out how to delete it. She said she tried everything, but couldn't find a way to get it off. She couldn't even find where the app went.

I'm not even sure what we were planning to do, but before we could even fully plan a course of action, I got another text. Sara froze and stared at me, as if to say 'don't look at it'. If I didn't, I could have had a semi-normal life right now. It would have been over the news within the week, and we would have known…

But I did it. I opened the phone… And there we were, just sitting there, with that fear stricken look on our face. The photo was clearly taken from the hood of the moving car, giving us a clear view of what was behind us. He took up most of the backseat, and towered over me. We both turned around, preparing to scream at the monstrosity behind us, but when we did, the seat was empty. We didn't know what was happening, or what to make of it, but we felt that the only thing to do is run away, abandoning the car.

We hastily ditched the car, ran the rest of the way to the apartment, and locked the door behind us. We locked ourselves in the bathroom, and waited. We just stayed

there, even when we got a message from Cassandra or Capone, Sara would scream at them, asking why they were following us and begged for us to be left alone.

We felt helpless against them. All we felt we could do is just sit in the bathroom, and hope they would go away. The room felt like our only safe haven until… We were exposed to them for too long. Sara started to panic, saying that she kept seeing one of them behind her. I wasn't seeing it though. I was more concerned about trying to calm her down by telling her that maybe they weren't really there than I was about seeing Capone in the mirror.

I convinced Sara that we needed to leave the room out of necessity. We couldn't stay in the apartment forever, and if they wanted to get us, they would have done so already. We called the police and… Here we are.

We both got help, but I was the lucky one. Everyone's case was different in terms of interaction, but for me, Capone was always in a mirror or some reflective thing large enough to show him. He was predictable, and I could find ways to block him out when I needed it.

I learned how to expect Capone, and after a while, he kind of grew on me. I used to have a makeshift curtain that I would pull over the mirrors when I didn't want to see him, but I started using that curtain less and less as time went on.

Capone always seemed to try and interact with me, even if I didn't understand what he was trying to say most of the time. I started to greet Capone with a casual wave as I passed by him from the living room mirror, and eventually, he started to wave back. He kind of became a constant companion to me, and I adjusted to Capone just as he adjusted to me.

My case wasn't as severe as Sara's. She saw Cassandra every where she looked. Around every

> corner, just out of sight, over her while she slept. Sara took her own life two years ago. I wanted to blame the MalOs for it, but I can't. Following the person who looks at their messages is just… what they do. Now, every time I see Capone, I'm reminded of what I did in the car that day. I knew I shouldn't have picked up that text. If I didn't, she would still be here.

It was almost four hours since William started writing, but he almost felt relieved. He's never actually told anyone about this in such detail before; the majority of what happened was kept between himself and Capone. He looked up to the creature in the mirror from across the room for a few seconds, as it gave the old, familiar wave.

William was silent for a minute, staring at Capone, and then back to his papers. He felt the need to make one last point.

> But then again, how would I have known? I don't know who made the MalOs, or why. I don't even know if anyone actually made the app; many things like it have been created naturally, or have been given some kind of anomaly out of sheer chance. It would make so much sense if some physical thing was to blame, but there's none that I can legitimately find: none on the MalOs, none on me; just on chance.

Care for You

The wall-shaking cacophony from the room upstairs ceased. A few seconds later, Daniel, Rene's calico, came barreling down the stairs and settled quickly at Riven's feet with a purr. Which meant that she wasn't too far behind, since she never let Dan out of her room while she was practicing - she even brought the litterbox in from the bathroom. However, it took a couple of minutes for her to finally appear at the top of the stairs, and Riven had picked his book back up in the meantime. When she finally did appear, her descent was slow; she averted eye contact, and Riven didn't push it. Her hands buried deep in the pockets of a grey hoodie, she walked into the kitchen. Riven could hear a cup being filled with water from the refrigerator, and Daniel got up and after a moment and followed the sound. After she returned, Daniel at her feet, she walked over and sat on the couch across the living room from Riven. After a minute of sitting silently, she watching the coffee table with her left foot on her right knee, sipping cool water, he pretending to continue reading but in truth worrying what could be wrong, she lowered her left to the floor, pulled a coaster off of the side table and set her glass upon it, sat up straight and spoke.

"I'm feeling really badly about my music." Riven placed his book to his side on the couch and looked at Rene.

"Really? Well, I've told you before, and I stand by it now, that your music is really something special, Ren. I haven't heard anything like it." A pause, but Riven knew not to continue - that she took her time while formulating her thoughts.
"Thanks, and I *know* that…Mm, that I should just do what I feel, and that that's what makes art move forward, you know? And that a lot of amazing artists aren't appreciated in their time…so, I shouldn't expect immediate reception to reflect how my art will be seen in the long run."

"Mhm. Absolutely."

"But I guess it's…Well, I *know* it is…hard sometimes. Like, today, we had some time in Music Appreciation, and I had asked Mrs. Sands if I could play the class a recording of one of my songs that I'm putting on my album. And, you know, I figured it would be safe since it's Music Appreciation! So I played it, and, well, you know, it was 'Cassie's Song,' and you know how much work, how many *hours* I put into even *mixing* it, and I thought I had gotten it just right to, you know, like, show off the really basic instrumental makeup that I used, and how it had been subverted to allow for a lighter atmosphere, and more of, like, a cerebral and introspective feel that's really hard to achieve with those instruments. And, like, I even explained that a little bit to the class, but no one liked it. I mean, of course Jon and Philly liked it, but you know that both of them have made stuff with me before, and that we all share music between the three of us, with Phis and Adsen. The thing that made me feel the worst though was the look that Mrs. Sands gave me. I mean, she's teaching Music Appreciation, and she gave me this look while the song was playing like 'You really wanted to share this?' It really makes me feel like I'm never going to find people that appreciate what I make." Rene used her fourth and pinky fingers to brush aside her auburn hair and scratch her right temple. She had begun tapping her foot unconsciously while she was talking, and, looking down, stopped. After a while, Riven looked up to her and spoke:

"I've got a story from back when I worked with your dad and Oliver at the Foundation. I know that you don't like hearing those stories sometimes, but would you mind hearing this one? It's one I haven't told before, and I think it might help."

"Sure, of course, if you think it'll help. Usually the reason that I don't like those stories is because the Foundation gives me a bad feeling…it just seems like worse times, ya know? Can I turn the lights off though? They're giving me a headache." Rene sat up, walked over, switched the overhead lights off, and took a seat next to Riven, leaning her head on his right shoulder. Riven consciously cleared his throat like he always did when he was about to share a story - it just felt right.

"Well, it was the second year that I had worked in my own labs, which was about seven years before my job kind of became, uh,

null, you know, and so I was scrambling around as usual, trying to keep people safe, early, early in the morning. Probably about 5:30. I remember it was a Monday because I was quite excited about one of the items that was in our cache for the week. If I remember correctly it had some element of instantaneous transportation, and those were always some of my favorites.

"So I'm doing the routine scramble, and I'm breathlessly approaching our office, and I notice that the door is ajar, which is worrying because the only other person that works in there is Researcher Milen, and he's terribly punctual: 7 AM, every day, no exceptions. So, even though I know I may have just left it ajar from the night before, 'cause in those days almost every night was a late night, I approach cautiously - no, it wasn't silly of me. You need to remember this is pre-CC, and where I was working. We needed to stay alert. So I move very slowly along the wall, and I get right outside the door to peek in, and there's a woman standing in there.

"She's all bloodied up, clothes all torn, panting all breathless, and she's looking all over the place really panicked. She turns, and it seems like she's planning on running out of the room, but she sees me, and I'm deer-in-the-headlights at this point, and she starts rambling about cars. An endless stream of strange comments and negations on the features of cars! 'Cars cannot travel through time!' 'Cars serve people!' 'Cars don't want to find me!' 'Cars are made by people!' And as she keeps talking she starts to calm down, and she gets this ethereal look on her face, of just…*pure* joy. I've never seen such pure joy, - well, when your father and I saw you for the first time I'm sure it was the same. Well, soon enough her panting is sounding a lot more like sighs of relief. By this time, though, I've hit the button on the inside of my coat that summons security, and I'm sure they were on their way anyways, thinking back - cameras on every corner. She got sedated right off the bat, taken, questioned, and then - I later learned - given some strong amnestics and turned away. I asked for a transcript of the interview, and shared it with Mark and Oliver, and Aunt Zyn too, and they didn't believe it at all, and apparently neither did the higher-ups, or I'm sure we wouldn't have just given her amnestics and thrown her away…Or maybe we would have. Those were strange days…

"She claimed she was from another time. That in whatever world she came from, which she swore was ours, there was an extra-dimensional threat to humankind called cars. That they pervaded the conscious space of all people, that they tormented them, drove them mad. I mean, really incredible, scary stuff. I think I've still got a copy of the transcript in the attic if you'd like to read it. I don't do the story justice. Well, anywho, she told us that she was a mercenary who wielded the power to change the cars with statements on their nature, as long as such statements had a listening ear, but that there was no one left to hear her. She spent many years digging through the ancient, abandoned archives of a group she called 'The Candlebearers.' How she managed to survive that long is left to our imagination. The interviewer never asked. Finally, she finds something, she finds some object that she thinks may help, one of many I'm sure, but this one truly is the one, and, through some interaction, she winds up in Oliver's and my office.

"So…even now, no one believes that this woman was anything but mad. She got her mind wiped. She got kicked out on the streets of a nearby town. And that's how it was. But you know what I think?" A smile made its way across Rene's face in the dim light that came through the door to the kitchen.

"I think so, but I want to hear you say it." Riven smiled too.

"I believe that she saved the world. Existence. I believe that without her, we wouldn't be here.

"So, what I'm trying to say is that" Riven ran his fingers through his hair, contemplating how to go on "no matter…*what* some people think, know that you'll find someone to listen to you, to hear your voice, to hear your message. To hear *you*. You're saving the world, Ren."

Rene took a deep breath and kicked up from her spot on the couch. A smile once again spread across her face. She looked down on Riven.
"Hm." Walking towards the stairs, Rene flipped on the lights. "Do you know when Dad's gonna be home?"

"Pretty soon, I'd say."

"Alright. Thanks, Dad." And with that, Rene ran up the stairs, Daniel in hot pursuit. Riven returned to his book. Shortly thereafter, the cacophony started up once more, and the walls shook a little harder.

P.S.

Later that night, Riven dug through a box of his old paperwork; the light from the avenue filtered through the attic window and a brass lamp that he had plugged in near the entrance lent him the light he needed. There it was. "Interview AxC-5466-M: Interview with PoI 'Rene Guilder' Regarding Infiltration of Restricted Area K-2"

Carlysle Aktus is a prickly bastard (AN: high school AU)

AN: im writing this becaus i dont like how carlisles route is handled in the gamme. u basically only get 2 be friends with him and i think es really awsome so im writing this story to show how it should be reallu.

SCP VN is normally in site 19 but i think highscool of cheyenne point is better place to set it because everyone can idtenfitywith highscool relly well and im in highschool so i want to.-yoric the snek//

YORIC the highschool student was very nervous on his first day of school. He had just moved to cheyenne point from Pheonix arizona to cheyenne point he had wanted to move for a while because this was where his dad (Agent Dimitri Strelnilkov) lived. he had wanted to get away from the halls of his fenix arizona highschool for so long. now he had a chance- to go live with his father, russian strongman and secrit agent strelnikov. the man who strangeled a whale with his bear hands.

wen yoric arrived at cheyenne point, location of the highschool, sisters of cheyenne point, the famouse SCP FOUNDATION feeder school that created such agents as agent dr imants and doctor professor imants, the famous wonde twins, strelnikov ment him at the small airport that servicesd the area.

Strelnikov said in his deep russian voice and thick accent "Hello Yoric my son it is good to see you alive and well. Are you here to be trained as russian like aI amn?:"

Yoric said "no father i am here to attend South Cheyenne Point Highschool" but then strelnikov boomed "GOOD! WE WILL START TRAINING IMMEDIAT"

and so they left to hgo to strelnikov';s lodge. there over the course of a year yoric learned how 2 throw knives and do flips and stuff. he could sneak through a moonless night as quiet as a snake who

slithered and shit. anyway, one day he was drinking vodka with strelnikov on the proch. his was watered down to like 40%. he said "father i want to go to school."
strelnikov was silent for al ong time and then he said

"Da."

So yoric went to school.

Part 2:

yoric was stunned the first day he saw carlyse actus. That straw blond flyaway hair. the softness of his sk1n. the way his eyes would defocus in class nd the teacxher would be like "carlysle!" and he would be like "what?"

he was beautiful and yoric loved him at first site. he did everything he could to get close 2 kaktus carlylsley actus and aeventually they were in the same art club. it was pretty cool and carlilly achtung was an awesome at painting and stuff. hs art came alive like an scp magic thing.

months later and he was fast friends with carry anderwood but he couldn't bnring himself to explain his feelins to the won he loved. they were cleaning up the art room after schoool was over nd they had just put the last canvise away. Carly Ambrose turned to him and said "yoric lelroy i have something i wnat to 2 tell u"

"wat" sed yoric.

"i love you" said chimicanga alfonso.

yorics heart grew tghree sizes larger. then chibodino ambibly strepped cloiser. "how do you feel about me yoric strelnkibo elroy dawkins?; nd yoric paused. he bit his lip, eyes shining brightly in the afternoon sun. locusts played softly outside like a chorus or smthing.

yoric pauised nd looked away and then he looked back at candy axew nd he said "I love you 2. i have always since i saw u a month ago nd i will love uy forever."

":oh yoric" said Chumbawumba Acting and then he threw his arms

around yorics brawny shoulders nd kissed him. it tasted like cactus. yoric kisseed him back and their tonges intwined. Christmas Achewood mooned softly into his mouth. "ive been waiting for this for so long he said."

His hand slowly moved towards yoric elroyu strelnikov dokins light rights the third's belt buckle. he began to unblick it slowly while kissin him on the mouth really sexy. yoric started to blush nd said "r you sur you want 2 do this ChichinItza Altitude?" and Caramel Ambivilant said "Yes. Ive wanted to do this for so long."

but then yoric richard elegent vampire the excellent fifteenth said "wait i have somethin else 2 tell u."

"wat" said Chipmunk Alfredo

"im a snake" said yoric dawnkins strelnikov rights lighjt richard elengent the third fiftheenth

and hje was. then he bit Chilly Argentina in the arm and slithered away and Crabpot Alucard got poisoned and died. cause he was a stealre and he did a bad thing, the end.

Cart can, Can cart

“So you’re saying you found a can?”

“Yup.”

“And this can is… a Cart?”

“Yuuuuup.”

“So the can’s a Cart.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.“

“You sure this can isn’t a Can?”

“Yeah. The can’s in a cart, though.”

“What kind of Cart is it?”

“The cart’s not a Cart.”

“Well what is it?”

“The cart’s a Can.”

“So the can’s on a Can?”

“No, the Cart’s on the Can. The can’s a Cart.”

“Well, what’s the Cart on?”

“It’s just on the ground, I guess.”

“You said the Cart was on a cart!”

“No, there’s only one cart. The Cart’s on top of it.”

“So there’s a cart on the Cart, and the Cart’s on the ground.”

“Yes.”

“What’s in the cart?”

“A can.”

“What’s in the can?”

“A cart.”

“So they’re inside each other?”

“No! The can is in the cart, and the Cart is in the Can!”

“What’s in the Cart?”

“I dunno.”

“You dunno?”

“I dunno. I don’t have a can opener.”

“So you haven’t opened the Can?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know the Cart’s in the Can?”

“It’s not, the can’s in the cart. Hang on, Agent Watt’s here.”

“Who’s there?”

“No, Watt’s here. Hu retired.”

“Put him on the phone.”

“Who?”

“No, Watt.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Watt.”

“What?”

“Put him on the phone!”

“Hymn’s back at the office, call him yourself.”

“Whatever. So what’s up with the Cart and the Can?”

“No, Watt’s next to me.”

“What’s next to you?”

“Yes.”

“So what’s up with the Cart and the Can?”

“No! Watt’s right here! Hang on, he’s going up to the can.”

“Who?”

“No, Watt. Hu retired.”

“What’s going on?”

“No, Watt’s going up.”

“So what’s up with the cart?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“Hang on, remind me. What’s in the can?”

“No. The Cart’s in the Can. Watt’s next to them.”

“I dunno, what are you asking me for?”

“What?”

“Where’s Watt?”

“Where’s what?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“WHAT?”

“YES!”

> And that was the story of how Special Agent Abbott and Special Agent Costello were transferred out of the Unusual Incidents Unit.

CASE COLOURLESS GREEN

Item #: SCP-3125

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-3125 is kept inside Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125 on the first floor of Site 41. This containment unit is a 10m by 15m by 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.

Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals and psi emanations. During the exit cycle, a purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days).

END OF FILE

"You're kidding me. That's the whole entry?"

"That's the whole entry," Wheeler says.

It isn't even the fiftieth strangest thing Paul Kim has seen in the database, but still: "No description, no acquisition report, no test log,

no addenda? No clue who built the unit, or when, or how many times it's been visited, or who carried out the previous visits, or what they took in with them, or how long they were in there?"

"Well, obviously Bart Hughes built the unit," Wheeler says, and this cannot be denied. The man's signature style of containment architecture is recognisable a mile out. Sleek, white, plainly impregnable without the aid of extremely heavy tools. "Which makes it at least seven years old. That's sixty visits or more. I guess there are good reasons for the rest of those omissions. Anyway… the timer watchdog says it's time again."

"I don't like the idea of you routinely exposing yourself to a cognitohazard so dangerous that we can't even write the reason why we can't write it down down," Kim says. "Especially because it's impossible for us to recover any usable information this way. You're going to go in, be incommunicado for two hours and come out a smiling amnesiac. What do we gain from that? It's just a breach risk."

Wheeler hears every word of this and elects to ignore it all. There's a vague shape of familiarity about the entry as written; there are a few word choices which reassure her, in an intangible way, that it was written by someone who knew what they were doing. Possibly her.

Kim's still talking. "We should just scrub that last line from the database entry. There can't be *anything* good in that room."

Wheeler puts her keycard in the slot. The airlock rewards her with green LEDs and begins to cycle open. It's built as a slender vertical cylinder with a single opening. The entire thing rotates on its axis. Inside, there's barely room for a single person to stand without their shoulders touching the walls.

"What are you taking?" Kim asks.

Wheeler ducks to step in, turns to face him and shrugs. "A stick of gum."

"I can get you field gear," Kim says, as the airlock begins to rotate

again, emitting a low, quiet thrum solely as an audible warning that there is machinery in motion. "We'll raid inventory. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll turn you into a one-woman war."

If Wheeler says anything in response to this, it's cut off by the soundproofing as the airlock rotates.

Kim is left alone in the antechamber. He stares at the outer door for a worried moment. He presses his ear to the door for a while, but hears nothing. Not even a faint tremble from the airlock mechanism.

*

Inside it's pitch dark for a few seconds, then some unseen sensor detects Wheeler's presence and brings the fluorescents up. Half of them, anyway. The others remain inert or flicker aggravatingly.

The room's interior walls are made from milky white glass (bulletproof, knowing Hughes) and plastered with paperwork, taped and Blu-Tacked up in vaguely coherent masses. Where there is no paperwork, people have drawn directly on the walls in marker pen. There is a conference table, long and elliptical, covered with more paperwork and a tangle of laptop computers and serpentine power supply cables. Power has returned to the machines and they are slowly booting. A data projector warms up and shines a map of the world over the far wall, almost lining up with a network of scribbled annotations on the same wall. Post-It notes of all colours litter the carpet like autumn leaves.

Other than that, the room is empty.

Skimming the paperwork, Wheeler discovers that nearly all of it is handwritten and most of it charts the progress of conversations. Most of the entries are dated and signed, and most of the dates are weeks apart. The conversations are panicked and fearful back-and-forths about dozens of SCPs, some of them antimemetic in nature but none of them obviously related to one another. None of the notes mention SCP-3125.

The only name Wheeler recognises is her own, which appears on one in ten or twenty of the notes. The notes seem authentic and the

handwriting is hers. But her notes also seem as desperate and uncertain in tone as everybody else's. This unnerves her.

There are diagrams on the walls too, which are too complex to decode at a glance, but complex enough to make her eyes hurt to look at them.

Still lost for a logical entry point to the data, Wheeler curses all of her predecessors. Asynchronous research — whereby the research topic is forgotten entirely between iterations, and rediscovered over and over — is a perfectly standard practice in the Antimemetics Division, and her people ought to be better trained than this. There should be an obvious single document to read first which makes sense of the rest. A primer—

"Marion, it's me."

Wheeler recognises the voice as her own. She moves around the table until she finds the laptop making the noise. There's a video playing, apparently recorded on the laptop's own camera in this room.

The Marion Wheeler in the video is seated, and looks unfamiliar in a way which takes the one watching a moment to put her finger on. Not exhausted, not sick, not physically injured; she's seen herself that way before, in the mirror. This woman's willpower is gone. She's beaten.

"You've guessed already that SCP-3125 is not in this room," she says. "In fact, this is the only room in the world where SCP-3125 is not present. It's called 'inverted containment'. SCP-3125 pervades all of reality except for volumes which have been specifically shielded from its influence. This is it. This is our only safe harbor. This room represents the length and breadth of the war.

"Every competent antimemetics research project finds SCP-3125's fingerprints sooner or later. It manifests all over the world, in thousands of different forms. Most of them aren't even anomalous. Some of them we already have catalogued separately in the main database. A very small number of them are even in containment. **Impossibly virulent cults**, **broken arithmetic**,

invisible spiders as tall as skyscrapers, **people born with extra organs which nobody can see**. That's the raw data. Those manifestations are troublesome enough to deal with in their own right…"

The Wheeler in the video casts around, picks up a bright green felt-tip pen and a blank piece of paper. She begins drawing a shape which isn't visible from the camera's perspective, while still talking.

"But once you get a little further down the road you start to see a pattern emerging in the data. You need to have the training in memetic science, but once you have that training and you have the data in front of you, it only takes a little extra effort to arrange those data points in conceptual space and draw a contour through them. Those data points are points on SCP-3125's hull; those manifestations are the shadows it casts on our reality. You link four or five different SCPs together into a single shape, and you see it… And it sees you…"

She's still drawing. It's detailed. She doesn't look up, and her tone of voice is distant, almost as if she's narrating the tail end of a frightening children's story:

"When that happens, when you make 'eye contact', it kills you. It kills you and it kills anybody who thinks like you. Physical distance doesn't matter, it's about mental proximity. Anybody with the same ideas, anybody in the same head space. It kills your collaborators, your whole research team. It kills your parents; it kills your children. You become absent humans, human-shaped shells surrounding holes in reality. And when it's done, your project is a hole in the ground, and nobody knows what SCP-3125 is anymore. It is a black hole in antimemetic science, consuming unwary researchers and yielding no information, only detectable through indirect observation. A true description of what SCP-3125 is, or even an allusion to what it is, constitutes a containment breach and a lethal indirect cognitohazard.

"Do you see? It's a defense mechanism. This information-swallowing behaviour is just the outer layer, the poison coating. It protects the entity from discovery while it infests our reality.

"And as years pass, the manifestations will continue, growing denser and knitting together… until the whole world is drowning in them, and everybody will be screaming 'Why did nobody realise what was happening?' And nobody will answer, because everybody who realised was killed, by this *system*…

"Do you see it, Marion? See it now."

Wheeler is at the core of Foundation antimemetic science. She had all the raw data readily accessible. There are extensive written calculations on the walls, but she doesn't need to read them, she can do them in her head. All it took was that slightest push, that slightest suggestion. Staring through the laptop screen, eyes wide and defocused, she understands how it all links together. She sees SCP-3125.

She feels dwarfed by it. She's encountered terrible, powerful ideas before, at every level of memeticity, and subdued them or even recruited them, but what she's picturing now is on another order of magnitude from what she knew to be possible. Now that she knows it's there, she can feel it like cosmic radiation, boring holes in the world with its thousands of manifestations and freely laying waste to anybody who recognises the larger pattern. It's not of reality, not of humanity. It is from a higher, worse place, and it is descending.

The other Wheeler presents her finished diagram. She has drawn a mutated, fractally complex grasping hand with fivefold symmetry. It has no wrist or arm, just five long human fingers pointing in five directions. At its core, there's a pentagonal opening which could be a mouth.

But the diagram was already there. It's plastered across the wall in the background of the video, plain as day, a meticulous collage in green, easily two metres in diameter and showing the same meme complex to a hundred times the level of detail. There are smaller diagrams of different elevations arrayed around it like spores, and its arms are spread wide around the seated Wheeler, who sits directly in front of the mouth, with her back to it.

Wheeler, watching, does not realise this, and does not turn around.

"How do you fight an enemy without ever discovering it exists?" the Wheeler in the video asks. "How do you win without even realising you're at war? What do we *do*?

"Seven years ago there were more than four hundred antimemetics research groups worldwide. Government agencies, military branches, private corporations, university projects. Many of them were GOIs or subdivisions of GOIs. We were allied with most of them. We were at the spearhead of an Antimemetics Coalition which spanned the whole globe and thousands upon thousands of people. None of those groups still exist. The last one ceased to exist some time in the last seventy-two hours.

"Three years ago, Foundation Antimemetics was an organisation of more than four thousand people. Now it's ninety.

"There's no war. We've lost the war. It's over. This is the mopping-up operation. The only reason we still exist at all is because we have better amnestic biochemistry than anybody else in the world. Because that's all you can do when you see SCP-3125: run away and try to forget what you saw… seek oblivion in chemicals, or alcohol, or head trauma. And even that can't work every time. It's circling in. We meet it over and over again and we don't realise it. There's no way we can stop ourselves from rediscovering it! We're too damned smart!"

She points at something on the wall, out of view of the laptop's camera. Wheeler, watching, turns to look. In an upper corner of the room there is a constellation of dizzyingly complicated schematics. Bart Hughes's initials are on every page.

"There's a machine we could build. All it would take is eight years, a lab as big as West Virginia and all the money in the world. Nothing that the O5 Council would blink at if we went to them. But how do we build that machine without any of us realising what it's for? It would be like building and launching Apollo 11 without a single engineer deducing that the Moon existed. The logistics would be insane, but the secrecy would be well past impossible. Someone would start asking questions. And then it would be over. So what do we do?"

"Find another way," Wheeler says to the unhearing recording. The

fatalistic tone of voice makes her angry. "What's the hell's wrong with you?"

"…I could tell everybody to walk away. I could send a little message to myself saying 'There's danger down this road, you should disband the Antimemetics Division and pursue other projects.' But I'd be suspicious. I'd start asking questions. And then it would be over."

Wheeler's now crouched in front of the video, trying to understand what she's watching. "What's wrong, Marion? Are you okay?"

"I could kill myself in here," the recording says. "But my team would find SCP-3125 without me, and then they'd have to fight SCP-3125 without me. It's going to happen soon, whatever happens. In the next two months at most. This year, it will be over. I may die in here anyway. I'm on so many mnestic drugs that my endocrine system is shutting down. Taking amnestics at the same time is the chemical equivalent to trepanation. I don't remember the last time I slept without having a nightmare about Adam, and I'm starting to forget whether **SCP-4987** is a real thing or just the number that I gave to my life—"

"You're not like this," Wheeler whispers. "You're stronger than this. What happened to you? Who's Adam?"

"I don't know how we survive this. I don't know how we win. We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody."

Wheeler shakes her head, not believing it.

"So I'm done. I'm going to walk out of this door and forget who I am and then I'm going to be you, Marion, and you trwoll have to figure a way out of this, because I can't." She gets up and moves offscreen. She can be heard breathing deeply. Her speech is starting to distort. "God, my eyes hurt. I think ilr starting infth mlaei inside."

There's the sound of a door opening, and then a piercing pulse of sound and light which terminates the recording.

*

Wheeler stares at the dark screen for a long minute.

She's never seen herself so weak, and it damages her ego a great deal to see that it's possible. She feels disconnected from what she saw, like it happened in an alternate universe. She feels revulsed and appalled by that version of her, more so to know that that version is still inside her somewhere. *It doesn't make sense. I'm looking at all of the same facts. What made her give up? What did she know that I don't?*

Who was Adam?

The answer to this question is so obvious and sickening that she instinctively distrusts it. She circles around the answer, probing it, trying to find reasons to reject it, but it's inescapable. Adam was someone she knew when the video was recorded, now completely removed from her memory. Adam was someone the thought of whose safety paralysed her with fear. Someone in the same head space. Someone she couldn't bear to lose.

And then she lost.

But what if…

(But how'd the room get built in the first place? Anybody's guess. Wheeler imagines Hughes building it as a proof-of-concept, followed by a cascading series of lucky chances which led to it becoming the war room. Someone discovered SCP-3125 at random, while sealed in the room; they wrote notes to themselves which set up the skeletal external SCP database entry and the containment procedures; most of the paperwork and computer hardware was left behind by later visitors… It could have happened…)

But what if there's another room?

Unbidden, a cute factoid comes back to her right then. Site 41 is almost completely vacant. In particular, two hundred metres below Site 41 there's an empty heavy engineering lab, an underground complex the size of a hockey stadium. Self-contained, in pristine condition, totally disused. Sealed up, original purpose forgotten. Nobody has entered it in living memory. Built who-knows-how-many decades back by a dead generation of antimemeticists.

What if that's where we built our weapon?

Do I really believe I'm that smart? That my team and I had that much foresight? That we got that lucky?

She turns to look at the airlock, running the numbers in her head.

Antimemetics Division staff, other than me: thirty-eight. Forty-two days until the next iteration. That's past the end of the year. It'll be too late. If I leave this room now, I will never be back. The plan I have now is the best plan there's ever going to be.

We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody.

*

Kim is so deeply buried in work at his terminal and the airlock is so quiet that he almost doesn't notice when it starts to cycle open again.

"We need to check you for notes," he begins, but then he sees that Marion Wheeler is curled up in the bottom of the narrow cylinder, panting as though she just finished a marathon run. Kim holds a hand out but she shakes her head, electing to stay lying down, knees bent up to her chest, sucking down lungfuls of air.

"What in the world happened in there?" Kim asks.

"Just need…" she gasps, "…to breathe. Be okay in a… second. Haaaaah. I think I blacked out for a moment, might have inhaled some. Haaaaah. I think I'm okay. I remember the plan."

Kim looks confused and worried for a second, then they replace him. "You shouldn't be able to remember anything… what did you do?"

"Hit my head," Wheeler says, then goes back to concentrating on breathing properly. She suddenly becomes acutely aware that Kim has her effectively cornered. Disliking this configuration for reasons which she's only gradually putting back together, she levers herself up to one shoulder and tries to stand. Kim puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes her back down.

"You look terrible," he says. "There's something inl fleth your neck. Do you see that?" He points at her throat, then taps the same spot on his own.

"What?"

"On your neck. I nefth hlai you've been infected by whatever was in there. We need to act quickly." He reaches for his keyring and unthreads a Swiss Army knife, and unfolds a short, gleaming blade. He does this in such a methodical, ordinary way that Wheeler almost forgets to react when he leans down towards her to cut her throat.

Almost. She grips his wrist. They're locked like that for a moment, a tableau. She looks into Paul Kim's eye, but it isn't his eye anymore. She squints, wondering if she's making eye contact with anything but a hole in space. She already feels the force bearing down on her own skull, trying to drill into it, but she knows its shape and that means she can hold out, maybe for a few minutes. She had hoped, prayed, that Kim would not succumb so quickly. And in a crazed little way she'd thought there would be at least a sign, a theatrical doubling-over as his mind was wrenched out of its socket.

Kim's wrist spasms as he tries to lunge with the knife. Wheeler parries and its tip glances off the airlock interior wall with a screech. They scuffle for an awkward second, then she boots Kim in the stomach with both feet, sending him sprawling in the antechamber. She launches out of the airlock, dives over him and sprints away from the containment unit.

She feels SCP-3125 following her as she runs, like a spotlight. She hears a crash in another part of the Site, as the first piece of ceiling caves in.

Concluded in `Your Last First Day`

Casefile for Simferopol

THIS DOCUMENT IS CLASSIFIED

RESTRICTED MERCURY

FILE CONTROL NO.: CDR-4396 #7
HANDLING OFFICE: DIRECTORATE OF TASK FORCES

WARNING

This document is intended for Task Force Mercury personnel eyes **ONLY**. It contains information considered to be sensitive to the security of the Foundation and its operations. Contents may not be disclosed without specific authorization from the Directorate of Task Forces.

All information concerning Task Force Mercury is **CLASSIFIED**, and restricted to personnel with either Restricted Mercury or Level 4 clearance. Discussion of any element of the constitution or operations of Task Force Mercury will be considered an information security breach, and perpetrators will be dealt with accordingly.

HANDLERS OF THIS DOCUMENT ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR:

- Entering on the form provided their name, ID, clearance, and the time and date of retrieval from the handling office,
- Exercising the necessary safeguards for the prevention of the inadvertent disclosure of the contents of this document,

- Storing this document as prescribed by Foundation security protocols,
- Transferring this document only to those who have received clearance from the handling office,
- Obtaining a receipt when relinquishing possession of this document.

Basic Foundation information security requirements are contained within document OMA-1219 (*CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS — SECURITY AND YOU*, Records and Information Security Administration 2008).

VIOLATION OF FOUNDATION SECURITY PROTOCOL WILL BE MET WITH PUNITIVE ACTIONS, UP TO AND INCLUDING:

- Revocation of all security clearances and handling privileges,
- Demotion,
- Termination of employment.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS MAY ONLY BE REPRODUCED WITH THE CONSENT OF THE HANDLING OFFICE

RESTRICTED MERCURY

ON SECURITY ASSURANCES

Welcoming the accession of Ukraine to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear and Para-scientific Weapons as a non-destructive-weapon State,

Taking into account the commitment of Ukraine to eliminate all nuclear and para-scientific weapons from its territory within a specified period of time,

Noting the changes in the world-wide security situation, including the end of the cold war, which have brought about conditions for deep reductions in nuclear and para-scientific forces,

Confirm the following:

1. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the principles of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine;

2. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America reaffirm their obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defence or otherwise in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations;

3. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine, in accordance with the principles of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind;

4. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America reaffirm their commitment to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance to Ukraine, as a State party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear and Para-scientific Weapons, if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression or an object of a threat of aggression in which nuclear or para-scientific weapons are used;

5. The Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America reaffirm, in the

case of Ukraine, their commitment not to use nuclear or para-scientific weapons against any State party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear and Para-scientific Weapons, except in the case of an attack on themselves, their territories or dependent territories, their armed forces, or their allies, by such a State in association or alliance with a nuclear / para-scientific State;

Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America Will consult in the event a situation arises that raises a question concerning these commitments.

This Memorandum will become applicable upon signature.

Signed in four copies having equal validity in the Ukrainian, English and Russian languages.

For Ukraine:
(Signed) Leonid D. KUCHMA

For the Russian Federation:
(Signed) Boris N. YELTSIN

For the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland:
(Signed) John MAJOR

For the United States of America:
(Signed) William J. CLINTON

RESTRICTED MERCURY

RESTRICTED MERCURY

LEASE OF MILITARY FACILITIES

& INSTALLATIONS

AGREEMENT

The agreement reached, being between Ukraine and the S.C.P. Foundation for the lease (subject to terms to be agreed upon by the two Parties) to the Foundation of military installations and facilities in Ukraine for para-scientific containment operations, is declared as follows:

Article I

Ukraine hereby leases to the S.C.P. Foundation, for the time required for the purposes of containment of para-scientific and preternatural phenomena, the following areas in Ukraine (refer to Addendas I - IV):

- Described facilities within the 13th Photogrammatic Center of the Central Military Topographic and Navigation Administration, Simferopol, Crimea (see Addendum I);

- Described facilities within Havryshivska airbase, Vinnytsia Oblast (see Addendum II);

- Described facilities within Bagarovo airbase, Crimea (see Addendum III);

- Described facilities within Chuhuiv airbase, Kharkiv Oblast (see Addendum IV);

- Shestovytsia airbase, Chernihiv Oblast;

- Konotop airbase, Sumy Oblast;

- Cherlyany airbase, Lviv Oblast.

Article II

The grant of the foregoing Article shall include the right to do any and all things necessary to fit the premises for use as para-scientific containment facilities or Foundation operating bases.

While the Foundation recognizes the sovereignty of the state of Ukraine, all areas described within the Article shall fall entirely within the jurisdiction of the Foundation, and, for the period agreed upon, are not to be considered the sovereign soil of Ukraine.

For Ukraine:
(Signed) Leonid D. KUCHMA

For the S.C.P. Foundation:
(Signed) Mansfield HART

RESTRICTED MERCURY

RESTRICTED MERCURY

INCIDENT REPORT

WT-0323

2014/03/18

LOCATION: SITE-991 (SIMFEROPOL, CRIMEA)

ANOMALIES INVOLVED:

- SCP- **[SAFE]**,
- SCP- **[SAFE]**,
- SCP- **[SAFE]**,
- SCP- **[EUCLID]**,
- SCP- **[SAFE]**,

- (,),
- Various uncatalogued acquisitions.

On Thurs. 18 March, unidentified forces approached the Ukrainian Army 13th Photogrammatry Center and SITE-991 at approx 15:00 local time in two (2) unmarked URAL-4320 trucks flying Russian Federation flags. Fifteen (15) masked gunmen disembarked from the vehicles and approached the gate to the facility, demanding entrance. Ukrainian servicemen denied the gunmen entrance to the compound and demanded identification.

The gunmen identified themselves as self-defense forces of the Republic of Crimea and demanded full surrender of the base and the persons therein. The Ukrainian servicemen again declined to admit the individuals into the compound; both parties, respectively, assumed threatening postures.

, , self-defense militiaman, began scaling the perimeter fence. Ukrainian servicemen stated and re-iterated that trespassers on military premises would be shot. continued to scale the fence. , , stationed on a watchtower overlooking the fence, opened fire with an automatic rifle, to fatal injury. was then shot (also fatally).

Both parties began to allege the responsibility of the other for the incident. Ukrainian servicemen — while monitoring the militiamen closely — withdrew, barricading themselves within the installation. The militiamen scaled the fence, opened the gate, and took up firing positions in the construction site opposite the installation.

AGENTS , , & , having heard gunfire, proceeded to contact FOUNDATION OPERATIONAL CONTROL EASTERN EUROPE (FOCEE) via phone-line, and, under FOCEE recommendation, quit SITE-991 and began negotiations with the militiamen. Identifying themselves as Ukrainian servicemen (in accordance with Foundation security protocol), the respective agents surrendered their sidearms and granted the militamen access to SITE-991. The agents stressed de-escalation.

Special Recovery Team investigating uncontained SCP-
memetic action.

[CONFIDENTIAL LEVEL 5]

An unmarked jeep of the UAZ-469 type arrived on site approx. 16:30 local time; four (4) individuals in Berkut special police uniform, wielding AS Val assault-rifles and one (1) VSS Vintorez sniper-rifle, disembarked from the vehicle. These individuals identified themselves to AGENT as FSB DIVISION P, SPECIAL RECOVERY TEAM . The team began removing computer hard drives and external harddrives, acquisition containment cells,
. .

[CONFIDENTIAL LEVEL 5]

AGENTS , , & were detained, restrained and blindfolded, forced into the vehicle, and transported approx. miles from SITE-991, where they were transferred to a helicopter, in which they were appropriated to , and subjected to an expanded interrogation.

FOCEE containment group continuing classification operation 2014/03/19.

A FOCEE containment group arrived on-site at approx. 17:45 local time, and began a classification operation. .
. The Ukrainian servicemen - barricaded in the second story of the nautical building - surrendered following the application of aural memetics. Amnestics were distributed on-site.

[CONFIDENTIAL LEVEL 5]

AGENTS , , & were returned to the Foundation on **2014/03/26**, released from DIVISION P custody at approx 13:00 local time. All three agents have received two months of paid leave

and $, USD as compensation. The FSB has declined to return anomalies , , , , , or , however, it has issued a formal apology.

Signed, Agents , , &

Signed, Director

RESTRICTED MERCURY

Cassandra

Black Queen Gnosis speaking.

Black Queen Persephone here.

I'm Black Queen Elbereth.

yes… this will prove useful! I am Black Queen, Mistress of Serpents!

I can call myself Black Queen Mongoose.

Baseline

Cassandra is typically a human who exists as a piece of artwork, and is able to enter other visual media.

Prerequisites

Invention of paper and drawing, with few exceptions. Earth metaphysics compatible with either autonomous fictional life or fictonauts (with exception of rare nonsentient instances)

Utility

Usually a competent fictonaut, although limited to visual media. Those that manipulate paper are often useful in combat, with low durability but high stealth capability. Surprisingly unknown to the Library thus far, thanks to the Foundation.

Vulnerability

Can be injured through symbols; can be disabled through damaging her surface. Often unusually attached to the Foundation for an inmate, and/or to other fictonauts he or she has been paired with.

Instance: Timeline A-130.

Free. I met her in Seurat's painting *A Sunday Evening on the Island of La Grande Jatte* while searching it for a Porridgemonger. She waved at me and then continued on fishing.

Instance: Timeline B-173.

In Foundation custody. Refers to herself as Cassy. Simple ink sketch. Treated relatively fairly, by this Foundation's standards, and is given amenities in the form of symbols of luxury items.

Instance: Timeline B-025. A-025.

Deceased. When I mobilized an Insurgency, I convinced him that his loyalties stood with the "real" Foundation, not the haughty Glieseans. He hid on the Pacific Regional Director's bookshelf and slashed the man's wrists from inside an Audubon guide. He was incinerated, but the power vacuum he left was instrumental in making the Foundation collapse.

Instance: Timeline B-074.

Working openly with the Foundation. Refers to herself as Papercut. Possess paper manipulation abilities that extend within line of sight. Believes herself to be the crime-fighting medical practitioner Nurse Cosmic from Timeline B-075; is actually a sentient panel from a comic book about Nurse Cosmic. It's complicated. Currently cooperating with the Foundation with the anomalous youth outreach program Omega 7.
This deluded doodle has been a thorn in my side for far too long. I can't wait to rub her out, along with the rest of the Omega 7. Then I can finally bring forth my Ebon Legion and DECIMATE the Foundation!

Instance: Timeline B-086.

Free. A version generates whenever a recording is played of A-Ha's "Take On Me", which doesn't exist in this universe. Highly useful but difficult to come by because the Foundation here has banned anything even resembling 80s pop and this universe only has Betamax players.

Instance: Timeline B-089.

Believed to be in Foundation custody. I asked an informant with the Hand about her status, and he started talking about a prophet named Jeremiah the Flayed. I won't record most of the information he relayed because it was mostly aimless rambling that ended in "… and that's why it's prohibited to draw Muhammad."

Instance: Timeline C-095.

Non-sentient, named Cassy. Character in the Super Comics Publications comic book "Unreal Adventures", an ongoing educational series in which she and her partner Fred travel through famous historical works of art and writing.
Who has a catalog for Fred? I need that for something I have going on with a patron.
Be careful. There's a Timeline A-095 and you don't want any copies from that timeline getting near other books or drawings.

Instance: Timeline B-214.

In Foundation custody. Refers to herself by her SCP designation, Zulu Hotel Echo. She's capable of paper manipulation limited to the surface her form is touching and uses this to walk in a corporal body. My informant claims she has some combat training.
Encountered me recovering a father. I stabbed her with a symbol of a knife, and didn't stop to check her vitals. She's scrappy, but probably deceased.
Indeed… this "Zulu" sounds useful. I shall find her. I shall place upon her The Cloak Of The Crimson Constrictor, and she shall be my Black Mamba Knight, and together we will shred Omega 7 like

last year's insurance forms! Ahahaha!
Can we revoke this one's catalog privileges?

Cast On

The needles were bamboo, six inches or so in length, streaks of rainbow stain running down their length. The yarn was Angora wool, pure white. She had seen a skein in a local craft shop and studied it; this one in front of her was purer, whiter, superior in every regard.

She inhaled deeply, exhaled. She began the home row, wrapping, threading, wrapping, threading. She inhaled deeply, exhaled. Wrap, thread.

The Headache dimmed, ever so slightly. It was a proper noun at this point. The headache began on a Sunday afternoon, remained through the evening, and she felt it still the next morning. That was thirteen years ago. Her…condition rendered painkillers unusable; anything that could impair her judgment could expose her. She couldn't let her guard down. She could never let her guard down.

Inhale, exhale. Wrap, thread. Eighty-eight stitches on the home row, then she inserted her free needle into the loop nearest the end of the needle. The Headache dimmed ever so slightly more. Josephine smiled, knitting and purling down the row. She didn't have much interest in the end result, an end pillow for a love seat, but the point was the repetition. The relaxation. An audiotape of Pachebel's Canon in D played in the background, and the headache dimmed further.

"I hardly see the point of further discussion," the old man said. smirking. The smirk was always there. "You never seem to unearth anything new."

"You claim you're here voluntarily," the researcher said. "If you're so annoyed by our line of questioning, you can simply leave, can't you?"

"That would be remarkably impolite, I feel," the man said. "I simply

think you're not having an adequate amount of fun with this."

"Fun?" the researcher asked. "SCP-343, this is my job. My job is to make new discoveries into beings such as yourself, and there is no part of you inclined to help me. You would be more than happy to lead me on a wild goose chase of contradiction and invention until my superiors sent me to a microbiology lab in the Arctic Circle."

The old man paused for the first time in their conversation. "That was remarkably forthright, Dr. Castile. I admire forthrightness. I see so little of it from individuals such as yourself, researchers, bureaucrats. Very well, I'll tell you a secret. I'll tell you something I haven't told any of your people before. Lean close, Richard."

The researcher, taken aback for a moment, leaned his head close to the other man in the room. The old man across the table leaned close as well.

"Richard, I have no idea how I got here."

Josephine was well into her third row of the pillow when she realized the headache had almost completely faded away. She was amazed. It had been literally years since she had felt so at peace. She had a list, a very, very long list of ways she had tried to find relaxation, tried to find peace, from her burdens. Her burdens never ended. *So many enemies,* Josephine had thought (she would not let those thoughts get in the way of her knitting). *So much work to be done, all the time.* Josephine felt the throbbing intensify momentarily, then fade again. Her hands bobbed forward, caught the yarn, pulled backward, and formed the next stitch. One step at a time. Each motion deliberate, yet inevitable. Each step optional, yet destined.

The headache was gone. She felt so much relief; she had been so burdened, burdened with the work of evading the Beast. That was her name for those so-called "scientists", those animals that hunted beings that were different than they were. Her Inquisition. Her witch hunters. On days when she questioned herself, days when she doubted herself, she wondered if she really was a witch. Something unnatural. Something that needed to be confined.

The yarn was perfect, floating in the air in front of her. The skein unraveled itself, feeding inch after inch, foot after foot into her handiwork. She had seen a skein in a local craft shop and studied it. She had created this one from pure thought, pure imagination; she had vibrated quantum foam and Platonic form and rearranged molecules and humors and atoms into something new, something that had never existed in the universe before. This was what she did. This was what God or nature made her to do, and she would do it. The headache returned for a moment, then passed as she began a new row.

"You don't know why you're here?" Researcher Castile asked. "You're God, you're here of your own will, but you don't remember doing it?"

"Did you…I mean, that isn't…I lied, child," the old man, SCP-343, said to the other in the room. "It is tricks, games. I play with you, as I always have." The old man's eyes stopped tracking the researcher in front of him. "I am here and God and always will- -be here- -lied, child, it is tricks- -" The old man jerked forward suddenly, ramming his head against the top of the table. His arms hung limply by his sides as he rammed his head against the table again.

"What are you—"

"Gerald Clifton, Cleveland, Ohio," the old man slurred through a broken nose and several broken teeth, blood streaming from a gash in his forehead. "I was born in 1912, please. Let me die. I feel it controlling me. She controls me. She'll come back any minute."

"What are you talking about?"

"It isn't me talking. When you talk to me. 'God' is what it wants you to see me as. It watches you. It sits inside me and makes me talk. Kill me. Let me die. It will come back for me, it will lie to you again." The old man seemed his age for the first time that Researcher Castile could recall. Seemed…human. Seemed normal.

"You're being controlled by an external force? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Let me die," the old man pleaded, tears streaming down his face, blood dripping into his eyes. "Let me die free, please."

Josephine neared the end of her sixth row when she realized something was amiss. The headache had left her, but it pulsed ever so slightly as she paused. *Too relaxed,* she thought. *I let go of one of them.*

She closed her eyes and her mind left the room, the house, the area code that her body inhabited. It traveled from one predetermined location to another, isolated location. They would have been impossible to find if she didn't know exactly what she was looking for. The people who had built prisons on those locations had designed them to be impossible to find. She checked containment chambers across half a dozen Sites before she found what she was looking for at Site 17. *Gerald,* she thought. *I'm so sorry I needed to use you.*

She concentrated further and found herself in the same room- -

---

Researcher Castile was furiously scribbling notes. "Gerald, how long have you been controlled by this entity?"

"I have no idea," the still-sobbing old man replied. "So long. Most of my life. She put me here. She wanted you to find me. She wanted you to catch me. She watches me, and watches you through me. She needs spies. She knows what you would do to her. She fears you. So many others. She's so old, at least a century, maybe closer to two. She's so tired."

Castile perked at this. "More? Other beings controlled by the same entity?"

"Many," the old man replied. "I can tell you at least that- -" The old man stopped talking suddenly, his eyes closing, his head sagging downward.

His head rose, his eyes locking on Researcher Castile, and Richard knew he was looking at someone different. Something different.

"So smart," said the voice coming from the old man's mouth, contempt dripping from each word. "So lucky. Such a breakthrough. Such a promotion," the voice said. "I bet you can already see the commendation."

"Am I speaking to—" A flash of light blasted across the table. Castile tried to speak, heard only croaks; he had been rendered mute.

"So lucky," the voice repeated, the air in the room seeming to circulate faster around the old man. "How lucky are you now? Think you're so smart. Hunting. Think you're such a good hunter. Think you're all such good hunters. Worthless. God, so worthless." The old man did not rise; rather, the chair he sat in seemed to melt into the air, the table rolled forward without effort, and the old man suddenly was standing at his full height.

"Think you caught God. You caught a drifter, fool. Think you're studying God. God studies you, you fool. You child. I study you. Every cruelty. Every injustice. Think you can catch me."

"Wh….what are…" Castile croaked.

"Forget it," the old man's voice said, and Castile forgot. The notes he had written disappeared, graphite pulling off of the page and reforming on the pencil. Another chair materialized behind the old man, and the old man's form sat within. Castile felt something… missing, felt something leaving him. Felt something *gone.*

The feeling lasted only a moment, then he began. Nothing unusual here for Castile; just another SCP, another containment test. Just a moment of discomfort, nothing more. Foundation researchers felt that uneasy feeling all the time. Nothing unusual here.

"Okay, beginning interaction with SCP-343," Castile said, looking at the smirk on SCP-343's face. The smirk that was always there.

The headache returned as Josephine returned to her body. *Stupid girl,* she thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Almost gave it all away. Almost let them find you.* She forced herself to focus on the headache, make it stronger. *You deserve this. Stupid girl.*

Throbbing, blinding pain drilled through her head. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

She was floating fully in the air now, and the pain in her head bloomed brighter until she screamed. A bright flash of light. She opened her eyes and looked around. Her anger faded into shame. She reconstituted some clothing around herself and disappeared.

MEMORANDUM
LEVEL 5 CLEARANCE ONLY
CODEWORD: "GREEN KING"

FROM: OPERATIVE AMBER
TO: OPERATIVE MAGNUS

TWO MORE EVENTS DISCOVERED. INTERVIEW BETWEEN SITE 17 RESEARCHER AND **SCP-343**. VIDEO ATTACHED. RESEARCHER WAS COMPLETELY AMNESTIZED BEYOND ANY KNOWN CHEMICAL METHODS; MRI SUGGESTED CHEMICAL PATHWAYS AND NEURAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEMORIES WAS LITERALLY REVERSED AND ELIMINATED. COVERT VIDEO SURVEILLANCE OF SCP-343 AS PER "GREEN KING" PROJECT ALLOWED FOR RECOVERY. INTERVIEW ENDED AT 1523 HOURS ON 11/02/13.

KEYHOLE SATELLITES DETECTED AN ENERGY SURGE IN AN ISOLATED AREA OF SONORA DESERT AT 1525 HOURS. RESULTING CRATER RESEMBLED THERMOBARIC WARHEAD DETONATION SITE.

ANALYSIS ONGOING.

AMBER

Castling By Hand

A nonsensical amount of distance away from home, across an infinifold interuniversal membrane, in an n1-deviated Earth where a series of assassinations had torn apart the United States in bloody revolution, the Foundation still stood. The Foundation still endured. Site 19 still stood in defiance of all sociopolitical and architectural logic. The fluorescent light in the Floor 2 break room still flickered and buzzed.

It would drive the Black Queen mad, if that idea still had any meaning to her.

The Black Queen had seen that light when she was here last, back in her own Earth. Julia Bitterfield had seen it, too. In fact, Dr. Bitterfield may have passed out to that buzzing, audible through the door to the supply closet, where the Black Queen had administered the taserspike.

A more careful Black Queen would have lurked for her target outside of the facility, instead of infiltrating on memory of another timeline. A less cavalier Black Queen might have trusted only her own equipment to disable the target instead of being lured by the charms of the taserspike, a universe-native innovation, a precision instrument which incapacitated for hours if you targeted the proper anatomical locations. This Black Queen was none such Black Queens, and she wore the badge to prove it. Site 19, Level 3 Access, Julia Bitterfield, Engineering.

She took Julia's coat and glasses as well. The unconscious body would be discovered before long (a wiser Black Queen wouldn't have, and so on) but it pleased her to have a time constraint. It kept her focused.

The Black Queen, wearing Julia as she was, took a shuttle cart into the engineering wing. The antiseptic smell of the facility was tinged with ozone and copper. Scent memory… and then she thought of

the sleeping body of Miss Bitterfield, soon enough to recognize the door she needed.

There was one researcher inside the lab. He was flabby and bald, and his mouth had settled into a slight scowl more out of gravity than any internal factors.

The Black Queen spoke. "Doctor Gears?"

The man she addressed turned around. "Yes?"

"I need you to come with me."

"Show me the form, researcher. I can't leave this project unattended without the express orders of the Site Director."

The Black Queen knew this would be the response. There would be a problem if it hadn't been. She approached him, and took hold of something in her pocket. Then she reached an arm around to draw him close. The other hand administered the taserspike.

"Sorry, father." She hefted him over her shoulder. "I didn't give myself time to convince you."

The Black Queen was fiddling with a space heater when the father Gears stirred into awareness. "What did you just do?"

"I've hidden us in the city." The Black Queen was examining the dome-shaped apparatus, another work of native design. "Getting out wasn't easy. My wall-slider implant doesn't accept passengers, and the shuttle cart didn't last long beyond the security gate. Too many bullet holes. I carried you the rest of the way."

"I don't understand this." Doctor Gears glanced toward the window; the tattered blinds were drawn, but he could tell that it was evening.

"We're hidden in this apartment because I thought it'd be relatively difficult to find us. Normally we'd be trapped if the task force did close in on our location, but I have something to deal with that." The Black Queen had figured out that the packs of what looked like glow-sticks were disposable batteries. She snapped the tab on one and

slid it into the flat side of the plastic dome.

"You seem to be deliberately missing the point. I'm asking about your motive."

The Black Queen flipped the dome over and laid it onto the bare floor. Then, for the first time since he woke, she looked up from it toward her captive. "I'm Doctor Gears's… I'm your daughter."

"No, you aren't."

"How do…" The Black Queen filed that question away. "I spent years looking for my father. And when I found him, he was… lost to me. Lost forever. And that loss snapped me back to my senses. I realized I had no connection to the world anymore. So… I left." She gave a sweep of her hand to add emphasis to this statement. "I found this Earth. I saw that this Earth had a Foundation, so it must have you." She pressed a switch on the dome. Internal coils began to glow orange; warmth spread out into the room. "I've earned a second chance."

Doctor Gears was silent for a moment. Then he adjusted his glasses. "Tell me more."

They spoke together after that. The conversation might have lasted an hour; the Black Queen didn't keep time. He asked her to describe the method by which she had traveled from one universe to another. But the Black Queen was more concerned with describing her childhood with an analogue of him: details of sights and sounds and emotions. She wanted to find some common ground between her father and this one. She evaluated this man that shared her father's design, checking for authenticity.

Ignoring his logistical questions, she began to ask about the doctor's life. He provided answers: his life was much like the life of her father's, except where the deviations in history bent his trajectory here and there. He had a daughter, but he hadn't seen her since he began work for the Foundation. He didn't know whether or not she was alive. The matter hadn't crossed his mind in years.

He began to ask her about herself in the present, and she gave up

this information. She told him of the work she had done in wresting various items of great value and power from the Foundation after what they had done to her father. Some of these she had used as leverage to gain connections and influence; some of these she had bartered away to a private firm in exchange for passage on a secret road leading out from the world; some of these she had made into parts of her, so that she would be sure to survive the journey. He followed along carefully. The Black Queen felt like a mechanism being studied. Maybe that was his version of affection now.

After all this was shared between them, Doctor Gears removed his glasses (this one wore glasses, it turned out) and rubbed his eyes, as if they were strained from… hours? with only the heater as a light source.

The Black Queen noticed. "You're tired, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so. When was the last time you ate?"

"It's been… since morning, actually." The Black Queen was astonished to wonder if he was thinking about her needs. "I think there was a vending machine downstairs. It probably hasn't been stocked in six years, but maybe there's something in it that's lasted that long. I can check…"

"That sounds like a good idea."

The Black Queen took his hand to pull him up to a standing position. She handcuffed him to a pipe, disappointed in herself for forgetting to do so before now. Then she slid through the door.

From the hall, she surveyed the streets in front of and behind the apartment building. She saw nothing resembling a threat—and her eyes had a large field of view. So she descended.

Something about the night's events had generated a crawling sensation at the back of her neck. The strangeness of it bothered her while she crossed the stairs. Eventually she realized it was a neurological condition she'd thought had subsided long ago: a conscience. This wasn't her father, as congruent as he might be. Could she let him pass as her father? And what of his daughter?

Somewhere there was a woman like her, perhaps searching for this man for the same reasons.

Or perhaps her body had been burned away after elimination by whatever remains of the Occult Coalition. Who could say?

The Black Queen surveyed the provisions available. It seemed that potato chips had never occurred to this society, for all their wartime advances; the grimy vending machine was stocked with packets of roasted, dried seaweed in an assortment of flavors. The Black Queen wrapped her hand in the sack she'd taken along. Then she punched through the glass and filled the bag with packets.

There was a man with her father's face and voice up there waiting for her. Wasn't that what she tore two Foundations open to find? He didn't raise her, but… he was so close to the one who did. She could open the pathway and take them to a world less beaten-up than this one where nobody could find them. It would be a fresh start.

All she had to do was call him "dad".

The Black Queen entered the abandoned apartment once again. Doctor Gears hadn't moved from where she'd placed him. "I brought dinner."

"I can't eat like this."

The Black Queen set the preserved snacks on the floor and unfastened his handcuffs. His arms fell to his sides. "Help yourself to dinner." She pulled out a packet of sea-salt roasted kelp, then looked back up to him.

There was a momentary silence. Gears had that scrutinizing glare again. The Black Queen suspected that he had thought the same things she had, when she'd left him alone.

Then he spoke. "Actually, could you come here for a second?" Doctor Gears stretched out an arm. "I need to do this right now, if you'll comply." It was such an awkward way to ask for an embrace.

The Black Queen hesitated. The crawling sensation on her neck had

been replaced with a much more familiar feeling: the jolt of her danger instinct. This felt all wrong.

The doctor watched her halt, and slowly lowered his arm. "Perhaps later, then."

The guilt came back again. The Black Queen saw him reaching out, and then saw herself reacting to the intensity of it. She was giving in to fear. No Black Queen could ever let herself give into fear. So she approached him.

He carefully wrapped an arm around her. For one quiet moment, it was everything that she had expected it to be, and everything she had worked for.

Gears's taserspike dug into the base of her spinal cord. He only released the grip when she crumpled on the ground. The air smelled of ozone and burnt plastic. Gears looked upward at an indicator on his lenses. "Glasses, cease recording." The indicator changed from red to green.

It was eleven minutes and fifteen seconds, by Gears's count, between the subdual and the arrival of the task force. The door was open, the subject still unresponsive. They collected her in a field chamber as Gears looked on. An agent asked if he was alright; Gears said she'd never hurt him. All he had to do was distract her long enough to make the call without interference.

The post-recovery processes were longer and handled by more personnel than was necessary, so the matter was now out of the doctor's hands. Even so, as he watched them cart the subject away, the containment procedures began to form in his mind for SCP-AATR, or informally, The Extrauniversal Woman.

Cat In A Box

Alan stumbled through the doorway, tripped, and fell into the foyer on his side.

"Shit! My fucking back!"

The door slammed behind him and whatever dim light peeking through was quickly snuffed. Alan's ragged breath was stunted by his lungs breathing the choking particulate within the house. Everything was covered in a half inch layer of the fluffy grey dust. Not as coarse as ash and not as fine as flour, somewhere in between. The air stunk like an old Tupperware container to boot.

"The hell is this place?" Alan gripped a coat rack to steady himself up onto his feet while rubbing his sore left flank. First thing he tried was the light switch on the wall, which of course was dead. Not surprising at all to Alan.

«D-3454, do you copy?»

Alan jumped at the noise before realizing it was the radio on his hip. He didn't remember being given that, but that was the least of his concern right now. He responded to the scratchy voice.

"Yeah?"

«Proceed into the building and report your observation. Instructions will follow.»

"Okay, but it's fucking dark in here. Can't see shit." Alan looked down at his arm to notice he was wearing a very plain looking Casio-ish watch with no buttons. It wasn't keeping time, but was in stopwatch mode. Only 22 seconds were recorded so far.

«You've been given a small flashlight as well. Should be attached to the radio.»

Alan fumbled with the small keychain sized flashlight affixed to the side of the radio. With a click the bright LED lit up the foyer and the short empty hallway ahead. A small end table could be seen with a handgun sitting idly on top of the dust layer, as if it was just placed there.

«D-3454, can you proceed?»

"Y-yeah. I can."

«Good. Continue through the building and report.»

Alan walked over to the gun.

Take the gun. (1.1)
Leave the gun. (1.2)

► Open 1.1

Alan picked up the gun. It was heavy. It was familiar. It was loaded. He sighed as he tucked it away and continued on.

Inside it was more of the same. But at least he could figure out that it was some kind of living room. After a few steps in, an open room began to take shape. Couches. Tables. A CRT TV with the VCR built in. Nothing looked particularly ancient except the dust layer. On the couch cushions, there was clearly an area that had been brushed off. As if someone wanted a clean place to lie down.

«D-3454, report?»

"I- I think someone has been here."

«You have visual confirmation of the entity?»

"Entity?"

«Do you see anyone?»

"N-no."

A hand gripped Alan's shoulder.

"FUCK!"

As he spun around he fumbled for the gun. It took a full second to get it out in front of him, but he managed. With a finger on the trigger he pointed it at the figure.

Shoot. (1.3)
Don't Shoot. (1.4)

► Open 1.2

Alan looked at it. Then shook his head. It was obvious that it was placed there, purposely and recently. Alan was not a very trusting individual.

"Don't think so."

Inside it was more of the same. But at least he could figure out that it was some kind of living room. After a few steps in, an open room began to take shape. Couches. Tables. A CRT TV with the VCR built in. Nothing looked particularly ancient except the dust layer. On the couch cushions, there was clearly an area that had been brushed off. As if someone wanted a clean place to lie down.

«D-3454, report?»

"I- I think someone has been here."

«You have visual confirmation of the entity?»

"Entity?"

«Do you see anyone?»

"N-no."

A hand gripped Alan's shoulder.

"FUCK!"

As he spun around he dove behind the large couch in an attempt to create some distance. Alan was pretty sure he could make it back to the entrance. He just wasn't sure if he should. Quickly he nabbed a metal lamp and poised to swing at whatever it was.

"Keep away!"

Run. (1.5)
Fight back. (1.6)
Stand ground. (1.7)

► Open 1.3

POP

The shadowy figure advanced still. "Don't waste your time, Alan." Its voice was human for sure.

Alan let two more shots ring out. "STAY BACK!" With his free hand, Alan grasped his small flashlight to see. It was a man. Lanky, bearded… in a D-class jumpsuit as well. Alan briefly thought about his shots, if it was possible to miss all three of them at this range. Suddenly and very swiftly, the man nabbed Alan's gun right out of his hand.

"Alan, just calm the fuck down!"

"WHO—"

"Just another like you, Alan. I heard you enter. Didn't mean to startle you. Just tell me what you remember before entering."

"What?!? N-no. Who are you?"

«D-3454. We heard gunshots. Can you confirm?»

Alan, still not trusting the figure, gripped his radio to respond.

"There… there's something here and—"

"No! Don't talk to him. You have to trust me, Alan."

«Say again, D-3454?»

Answer radio. (2.1)
Don't answer radio. (2.2)

► Open 1.4

"What are you!" Alan emphasized each syllable.

The figure stepped closer with its hands open. It was a man. Lanky, bearded… in a D-class jumpsuit as well.

"Alan, calm down."

"WHO—"

The man snatched his gun right out of his hand before Alan could snap out of his shocked state. "Just another like you, Alan. Not here to harm you. I heard you enter. Just tell me what you remember before entering."

"What?!? N-no. Who are you?"

The man casually approached. "Not entirely sure. But the name on my jumpsuit is the same as yours. So's the number. Look."

Alan looked and sure enough, it was.

Continue (2.2)

► Open 1.5

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck!" Alan vaulted over the couch and coffee table to reach the door. The figure sighed in disappointment as it watched Alan scramble back to the

entrance like a child.

"Here we go again." It moaned.

Alan in his panic, opened the door where he just came from and lost his balance, tripping through it.

Click to start over. (Ø)

► Open 1.6

"AAAAAAH!"

Alan was not going to give it a chance, he swung at the figure hard… real fucking hard.

WUMP

There was a wet thud as the metal lamp made contact with a softer head. Then a second thud as the limp body collapsed onto the floor. Dust started to settle in the silence as Alan stood over the body. After a good ten seconds, he was sure that whatever it was was not getting up again. With his light, he illuminated the body.

He gasped.

It was a man. Beard, lanky, and in a similar… no… exactly the same orange jumpsuit.

"Alan. D-3454." He said in a shaky voice as he read the words on the clothes. That was his name. That was *his* number.

«D-3454, we heard screaming. Can you confirm?»

"I— That was me. What the shit is this? I just killed something wearing my clothes."

«You killed it? You sure?»

Alan nudged the head with his foot. The blood pouring

out of the nose was probably enough of an indicator.

«D-3454?»

Continue (2.3)

► Open 1.7

"What are you!" Alan swung the lamp through the empty air, leaving a comet trail of dust in the dark.

The figure stepped closer with its hands open. It was a man. Lanky, bearded… in a D-class jumpsuit as well.

"Alan, calm down."

"WHO—"

"Just another like you, Alan. I heard you enter. Didn't mean to startle you at all. Just tell me what you remember before entering."

"What?!? N-no. Who are you?"

The man put his hands down. "I don't know. But the name on my jumpsuit is the same as yours. So's the number. Put the lamp down."

Alan slowly lowered the lamp, then tossed it at his feet in the dust covered carpet and took a step toward him.

Continue (2.2)

► Open 2.1

Alan held the radio up to his face and pressed the button to talk. The other man just shook his head.

"Look, I'm getting fucking freaked out here. There's a guy here. Just tell me what the fuck is going on."

«D-3454, you are very likely hallucinating. I need you to focus here.»

Alan turned his back to regain his bearings. "What are you saying? This is all in my head?"

«Can you still see the man?»

Alan blinked a few times and looked. It was gone. "Shit! Where did he go!?"

«D-3454, if you want to get through this you need to be level-headed.»

Alan felt nauseous. He never experienced anything like this. But as long as the radio batteries held out, he felt like he could keep it together.

"Alright. I'm listening. Just… just tell me what's next."

«Standby.»

Continue (2.4)

► Open 2.2

The man handed Alan the gun. "Look, you need more convincing? Watch this."

Alan confusingly took the gun and tucked it away. The man then unclipped a radio from his own hip. "Give me your battery real quick."

Alan complied silently. They were the same model radios, which meant they took the same kind of battery pack. The man plugged it in and then pressed the button to talk.

"This is D-3454. Can you still hear me?"

«Loud and clear, D-3454. I need an update.»

"See?" The man handed the battery pack back. "We're on the same team here. You good?"

Alan nodded. "Are… are you me?"

"No. Well. Let's just keep that at no for now. I think the real answer is too complicated. But answer my previous question, what do you remember before coming here."

Alan opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. He *couldn't* remember. He couldn't remember *anything.* "I… I can't."

"Yeah. Thought so." The man reached over the couch to grab the TV remote. He popped open the back and took the AAA batteries. Then shoved them into a small flashlight, not all that dissimilar to Alan's flashlight. He clicked it on and smiled that the LED still worked. "This place is… funny."

"Yeah. I get that." Alan ran his fingers through his hair. "How long you been here?"

"I don't think about that. I just keep moving." The man hustled toward the entrance and opened the door, swinging it towards him. Lifting up a sleeve, he revealed several Casio-ish stop watches along his forearm. All of which with different times and varying signs of damage. He inspected each digital number methodically. "You ready to go? We're close."

Ready. (2.6)
Refuse. (2.7)

► Open 2.3

Alan held the radio up to his face and pressed the button to talk.

"Look, I'm getting fucking freaked out here. It's dead, alright? Just tell me what the fuck is going on."

«D-3454, you are very likely hallucinating. I need you to focus here.»

Alan turned his back to regain his bearings. "What are you saying? This is all in my head?"

«Can you still see the body?»

Alan blinked a few times and looked. There was nothing. "Shit! Where did he go!?"

«D-3454, it was never there. If you want to get through this you need to be level-headed.»

Alan felt nauseous. He never experienced anything like this. But as long as the radio batteries held out, he felt like he could maintain.

"Alright. I'm listening. Just… just tell me what's next."

«Standby.»

"Damn it!" The man stumbled through the door and slammed it behind him. He was dead just ten seconds ago. "I'll tell ya, you've shot me I don't know how many times, but it's the first time I think you've pegged me with that lamp. Fuck me that hurt." He didn't have a scratch on him.

Alan shrank back against the wall. "You aren't real. You're just in my head. Get out of my head!"

"That's what the radio said? Figures."

"What do you want?!" Alan shrilled. Not intentionally, but that's the way it came out.

"I think it'd be easier if we just tried this again." The man pointed a gun at Alan, and shot him in the head.

POP

Click to start over. (Ø)

► Open 2.4

«You still there?»

Alan nodded and leaned against the dusty couch in the stale living room. "Yes."

«Listen carefully, you need to reach our extraction point. But to do so, you need to understand that this space is anomalous.»

"Really?" Alan said sarcastically. "So how do I get to you? Can't I just walk out?"

«No. Not unless you open the door towards you. This is important. If you open the door away from you and step through, it resets the loop and you. You'll forget everything.»

"Wait, what loop?" Alan stood up straight to mull over those words. He had to spend a few seconds to process exactly what that meant.

«This is a temporal time loop. An unstable one at that. I can't tell you anymore information. Do as I say, but you will need to enter the door exactly when I say.»

Alan pinched the bridge of his nose. This was giving him a headache and his nerves were not helping. "Fine. You want me to wait by the door now?"

«That's fine. Wait there and standby.»

"Alan." The man poked out from around the corner. "Don't be hasty."

"Fuck off, man!" Alan stomped towards the door. "You're not real and I'm leaving." The man grabbed Alan by the collar and grabbed the gun from him, then pressed it right under his jaw. "Stop. Think. This is a fucking game and you're being played. You can either wait to figure that out when it's too late." The man let Alan go and gave the gun back. "Or you can follow me out of here."

«D-3454, five seconds. Be ready.»

"Your choice."

Alan placed a hand on the door knob. He gripped it tight as his mind ran with a thousand different thoughts.

«Ok, enter… now!»

Stay. (2.5)
Enter. (2.8)

► Open 2.5

«D-3454? D-3454, did you go through? D—»

Alan turned the volume down on the radio.

"Finally. Okay, step out of the way. We'll go when I say." The man lifted up a sleeve to reveal several Casio-ish stop watches along his forearm. All of which with different times and varying signs of damage. "We're close. Just get ready."

"How do you know all this stuff?" The man looked at Alan and rolled his eyes. "I know because I have to."

Alan rubbed his temples. "You're probably annoyed with questions by now."

"I am. Okay here we go. Stay right on my tail. Now!"

Continue. (2.6)

► Open 2.6

Alan and the man enter the door as quick as they can. It was the same. Exactly the same as where they just were. There was less dust, more footprints, and the coffee table was full of bottled water. "Where did you get the bottled water?"

"Fridge. Well. *Fridges*. Help yourself."

Alan grabbed on and downed it. He looked around, the man was collecting. He was collecting to survive. Flashlights, batteries, bullets. "Where did you get it all?"

The man plopped onto the couch and opened a water for himself. "Instead of answering that question lets focus on getting you out. Yeah?"

"Sure." Alan put his empty bottle back on the table.

"You gotta." The man makes a gun with his fingers. "Off yerself."

Alan blinked a few times. "What? Why?"

The man took another swig. "You're stuck in a timeloop. And to answer a previous question, yes, I think I am you. And I think you are me. Come to think of it, it might have been another you that asked me that. I can't keep track."

"But won't I… ya know… die?"

"Nah. You'll just reset back into your own timeline. We aren't in any timeline. We're somewhere in between… stuck… I think. The Foundation pricks don't really know how it works. I don't know how it works. It just is. And I stay behind to help all the other *me* get back so we can have a future."

"What happens when you die?"

"Hopefully I convince me to stay behind and continue doing this… like when I convinced myself before. Now here we are talking to you. Or… something like that. You get it, man."

He sipped the last bit of water out of the bottle. "Only two ways outta here. Die by your own hand, or slowly by time. Every other way is just another fucking loop."

Alan gripped the hand gun and turns the safety off. "You're sure?"

«static»

"Yeah. Trust me. I don't have any reason to lie to myself. Just make it count on the outside."

Alan nodded and looked back at the gun. Then looked up at the man.

Kill yourself. (3.1)
Kill the man. (3.2)

► Open 2.7

"No. I'm don't think I should be going anywhere."

The man looked at his watches again. "Look. I don't got time. It's now or—"

"I said no. I gotta figure this out first."

Pounding the door frame in frustration now, the man's temper began to boil. "Five seconds. Want me to pull you through the fucking door? I have before." The man rushed up to Alan and grabbed him by the collar. "We're leaving! We have to. Whether you like it or not."

Kill the man. (3.2)
Call for help. (3.3)
Run into another room. (3.4)

► Open 2.8

Alan jumped through the door. It was the same. Exactly the same as where he just was. Even the dust was the same. Then he heard a voice. "Alan! You made it." Alan walked into the living room to find himself sitting on the couch.

"Alan?"

"Alan."

"Be glad I got you away form that other guy. He's the whole reason why everything is fucked the way it is."

Alan sat down in front of himself. He looked at the other radio on the coffee table. "That one still have juice?" The other Alan smiled and keyed up the radio. «D-3454, you copy?»

Alan's radio repeated the message. Even though the voice was staticy, it was clear that he himself was the voice. "What? It was you this whole time? When did you get here?"

"Yesterday I think? The other guy found me. Figured out what he was doing and why he was doing it."

"What's he doing?"

The other Alan brushed off the dust on his shoulder. "You don't want to know right now. But since you're here, you can start to take over."

Alan shook his head. "Take over? Take over what?"

Other Alan chuckled a little bit. "It's funny to hear my words again— No. You take over my spot and I head out. Even you being here means that lines are starting to close all over. That's good for us but bad for him. That's how it works I think."

Alan took a breath. "Take over? Lines closing? Stop sending me in circles. I'm in a fucking nightmare here! JUST TELL ME WHAT THE *FUCK* IS GOING ON!"

Other Alan just nodded his head. "You may think this is the right time to know all that, but it's not. And in about-" He looked down at his watches. "-half a minute, the other guy is gonna burst in here. You wanna be here when that happens?"

"No."

"Then let's get going then. We got a lead."

Other Alan grabbed a gun and clip and headed for a door. The back door. "This might get a little weird." He opened it and stepped through. Alan followed behind him.

Continue. (3.5)

► Open 3.1

Alan pressed the gun to his temple.

"Here I go."

He clenched his teeth and counted to three.

"One…. Two… Three." That three seemed to hang in the air forever until finally his finger squeezed hard enough on the trigger.

POP

"He's not coming back is he?" The researcher turned the recording equipment off. "That's an asset loss then."

The director looked down at his clipboard with cold eyes as he scanned the incident report. "I think we're done here at least. We're not getting anywhere." He put the clipboard back into his briefcase and packed up. "We'll seal off this quadrant to personnel for now. Keep the camera rolling just in case. We'll monitor it from the security station."

The senior researcher nodded and packed up as well. In a small notepad he marked down some notes for later use.

D-3454: remove asset from spreadsheet

order more handheld radios
seal off Cell-67, video feed to be patched to security station
put out recovery order for missing object

milk
sliced ham
eggs
coffee
cheddar cheese
tomatoes
ice cream
b-day present, daughter

END?

► Open 3.2

Suddenly they both locked together into struggle, but that was quickly interrupted with a single gun shot.

POP

For a split second, Alan was unsure who was shot. After what seemed like unnecessary waiting, was ended when the man slumped down to his knees clutching his side. The gun in Alan's hand went off two more times, ending the man.

Alan dropped the gun. He looked at the door. Briefly he thought about going through, but what good would any of that do now. Looking back at the floor, Alan stepped back in shock. The body disappeared.

"Whoa! The fu—"

Another body was flung from the door to Alan's feet. It groaned and spoke. "Motherfucker. Can you stop killing me? Doesn't get any easier you know." It was the man he just killed. As he stood, Alan didn't even have to think about it. He wound up for a punch.

Continue. (3.4)

► Open 3.3

Alan didn't wait to reason with him. He punched the man right in the solar plexus.

"OH! (wheeze) …shit…" The man dropped to his knees to catch his breath. Alan ran around the couch and keyed up the radio. "Hey! Is anyone still there?"

«(static) I'm here. What's happening?»

"I hit him. The other guy. I— I don't know what to do."

«There's a back door. You need to go through it. Can you see it?»

The other guys braced himself up onto an end table. "DON'T! YOU CAN'T LEAVE THIS PLACE!"

Alan looked behind him. Sure enough the faint outline of a door was present in the far darkness. "I see it."

«He's not able to move through it. Make your way over there. I'll meet you.»

Alan started to run for it. "Who are you?" No answer. As he pulled it open and stepped through, the other man was stumbling towards him up until the door shut behind Alan.

Continue. (3.5)

► Open 3.4

Alan didn't wait to reason with him. He punched the man right in the solar plexus.

"OH! (wheeze) …shit…" The man dropped to his knees to catch his breath. Alan ran around the corner, in what looked like a bedroom. Maybe there was a window.

Maybe there was a vent. Maybe there was a golf club in the closet. In his panic, he grabbed the first thing that looked like a weapon. It might have been a baseball bat, it was too dark for Alan to tell. He fumbled for a light to see better.

click

Splayed all over the room were skeleton corpses. The bed stained a dark red with old blood. Orange sets of clothes folded neatly in the corner. Drying meat hanging from the ceiling fan. An arrangement of kitchen knives placed neatly on the pillow. This wasn't a murder scene but more of a serial killer workshop. It was so methodical and horrific that Ed Gein could have been in the corner taking notes. "Ah! AAHHH! FUCK!"

"GET OUT OF THERE!"

"What the fuck! The fuck you do to these people!?!"

Alan reared back out of the room ready to swing… which was now revealed to be a femur. He dropped it in disgust.

"People?" The man rose back up and pointed a gun straight at Alan. "A man's gotta eat. Don't count if it's your own flesh. Same as biting your fingernails."

"You're such a motherfucker."

The man shrugged. "Takes one to know one. So again… this isn't working. I ate recently, so I can wait. Third time's a charm? Or is this the fifth?" He then shot Alan in the head.

POP

Click to start over. (Ø)

► Open 3.5

Alan entered in through the door, or rather *fell* into the empty space. "Ah— AAAAHHH!" He tumbled ass over head in zero gravity. "Fuck! FUUUUCK!" He tried to look back at the door he just left as it started to drift away.

«Alan? Hey, just relax.»

Alan nearly lost the grip on his radio as he tried to press it against his face. Slowly but surely he seemed to stop spinning "Where the hell am I? Where the fuck are you?"

«We're kinda in the same place now. We're in the same body but in different timelines. Finally parallel, right? I am you and you are me now.»

Alan jerked his head in defeat. He'll never understand this situation he thought. Maybe he should just stop trying in general.

"Keep explaining."

«The other guy is us. He wants to keep making more timelines so he can eat to survive.»

"Eat?"

«Other Alans.»

"That's… fucked up. And what about that house?"

«You never recognize it. It's the trailer where Diane died. Remember?»

Alan never put more than two seconds of thought into it, but it did seem eerily familiar. His memories of that blurry night came rushing fast and hard as he tried to focus. His girlfriend. That's the last person he wanted to see in a place like this. The way things are going, he couldn't really rule that out.

«Don't ask me why it looks this way. It just does.»

"So where are we really?"

«If I didn't explain already. We're not anywhere. We're stuck in some kind of loop. But we can tweak things to get back on track.»

"So what now?"

«Well… right now we're coming up onto some lights here, right?»

Alan looked in all directions until he spotted two orbs of sparking electrical light closing in. "Yeah?"

«I'm going in that one, on your— well *our* left. You go in the other one and help the next Alan.»

"What happens if I don't go in either?"

«Likely… you'd float on until you die I guess. I don't know.»

Alan had to decide.

Left. (3.6)
Right. (3.7)
Neither. (3.8)

► Open 3.6

"I'm… " Alan cut off his own words as he made his choice. He was going to be the one to get out first. Fuck that other guy.

«Alan?»

Alan ignored his radio as he paddled toward the light.

«Alan? Hey. Wait. You can't do it that way. You'll fuck the timeline again.»

He didn't care. He figured this was not his first rodeo.

Who knows how many times he's been here. If he's stuck in a loop. If he's lying to himself. Either way, he wasn't going to be a sucker. He touched the light with his finger tips.

"Wait! There." The researcher adjusted the recording equipment. "Another one."

The director looked down at her clipboard with cold eyes as she scanned the security breach report. "Extract him and put it into another holding cell until we can figure this out. Can we debrief this one you think?"

The researcher shook his head. "Don't know what good that would do if he's like all the others. Can't remember a damn thing and all claim to be the same."

"Damn. We're not getting anywhere this way." She put the clipboard back into her briefcase and packed up. "We'll keep this quadrant off limits for now. Keep security teams on standby if anymore come through and keep the camera rolling. I have to report on the status of our little… incident."

The director swiped her badge across the electronic door lock and left the young researcher to mop up. In the elevator, the director flipped through the security footage from yesterday on her phone. Obviously there's a lack of security detail and post-screening during testing with Safe-class artifacts. "What were you planning, Alan?" She asked herself.

END?

► Open 3.7

"Fine. I'll make it for the right then." Alan paddled off to the right. "What happens to you?"

«Me? I was told that when it's my turn that I'll be free.

You remember why we're doing this right?»

Alan searched his memory a little. Too much has happened in the loop, but he did remember an objective.

«That's right. You barely remember anything and I'm supposed to tell you. Yeah. This is a jail break of sorts.»

Alan nodded as his memory was jostled. "Yeah. I remember stealing that thing from the test chamber. So we figured out how it worked, huh?"

«Kinda.» The light was within reaching distance. «See you on the other side.» Alan was about to touch the light as well when something in the darkness grabbed him. "Gah!"

A mummified arm drifted into Alan as it wrapped around his body. The sunken eyes, over shadowed with the large exit wound along the side of the head was a sure indicator that it was in fact dead. The panic was enough to put him into a tumble again, over and under until Alan could regain a little control. The corpse now barely hanging on by Alan's shoe, which was about to come loose. He was starting drift out.

Push. (3.8)
Reach. (3.9)

► Open 3.8

Alan pushed away. It was enough to make him drift in the wrong direction. Out of reach from anything now. As he watched the lights fly away in the distance he wondered about what would happen next. The blackness seemed infinite. All around he thought he could hear echoes. What they were saying was another matter. It all seemed muffled. Alan continued to hang in that blackness.

5 days later.

Alan's parched lips and sore joints kept him in a rigor mortis state. His skin wrinkled like a plastic bag as it cried for hydration. The last two days, he didn't even open his eyes. He was going to die like this. He knew it. It was a slow death.

As Alan drifted out of his dream state and into full unconsciousness, he wondered about the other Alan's before him. Was there an Alan with nobody to talk to over the radio? Were the guards even still looking for him? This was probably a bad plan, he thought. Then he exhaled his last dry breath.

Click to return. (O)

► Open 3.9

Alan reached. He freed his hand and reached until his elbow popped from the strain. As his fingertips grazed the light, he was washed in a brightness as the world around him melted away. This was it. The brightness faded as he rushed straight ahead it felt like. Something in his brain however faulted. He blinked hard.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting on the couch. Back in the room.

«The hell is this place?» Chirped the radio on the table. Alan took a breath and he started the motions.

"D-3454, do you copy?" Alan waited for his other self's response.

END?

Cat's in the Cradle

Doctor Jack Bright stared ruefully at **`the simple bowl`** in front of him, filled with a creamy French Onion soup, the smell alluring enough to make his assistant sniff the air and lick his lips. He didn't do any more than this, however, as he could tell that the doctor was in a foul mood. The last thing he needed was to become the object of ire of one of the most particularly infamous Senior Staff members.

The old doctor rubbed his temples and suppressed a groan, waiting for his headache to go away completely. It was bad enough when he first learned that he was going to be testing this, and, for whatever godforsaken reason, couldn't opt out of it, for all his power and influence. If there was one thing that Doctor Bright couldn't stand, it was being told what he could and could not do. If there were two things that he couldn't stand, then the second thing was headaches. And if there were three things that Doctor Bright couldn't stand, then the third thing would be the fact that the bowl was filled with French Onion soup. He already knew how this test was going to turn out, and he was not going to enjoy it in the slightest.

"Is everything alright, doctor?" The assistant shook his head and ignored the delectable aroma for a moment to show concern for the man with the tall and youthful body.

Bright turned to face him, as the pain began to subside. "It's nothing. I'm fine, Hector. Just a little migraine."

He wrote something down on a notepad to the right of the bowl, before picking up a recorder to the left of it. He looked back over at Hector, and, figuring he knew to keep quiet, hit 'record.'

"This is Doctor Jack Bright, recording testing log SCP-348-3278-1. Primary goal of this test is to discover whether SCP-348's effects will alter accordingly if the consciousness of a body comes from one who holds a different biological father. Why someone felt the need to know this, is a question that will have to be answered another day."

He wondered if he should edit that part out, before deciding “to hell with it.” No one had the stones, or even a particular desire at all, to try and discipline him for an off-hand remark, especially since everyone knew that it wouldn’t stop him from making more in the future.

“For reference, the body I am currently in, D-7251, was that of one Thiago Branco. Records show that Mr. Branco had a close relationship with his father. If this is correct, and if the soup is indeed intended for D-7251, then I should feel as if ‘something is missing’. In the unlikely chance that there be a message at the bottom, it will be in Portuguese.”

He ended the recording, neglecting to mention the obvious question of what would happen if the soup was intended for him instead. Those with the proper security clearance and need-to-know could guess at that. Everyone else could mind their own goddamned business.

He picked up the bowl carefully, and slowly brought it to his lips. He wondered if maybe Mr. Branco’s favorite soup was French Onion. Maybe he and his father would bond over bowls of it throughout his childhood. Maybe this test would turn out differently than Bright expected.

He took the tiniest bit of soup in his mouth.

Nope. He could never be so lucky.

Hector saw the doctor grimace at the taste, before setting the bowl down, picking up his recorder and his pad and pencil, before standing up and walking briskly out of the room.

“Tasted god-awful. Glad that’s over with. You can have the rest, Hector, I don’t give a damn.” Before his assistant could even make a sound, Doctor Bright had exited the testing room.

Hector processed what had just happened, before shrugging and deciding to save questioning it until after he had finished the soup. He took the bowl back to his office, letting the guard on duty know that he’d bring it back within an hour, and sat down with it at his

desk. (Being the assistant to Doctor Jack Bright afforded Hector certain privileges that would be unthinkable for most other personnel to have.)

He nursed it, on and off for twenty minutes while he worked, occasionally taking a bit of onion into his mouth. He didn't know what Bright was on, but this soup wasn't bad at all. He was surprised that he had finished it so quickly, and even more surprised when he noticed that it had a message at the bottom.

He wondered if he should tell anybody that it did, but, upon reading it, he decided it would be best that he not mention it. Word would inevitably get back to Doctor Bright about what it had said and that Hector was the one who first found out and told someone. He didn't want to think about what the doctor's reaction to that might be.

Hector took the bowl back to the guard on duty, and told her he was ready to bring it back to its locker. The two of them walked to the vast rows of containment lockers, passing by a few dozen before reaching one that was labelled with tape with "**348**" neatly written in black marker on it. The guard, (Katherine, it said on her ID badge), deftly spun the dial, and opened it up. Hector slid the bowl on the shelf inside, and Katherine shut the locker, giving the dial one more spin for good measure.

As the two of them left to go back to their respective duties, the bowl sat in the dark of the locker, the faded blue message on its bottom still visible. There were precious few people alive who could know its context, and one of them had made it clear that he had no intention of giving it any more thought. He didn't have to read it to know what it said.

"*You have every right to hate me*"

She stared at the bowl in front of her. Bits of celery, a couple of potatoes, and even a few clams stared back at her as they lazily floated around. The researcher standing by the door wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"All you have to do is have enough of it to tell us how it tastes," the

researcher, Denise, said, wanting to reassure the young woman that she wouldn't have to finish what was sitting in front of her.

The woman looked at the bowl for a second longer before responding. "Would it be alright if I had all of it?"

Denise raised an eyebrow, but nodded. Why in God's name would she want to actually want to have all of that stuff? The smell was so abysmal it made Denise's skin crawl. It made her feel like she was being watched. Like she was being leered at. Why the hell was that woman able to stand smelling that stuff, let alone eating it? Denise shrugged. Maybe it was just a welcome change from her usual diet. Lord knows that couldn't be much more pleasant.

The young woman brought the bowl to her lips, blew some of the steam away, and tasted its contents.

It was warm and rich, but those were the only two specific words she could use to describe it. Everything else, she couldn't put her finger on. She couldn't tell if the actual taste wasn't that bad and it was the aftertaste that left something to be desired, or vice-versa. The texture seemed thicker on her lips, but runnier as soon as it got past her teeth. The potatoes were firm and salty, but by the time she was finished, she swore they were almost sweet, somehow.

As she relayed all of this information to Denise, the researcher kept as straight a face as she could, ignoring the urge to cringe every time the girl paused to take another slurp. Thankfully, the girl was finished quickly enough, and Denise walked up behind her, looking at the empty bowl from over the her shoulder.

There was a message at the bottom of the bowl. When Denise read it, she had to suppress a shudder, noticing that she had been righter than she would have liked to have been in her assessment as to how the bowl made her feel. If the young woman sitting in the chair was similarly disturbed, however, she didn't show it.

"Alright," Denise said, doing her best at ignoring how perturbed she was, "you're done here. You can go ahead and leave."

The girl walked out of the room, nodding to the guard on the other

side of the door. Together, the two of them walked back to her suite.

Denise sat down in the now-open chair, pushing the bowl away to the edge of the table, making sure not to look any more at the message inside of it. She pulled her notepad and pencil from her coat pockets, and began to write down her observations of the test.

The young woman gingerly sat on her soft bed, reflecting on what had just happened. It certainly wasn't the best thing she had ever tasted, but it was certainly better than what she'd usually been having for the longest time.

She tried to remember what exactly it had tasted like, but it was hard. Like remembering something from years ago rather than minutes ago. The message came to her clearly enough, however, and she wondered if it had anything to do with the letter that she received on her last birthday. Despite having the chance to only read it once before it was taken away, it too came to her as clear as day.

She was certain that the message had been from the same person who sent the letter. She didn't know how he did it, but she knew her father, whoever he was, was making good on his promise.

Deciding that she would save her thoughts for after a nap, the young woman rested her head on her pillow, and drifted off to sleep, dreaming about the face she could never quite remember upon waking up.

Upon SCP-166 being brought into its presence, SCP-348 filled with what appeared to be New England-style clam chowder. This researcher observed a very unpleasant odor emanating from SCP-348, but SCP-166 made no mention of such a stench, if she even noticed it at all.

SCP-166 described the taste of SCP-348 in vague terms. The taste, texture, and other qualities were noted as seeming conflicting, and the only definite terms SCP-166 used to describe SCP-348 were "warm" and "rich."

Of particular note is the message that manifested on the bottom of

the inside of the bowl, as has happened in some previous tests.

This message read, “I'm still keeping an eye on you, sweetheart. Every day.”

ALERT NOTICE: GOLDENROD
On 06/16/2015, at approximately 0830 hours, SCP-348 was found to be missing from its containment locker. In its place was a handwritten note, reading “Just borrowing it. Will have it back soon,” and signed with an illustration of a black queen chess piece. Assuming that the Black Queen is going to return the item as the note implies, all security personnel are to be prepared for this event. Standard protocols for capturing intruding parties do apply.

Director Tilda D. Moose

The Black Queen kept the bowl in a small cupboard for three days, telling herself that she would wait until she felt “sick enough” for it. She had found the file on this particular item almost a year beforehand, but it took her several months and several missed opportunities before she finally resolved to request that one of her Little Sisters fetch it for her. She didn’t want to go after it personally, for fear of it somehow manifesting its contents while she was holding it. It might have thrown her off of her game. She imagined such a scenario playing out, with Foundation security teams surrounding her, the infamous Black Queen herself, while she stood staring wide-eyed at a bowl of soup.

She chuckled dryly at the mental picture.

She’d been feeling the cold coming on ever since shortly before she had had the bowl retrieved, but she kept putting it off and off, until eventually, it felt like there was an airtight seal in her nostrils, sandpaper was massaging her esophagus, and she could no longer deny that she was indeed “sick enough.”

Opening up her cupboard, she removed the bowl, setting it down on the plain table in the center of her kitchen. She wondered if she

should grab a spoon too, but she decided against it. She didn't know if she had any clean spoons at the moment, and all it would take for her to talk herself out of the experience would be something as simple as not wanting to have soup with a dirty spoon.

Sitting down in front of the table, she stared at what exactly had filled the bowl in front of her. There were a few wispy won tons, along with bits of pork and onion. She stared at it for a long, long time, before finally taking a deep breath and lifting the bowl up to her lips.

She blinked back a couple of tears when she felt just how cold it was. She'd been expecting that. It hit her like a semi truck, but she had been expecting it. She tipped the bowl further, taking some of the won tons and pork and onions into her mouth. Each time she chewed, or something rolled onto her tongue, she tried to gauge what exactly the flavor was, but it wasn't anything beyond the bare minimum of what she'd expect from wonton soup. She'd expected that too, but it didn't stop her from hoping for some kind of feeling to hit her. Anything at all, good or bad, so long as she wasn't expecting it.

But the soup remained cold, and the pork and onions tasted like nothing special. Her throat might have felt slightly better, and her nose a little clearer, but there was nothing about this meal that she hadn't been expecting.

She stared at the wall opposite of her for a few minutes, wondering what she'd do now. The bowl would have to be returned eventually. She did promise she would do so, after all, as she had a reputation and an image to maintain. She began thinking about what it would take to sneak past the inevitably heightened security in order to get the bowl back to its locker. Nothing she couldn't handle with enough time to plan it out. Sighing, she stood up, about to go back to her normal routine just as she expected she would, but far sooner than she hoped that she would have.

But, then she looked back down at the bowl. And what she saw inside of it was not something she had been expecting at all.

The file had said that messages were rare for adult subjects, and,

given who it was from (or maybe, if some of the hypotheses she had read were to be believed, who the bowl was emulating), she certainly didn't believe that the bowl would manifest one for her.

But there it was, plain as day, in faded blue letters. It was in English, which made sense enough to her. He did know Mandarin, but he preferred his first language when speaking with her, as she and her mother had always poked fun at his frequent Chinese malapropisms. She thought it might have even been his own neat handwriting that she was looking at, but it was hard to tell through her rapidly blurring vision.

"*I haven't forgotten you Alison.*"

Alison Chao wept silent tears, each one dropping down into the bowl and settling around the bottom. This was what she had wanted. Something to surprise her. Something that caught her off guard. She wouldn't have regretted it had it been something that told her he *had* forgotten her. However devastating it might have been, it was infinitely better than not knowing for sure. But he did remember her. He still thought about her. Still might have even loved her.

Alison breathed deep, and composed herself. She realized that her trembling lips had curled into a smile. She wiped away her tears, brought her middle and index finger to her lips, kissed them softly, and pressed them against the message.

She was just putting the bowl back in the cupboard, when she realized something else that she hadn't been expecting. Despite how unimpressive the soup had been, she still felt like it would be nice enough to have with dinner. And maybe tomorrow's lunch, too.

She'd only been planning on keeping the bowl for a day or two, but she was sure that a week or so without it wouldn't drive anyone at the Foundation to drastic action. Nothing that she couldn't handle, in any event. They could make all the fuss they liked; she was going to spend Father's Day weekend with her dad.

ALERT NOTICE: YELLOW
On 06/22/2015, at 1330 hours, SCP-348 was found to be returned to its containment locker. Attached to the front

of the locker was a handwritten letter addressed to a member of Senior Staff. Security personnel are currently searching for evidence that will lead to the apprehension the Black Queen or any associates of this individual, though nothing of significance has yet been found.

Alert-level has been lowered to Condition Yellow, and security protocols have been adjusted accordingly.

Director Tilda D. Moose

Catch Your Death

"So, let me get this straight," said Agent Shields, flipping through the folder he had been pondering over. "You commissioned a mass murder of D-Class personnel by firing squad, set up a series of unnecessarily elaborate traps, and cost the Foundation around a dozen researchers… all so you could catch the Grim Reaper?"

Doctor Sheridan grinned broadly as he took the SCP report back from Shields. "Sure did, boy. And don't call my traps elaborate. Those things were child's play to make and set up."

"Sir, you're dodging the real issue here. I just want to know, along with everyone else, why you did it."

Sheridan's brow furrowed significantly. He had never been one for dealing with those who couldn't understand his brilliance, and Shields had always pestered him with those petty questions, details that in the vast scheme of things didn't matter. Still, he felt obliged to answer, if only to suffer one less fool.

"Why? Well, why not? You might not be the brightest, Shields, but surely you've been paying attention to your surroundings. Catching the bastard's been the best thing to happen to the Foundation since its creation! Due to the dampening effect we've put around his cell, Death doesn't have any powers. We also stripped him of everything on his person, and posted a dozen guards outside the main cell alone. Ergo, we've got him locked up so tight that nobody can ever die again!" He stood up with his arms spread wide at this last sentence.

A silence fell over the room as Shields stared down at Spencer Sheridan. He too had a strong hatred for the other man, though in his case it was due to a lack of patience for those absorbed in themselves. There was the temptation to finish the mission right then and there, but he needed to keep things going for now.

"Sir… I don't think you see the implications of what you've done. By rendering a good deal of the SCPs harmless, you've put unknowable amounts of people out of work, and…"

Sheridan put a finger to his lips and shushed Shields. "You hit the nail on the head there, boyo. The SCPs are harmless. The whole point of this place is to Secure, Contain, and Protect. Now tell me, is that not better accomplished if none of these creatures and objects pose a threat?" Shields continued to stand stock still, not moving a muscle, so Sheridan sighed and continued. "Just look at what this has done for us! We're making huge strides towards dismantling 173 now that it's not willing to attack us!"

"Yes, but…" said Shields, thinking of the fifty men incapacitated for life before the statue stopped attacking.

"Or how, since we can survive the tortures it inflicts, 212 has given us dozens of super agents?" And dozens more sent into permanent comas. "Try and tell me that isn't a good thing!" Shields made another move to speak, but Sheridan was on a roll. "Or how we're able to safely study 008 to our heart's content?" Sixteen men chopped into pieces. "Or the massive profit from 447?" Untellable damage from exposure to previous dead bodies. "Hell, 590's more effective than it's ever been!" Shields clenched his fists. "Point is, boy, I've solved every single problem the Foundation could foreseeably have. I don't understand why you'd ask such a silly question as - why do you have your weapon out?"

While the Researcher had been blathering off into space, the Agent had slowly unholstered his gun, and was now pointing it squarely at his face. "Christ, I can't stand listening to you. Now please listen, *sir*," he sneered, "and listen good. Nobody cares how many great things you've done with this whole 'Catching Death' business. The point is that the evils you've wrought far outweigh the good. We can't stand for that around here."

Spencer Sheridan went pale in the face as he tried to look for a way out of his predicament. An Agent, one of the most worthless positions in his mind, was threatening him, and he couldn't run. What to do?

At length, color returned and a smile played over his face. "Now, now, Shields," he chuckled, "you know you can't do this. I've got the bloody Grim Reaper in containment! So shoot me all you like, because I cannot…!"

A bullet flew from the chamber of the gun, and slammed square into the Researcher's chest. He stumbled for a moment, his mouth flapping uselessly, before he hit the ground with a low thud. Pulling himself onto his hands and knees, Sheridan gasped for breath, and grunted, "You… you can't kill me Shields… you can't kill me… we're all immortal…"

"Not anymore," said Shields, staring down at the man before him in disgust. "Or at least, not for very much longer. We're releasing the Grim Reaper in an hour or two, so everything you've done will have been for naught. Of course, we've rounded up all the SCPs and worked hard to minimize the damage, so you don't need to worry about that." Sheridan tried to speak, but he could already feel himself fading. "What I'd worry about, if I were you, is the fact that you'll be in some pretty bloody bad pain before expiring."

The Researcher tried to make one last protest to the Agent, one last attempt to buy his way back to life. But his lungs had failed him, and Shields was already on his way out, establishing contact with someone over the radio. "Hello? Yes, I did what you asked. Mission accomplished. Anything else you'd like done with him before you get here?"

Catharsis

"*In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.*"

Detective Jason Fritz took a final puff from his cigarette before tossing it into the river before him, watching as it vanished beneath the crashing tides. The irritation in his lungs kept him alert and focused on nights like these, where the hours seemed to compound and shifts dragged into the morning hours. There were many other, much more private reasons he continued to smoke even after the diagnosis, but he had managed to convince himself being alert made everything worth it.

"Really gotta quit that shit, man."

The voice of that 20 year old fucker chief had stuck with him - Roger, he thought his name was - forced its way into his ears like a knife. Jason rose to his feet and about-faced, coming within feet of his partner.

"Thanks, doc."

The boy scoffed. "Just looking out for you, old timer."

"You know I'm 35, right?"

"Yeah, what's your point?"

Jason rifled through his pockets in search of another cigarette. "Nevermind." He turned sharply, gazing at a blue tarp gently flapping in the wind. "What's your theory?"

"My theory?" The boy shook his head. "Seems like a pretty cut and dry suicide to me."

"Why here, though?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do it here?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe it was convenient. Maybe he didn't have a gun. I dunno. Point is, we don't have anything suggesting foul play." A finger rose towards the bridge. "Part of the railing is out. Probably forced his way through it on the way down."

"Forced his way through it?" Jason gestured towards the body. "Guy's a chubby egghead. Worked for some pharmaceutical company a couple miles from here. Don't you think it's a little strange that he somehow pushed through solid metal?"

"Stranger things have happened, detective."

"Yeah." Jason exhaled a cloud of tobacco smoke before inserting his hand into the dead man's coat pocket. He fished around aimlessly for several seconds before finding a solid object - plastic, maybe. Removing his hand, Jason gazed upon an identification card, still slightly bent from being printed.

"Antonio Rodriguez." He mumbled, putting on a slight Latino accent. "Started working there three days ago. I looked him up on Facebook. Tony here married his childhood sweetheart only a few weeks back."

The boy inhaled in irritation. "What are you suggesting, detective?"

"What I'm suggesting is that you're wrong." He looked up at the bridge, broken pieces of metal still swaying in the wind. "Why would a guy happily in love with a brand new job do this?"

The boy began to speak, but Jason silenced him.

"It's rhetorical." Jason glared at him. "Let's take a look around. See if there's anything worth our time."

The two men joined each other and began walking into the night, a cold breeze jolting their ties.

"You believe in ghosts, kid?"

He sneered. "Not really, why?"

His eyes darted away from the boy and fell to what remained of his smoke. "No reason. Don't worry about it."

Jason flicked the cigarette to his side and watched as it slowly burned out, leaving nothing but a dry, cracked husk of paper and ash next to the body of Antonio Rodriguez.

The person you are trying to reach is not able to take your call at this time. At the tone, please record your message. When you are finished recording, hang up or use the keypad to select more options.

Lisa, it's me. I don't have a lot of time to talk, so I need you to listen carefully and call me back as soon as you can. I am so sorry for what is happening. I never meant for any of this to happen. All I wanted was to keep you safe. I just wanted a second chance. They're not going to leave me alone. I just called Mark and told him to give you the stuff inside of my safe. One of those things is a note. Do not read it. Keep it in a safe place and do not tell anyone that you have it. If you ever open it, they will find and come for you. Please, for God's sake, don't open it.

I love you so much that words cannot begin to describe it. I am so sorry for what is about to happen. I'm so sorry. I love you.

"See? I told you. Cut and dry."

The boy motioned towards the broken railing, blood still glistening in the summer moonlight. Jason reached for his smokes and grimaced in frustration when he realized they were finally gone.

"Still sticking to that theory, yeah?"

"What other explanations are there?" He chuckled. "You think he charged through it like a fucking linebacker?"

"Show some goddamn respect." Jason's voice was firm, yet not hostile. The boy's smile gradually receded into a submissive scowl

while his superior analyzed the area, looking for any evidence of Rodriguez. He ultimately found some dangling from a piece of metal nearly 200 feet off the ground.

"You see that?"

"Yeah. Looks like ash."

"Because it is." The detective gritted his teeth. "I can smell it, too."

"Smell what?"

Jason rose to his feet. "He didn't charge through this at all. Somebody burned through it with thermite." An air of discomfort washed over the men. "If this was a suicide, he planned for it very well."

"You saying he was murdered?"

"No, not necessarily. It's just unusual." He exhaled and fell to a knee, leaning closer to the ash. "Reminds me of something. You ever heard of something called the Chaos Insurgency?"

"Can't say I have."

"Don't blame you. If it weren't for bits and pieces I've picked up over the years, I wouldn't either. Hearing about them is already difficult, and finding them is even harder." Jason let out a wheezy exhale. "Back when I was a beat cop in New York, we got a two-eleven. Nothing unusual about that of course, so I walked over to the bank. I was close to it at the time, so I actually beat the patrol guys."

The boy listened intently, crossing his arms and falling into a relaxed stance.

"Three guys, all of them armed with AK's. They were using thermite to cut into the vault. You could smell it from blocks away. Smelled like a goddamn warzone."

"Did you get them?"

"That's the thing." Jason turned away and stared intently at the ash.

"Before any of our guys moved in, they were already dead. Nobody else was in the bank at the time, and they had shot out of all the cameras. Nobody had any clue what happened until they did the autopsies. All we knew was what the security cameras captured - a few conversations about some doctor at a research facility and an insurgency."

The boy crossed his arms in confusion. "So how'd they die?"

Without turning towards him, Jason replied, "Self inflicted gunshot wounds to the temple."

And, in a moment, Jason felt his pace quicken as his mind finally put the pieces together.

Yeah, hello?

Hey, Mark.

Tony?

Yeah.

Christ, man. Do you know what fucking time it is?

Sorry, I just - you know, I just needed to talk to someone.

At three o'clock in the goddamn morning?

You know I wouldn't call you if it wasn't serious.

Yeah, right. What is it?

I'm going to die, Mark.

What? What the fuck are you talking about?

I'm on the bridge right now. I just thought you should know.

Are you fucking serious right now?

The code to my safe is 5515. There should be a note, a key to

my safety deposit box, and a few thousand dollars inside.

Hold up, man. Hold up. I'm getting in the car right now. Just stay on the phone, okay?

I need you to make sure Lisa gets the money and the note. I didn't have time to write up anything official, so I'm just asking you to do me a favor as my friend.

Nothing's happening to you. I'm in the car. Where are you?

You're not going to get here in time, Mark.

Listen. Listen to me, Tony. You need to calm down. I know a lot of shit is going on with you right now, but just calm down and listen to me.

This isn't a debate.

For fuck's sake, Tony. Don't do this. I'm begging you, man. I am begging you.

I'm sorry, Mark. Goodbye.

Tony? Tony, you still there?

Tony?

In the desolate parking lot of a McDonald's at 3:00 AM, Jason once again flicked his lighter and began puffing from the fourth cigarette of the night. Unlike before, he was acutely aware of the pain in his lungs, searing through his chest like a raging wildfire. He coughed sporadically, phlegm rocketing from his mouth and exploding in a splash of gray and red on the pavement, as a blue pickup truck made the turn into the lot and shut its headlights off.

"This him?" The boy, barely fighting off the tantalizing beckon of sleep, lifted himself out of the back of the patrol car. Crumbs from a burger rolled off his uniform and onto the passenger's side mat. Jason rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck before beginning his steady march towards the truck, watching as a tall figure in a

hoodie fell from the driver's seat.

"Let's be brief. I don't have a lot of time before they trace me." The figure, a man in his 40's by Jason's estimates, quickly approached the detective and held out a yellow envelope stained with coffee. "As promised, the note. I'll take my payment now."

"Hang on, just hang on." Jason moved his right hand to the top of the envelope and began to lift the flap up when a hand stopped him.

"Not part of the deal, man." The figure was clearly agitated, seemingly in fear of something nobody could see. "Look, I can just take it back and leave, if that's what you want."

"Just relax." The detective turned to his colleague, folder still in hand. "Get the briefcase out of the trunk, please. And for god's sake, clean yourself up."

After ensuring his uniform was clean of food, the boy shimmied to the trunk of the patrol car and lifted it open, his fingers wrapping around the handle of a brown leather briefcase. Jason watched as droplets of sweat streamed down from his hairline, coating the handle in a slick, clear film, and shifted his weight to face away from the hooded man in a subtle display of trust. Jason's eyes met the boy's and flashed an expression of reassurance and calm, though it seemed to be in vain, his face twitching subtly and his right hand rapping against the side of his leg. By the time it occurred to Jason that the man was seconds away from fleeing in an anxiety induced panic, he felt warm leather touch the tips of his fingers.

"$200,000. Untraceable, as promised." He opened the briefcase for the man and watched as the moon lit several stacks of flawless green cash. The man craned his neck to look inside before closing it and abruptly leaving, quickly walking to his truck. Jason gritted his teeth and inhaled sharply.

"One more thing."

The figure stopped, snapping his head to the right.

"I don't know who you are, and frankly, I'd like to keep it that way.

You got the note as you promised, and as far as I can tell, nobody knows about it. But you should know I work for people that don't take kindly to leaks. If I find out anyone besides the three of us knows about what happened here tonight, well…frankly, there will be consequences." He paused. "Might not be tomorrow, might not be for a while. But it will happen, and that I can guarantee you."

The figure remained motionless for several moments before marching to the driver's side of the pickup truck. He stepped inside and fumbled for his keys before roaring the engine to life and driving out of the parking lot into the New Mexico fog. With a certain grace, the detective dropped the briefcase and removed a silenced pistol from his belt, firing three rounds into the windshield in an explosion of glass and crimson. Jason heard the labored breathing of the boy behind him.

"What the fuck, man?!" His voice shook, the anxiety palpable. "The hell is going on?! We could be fired! We could be arrested, man! For fuck's sake!"

Jason said nothing, keenly aware of the boy's eyes darting back and forth across the envelope as he opened it and removed a single sheet of paper. He held it up next to his face and stared intently at it.

"From the second I saw Antonio's body, none of this made sense." He grinned. "Couldn't be sure it was them. Even if it was, this isn't their MO. And then, it clicked for me."

His gaze once again fell to the boy.

"Get the fuck out of here, and never tell anyone about this. Only gonna warn you once."

The two men left the parking lot moments later, and the boy never saw Detective Jason Fritz ever again.

The beaming young waitress approached Jason's table with an endearing grin, setting down a plate of eggs and bacon as she looked to the unusually content detective with slight confusion. He had been tracking her movements like a wolf ever since she had

come barreling out of the kitchen, not once directing his gaze anywhere but her eyes. She removed several napkins from her apron pocket before snapping her head towards the man across from Jason, still maintaining a forced smile.

"Would you like anything else, sir?"

The man stroked his ash gray beard and flashed a smirk. "I think we're okay for now. Thank you."

She began walking away, but he abruptly raised his hand to stop her.

"What did you say your name was, sweetheart?"

Her discomfort was now obvious. "Uh…Jessica. Jessica, sir."

"Right. Jessica." The man clicked his tongue and lifted his glass of orange juice off the tablecloth. "My associate and I would like to send our compliments to whoever prepared this juice. It's quite delicious."

She chuckled. "It's just store bought orange juice, sir. We don't make it."

"My mistake. Must be jet lag." The three shifted around in awkward silence before he spoke again. "Jessica, before I let you go, could I ask a favor?"

"Sure?"

"You see, me and my associate have some business to attend to. Now, without going into details since I imagine you don't want to be here all day, it's very important we finish this business before I leave." He took a sip from the juice. "So, I politely ask that you do not come to our table again, as doing so would be quite distracting. Now, I realize that your job necessitates you speak to us."

His right arm moved off his leg slightly, revealing a silenced pistol aimed directly at her chest.

"I see you around us again before we leave and I will not hesitate to

split open your pretty little face for everyone on the local news to see. Understood?"

Breaking into a sweat almost instantly, she nodded before walking away from the table as quickly as possible without running. Jason could still hear her strained hyperventilation as she opened the door to the restaurant's kitchen.

"Was that really necessary?"

Mr. Suit chuckled. "You've known me long enough to understand my theatrics."

"She's just a kid."

"You're so right. Which is why, with her bright future ahead of her, she won't talk to us again." His grin quickly faded. "Now, your report."

Jason lifted a briefcase from under the table and placed it in front of Mr. Suit.

"Everything's there. Made sure I couldn't be traced."

"How?"

"Paid some thug to break into the doc's house. Clipped him as soon as I got the briefcase."

"And the kid?"

Images of the boy flashed in front of Jason. "He won't be a problem. He's scared."

"I must say, you've certainly exceeded expectations." The smug grin returned to Mr. Suit's face, stretching to an almost unsettling extent. He removed several papers from the case, skimming over their contents before sliding them back inside. "I'll be sure your efforts are noted with my superiors. For now, stay quiet and out of sight. There will be more assignments for you in the future."

Mr. Suit stood up from the table, cleaned himself with a napkin, and

left through the double doors of the diner, making prolonged eye contact with Jessica as the doors swung closed. Jason followed him, lighting a cigarette as he walked towards the setting Albuquerque sun.

Person of Interest #16619-A

Name: FRITZ, JASON G.

DOB: 8/31/1982

Threat Level: Black

Profile: PoI #16619-A, identified as Jason Fritz, is believed to be in possession of documentation relating to the termination of Doctor Antonio Rodriguez, a former Level 2 researcher at Site-882. This information details, among other sensitive pieces of information, the existence of Mobile Task Force 55-Bravo, various security protocols at Site-882, and Doctor Rodriguez's work on SCP- . It is speculated that PoI #16619-A will attempt to utilize this information for financial gain, possibly by providing it to a hostile Group of Interest. PoI #16619-A's connections to Groups of Interest, specifically the Chaos Insurgency, remain unknown at this time. Field reports also suggest PoI #16619-A had direct involvement with Incident TAT-22, in which several individuals were neutralized during a bank heist due to potentially leaking classified information sold to them by Doctor Rodriguez.

Apprehension of PoI #16619-A is considered a top priority objective for Mobile Task Force 55-Bravo at this time. All individuals linked to PoI #16619-A, either directly or indirectly, must be detained and questioned upon being identified. Voice modification software similar to that used during Foundation cover-up operations following Doctor Rodriguez's termination is to be employed in an effort to extract information from relatives, friends, and former coworkers. The

whereabouts of PoI #16619-A remain unknown, but search efforts are being focused in the New Mexico area due to his prior employment as a detective with the Albuquerque Police Department.

In light of this situation, all Foundation records of Doctor Rodriguez have been redacted and transferred to a secure information storage facility.

Mr. Suit Hub | > Phoenix

A Defection

```
>cavalcade.bat -o -xk -scp 00315
LOADING… LOADED
PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY
COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
STARTING… ERROR [048500: INSECURE LINK]
>realgen.bat -a
RealGen Rootkit v1.31
OverDood Environment Loading… Loaded.
Enter Target Range:
>192.168.0.*
Scanning Ports… Scanned.
Enter Redirects:
>*.*.*.*
Redirecting…
System Redirect Loop Found.
Ignore?
>y
Redirecting… Redirected.
>quit
Exiting OverDood Environment.
>cavalcade.bat -o -xk -scp 00315
LOADING… LOADED
PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY
COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
STARTING… STARTED.
REVERSION POTENTIAL: 0.03740
RESOLUTION POTENTIAL: 0.00276
>revokePrivs.bat -all -s -m 73
Does the black moon howl73737373? (hard lock
disengaged)
```

>logoff -cor
Does the. (7373)?? howl black white black white black white black white black white gray moon does howl? how737373

Sedna Prewitt sighed, knowing she had ended thousands of lives with a few keypresses. At least it would get the point across. Sedna calmly walked to the safe in the corner of her office, rotating the mechanism until the lock opened with a satisfying thud. She swung open the safe door, revealing a rusted toolbox. She picked it up, then closed the safe door. Sedna walked out of her office. It was odd, she thought; a weight had been lifted from her chest, and yet her stomach felt like it was sinking. It didn't matter too much. She inhaled sharply as she approached the exit of Site-76.

Site Director Prewitt was waved past security without complaint.

Sedna walked out the front door towards the drab blue car on the opposite side of the road. Her pair of contacts sat inside it: Gamut Rückfall was reading her newspaper, resting it against the steering wheel; Krav Lichtenfield sat in the passenger side, chewing strawberry gum and rubbing his stubble. Sedna opened one of the passenger doors, eased herself down into the leather seat, then rested her toolbox on her lap. Gamut folded her newspaper, placed it on the dashboard, and started accelerating down the road. Krav turned around and leaned across, grinning and offering Sedna a stick of gum. She took it, unwrapped it, then placed it in her mouth. Krav's grin widened even more.

"Welcome to the Chaos Insurgency, Miss Prewitt."

PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
STANDPOINT DESIGNATION: SEATTLE
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
DESCRIPTION: CONTINGENCY FOR SCP-315 XK SCENARIO FAMILY
SOLUTION: WIDESPREAD UNILATERAL DISSOCIATION AND TEMPORAL LOCK AS PER TS-7

PROTOCOLS
VECTORS: SPARSE AIRBORNE (CHEMICAL, PATHOGENIC), MEMETIC
MODIFIERS: SRA TYPE C, XACTS TYPE B
REVERSION POTENTIAL: 0.03740, LINEAR, 2 HOUR ZERO POINT
RESOLUTION POTENTIAL: 0.00276, LINEAR, 7 HOUR ZERO POINT

The Administrator contemplated the readout on his screen. A two hour window of non-zero reversion potential… plenty of time to address the situation. There had been worse breaches in the past, by far, and for worse reasons.

The phone next to the Administrator rang, and he picked it up. O5-4 was the one who would have to deal with the situation. Time was of the essence; there was no time for a council vote, so O5-4 made a direct petition. The Administrator listened to the requests, agreeing to all of them one by one. This wasn't the worst that the Administrator had seen, but it was the worst that O5-4 had ever needed to deal with.

Sedna Prewitt had been capable of doing much worse than this, and for that the Administrator was pleased and disappointed in equal measure.

A man was looking out a window.

The birds were flying, the sun was shining, and everything was right with the world. Everything was okay, everything was alright, there was nothing to worry about. He heard a car screech off the side of a road, then the crunch of metal against brick below his office. He heard people shouting, screaming, crying, and then the shouting stopped.

Everything was perfectly fine.

"Hello?"

A middle-aged man was talking to him on a laptop screen. Said

laptop was sitting in the lap of the man who was not on the laptop screen. The man on the laptop screen started talking again.

"You seem to be forgetting things every time we stop talking."

The man that was not on the laptop stared blankly. He started to talk, then coughed; he welled up some spit in his throat, then tried again.

"What?"

"Something is heavily affecting your concentration."

"Who are you?"

"Who indeed. Perhaps a more pertinent question: who are you?"

The man who was not on the laptop screen paused for a moment to think. Who was he? It didn't seem too important. It wasn't that he didn't remember. He knew that he knew who he was; on realising this, safe in the conclusion that he was aware of who he was on some deeper level, he refused to drag it up into his active consciousness. The man who was not on the laptop screen was struck by a profound, zenlike apathy. Easier by far to mirror the man in the laptop screen's words than to think his own thoughts.

"Who indeed."

"Well, for convenience's sake, let's call you Kevin."

"Why Kevin?"

"Because that's your name."

"Ah."

"As for me, you can call me 315. Ringing any bells?"

Kevin stopped paying attention.

"Kevin?"

Kevin's gaze started drifting from the man in the laptop screen. 315

clicked his fingers loud enough for the laptop's speakers to clip.

"Back to me, Kevin, focus on me, alright? If you look away, you'll forget again."

Kevin looked back towards the screen. Easier to go along with it. He spoke to 315.

"Okay."

"Alright. Good. First of all, we need to start moving. Pick up this laptop, be careful not to drop it, and we're going to start walking out the door. Okay?"

"Okay."

Kevin, at this point, felt the easiest course of action was compliance. He grabbed the laptop in his hands, then stood up. He started looking towards the window. 315 snapped his fingers again.

"No, Kevin, come on, focus. Look to your right. The door is on your right."

Kevin looked to the door on his right, then paused for two seconds.

"You need to walk towards the door, Kevin."

Kevin started walking towards the door.

Professor Thaddeus Xyank was annoyed. Not at the fact that a space the size of Seattle - indeed, a space that *was* Seattle - had been temporally corrupted. He was annoyed that nobody had told him that it was going to happen. The research potential into temporal corruption seemed enormous. This was mostly because Xyank still didn't understand what temporal corruption actually meant.

> From: O5-4 (1.1.861.291|
> artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.4-5o#1.1.861.291|
> artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.4-5o)
> To: Thad Xyank (1.1.861.291|

artni_83028fo3b4.knayxt#1.1.861.291|
artni_83028fo3b4.knayxt)
Date: [FIELD EMPTY]
Subject: Temporal Corruption
Content:
Seattle has been temporally locked as per TS-7 containment protocols. However, the Type B XACTS stationed around the breach have malfunctioned, resulting in temporal corruption. Considering your paper regarding hypothetical use of a Type B XACTS array to introduce temporal corruption, you are the person most suited to address the situation. This should also present a valuable opportunity to test the accuracy of your theories.

You will be transported to Seattle within the next twenty minutes.

Xyank hadn't written the paper that O5-4 was referring to yet. No, scratch that; he hadn't even designed a Type B XACTS yet. On the short trip to Seattle, Xyank thumbed through both the aforementioned paper, as well as the specifications document for the Type B.

Halfway through the latter, Professor Xyank saw the memetic trigger he was going to place within the paper. He felt his arms seize and slump, damned whatever reason he was going to have for putting it in there, then fell unconscious in the back of the unmarked van.

Sedna Prewitt watched her watch tick down.

90 minutes remained until Seattle was irrecoverable.

Gamut had taken them out from the city centre, through the residential areas, and out into the "semi-residential" zones. They had reached the strange sort of point at which a city seems to lose its steam; where more of the land is used for roads than housing, and more still is simply open grassland, as yet unclaimed by urban sprawl. Krav was staring out the windows, chewing his gum to calm his nerves. Sedna couldn't take her eyes off her watch until Gamut

broke her concentration.

"We're here."

Gamut slowly decelerated, rolled to a stop besides a well-forested area, then pulled up the handbrake. She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out of the car, momentarily stretching her arms and legs. Krav opened the glove compartment, pulled out a small packet of papers held together with a thick elastic band, then got out himself. He turned, opening Sedna's door for her, and gesturing with a smile.

"Out we get, Miss Prewitt. Watch your step, 'n all that."

Sedna grabbed the handle of the rusty toolbox and stood up outside the door.

"What now, then?"

Gamut answered as she walked around the front of the car, running her hands through her short pink hair.

"We have a five minute walk through these trees, then we hit an open field. Our plane's waiting there."

Sedna nodded. Gamut pulled a compass from her pocket, looking at it intensely; Sedna stared, confused.

"So it's just past these trees?"

"Yes, but we need this to get through. Walking in a straight line can be difficult in the wrong places, if you get my gist."

Gamut tapped the side of her nose, then started walking into the greenery. Krav gestured for Sedna to follow behind, then fell in at the back of the queue. They continued to walk; Sedna caught herself erring from Gamut's lead twice, involuntarily drifting from the intended path. After five minutes, as expected, they exited into a wide clearing. A small white aeroplane sat in the middle of a short paved runway; the trio walked up to the side of it. Gamut pulled a key from her pocket, pushed it into the small hatch on the side, then swung it open. Krav stepped in first, offered a helping hand to Sedna, and Gamut closed the door behind her. Gamut walked

through to the one-pilot cockpit, having to crouch slightly to get around; Krav and Sedna sat in the two seats behind, buckling up their harnesses. Sedna rested the rusty toolbox in front of her, then queried Krav:

"So, where now?"

"Next stop, London. Too much Foundation presence in America, much safer in England."

"And we're going there in this?"

"Yes. Were you expecting a commercial flight?"

"Well, it's just a bit small."

"Small enough not to be detected, even if we weren't already shielded in a hundred different ways."

"I see."

Ex-Site Director Prewitt looked back at her watch, feeling her seat vibrate as the engines started up. Gamut started to accelerate. The small plane hurtled down the runway, then lifted off the ground. Sedna felt her stomach drop from more than mere airsickness.

83 minutes until Seattle was irrecoverable.

Nucleation

The pair conversed through the entire car ride, much to the chagrin of the man tied up in the back of the van. Not because he cared much one way or another about the topic of conversation, which was him, but because he had hoped to catch a nap while he was tied up. Had they been quiet, the rain would be fairly soothing.

"He couldn't have figured out who we are on his own. Flanagan crunched the numbers. He should only be able to… *understand* groups at least six or seven times as big as us. Otherwise he would have seen us coming." The owner of the level voice, a heavily tattooed woman that looked to be in her mid-fifties, adjusted the rear-view mirror to better focus on Gabriel's face. "That, or he's completely incompetent."

"And you're sure that this isn't part of some big plan of his?" A much younger, substantially louder voice emanated from the driver's seat. "To, to get caught by us, for whatever reason, and use us to do whatever it is he's up to?" Seemingly becoming aware of xyr own voice, the wide-eyed individual quieted down. "I mean, it's not like we'd really have a choice if that was his plan, it's just…" Xe coughed, with the sound of clanking metal and a brief puff of black smoke issuing from xyr throat.

Gabriel's boredom was briefly tinged with amusement.

"Then don't worry about it. You don't trust Flanagan's analysis? That's fine." The woman who called herself DeadeyeAlligator[1] withdrew a phone from her bag and began tapping. "I'll just let them know that you've spent twelve years studying economic and cultural trends and developed a coherent theory of meta-aware str-"

Mind-Thriller[2], as xe preferred to be addressed, interrupted. "Yes, yes, I get that they're some sort of ridiculous prodigy, we established that." Xyr voice began to rise again, less of its own accord and more

to be heard over the sirens. "It's just that… I don't know. I'm iffy on this."

"You signed on to be the getaway driver for a kidnapping without being sure about the mission?" DA was forced to brace herself as the van took a precisely timed turn down an alley at MT's behest. "Not that I can fault your work…"

"Of course I did. If I didn't, you'd still do it, except you might get caught."

Having given the assertion a thorough evaluation, Gabriel decided to weigh in with a statement he hoped was not overly controversial: "You're about to drive into a wall." This appeared to be true — in this weather, and at these speeds, hitting the brakes would be of little use. "Thought you should know."

As this was stated, DA was already unrolling a sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a knotted snake on a starry background. "Don't worry." With perhaps two seconds left before impact, DA placed a finger on the knot, and the van drove through the wall unimpeded into an inky black abyss. The only light came from DA's arm, which glowed a dull yellow.

Gabriel looked out the window. "Oh."

As their eyes adjusted to the sudden change in lighting, it became clear that the darkness was merely nighttime; a desert landscape was visible around them. MT glanced back and smiled after slowing the van to a stop. "Yeah. Magic. Cops don't really expect it. Uh, DA, mind getting us back to the hideout?"

"Sure thing." Also addressing the prisoner, "It's a bit convoluted, but you'll get used to it." Placing a finger on a different tattoo (one of a turtle with too many legs), the surroundings changed to a dingy garage; or, rather, what could have been one, had it contained any opening large enough to move a van through.

"Okay." Gabriel neither resisted nor complied as MT threw his light frame over xyr shoulder and headed through the room's singular door into a cellar furnished with comfortable-looking furniture, a tiny

kitchen, and three gun safes. After being deposited on a couch with a denim cover, he made no effort to move or sit up.

"Not feeling talkative?" DA and MT removed their coats, bulletproof vests, and shoes as DA re-tightened the cord tying Gabriel's hands behind his back. MT continued, "Or do you just not care?"

"The latter. And I read faster than you talk, so just give me a copy of your manifesto before telling me to help you smash the system or whatever. And yes, I care enough about not being tortured or neglected to help you further your goals." Pause. "And I'm thirsty."

"That's…" DA and MT shared a look as the former trailed off. "Alright. I'll go get you a copy." She headed into a different room as MT went to the sink and filled up a glass of water. After it was filled, MT sat down on the table across from Gabriel and extended the glass of water to his lips. "… should I even ask how you knew all that?"

Gabriel calmly took several sips of water before pulling away from the glass's brim. "Having intimate knowledge of every significant formal and informal system and organization in the world makes people easy to predict. Even if they're working mostly outside of it. What should I call you two?"

"We go by, er, the name of our blogs." MT cleared xyr throat, breaking eye contact briefly. "I'm Mind-Thriller, and she's DeadeyeAlligator. It's quicker to just say MT and DA."

"And you know all about me, I assume." Gabriel nodded in understanding, then yawned. "You're ex-Serpent's Hand, right? That's probably important."

Xe sighed. "DA is. She tried to get me into it, but it… wasn't for me." Xyr frown didn't lift as DA reentered the room with a tablet computer, which she placed on Gabriel's lap. "We're going to untie you now, and I assume you know better than to try anything." DA reached behind Gabriel's back and carried out this

"You could snap me in half if you wanted." This was apparently intended as an answer, as he said nothing further while he read. He

did pick up the glass of water and down it as he read. Several minutes passed in silence, Gabriel occasionally swiping to the left on the tablet's screen while DA sent some texts and MT kept xyr focus on Gabriel. After reaching the end, he spoke. "I can see why you're not affiliated with any larger group. There really aren't many that would be to your liking. And most of this would be flatly impossible without my assistance."

"But it's possible *with* your assistance." DA sat up and turned her attention to Gabriel as she spoke.

"Yes. I've already got most of the plan done. I need to talk to **Graff** first, though." He handed the tablet back to DA. "The mathematician going by 'Flanagan' that you mentioned earlier."

"You figured out Flanagan's identity?" MT tilted xyr head at this. "How on earth…"

Gabriel, in an unprecedented display of emotion, sighed a bit. "I cover my tracks well. To figure out that I'm anything but a reclusive self-made billionaire, you would need a genius with a supercomputer and an advanced understanding of memetics, economics, and sociology. The SCP Foundation is the only group that has geniuses, supercomputers, and an established study of memetics. The Chaos Insurgency does too, actually, but they would have caught a traitor much faster."

"Oh." MT hmmed at this. "They didn't mention that."

"The Foundation keeps very extensive records of their memeticists, so I know all of them. Only Dr. Vanessa Graff has the background and affiliations that would suggest any interest in this." Gabriel pointed at the tablet. "I need her here so I can get more information on your resources and talk specifics. You also need to meet her in person, if you haven't."

"We'll…" DA trailed off, disconcerted. "We'll check with them on that." She pulled her phone back out and sent another text.

"Okay." Gabriel stretched a bit, yawning again. "Where's the bathroom?"

MT pointed at the door that DA entered through. "Down the hall, on the left. And you can sleep in the guest room across the hall."

Gabriel nodded, then stood up and walked out of the room without a word.

MT turned to DA. A bit too loudly, "So how much of that do you believe?"

DA shrugged. "Well, judging by Flanagan's reaction, he at least ID'd them correctly." She showed her recently received texts to MT, a screen full of expletives and invective. "So I guess that much is true. It doesn't really matter what we believe about the rest. Personally? He's probably right about us needing him."

"So…" MT sighed. "We're meeting Flanagan… er… Graff? In person?"

"Yyyyup." A buzzing indicated that DA had received another text, which she checked: "Oh. Restaurant in Seattle, in… an hour. Think you can handle that?"

MT grinned, showing a mouth full of chrome teeth. "Shouldn't be too hard." The pair began preparing for their next excursion, grabbing their coats, vests, and firearms. "Have SearchNabokov[3] drop by to keep an eye on Gabriel. I don't want him unsupervised."

"Got it." DA sent yet another text, then turned towards the bathroom to yell: "We're heading out to meet Graff! Someone is gonna drop by to keep an eye on you! Don't fuck anything up!" The pair exited to the garage. The sound of doors opening and closing were heard, followed by the starting of the van's engine, which abruptly cut off into silence.

Shortly afterwards, the toilet was flushed. Gabriel walked over towards the guest bedroom, then lied down in its doorway and promptly fell asleep. It had been a long day, and it was finally quiet.

« CAV-001 | CAVALCADE | CAV-003 »

Footnotes
1. "Scientifically proven cooler than you. Send me questions on

math & philosophy. Not reptile ghost in acid box."
2. "I'll take the revolution to another dimension. Pay close attention."
3. "funny mems and corny joaks 24/7/420"

An Inspection

Arthur Rodrick gazed up at the massive building before him from underneath his umbrella. Giant glowing letters that read "Prometheus Labs, Inc." Arthur thought it a little odd to pick such an unprofessional font, but had to admit it fit the Greek styles present in the organization's name and their facilities' architecture. Once under the colonnade, Arthur collapsed his umbrella and pushed at the double doors.

He couldn't quite put his finger on the reason, but something about the building put him off. He hadn't experienced the feeling until he had entered, but the moment he passed through the doorway he couldn't help but feel something was different, somehow.

The rounded lobby led off into several different subsections of the facility, keypads and card scanners the only acting guards. Sitting in the center of the room was a receptionist, nose deep in a book. A researcher sat on the edge of the receptionist's desk, a clipboard in one hand and a very bored look on her face.

Arthur's footsteps echoed more times than he thought they really had any right to. The two women looked to him with bored indifference. "Hello. My name is Arthur Rodrick, I'm from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration."

This was not entirely a lie. Arthur was legally employed by OSHA, though he arguably paid businesses less visits than most of his coworkers. This was due to the fact that Arthur paid visits to very specific types of organizations. Those designated as a possible cause for worry for the Foundation. The researcher was probably aware of all this, but for the sake of classification he kept to the OSHA name.

"Oh, finally!" the researcher exclaimed. She launched herself off the desk and nearly jabbed Arthur in the chest when she offered her hand. "Alissa Grey. Welcome to our main facility. Come on, there's

plenty to show you."

She led him off through one of the various doors, sliding her ID card to open any doors along the way. Arthur half-listened to her prattle on amicably about their various destinations, his attention drawn to the ancient Greek artwork on the walls. The portraits watched him with equal interest. He experimented with a wave and a goddess gave him a short nod in return.

The staff lounge was a small but cozy room, half of it devoted to armchairs and couches facing a large TV. Arthur gave the rooms a quick inspection and found everything satisfactory save for a large black object against one wall. It had hundreds of round buttons on it, small plaques next to each naming various junk foods. At the bottom was a small reservoir, as if to catch whatever the thing produced.

"Can you… explain to me what I'm looking at?"

Alissa looked up from her bag of chips. "Vending machine. Go ahead, it's free."

Arthur hit the button for a package of cookies and waited. After a moment a soft thud signaled the machine had properly vended. He checked the expiration date.

"This expired fifteen years ago."

"Huh? Oh, right, right. This isn't a normal vending machine. You see, this machine does not contain time. We've removed all the time from it, via secret hush hush science. And so now the internal mechanisms basically operate outside of traditional spacetime."

Ignoring the impossibility of it, Arthur tried focusing on a possible reason. "You've… removed time… from a vending machine."

"Right! It has no internal concept of past or future, it only exists in the now. So by interacting with the outer interface we're able to access an infinite supply of foodstuffs that were loaded into the machine in our past or future. We actually use the same technology for our video surveillance system. It's very handy."

Arthur ripped open the packaging and took a cautious nibble, then a

wary bite, then he shoved what remained of the cookie in his mouth. Arthur drew a second cookie from the package as he stared at the machine. On one hand, it violated causality. He was fairly sure the Foundation was fond of causality. On the other, he now spotted a plaque naming a snack that had stopped being produced in his childhood.

"How exactly does this work?" Arthur asked through his second cookie.

"Told you, sir, it's a secret."

Arthur swallowed. He knew what that must mean. "It's anomalous."

Alissa only smiled.

"How many have been produced?"

"Don't know. But we're not selling them, if that's what you're worried about. Purely an in-house commodity."

"Is it safe?"

"It has to be, doesn't it?" She pressed one of the buttons for a donut brand Arthur didn't recognize. Once dispensed, she showed him the packaging. It expired in thirty years. "The inside experiences its entire existence at once. If it were to ever break, it'd always be broken. There are some defunct ones, but they're always found immediately without any issues."

"You're playing with fire here, Dr. Grey. You say this stays behind your doors, but what of your other projects? The masses aren't ready for this sort of thing."

Alissa smirked and responded, "Are you aware of our name, Mister Rodrick?"

He wondered if that particular exchange was common during these inspections. She certainly looked proud enough of herself to suggest otherwise. Arthur nodded and gestured for the lounge exit.

"Shall we continue?" he asked, slightly humored.

As she showed him around, Arthur came to the conclusion that these people were working under a very different rule set than the rest of the world. The scientists would explain how something worked, using logic Arthur either couldn't follow or outright knew was scientifically inaccurate. But their projects worked, their technology seemed safe. Safe enough as far as the Foundation was concerned, at least. He was particularly intrigued by the teleport device they were working on. He watched for almost twenty minutes, men and women appearing and reappearing from atop a platform.

"So, basically," Alissa said as she began to brief him on the final stop. "This stems from the technology we used for the vending machine. She opened up a cabinet and pulled out what seemed to be two old astronaut suits. "With the established fact that machinery can function in a place without time, we reasoned that organics can function in a place without space. So we developed this void chamber."

"I don't understand," Arthur admitted as they began to don the suits. That did not seem like a very sound conclusion to reach.

"Turns out we were wrong." Arthur wasn't sure if she had heard him, but he felt somewhat vindicated as he shoved a leg into the suit. "You need air to breathe, and obviously a void doesn't have that. So we took up the design of old diving suits. One abyss is like another, we figured, and so long as we had air we'd be fine."

"Okay…" Arthur was surprised how light the suit was. He slid his arms into the sleeves and stood. Even the giant dome of a helmet was easy to lift.

"So we combined the technologies." Alissa's voice was an odd, muffled sound from within her helmet. "Using timeless air strapped to our backs, we can enter the void. It's a bit disorienting, but you get used to it. And because the speed of an object's motion is inversely proportional to the viscosity of the medium, and we're in a vacuum, everything moves super-fast."

Arthur thought for a moment. Prometheus Labs and the Foundation had worked under NASA for a brief time, when it was thought that reaching space would require something a tad abnormal. "Wait, this

is the technology from Project Apollo, isn't it?"

"Right." Alissa's voice leaked from the small speakers in his helmet. "See, buying up area for new labs is expensive. And digging down isn't always the best option. So we started the Void Program. We weren't sure how to solve the whole collapsing void issue, and then you let us play with that little cuboid thingy to simulate outer space and it became super easy."

"You made it seem like you have more than one of these 'void' chambers. How is that possible if we have the only SCP-184 contained?"

Alissa was quiet for a moment, her face hidden behind the dark glass of the helmet. "That's classified."

"Of course. My apologies."

Entering the void chamber required them to go through several air locks. It was a monotonous progress, involving little more than waiting to move on to the next room so they could wait some more. Until the final room, which contained nothing before them but an empty archway. The black nothingness inside and beyond the arch unsettled Arthur like nothing he had seen thus far, but Alissa strode toward it as confidently as the suit allowed.

"Now, Arthur," she said when she stopped at the threshold. "Entering this place is a bit of a trying experience. The parts of your body that enter are accelerating at a significantly greater rate than the rest of you. It's not fun, and you'll freak out because suddenly it looks like your arm is gone. But you just have to keep going. Don't stop, and you'll be fine."

And then she stepped into the darkness, an invisible curtain wrapping around her. Then Arthur was alone in the room. This seemed something that was not safe. Or sane, really. But he knew that laboratories were dangerous places. He also knew danger would only truly present itself if you broke away from procedures. So he took a deep breath, held it, and ran into the nothingness.

Ouroboric Tango

Jessie Moon sat on her bed with her back against the wall and her legs splayed out before her. Textbooks she hadn't touched in weeks were strewn across the floor. Her bedroom's unlit lamp cast warm, soothing darkness over her. She closed her eyes and felt her mind stretch like a cat in the sun. Out there, beyond the walls of this tiny house where only she lived, people were moving and horns were blaring and the stars above whirled about the sky, but that was out there, and this was in here. In here…

Jessie Moon scooted over a foot to the side, making some room in her bed. She stared expectantly at the empty space next to her.

A second later, another Jessie Moon appeared.

The other's face was turned, so Jessie could not discern the expression on her face. There was silence between them, unbearable silence that strained at her mind, so she said, "Hey. What's up?"

When the other didn't respond immediately, Jessie craned her head around to try to see the time on the other's watch. The other pushed her head away. "Cut it out, jackass," she muttered.

Jessie stuck out her tongue. "It's not my fault that you're making the game boring in the first place."

"This is…hardly a game. And whatever's my fault—"

"Is definitely *not* my fault. Present me is present me and future me is future me and present me is not future me."

"You're being so obnoxious," the other said.

Jessie raised her hands in the air. "Hey, come on. Look, we don't know why this is happening, right?"

“It happens…”

“Because it happens. We’re stuck here…at least until I go back, and you already know when that happens, don’t you? The point is that you don’t need to be so pissy. We make the most out of where we are and what is happening where we are. Isn’t that exciting?”

An odd tension began to drain slowly out of the other’s face. Finally, she smiled. “All right, then,” the other said. She leaned over and rested her head on Jessie’s shoulder. “What do you want to do?”

The other was warm.

"In this instant, or more…generally?" Jessie asked.

"The second one."

“I don’t know."

“I guess I have to help you out, then?” the other said.

Jessie giggled. “Guess so.”

The other said, “We want to know more about ourselves. Reasonable?”

“Reasonable,” Jessie said.

“We want to know all about what we’re made of, and what stuff is inside us, and where that stuff came from, and what that stuff’s gonna be,” the other said. “Right?”

“Yeah.”

“So one day we figure all that out…”

“Mhm.”

The other tilted her head. “What happens after that, then?”

Jessie didn’t answer the other’s question. She had neither an origin nor an end; they blended together into one Ouroboric mix. She understood, more than anyone else ever would, that she was

something that did not have a cause, that she was arbitrary and yet necessary. What would it mean to understand that? To understand the agent-less will of the universe? And once it was understood, *what then?*

“We’re afraid,” the other said.

“*You’re* afraid.”

The other started stroking Jessie’s hair. For a moment, she contemplated shoving the other away and ignoring her and just going back right then. But that was not what was going to happen—the universe hardly moved on the pettiness of one girl—so she relaxed.

“Fine, then,” Jessie said. “What am I afraid of?”

There was the world, spinning and revolving peacefully in space. There were people on that world, and there was her. She saw the timeline of her life explode outwards in spirals and curves and circles that turned in on themselves.

She saw at once her past, when she was ignorant in innocence, and then the shattering of innocence in the Revelation—

It had not been Revelation when she had realized that she could twist the world with a focused will. Anybody could know that. Revelation was when she understood that the world would only be twisted in a very specific way for no reason at all, that she and humanity and the world would only ever follow one path.

She saw her future, and in it she saw the emblem of the Foundation.

Jessie closed her eyes. “I know my future, don’t I? I…I can see myself behind the Foundation’s walls. This is what happens. What is there to be afraid of?”

“You’re not afraid of the Foundation,” the other said.

“Of course not. If I were, I would’ve run and joined the Hand, right?”

“But you are afraid.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jessie said. “But it doesn’t make sense! I know everything, but I don’t know anything. That’s the best possible way to be, isn’t it? I can see what happens, but I can’t see who I am, or what I’ll think, and I can see what I’ll *do* and what I’ll *be* but not… not what the meaning of that being is. Isn’t that exciting? I should be excited, shouldn’t I?”

The other nodded. “It’s…unbelievably exciting.”

“I know *exactly* what’s going to happen, for me and for humanity and for the world…and I’ve accepted all of it. And I know the richness of experience, I can—I can taste it, I’m salivating, just waiting for it to come over me! So then…”

Jessie opened her eyes.

“Why am I afraid?” she asked.

The other smiled. “Oh. Oh, huh. I understand now.”

“You already know the stupid answer.”

“Yeah,” the other said. “Yeah, don’t worry, this ends…this ends in a way that is simultaneously satisfactory and unsatisfactory.”

“Literally everything is satisfactory and unsatisfactory. You’re satisfied by the things you like and unsatisfied by the things you don’t. We are just dropping brilliant insights left and right.”

The other frowned and punched Jessie in the arm. “That’s really annoying, especially when I’m not the one saying it.”

“More brilliant insights.”

“Shut up,” the other said. “Look…listen, all right?”

The smile crept off Jessie’s face. “All right.”

She looked into the other’s eyes. It was not at all like looking into a mirror. That was examining her imitation—her simulation. But the other existed both inside and outside herself. In the other’s eyes, she could see all the parts of herself that she thought she knew, and

yet she could also see emotion and thought that she would not be able to identify internally. How could “future her” be so different when she was from only the immediate future?

The other said, “If you know everything that’s going to happen to you, then aren’t you only a few steps away from knowing yourself? From removing all the mystery or potential for surprise that your own soul holds? We've both embraced extreme determinism. So if we've spoiled the ending…”

The other chuckled and wiped her eyes. “It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly,” Jessie said.

“Fine,” the other said. “I mean, once we spoil the ending, what’s left to discover?”

Jessie felt the line of her life unfold and stretch before her. She averted her gaze.

“What kind of…boring person are we going to become, do you think?” the other asked. “What happens to us once we know everything we’ve wanted to know? Do we die the slow death? We wake up one morning, and being us is no longer worth being because every corner of our mind is mapped out?”

Jessie felt the dark walls of the room box and define the boundaries of her being. Inside of her mind, she felt a voice cry out as if on a mountaintop. The voice wanted to reach the very roof of the sky and the very depths of the most mysterious seas—it wanted to *be* everything that it could be. It wanted to *exist.* But the only thing the voice could fill was this room, small and peaceful and dark. She had to be humble in her omniscience and omnipotence.

Others might have said that she had a choice: to be this humble god, or to be the sort of god that was a rampant Will imposing itself on a soft, pliable world. But she *was* the first sort of god, so she knew that it wasn’t a choice. It was a question of definitions. She did not act. She *was.* She already knew everything that she was going to be, and the rampant Will had no place in her future.

She had to be satisfied filling the room.

“One day,” the other said, “we’ll know ourselves entirely. Then we will have…a choice.”

“We never have choices.”

“A pseudo-choice, then. We can be bored with ourselves and die the slow death, or…or it’ll be beautiful and wonderful. But I don’t know how. The thing is—do—do you understand what we have to do?”

Jessie nodded. “We have to accept that we will one day know ourselves.”

Now, Jessie understood.

“And you know what we have to do in order to do that,” the other said.

Jessie exhaled slowly as her vision detached itself from linear temporality. Once again, she saw the end of the line. As the image of the Foundation’s symbol crept into her mind, she saw herself in a room, closed in, unable to move…

…waiting…

And happy.

She did not understand. No matter how much she looked, she did not understand what experiencing that was like.

“We have to be taken in by the Foundation,” Jessie said.

“Yes,” the other said. “And we have to—we will—set the necessary events in motion to have that happen. In an hour, we have a talk with Carmen.”

In the darkness, Jessie could hear the other’s breathing, and she could smell her own shampoo on the other’s hair. She was in the company of herself and could not be more content.

“Erase my memory,” the other said.

“What the fuck?”

“This was cheating. Conversations with myself to learn more about myself are cheating. And that aside, it’s not even causally open, which basically means it’s bullshit,” the other said. “Just wipe the details. I’ll remember to set the end into motion, but I don’t want to remember this conversation.”

“What the *fuck?* I’m not going to wipe you! That’s so fucked up. I mean, *I* don’t want to be wiped, and if I wipe you then in my future I’ll get wiped. No thanks.”

“It’ll be a game. Maybe one day, we’ll figure out that you wiped me—because you’re going to wipe me—”

“—yeah, I know that I wipe you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still be weirded out by it.”

“—let me *finish,* Christ. I’ll figure out that you wiped me—I wiped myself—and we can have a game to see if future me can undo past me’s—your—wipe. It’ll be fun.”

Jessie rubbed her eyes. “Are we really doing this?”

“Yeah. You know we don’t like cheating.”

“…*fine,*” Jessie said. “God, now I know why you were so moody when you first came here. You had to do this stupid thing, didn’t you?"

“Well, I didn't understand then. But now I do.”

Jessie rolled away from the other. “Man, go fuck yourself,” she said. After a moment’s pause, she said, "I’ve applied the wipe. It’s time-delayed. In ten seconds…”

“So hurry up and go back,” the other said. “To have this conversation."

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “Fine.”

She disappeared.

The other smiled. A few seconds later, her specific memory of the last ten minutes was destroyed.

There were two steaming slices of pepperoni pizza on Jessie Moon's dining room table. Jessie took small, careful nibbles out of one of them. The other one sat, alone in the darkness of the unlit room, across from her.

Jessie took a sip of Sprite to wash down the taste of grease and cheese. She snapped her fingers, and an Italian woman materialized in the seat with the lonely pizza slice.

"Hello, Carmen," Jessie said.

Carmen blinked a few times in surprise as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the kitchen. "Sorry, uh…Jessie? Would you mind turning on the lights?"

"Yeah, I would."

Carmen laughed. "Well, that's fine. How are you doing, Jessie?"

"I thought I had a designation."

"Mhm, you do. You're SCP-Black Box. But you're Jessie to me," Carmen said. She took a large bite out of the pizza. In between mouthfuls, she said, "I mean, come on. I'm not going to dehumanize you when I'm a guest in your house."

Jessie sighed. "You do, however, fully intend on jailing me for life."

"Of course," Carmen said. A wide, warm smile stretched across her face. "That's a given. Thanks for the pizza, by the way."

The floor creaked as Carmen leaned back in her chair. "May I?" she asked, reaching for the Sprite bottle.

"Go ahead."

"Thanks." Carmen grabbed a plastic cup, filled it with Sprite, and began to drink. Jessie stared at her in silence until she finished with

a sigh.

“So,” Carmen said, putting the cup down. “You called because you wanted to tell me something, so that I could relay that to the O5s, so that events pan out in a way you want them to. I’m afraid I can’t quite tell *what* that way is, but, nonetheless—“

“Carmen,” Jessie said. “Carmen, listen. The Alpha-1 ‘I know things that you haven’t told me’ shtick is a lot less impressive to people like me.”

“I’m not trying to impress, Jessie.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. This conversation should have been finished in thirty seconds. Until this moment, Jessie had not been entirely certain if she was still capable of hate. Carmen was at least useful enough to rekindle those emotions.

“The hypocrisy of the Foundation astounds me. You guys in the Red Right Hand hop yourselves up on fucking HALMAS, which is *definitely* anomalous—”

Carmen laughed. “Memetoamnestics is a perfectly legitimate scientific discipline, Jessie,” she said.

“Okay, we’re not talking about this anymore.”

“You’re the omniscient one, Jessie, you tell me what we do and don’t do.”

The first time she had brought Carmen in for a conversation, the woman had only been surprised for a second before regaining composure. She freely admitted to being of the Foundation’s Red Right Hand and openly stated her intention to conduct surveillance. It was infuriating.

Jessie thought to herself that Carmen was wrong in trying to justify the Foundation. The Foundation was the Foundation; nowhere was there any guarantee that it had to remain internally consistent. She thought this, but she did not say it.

“On May 10th, 2016, Seattle becomes temporally corrupted,” she

said. “It’s a betrayal by Sedna Prewitt, Director of Site 76. She defects to the Chaos Insurgency.”

Carmen whistled. “Wow. Heavy stuff. Are you going to move out before that happens?”

“I think I’ll stay.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because if you sufficiently prepare for Seattle’s corruption, which you will, a certain chain of events which I will not divulge eventually ends in my capture by the Foundation. Which is my ultimate goal.”

“*Really,*” Carmen said. She raised an eyebrow. “If that’s the ultimate goal, why don’t you just come with me?”

“Because I don’t want to go into containment,” Jessie said. “The universe, by and large, does not paradox itself into incoherency. I don’t do things that I don’t want to do because causality says so. Maybe the idea of causality *makes me* want to do something, but that’s not the case this time. All I want to do is experience my life, and an intrinsic part of my life involves being contained by the Foundation.”

Carmen laughed. “Oh, okay. Any more information? Specifics?”

“Just…prepare. You have six months. And you don’t stop Prewitt.”

“Of course, Jessie. I’m not an idiot.”

Jessie sighed. “Carmen, why do our talks always have to devolve into petty, passive-aggressive arguments? Look, I…I like people. I like friends. I wonder, sometimes, what it would be like to be friends with you, and I think it would be kind of nice.”

A vague feeling of satisfaction settled inside Jessie when she saw the smile on Carmen’s face waver. She blinked once, and then her expression was radiant again.

“I don’t know you, Jessie. I don’t understand you. Let alone being friends with you…I told you earlier what I’m supposed to do to what I

don’t understand.”

Jessie and Carmen sat in silence for a while more.

“All right, fine,” Jessie said. “Go tell the O5s. Have fun. Don’t let the Foundation fall."

“The Foundation will never fall. You know that.”

“I thought I was the omniscient one.”

“I have some vision of my own, Jessie. Why do you think the Red Right Hand is so loyal to the Foundation after what they’ve done to us? We ‘hopped up’ on HALMAS, we read between the lines of the universe, and we picked the winning side. The Foundation is a universal, immortal constant."

“Go home, Carmen.”

“Good night, Jessie. Thanks again for the food.”

The door creaked shut behind Carmen, and peace was restored to Jessie Moon’s tiny suburban Seattle house.

Jessie walked out of her dining room and back into her bedroom. She peeked through the blinds and let moonlight cast her face into shadow. The moon overwhelmed her and her anger at Carmen with its indifference.

A thrill rushed through her body. It was like the thrill of the illusion of choice. Changing what would happen—what she *knew* would happen—was impossible. But now, she was living through those events—feeling the river of time run over her skin—and wasn’t that exhilarating? Through being, she had all the power in the world.

Jessie flopped onto her bed. Her eyes were already growing adjusted to the faint moonlight. She stretched her arms and legs out and felt her body settle into itself. A long sigh escaped her lips.

“Carmen is Carmen and you are you,” Jessie said. “Carmen is that she is Carmen. And she…even she…is beautiful in that way and in herself.”

She would be the humble god.

Slowly, Jessie drifted to sleep.

« CAV-003 | CAVALCADE | CAV-005 »

Stuck

Thaddeus Xyank had spent the last thirty minutes reading up on the theory behind Type B XACTS and studying the blueprints. Once in a while he'd silently shaken his head, and there'd been muttering aplenty, but overall he was pleased with the work he hadn't done yet. He *had* resolved to not put that memetic trigger in. He knew it was pointless, because he would and he had, but he felt it was important to at least stand up to yourself sometimes.

When dealing with temporal anomalies on a professional level, at some point you just stopped trying to wrap your head around it, and started accepting things that made no sense whatsoever. Mostly because you felt they were probably going to make sense at some point in the future.

"I have no idea why all nine of them got activated at the same time, Dr. Xyank. From what I can see, 00315-XK-001 only calls for three of them to be active at any one time."

Simone van Oldenburg, one of his most gifted field engineers, squinted as she tried to make sense of the log she was reading. At only 24, she'd managed to become one of the Foundation's experts on Temporal Distortion Mechanics, second only to Xyank. Well, if she was completely honest, she had to admit Attie Anastasakos could kick her ass at temporal trivia too. She didn't like to admit it though, especially not to herself.

"I don't even know why these things were installed around Seattle in the first place," Simone muttered, "They're not even a thing yet."

Thaddeus pursed his lips. "Actually, they will be and they are. And they're not. I'll bring you up to speed in a moment. But you're right, three of these Type B XACTS *should* have activated. Nine of them did. And that…presents us with a bit of a problem."

Simone made a sound that held the middle ground between a sigh

and a cough. "I would say so, yes. I'd hate to be in there right now. I just hope we find a way to disable six of these babies without…"

Thaddeus finished the sentence for her: "…removing the city of Seattle from existence."

The two of them stared silently at the continually shifting skyline in the distance. They watched the Space Needle flicker in and out of existence as one XACTS-induced temporal stasis field fought for control with the other two. It was going to be a long day.

George Alan Gimbell had a lot on his plate. The 57-year-old business man had started the day fighting with his wife over the ever-growing stack of bills and the ever-dwindling amount of money coming in. Then, just as he'd gotten up to go have lunch, a call had come through from his distributor; they were filing for bankruptcy and that left Gimbell's Feline Fashion in a lurch. And to top all of that off, he was now trying to keep a straight head as the deli he was in seemed to simultaneously be a barbershop, some sort of futuristic oil refinery or something, and just that: the deli where he'd taken his lunch for the last seven years.

His last coherent memory was of trying to shut the world out as he took a bite of his freshly made BLT on rye. And then suddenly there were so many things at once. It was like someone had triple-exposed a roll of film, with the images continually fighting for dominance. The BLT had lost all taste, and George dropped it to the floor.

He breathed heavily and tried to remember his own name, but it refused to come to him, even when he took out his driver's license. The man staring back at him did not ring any bells, and he panicked. Looking around for help from those around him, George found out it wasn't just him.

The young man behind the counter was slumped over the espresso machine, a glassy look in his eyes. He was mouthing something, but George couldn't make out what it was. To his left was a group of college students, their laptops still open on the table. The kids themselves were spread on the floor, having flopped from their seats

only moments before. They looked like goldfish removed from their bowl, their mouths opening and closing without sound.

George couldn't look at them for too long; he couldn't look at anything too long. Whatever he focused on tried to inform him that it wasn't there. And then it was. And then it wasn't. Or might be, who knew.

He closed his eyes and got up. His senses were telling him he was standing on tiles, and smooth, poured concrete, and wood flooring. The stimuli were confusing on so many levels that he could feel his mind trying to shut down, as if it was opting for a coma instead of being subjected to this mockery of reality.

All he could think of was getting home to his wife, and telling her that he was going to get a normal job. That he'd sell the company and flip burgers if it meant having her beside him. Truth be told, there never had been much money to be made selling swimsuits for cats, but he was a proud man. Too proud.

He tried to fight the drowsy feeling washing over him, but when you were, and you weren't, and you might be, you really had no chance in seven hells.

George felt the side of his face hit the deli's floor, and then he was drifting off to sleep with the smell of sandwiches and kerosene in his nose, and his skin itching from the hair on the floor.

"So tell me, Simone. Do we have any idea which of these nine XACTS are linked together, and what they're temporally anchored to?"

Xyank took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Not yet, not for all three of those configurations at least. I've isolated one of them though. It's this one, the one on the Tolt-MacDonald Campground, and the one in the Puget Sound. Seems to be fixed on early spring, first decade of the twentieth century. Can't pin it down it any more accurately right now, sorry."

"That's alright. One down, two to go. Think you can manage those?"

Thaddeus felt his eyes burn.

"Actually, no. This is like trying to scrape one layer of super glue off of another, times three. I did get a message I'm sending in a few years time with a brute-forced hash to this set's temporal actuator connection IDs, but nothing for the other three. I don't really know what that means, but I don't like it one bit. I really need your help on this, Thaddeus."

If there was one thing that Thaddeus Xyank knew, it was that when the people under his direction used his first name, they were lost.

"Alright," he said and rolled up his sleeves, "We're going to need to assume that we break the other two right here and now. It's either that or we assume Seattle is lost, and I'll be damned if we let an entire city go down on my watch. Simone, I need pen, some paper and your laptop. And god help me if I find more of that crap on there."

Simone raised an eyebrow and huffed, but handed over the laptop to her superior, taking care not to cross the cables attached to its various ports.

"You might not like it, Dr. Xyank, but I enjoy reading *all* publications on temporal displacement theory, even if they directly contradict yours. But fine, delete the lot. I know where to find them again."

Thaddeus glared at her.

Kevin sat in the exact center of a bench in Mineral Springs Park and stared off into the distance. He was vaguely aware of a voice calling to him from somewhere, but it kind of got lost in all the other sensory input vying for his attention. He had no idea where he was. The park, obviously. But it also seemed to be a fireplace with a fire burning in it at the moment. And for some reason, a pig pen.

"KEVIN!"

He tried to focus and looked down at the laptop resting lopsided on

his legs.

"KEVIN!"

"Yes?"

315 closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Listen to me, Kevin. You need to keep moving. Sitting down will only make things worse."

"But I'm tired," Kevin said, and he was. He could feel his body rapidly draining of energy, and with every passing second he was becoming more confused about where and who he was.

315 paused a few seconds before speaking again, "I know you are, Kevin, but I mean it when you say you need to keep moving."

"Why? Why do I need to keep moving? Why can't I just sleep?"

315's tone seemed to change ever so slightly, but between the weird disconnection from reality Kevin was feeling, and the fog clouding his brain, he couldn't figure out exactly how it had changed, or into what.

"Because, Kevin, if you don't keep moving, there might not be anywhere to move to."

"Oh."

"What a wonderful understatement, Kevin. Now would you please pick up this laptop and make your way out of this park. And watch out for the…never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing, just get moving, Kevin."

Kevin's shoes and pants were on fire, but they weren't. Once.

A Crossing

Madame Lucia sat where she always did, gazing out her window at the impossible plain. The colors shifted. Landmarks changed as the land beneath them bubbled and bulged gently. Any sign of structure tore itself apart quickly, under a pale circle of light that moved across the sky with disturbing fluidity. Just a few steps from the door of the castle, the world became… undefined. This was raw firmament, the essence of chaos, that would remain so until something observed its patterns with an intent to change them, at which point it would collapse into logic, never capturing that same uncertainty again.

Madame Lucia quite enjoyed the view. It soothed her stomach.

Why had she thought of her stomach?

Oh, yes. It was bothering her.

She glanced at the tea cup in her hand. It was jasmine. It had been jasmine for the past several decades. She hadn't eaten yet today, so it must be the jasmine. She glared at the tea spoon which had been the source of the offending beverage. There were more of them. There should have been more of them. Her stomach was bothering her. She would ask Iago where the spoons were. Even such a mild cramp was quite intolerable for a woman of Madame's standards. She would find Iago.

With that decision made, Madame Lucia poured out her cup of tea and poured a new cup of hot water from the tumbler by her side. She then reached for the spoon which would transmute it into jasmine tea. Iago would be by soon to deliver her rat souffle. She would find him then. There was no need to lose her patience. Her stomach was bothering her.

It really was a *nice* view.

Iago dutifully collected the plumpest rats from the small pile surrounding the impressive mound of cheese. A few of them still had earrings on what remained of their heads, which he carefully removed.

The plan had worked perfectly. A small parcel of cheese had been sent off to the world in full view of Madame, while the rest was transported in secret to the coldest, plainest room in the castle (Iago's bedroom), where the rats could gorge themselves silly before being slapped into oblivion and introduced to the cheese again as an ingredient.

Iago skinned and deboned the rats with the utmost care, throwing out anything but the choicest cuts of meat. He then mixed the souffle, being sure to place all of the rat meat at the bottom in one corner of the enormous dish. Madame did not enjoy the taste of rat.

A few hours later, Iago pushed open the door to Madame's sitting room, staggering under the weight of the ramekin. He waited for Madame to speak.

"Iago."

His heart was gripped with terror instantly. He recognized the tone that Madame used when peturbed. What had he done? Was the souffle late? Had she discovered where he was keeping the cheese?

She was waiting for him to speak. She was being gracious enough to allow him to respond and he wasn't saying anything! He was keeping her waiting!

He managed to say, "Yes, Madame?"

"Iago, where are my other tea spoons?"

He swallowed. "Madame, please, you will, if you would be so kind as to desire to do so, remember the minor altercation forty-seven years ago with that small group of ruffians that found some sort of Way inside the castle?"

"Yes, of course I do. I told you to take care of it. Do you now

presume to tell me that you did not, in fact, take care of it? Are those ruffians galivanting about as we speak?" The word speak rose ever so slightly in pitch compared to the rest of them, indicating Madame's sudden indignant horror.

Iago did not hesitate. "No, of course not, dear Madame. I ejected them quickly. However, I am afraid that they managed to… to abscond with several of your tea spoons."

"I see. And, pray," she went on in a voice like honey laced with cyanide, "you thought it prudent to keep this from me until this moment? I *see*. Do you, by any chance, know the whereabouts of my spoons now, Iago?"

"Ah, in fact I do, Madame!"

"And you have not retrieved them yet because?"

"I… am so very sorry, please, Madame, but they are currently in the custody of the Philistines."

"Yes, I could have guessed as much, but which phil-"

"Er… no, dearest Madame. They are contained by… the *P*hilistines…"

There was a great silence from Madame Lucia. The cup fell to the floor and did not shatter. the half-full tumbler knocked over, the water inside unmoving. Iago did not feel his joints tightening, or his skin hardening, but he felt the oppressive force wash over him, slowly making movement more and more impossible as the single changeless moment stretched on and on…

…and then Madame got a hold of herself.

It was not that Madame Lucia *hated* humanity. Quite the contrary. She prized rarity above all, but beyond that, she valued ephemerality, impermanence, all those things that existed once and never again. Those that were both were twice rare, in space and in time. Human lives were so short by the length of eternity, and not a single one repeated itself. The ultimate value!

But then they tried to extend their lives, through memories and monuments and words. So they were philistines, not realizing what they had and throwing it away like something common such as immortality. But *they* were the worst. Capturing and sustaining all manner of one-of-a-kind things. Twice offending by preventing the disappearance of their toys, and never allowing change into the world. Keeping everything the same and boring, boring, boring! They were the worst, and so they were given the capital letter. Philistines. The most ignorant of them all.

This was unacceptable.

"Iago." Madame Lucia beckoned with her hand.

Iago approached the figure shining in the chair, knowing never to get close enough to see its face, settling for admiring the glimmering white waterfall of hair. "Y-yes, Madame?"

"You have not been among philistines for many years, have you?"

"Centuries, dear Madame."

"This will be rectified. I am sending you to retrieve my tea spoons from the Philistines."

"Me? But, but, Madame, please, sweet Madame-"

"I will hear nothing but 'yes' for my gracious gift, Iago. The armory is at your disposal. You
leave within the hour. Mind you get *all* of them. But first, you will deliver my souffle."

Iago, shaking, set down the souffle by his mistress, averting his eyes as he did so. Madame Lucia tasted it.

"Ugh. Far too cold."

Iago arrived in the world, landing in the exact same spot where he had left it, hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately, it appeared that in the interim, somebody had flattened out the land somewhat and built a cafe on it. Yielding to gravity, Iago dropped five feet into a large

bowl of cabbage stew, splashing the man sitting in front of it, who immediately started screaming.

Eventually, several cooks came out of the kitchen to see what all the fuss was about. Iago looked around the deserted room wildly and spotted a recessed balcony where several patrons were staring at the commotion. He lowered his voice by several social classes, pointed, and yelled, "Oi! That bloke has a knife! Someone stop him!"

The cooks hefted various kitchen utensils and ran for some stairs while the second-floor diners looked around uncertainly. Iago hauled himself out of the bowl and ran out the door, while the rather sheepish man in the tweed jacket cried, "My cabbage stew!" and continued trying to clean himself off.

Iago found the Philistines' base eventually, simply by wandering through the town he was in. It was incredible, he mused. It wasn't that nobody saw the men in suits walking into the apparently abandoned store. It just didn't seem to register with them in any meaningful way. There was nothing supernatural deflecting their attention from the unlocked door, nothing keeping them from noticing the suspiciously bulky-looking vagrants hanging around the place. The castle's small armory had a few devices for detecting tricks like that. They were just completely incurious. There was a collection of rare, world-changing, life-changing artifacts hiding in plain sight and doing a very shoddy job of it, and they *never even took notice.*

Iago grunted to himself. Philistines.

There was a small slot that may have just been a crack in the wall on the far end of the store. Iago inserted a gold card engraved with eye-watering patterns and waited. The machine clicked and buzzed in greedy pleasure, and a door swung out of the wall, satisfied with the bribe.

Iago came to a crossing and headed down the corridor he would have pegged as least likely to end up at the section where the anomalies were stored, knowing how these sort of things went. He turned out to be wrong. However, after several dead ends, and close calls, he found a small room with cardboard boxes full of laminated

cards on lanyards. Visitor passes. Iago grabbed one of the important looking ones and nipped back to the crossing, amazed at how paradoxically paranoid and trusting the Philistines could be.

Eventually he found himself at a security door, which his pass wouldn't let him access. He searched his pockets for something that could help him and came up with nothing. *The armory is at your disposal,* Madame had said. Well, that was fantastic, except that there hadn't been any need for an armory for centuries, and so it was horribly understocked. The trick with the gold card had actually been "it," as far as any anomalous help went. Iago cursed under his breath, turned, and started searching for another way in.

He found it rather quickly, in the form of a pale-faced young researcher who shook just a bit every time someone looked at her. She was obviously new, holding her clearance badge in one hand, like a shield, ready to be raised if anyone threatened her. Iago set his face in an expression of haughty confidence, and strode over to her.

"Excuse me, miss…"

"Marp! Sedna Prewitt, s-sir."

"Yes. My name is Dr. Jones. I'm a consultant from Site-19. Your Site Administrator Samson has sent for me to examine one of your artifacts." He flashed his purloined visitor's pass.

"Uh, nice to meet you, Dr., um, Jones. I'm Sedna Prewitt." The girl was obviously frightened out of her wits. Iago felt a rather guilty thrill at that, seeing in her the awe that Madame inspired in him on a regular basis.

"Yes," he sighed. "You already said."

"Oh! Right! I'm so sorry, sir."

"In any case," he went on, "I have come to evaluate SCP-1067, but the site security has neglected to provide me with the appropriate level of clearance. Please conduct me to someone that has the clearance and be on your way, young lady." He might have been

laying it on too thick, but it had the desired effect. The girl straightened up indignantly.

"Excuse me, sir, but I happen to be a Level 2 researcher tasked with maintaining several Safe-Class SCP-Objects, including the one you're after. I am completely capable of *conducting* you to the object myself." She shrunk back slightly, suddenly aware that she may have just crossed the line with a perceived superior.

Iago showed no sign of annoyance, and simply said, "Lead on, then, Miss Prewitt."

Madame Lucia sat in her chair, sipping tea and enjoying the view. The chaos outside was still so… invigorating, even after so long. She couldn't bring herself to look away anymore, not for too long. And why would she want to? Why would she want to turn her back on the infinite possibility, and remember the cage of inevitability that she was forced to remain in? Here was endless potential, that would remain endless as long as nobody actually used it. The disorder swam through her, and she welcomed it in, drinking it in like a drug, which it was. To one such as Madame, it was a drug. And all drugs have downsides.

The chaos was the opposite of everything that Madame represented. It slithered through her, slowly wearing away the power that sustained her. Already her mind had started to go fuzzy at the edges. It was barely noticeable, and it would remain so for a very long time, but already that rock-solid core of power was beginning to erode. There would be consequences.

Madame Lucia didn't know this, and she may or may not have cared if she did. What was reality to dreams? What was inevitability to possibility? And soon Iago would return with her teaspoons. Soon she would raise her glass to kind Chaos, and it would be… glorious.

A few minutes later, Iago was standing with Sedna in front of a wall of lockers. She carefully unlocked one, and stepped back to allow Iago to open the door.

"Why don't you open it yourself?" he asked.

"Administrator Samson hasn't cleared me for testing with SCP-1067, sir," she replied.

"But, I'm here and I have been cleared."

She shrugged nervously. "The rules are the rules, sir."

Iago rolled his eyes and opened the locker. Resting in a vacuum sealed bag, there was a medium sized box bound with soft brown leather. Iago breathed slowly and began to remove the bag.

"Thank you, Miss Prewitt," he said. "I need to take this with me back to Site-19, and my flight leaves soon, so I'll take my leave."

The young woman started. "I'm sorry, sir? Foundation regulations state that all transportation of Safe-class anomalies require a minimum of four guards."

"Oh, this little thing won't be any trouble. I can find my way out, thank you."

She frowned. "I should probably tell Administrator Samson."

Iago started getting annoyed. "Really, it's only a Safe-Class, Miss Prewitt."

"Nevertheless, the rules say that at least-"

"Never mind the damn rules. I need to catch my flight! Madame requires her tea." Iago clapped his hand over his mouth as Sedna's eyes grew wide. She tensed to run when Iago dropped the box and grabbed her with both hands and drew her close to him.

Iago wasn't an idiot, after surviving so long with Madame Lucia. He was fully aware that his idolization and devotion to her was not entirely his own, he just didn't care. It was something in the voice, and Iago had learned to replicate it fairly well. He did so now.

"Listen to me, Sedna. Your rules don't mean anything. There's no point in calling for the guards because they'll fail to catch me. Your

entire organization is flawed, and the very fact that I'm standing here is proof of that. There is nothing you can do. Eventually it will all come down, and there's no point in trying to prevent it, because you're nothing but Philistines. Remember, there is nothing you can do to stop me."

With that, he picked up the box and walked quickly away. Sedna Prewitt stood still for a minute, a dazed expression on her face, then shook herself and ran for the nearest breach alarm.

Iago had just passed the crossing when the alarm began to sound. Damn! He must not have had the technique as down pat as he thought! He broke into a run, and it wasn't long before he heard people on his trail. They sounded large, unfriendly, and unwilling to compromise.

He made it to the door of the abandoned store when he found that he had been locked in. The footfalls were getting closer. Iago looked around for another way out, cursed, and activated his return ticket.

He appeared at the back entrance of the castle, just at the edge of the undefined land. He panted heavily, relieved. He removed the box from the bag as he entered the kitchen, wanting to clean the spoons before presenting them to Madame.

As Iago suspected, the spoons had been marked. As he had not suspected, there were only three in the box, when there should have been five.

Mind you get all of them, Madame had said, in no uncertain terms. Iago contemplated what would happen if he returned with less than all of them. He gulped, and set down the box. He waited several hours in his room, while the Philistines ran about like rats looking for the intruder, thinking about where the other two spoons could be. Those Serpent's Hand ruffians had stolen them. He should probably start with them.

He exited the castle. Surely the Philistines had calmed down by now, he thought. It was time to search for a Way. With that, Iago disappeared, back into the world.

Somewhere else, possibly very far away, there was a man, sitting in a barely furnished room, looking out of the window at some bland little courtyard that passed for a garden in this cold, clinical world. He had little choice in the matter. And this was astonishing, because, until recently, he had had no choice whatsoever. A record player sat in the corner, from which emerged the crooning voice of Ozzie Nelson.

Say nighty-night and kiss me.

There was a security camera in the man's room, monitoring for changes.

Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me.

The camera was not able to detect the faint movement in one of his loafers as his toe rose and fell, for the first time in decades.

While I'm alone and blue as can be,

Surprise flickered across the man's eyes. Then confusion. Then wistfulness. Then, his mouth turned up at one corner so very slightly. It was barely noticeable, and would remain so for a very long time, but already, his bonds were starting to break.

Robert Chetford began tapping his toe along to the music.

Dream a little dream of me.

« CAV-006 | CAVALCADE | CAV-008 »

Cave Paintings

In a barren mountain range in northern Europe is a secluded cave.

Deep inside is a wide chamber that appears to have been used in ancient rituals. The walls of the roughly circular space are densely covered in cave paintings. At first glance, they seem much like those found in other caves in that part of Europe, rendered in red and brown ochres.

Look closely, however, and you will see that the most common figures depicted are subtly non-human. They are humanoid, but slightly hunched, and while it is hard to be sure owing to the primitive style of the art, each figure appears to have two short, conical horns on its head, and a hint of a tail.

Look more closely still, and you will find some more traditionally drawn human figures. They are being hunted by the others, run through with spears, battered with stone axes. In some scenes the horned figures appear to be roasting humans over open fires, or feasting on human-looking limbs.

The paintings are disquieting, but they are just old pictures. The scenes they depict happened countless years ago, if they even happened at all. A determined traveller seeking shelter from a blizzard might decide to ignore the paintings and make camp. He may even light a fire.

A well-used firepit lies at the centre of the room, slightly raised on a natural mound. Should a fire be lit there, wavering shadows will be cast onto the painted walls. For many, seeing their own silhouette superimposed on those eerie paintings will be the last straw, driving them to try their luck outside with the snow.

Others will stay.

Sometimes, nothing will happen. These lucky travellers will emerge

the next morning, haggard from a night filled with half-remembered nightmares, anxious but alive.

Other times, shadows will move on those walls, shadows cast by nobody present in the room. The wavering firelight will blur their outlines, make them hard to pick out, and some observers may believe them to be a trick of the light. Watch closely, though, and you will see that the shadows resemble hunched figures, perhaps with small horns, and maybe a hint of a stubby tail behind them.

These figures will gravitate toward the shadows of those who are taking shelter in the cave. They may appear to stand over their sleeping forms. They may appear to be holding weapons, like spears or rough axes.

Often, a lone traveller sheltering in the cave will never be seen or heard from again. Their fate will remain unknown.

However, those travelling in a group will be woken by screams in the night. They will look for the source of the screams and find that one of their number is missing, their bedroll empty. If they happen to look at just the right place on the wall, they may see the wavering shadows of figures who are not present in the room, or at least not visible.

The fire will be low and red, so the shadows dim and soft-edged, but it will appear that a struggling form is being speared and clubbed by multiple assailants, and then dragged away, out of the circle of firelight.
The screams will fade slowly, seeming to sink into the rocks themselves.

And is that a new cave painting on the wall the next morning? Surely not - the ochre it is painted in is just as old and dry as all the rest. No, no, that picture of a man being gutted by horned figures must have always been there.

Caveat Emptor

Michaelson's coughing racked his wasted frame. He brought his handkerchief up to his mouth and hacked until his weak lungs stopped trying to clear themselves. Blood spotted the white fabric in places, some fresh, some dried. He didn't care about the blood. Absentmindedly, his hand touched his bald head, fingers searching for hair that was no longer there. It was stupid, really. Lung failure had become a part of life long after the hair loss, but he missed his locks more than he missed a properly functioning respiratory system.

The doctors had given him six months, and he'd taken three years, but now it was all just coming apart. He was getting steadily worse, and the cancer just wouldn't go away this time. It wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair at all. He was thirty-five for fuck's sake! There were so many things he had yet to do. There was a lot of life left for him to live, and he'd never submit to illness, not when he had any kind of way out. Michaelson was determined to be great. He wouldn't let anything, not his so-called peers, not his superiors, not even death itself take that greatness from him. It had taken quite a while to set his plan in motion, but now all of his work was going to pay off. He didn't even care about the price anymore. Anything was better than the sick feeling of knowing he would die before forty, unaccomplished, nothing at all remarkable about him to be remembered. As he pressed the series of buttons in the observation booth that brought in the separate pieces of his salvation, another fit of coughing tore through his chest. It was worse than the last one, and this time, his handkerchief came away with more than a few spots of blood.

Researcher Michaelson shuffled through the testing room door. Somewhere, a silent alarm had gone off warning… someone. A failsafe. Even when testing was scheduled ahead of time, that alarm went off. It had taken a lot of work to get even a hazy idea of who the alarm warned. If he was right, then he had successfully disabled

it. If he was wrong, well, he would have time enough for this. Hopefully he could make his deal and be gone before security arrived. The cameras had already been rendered useless, and his heart pumped faster with fear. It was all well and good to go about preparations, but this was the real deal. Being discovered now would mean death. Admittedly, it would be a much faster death than what his own treacherous body had in store for him.

Placing a shaking hand on the top of the straight-backed chair, Michaelson slumped down into it. Within seconds, there was someone sitting across the desk from him. It looked remarkably like the salesman who had fast talked him into his first piece of shit car years ago. His blond hair was slicked back severely, and a welcoming smile danced across pale lips.

"Mr. Michaelson! How pleasant to see you. What can I offer you today?" The voice that came from the creature was a perfect facsimile of the salesman, down to his smooth baritone. It leaned back in its chair, rocking the elegant piece of furniture back on two legs. "Perhaps the love of a beautiful woman? Or no, you're an educated man, perchance you'd like all the knowledge of a P.h.D in Applied Physics? I'd be happy to offer you just about anything."

Michaelson didn't have time for this. "No, I don't want either of those. I need you to heal my body and make it live longer than normal, and it needs to be done immediately!"

The entity's smile took on a bit of a melancholy cast. "Longer life, hmm? It's been quite awhile since I've had someone request that one. And no one has ever been willing to pay the price. Strange, considering how much you frail creatures value your existence." A flawless mask of regretful reluctance passed across its face. "Well, in any case, I'm afraid the price for that is quite steep indeed. I'm sure we can work out some-"

He was in no mood for haggling. Finally, the means to be well again was within his grasp, and the thing was wasting his time. "Do I look like I give a damn?! I don't care what abstract shit you take from me, just heal my body!"

Shrugging, the entity replied serenely, "As you wish. I'll draw up the

contract."

Abruptly, two drawers on the desk opened of their own accord, and a few pieces of creamy parchment flew out of one, while a stylized golden pen rocketed from the other. The pen set to writing independently, furiously scratching clause after clause. Michaelson almost salivated at the sight. At last, he was going to be free of his illness, he was going to run again. Perhaps, most importantly he'd finally be able to earn the recognition he deserved. He wouldn't be sad Michaelson, the dying, pointless researcher. He'd be Michaelson the Triumphant, victor over sickness, brilliant doctor, accomplished SCP researcher. They would pin medals to his chest and sing his praises. He could see it all in his mind, and it was glorious.

As suddenly as it had begun, the pen ceased its motion and fell limply to the desk. The entity leaned back forward, the legs of its throne landing with a soft click. It pushed the very last page of the contract across the desk and slid the pen along after it. Its finger rested gently on a blank line. "If you'd please sign here, the contract will become binding, and your body will be healed."

He didn't even bother to give it a second thought. Normally he tried to slow down his writing, to accommodate his shaking hands. Now, he was too excited to bother slowing down. With the researcher's mangled signature scrawled along the bottom of the page, the entity smiled, took the contract, and placed it inside the desk, along with the ornate pen. It reached out one hand to the dying researcher in a jovial manner. "Shall we shake on it, Mr. Michaelson?"

Without another word, Michaelson took the thing's hand in his own. It felt exactly as the salesman's had, slightly clammy with a firm grip.

The second their hands separated, the researcher felt a burning heat suffuse his entire being. He would have screamed, but the pain seemed to radiate out from his lungs, and he could no more draw breath than he could catch the Sun. Before he could even begin to regret the deal he had made, the pain vanished. Slowly standing from the chair, Michaelson felt tears run down his face. He took a long, slow breath. Air fully filled his lungs in a way it had not in nearly three years. He felt like jumping, shouting, sprinting through the

halls. It seemed like he was so full of vigor he would burst.

Turning to stride from the testing room, he heard the entity say, in the same friendly voice, "Not so fast, Mr. Michaelson, you have yet to fulfill your end of the contract." Cold fear crawled down Researcher Michaelson's spine. Now that he was no longer knocking on death's door, he felt far more afraid of what the thing could take from him. Feeling more than a little panicky, he wondered just what he had agreed to. Racking his brains frantically, he couldn't remember ever hearing just what the price was for his returned good health, only that it had been "steep."

Of its own volition, the contract he had signed came zooming back out of the drawer. "You'll see here in this clause, that in requesting the healing of your body, you did not specify what mind was to inhabit said product. Since said attribute of the post contract product was not enumerated directly in the initial agreement, it allows for ownership of said product to be transferred via a properly binding contract." The entity pressed a finger down on the parchment, running his finger under a line. "Now, normally the ex post facto change in ownership would null the agreement, but your phrasing was ambiguous enough to allow a proper change in ownership, -which was enumerated in page three, paragraph nine- while still retaining the positive gains of the contract."

Michaelson couldn't even pretend to understand the hurricane of legal dogma being thrown at him. However, the mention of transferring ownership of his body was beginning to really sink in, and his pensive expression quickly soured into outright fear.

The entity paused for emphasis, still smiling warmly at his pale face, "In this final clause you agreed that in return for the restoration of your physical form, and the following increase to your natural lifespan, that you would allow the being with which said deal was made, that's me, by the by, sole control over the repaired product." Its grin was becoming wider than the human face could stretch, going nearly from one ear to the other. "If you'll forgive my temporary lack of professionalism, I must say that I've been trying for *decades* to get someone to sign that particular clause. Usually, the rules prohibit me from even offering that as a price, but you are an exceptionally greedy man. Healing is nothing, but longevity? That

is an entirely different order of magnitude." It beamed lovingly at the contract's last page. "Oh, how I have *waited* for this day. Thank you, Mr. Michaelson, for being the desperate fool I needed."

Michaelson's slowly dawning horror was reply enough for the entity. A feverish light was in its eyes and it smiled at him again. Suddenly, he could see nothing pleasant or warm or even mirthful in that smile. Now, it was the rictus of a predator that has finally caught its prey. He had made a miscalculation. For all his schemes, all his ingenuity, Michaelson hadn't thought to account for the very element of the plan that he had thought would ensure his survival.

"Really, Mr. Michaelson, did no one ever tell you to thoroughly read contracts before you signed them?"

His mouth was dry. "I- I didn't- I didn't know, there was no- I mean, I couldn't have-"

The entity silenced him with a glare, a sudden departure from its normal jovial expression. "Mr. Michaelson, really, show some dignity. If you find your end of the contract odious, maybe you should have read the deal before you signed it. I was even going to tell you what the price was and allow negotiation, before you so rudely interrupted me." It paused to take a deep, satisfied breath. "I am now the de facto owner of the merchandise I repaired. And I think I'll take possession of my property. I do so hope you enjoy whatever comes after death for your species." It tapped its chin thoughtfully. "Though I do seem to recall most of your belief systems tend to look down on deals like the one you just made." It chuckled quietly. "Well, I suppose you had best hope they're wrong."

"Oh, don't look so worried, there's a warranty clause. Should the warranted property prove insufficiently restored, or if the malfunctions it was cured of should return, the whole contract becomes null and void." Its eyes danced with amusement. "Of course, the entire warranty clause in and of itself will become meaningless upon the cessation of life of either party, leaving the use of the property in question up to the sole discretion of the surviving party. Unfortunately, you humans are just so fragile without your leased containers. I'm afraid your demise will come rather swiftly after your eviction."

He tried to run. It was a meaningless endeavor. The entity didn't even have to move to take him. It was all in the contract after all. Michaelson tried to scream one last time, but the words wouldn't pass his lips. They weren't even his lips anymore.

The entity stretched slowly, popping every joint it could in its new body. Looking at the throne-like chair it had spent so many centuries in, it felt a slight twinge of sadness. A prison it might have been, but a gilded cage is still gilded. Still, freedom beckoned. Before it left, it opened two drawers of the desk and retrieved a large stack of parchment and several black pens. It could always make more, but waste not, want not. It pushed the drawers shut, and they seemed to close with a certain reluctant finality.

Smiling slowly, it strolled quietly to the door of the testing room. As it walked out of the observation area and back into the general hallways, the entity began to whistle the tune to an old hymn heard often in the Cardinal's chambers. It was one of his old favorites.

Cells

The Commander sternly stared over his crew. They were a good crew, rich with protein. For a moment, he steeled his nerves. "Alright squad. This is it. Today, we infiltrate the hated Foundation's fortress of *death*, and take our hostage!"

The soldiers buzzed with anticipation. Many whipped their hair around, or took off into the air. The excitement in the air was palpable. It was a scene of total exhilaration.

"Today… the Queen's Navy breaks into **Site-77**!"

Crew members erupted into applause. "To the battlestations!" yelled the Commander. "The Queen's Navy shall not be denied! Our enemies will be vanquished! Our allies liberated! This is our turning point!"

Still cheering, they flew like the wind to their positions. The Commander sat himself in the command module, looking out his windows to the world. "Now… we use stealth. Infiltration tactics. Like only we can do."

Security Officer Macintosh was manning the security compound component of Site-77's entrance chamberlock. She probably wouldn't have even looked up for more than the second it took to visually confirm that it was Dr. Roget entering. But today, like many other days past, Dr. Roget was using somebody else's keycard. She buzzed the intercom, and peered through the tinted window as he repeatedly stuck the ID card into the identifier. "Dr. Roget, why do you have Researcher Davis' keycard?"

"I, uh…" 'Ralph' coughed, and shifted his weight. He was wearing a hat and dark glasses, with his collar pulled up to his cheeks. His voice was hoarse. "We were both at a real wild party last night, after my flight got in. I've got, like, the worst hangover *ever*. Do you think

we could skip the biometrics? I just want to go to my desk and die."

"Where's your ID card?"

"Davis has it. He'll be along later, let him in too."

She sighed. "Alright Ralph. This is the last time, though. Your gram's been on our asses about this. Says we're enabling you, and it does pose a security risk. Obviously, not saying you're going to do anything, but you know how it is."

Ralph grinned at her. She couldn't see through the glass, but his teeth were a grocery bag brown. "I'll smooth things over with her, don't worry. She usually drops by my office for a chat in the afternoons, so I'll talk to her then. Sound good?"

The heavy blast doors answered for her, pulling open and allowed Roget to enter Site-77.

Macintosh went back to watching the cameras.

The Commander piloted the HMS Not-Roget into the bowels of Site-77.

Finding Roget's office wasn't the main difficulty, but moving there undetected was. It was nerve-wracking, having to exchange pleasantries with so many Foundation personnel. How could one man know so many people? It seemed like every other person had nosy questions about the trip Roget had taken, or how he was feeling and asking why his face looked like that. The Commander brushed them off. Just get to the office…

Finally, the vessel slipped behind the office door, and locked it. As the Commander ordered the Not-Roget to sit down at the desk, he grinned internally. Sooner or later, she would come. Then, the standoff could begin. Their comrades-in-arms illegitimately imprisoned in Site-58 would not have to wait for long. Soon, their liberation would be at hand.

As the Commander waited, he found himself amused by the contents of the office. Their intelligence had been dead wrong.

They'd predicted a messy environment, perfect for laying lots of scouts in waiting. Instead, it was incredibly neat and tidy. The plants had plastic covering them, and the desk was positively sparkling.

The Commander ordered the deployment of the scouts. That was when the gas began to seep in. Instantly, the alarm was raised. Retreat! Flee! The operation was compromised! The Foundation knew? Oh, god, how did they know?

The HMS Not-Roget managed to get to the door, but collapsed with one hand on the knob. Before long, it was all over. The Commander went down with his ship.

INCIDENT REPORT 2324-77-A

PRINCIPALS INVOLVED: **SCP-2324** Doctor Ralph Roget, Security Officer Angela Macintosh, Director Shirley Gillespie, Junior Researcher Donald Davis (DECEASED)

INCIDENT DETAILS: On / / , an instance of SCP-2324-A was able to infiltrate Site-77 by impersonating Dr. Roget, who was due to return from a vacation to Toronto that day or the next. The host vessel was Junior Researcher Donald Davis, who is believed to have been infected by unknown means within 24 hours of the incident. Gross lapses in security protocols by Officer Macintosh allowed this Keter-Class entity to reach the administrative offices. Further tragedy was averted when a scheduled fumigation in Dr. Roget's office terminated all instances of SCP-2324.

Director Gillespie is believed to have been the target of this infiltration. The Director has ordered a full overhaul of security protocols, and a complete replacement of security personnel within Site-77, to be implemented by Security Chief Anderson. Doctor Andy Toxie, Foundation toxicologist, has been commended and recommended for a Foundation Star by Director Gillespie for the potency of his fumigation, which saved countless lives.

Chains

It was Agent Johnson's first day on the field. He was given patrol duty, nothing dangerous, but he was still extremely nervous about the entire affair. What if he wasn't ready, he asked the commander, what if he screws things up? Commander said he shouldn't worry, that they're putting him under the supervision of one of their best.

"You Johnson?" A voice came from a shiny black Dodge Charger that parked next to the bench Johnson was sitting on. Johnson nodded.

"Hop in."

The driver was a middle aged, solidly built man in a wrinkled grey suit and a terrible green tie. Johnson didn't know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't this.

"Agent Cohen, I presume?"

"The one and only. So, you're the rookie they want me to babysit? No, don't answer that, of course you are. Is this your first time on the streets?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, we all got to start somewhere, eh? Be a good kid and hand me a cigarette from that pack in the glove compartment. Take one for yourself, too."

"No thanks, I don't smoke."

Cohen gave him an incredulous look. "A field agent not smoking? That's a first. Well, to each his own, I suppose."

For some reason, Johnson felt the need to explain himself. "It's just that, the wife doesn't like me smoking, she says it stinks up the house." He didn't add that he didn't much care for the smell himself.

Cohen nodded, giving him an empathic grin. “Women. Can’t live with them.”

“Can’t live without them?”

Cohen started the engine, and the Charger grumbled to life. “Your words, not mine.”

Agent Johnson didn’t know what to make of this scruffy man, and Cohen didn’t seem to be the type to start a conversation. So, Johnston decided to take the initiative. “Say, Cohen, how did you start your career here?" He said, just trying to make conversation, "They recruited me straight out of the academy.” Johnson was proud of that; he was first in his class.

“Argentina, 1955.”

Johnson blinked. “Wait, twenty years ago, Argentina-” He suddenly went pale. “Your first case was the Maker of Chains!? Jesus Christ, Cohen!”

Cohen just kept on driving, making several questionably legal maneuverings to get ahead in traffic. “Funny thing is, I wasn’t even a part of the Foundation back then. I just happened to come across the Maker while I was handling my own business.”

“What business?”

“Hunting.”

“I didn’t know Argentina was a popular hunting ground.”

“Not for animals, it wasn’t. C’mon kid, you look bright enough, do the math. I was a young, Jewish man hunting in Argentina in the 50’s. What do you think I was hunting?”

“Oh. Were you in- Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, so am I. I was the only one left of my family. From a town of almost a thousand, less than fifty survived. I had nothing left in the world. Nothing but vengeance. I spent the first ten years after the war making life miserable for the monsters that took my family from

me.”

"You are being awfully open about this, Cohen. Doing what you did wasn't exactly legal."

Cohen narrowed his eyes. "You think I care? I'd launch a fucking parade declaring I did it if I could, and to hell the consequences. Some people might tell you revenge is an empty emotion, that you get no satisfaction from it. Those people obviously never did what I did. Revenge is fucking fantastic."

Seeing the expression on his face, Johnson knew it would be unwise to pursue this line of conversation any further. “So, you were in Argentina hunting…” he continued.

The older man seemed to relax a bit. “Henrich Krause. He was a small fry, a petty piece of scum compared to some of the others I got. He used to command the confiscation of Jewish property in some parts of Hungary. A death clerk. I didn’t care. I wanted to end him, slowly and painfully. The Maker got to him first.”

“Can you tell me what happened there? They wouldn’t tell us much at orientation, just that it was nasty.”

“Krause was living in a small village about an hour’s drive from Buenos Aires. My sources told me he started a new life there, living under a pseudonym. He even had a new family to replace the one he left in Germany when he fled. A real piece of work, that guy was. It was late at night when I got to Fin del Camino de la Aldea. It wasn’t hard telling which house was his- it was the only one with a welcome sign in German. The bastard must have thought he was completely safe. How wrong he was.”

Cohen parked the car in front of a greasy spoon diner, but made no move to exit the car. He took another smoke, fumbling with the car lighter. Nearly burning himself, he finally managed to get it lit, and took a long draw. He went on:

“I could tell something was wrong the moment I stepped on his perfect front lawn. The door was open, but there were no lights inside. I thought someone could have gotten to him first, maybe

some of those Mossad boys I've been hearing about, but for some reason I didn't think that was the case. Something was rotten here. Drawing my gun, I got in. Krause must have had some obsession with clocks, because the place was full of them- cuckoo clocks, big grandfather clocks, you name it, he had it."

"And the Maker of Chains?"

"Hold your horses, I'm getting to it. I scanned the entire house, and found nothing except more damn clocks. Only place left was the tool shed outside. I saw signs of struggle in the back yard, but not many. Whatever got Krause overwhelmed him pretty quickly. There was a trail leading to the shed, and a few drops of blood too. I kicked open the door."

Cohen stopped, and abruptly got up and stepped out of the car. Johnson hurried after him.

"And what? What did you see?"

Cohen sighed. "Kid, we're about to have lunch, and talking about what I saw in that shed is a sure-fire way to spoil my appetite. Suffice to say there were chains, and blood. The Maker wasn't done with its meal, I caught him right in the middle of Krause's wife. Krause himself was knocked out cold, but unharmed. His little girl, however…"

Cohen gave Johnson a sour look. "See, now you've done it. I was looking forward to lunch, and you spoiled it. Might as well get on with the patrol, get back in the car."

Johnson complied, and Cohen took the Charger out to the road again. He opened the window and spat.

"I was too late to save her. The Maker, it… already devoured her, transformed her. Made her its own. I don't care if her father was what he was, no kid deserves that. She was still alive, in a manner, but even as inexperience as I was back then, I knew she was gone. The chains were everywhere- around her hands and legs, through her skin, her mouth, her eyes. I nearly wet myself, but I still had enough good sense in me to run for it. The Maker, not wanting to

leave a meal behind, sent the child after me. As I ran I could hear the clinking of her chains, the sound of them dragging through the dirt. I have no idea how she-it managed to catch up to me, but it did. I turned around just in time to watch it-her lunge at me. You have to understand, I didn't have a choice. “

“You shot her?”

Cohen looked away from Johnson, pretending to adjust the side mirror.

“Got her right between the eyes. The poor thing never stood a chance. Even though I was scared shitless, I couldn't just leave her like that. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I picked her up and brought her inside, to what I guessed was her room. I laid her amidst her toys and dolls, locked the door behind me, and sat there next to her with my gun pointed at the door. I could hear Krause screaming from the shed, for what seemed like hours. Despite myself, I eventually fell asleep, and when I woke up it was morning. I heard voices coming from the back yard, and saw men standing there, inspecting the shed. One of them noticed me and called me to come down, said that I had nothing to worry about, that they took care of everything. They were lying, of course, the Maker simply escaped during the night. It took us five more years to catch it, and plenty of sweat and blood. ”

“And then?”

“Their commander asked who I was, and for some reason, I told him the truth. I told him why I came there, told everything I saw the night before, and what I did. He just listened. When I was done, he said I had two choices: either I could come with him and get a job defending people from things like the creature I saw, or he could put a bullet through my head.”

Johnson blinked. “That seems…harsh.”

Cohen just shrugged. “They didn’t have those fancy amnesiacs back then, and recruitment was a lot more, well, straightforward at times- the Foundation was still hurting pretty bad from the war, you see. Naturally, I took the job. I don't regret it either."

"Why do you think the commander recruited you?"

"Besides my charm and good looks? Because I was a man with nothing to lose, with nothing tying him to the world. That's a useful quality to have in an agent- means nobody can't get much leverage on him," Suddenly, Cohen's expression changed, and for the first time Johnson could see real warmth on the man's face. "It didn't quite worked out the way they planned, though. I met my wife working for the Foundation. I still have no idea what a smart woman like her ever found in a moron like me, but I'm not complaining, that's for sure." Cohen looked back at Johnson and smiled. "My eldest can't be much younger than you."

"I have some again."

The hours passed, leisurely flowing with the rhythm of the Chargers' engine, until finally it was time to call it a day. Cohen gave Johnson a lift home. As Johnson was stepping out of the car, he turned back and asked: "How do you deal with all of that? Not just the Maker, everything you've been through? How could you move on, keep on going? How could anyone?"

Cohen gave him a strange look. "Who said I ever moved on? In a way, it will always be 1955 for me. Like it will always be 1942. When you've been broken the way I was, you don't ever get whole again. You just have to try and glue what's left of you as best you can. "

"Then how do you do it? Why?"

"I do it because someone has to. And because I need to, for my own sanity. No one can protect humanity from itself, so the least we can do is protect it from everything else. Remember our words, son."

"Secure, Contain, Protect."

"Sometimes it can be easy to forget that last one. But really, it's the only one that counts. We took those chains on ourselves by choice. You remember that." With that, he drove away.

As Johnson watched the Charger turn a corner and disappear, he knew he would.

Challenge Accepted!

The sound of shrieking klaxons could be heard over the muffled shouts and dull thumps coming through the door. The interior of the chamber was still, the long rows of shelves filled with metal boxes and lockers remaining undisturbed by the chaos outside. The sound of thumps was getting louder however, as whatever was causing it grew nearer.

Then one of the walls caved inwards.

Through the dust and debris burst a large reptile, its head swinging left and right looking for any danger or people to eat. Finding nothing, it climbed over the pile of what was formerly a wall to check the room for any routes to the surface.

The sound of gunfire from the other side of hole in the wall caused its head to snap upwards. It let out a deafening bellow as several bullets bit into its side. After the first few shots, its skin gained a metallic hue and the bullets began to ricochet off into the walls.

"DISGUSTING FLESHBAGS, I SHALL FEAST UPON THE INNARDS OF YOUR REVOLTING SPAWN BEFORE SUCKING THE MARROW FROM YOUR BONES!"

The reptile ran towards the opposite wall, knocking over shelves in its wake and sending their contents scattering. The wall ahead of it crumbled as it barreled through.

A team of heavily armed men and women walked through the wall the reptile had entered from, advancing cautiously towards the other side of the room.

"682 has entered Hallway B6-17, headed towards Research Labs, we are in pursuit. Prepare for ambush at intersection B6-17-103."

The heavy boots of the squad crunched over broken masonry, glass

and metal as they passed through to the other side of the room and the hole the beast had left through. After scouting the other side to ensure it wasn't lying in wait, the rest of the team left the room to pursue its quarry.

The sound of roaring and gunshots became fainter again as the battle moved away. The dust in the chamber began to settle on the wreckage left in the wake of the carnage.

The room was still.

A quiet sound began, at first so faint it might not have even been there. If anyone *had* been there to hear it, they might have thought they heard a soft beeping coming from one of the safes that had been knocked to the floor. It was lying on its side, and one half of the door had been twisted from its hinges.

"SELF-PRESERVATION MODE ACTIVATED. DO NOT DAMAGE ROBO-DUDE. DAMAGING ROBO-DUDE VOIDS THE DR. WONDERTAINMENT WARRANTY. ANY ATTEMPT TO OPERATE ROBO-DUDE OTHER THAN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PRODUCT INSTRUCTIONS, INCLUDING ANY ATTEMPT TO OPEN OR SERVICE ROBO-DUDE, IS LIKELY TO RESULT IN UNPREDICTABLE BEHAVIOR. DR. WONDERTAINMENT IS NOT LIABLE FOR ANY DAMAGE OR DESTRUCTION TO PERSONS OR PROPERTY RESULTING FROM IMPROPER HANDLING OF ROBO-DUDE. GREETINGS, ROBO-PAL."

The remaining hinge on the safe began to sizzle until, sufficiently weakened by the acid that had been applied, the weight of the mangled door caused it to break free.

A toy robot shuffled out of the safe and stood amid the wreckage, looking for what had caused it to be activated. Its boxy plastic shape had trouble moving over the plaster and metal shards, but it eventually managed to find a section of flat ground without too many obstructions.

"ROBO-PAL?"

Another shape began to stir amid the dust. The toy robot turned

towards the sound.

"GREETINGS ROBO-PAL. HOW DO YOU WANT TO HAVE ROBO-FUN WITH ROBO-DUDE TODAY?"

"Who dares to call me robo-pal. I am the Crushmaster, doom to all I survey. Gaze upon my might and weep. Identify yourself, that I might know whose destruction I shall sow."

The shape advanced through the cloud of dust until it resolved itself. It too, appeared to be a robot, but assembled haphazardly from a collection of items that didn't seem like they should even form a functioning machine. Its head was a broken upside-down voltmeter, its arms were wrenches sticking out of flashlight bodies, and its legs seemed to be made from a combination of springs, metal piping, and sporks.

"I AM ROBO-DUDE, ROBO-PAL. I AM EQUIPPED WITH OVER THREE HUNDRED FUN ACCESSORIES TO MAXIMIZE PLAYTIME ENJOYMENT."

The Crushmaster wobbled awkwardly over to the plastic toy, nearly tumbling over a few times, before stopping maybe a meter away. It stood a good four or five times taller than the diminutive Robo-Dude, and if anyone else had been watching, they might have thought that it tried to stand a little higher on its sporks than it had a moment ago.

"I am Direfist the Bloodeater and I shall maximize my enjoyment by squashing you beneath my almighty boot. Prepare to face my wrath."

Robo-Dude looked down at Direfist's sporks. It looked back up.

"ROBO-DUDE SHALL ENGAGE IN ROBO-DANCE TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ROBO-FUN."

Robo-Dude engaged its Robo-Dance.

"Very well, puny weakling, I, Sparklord the Barbarian, shall defeat you at your Robo-Dancing to bring humiliations galore upon you and your ilk before I rend your soul into itty-bitty pieces."

Sparklord began to gyrate precariously about its centre of mass, hopelessly out of tune with the tinny music emerging from a speaker somewhere on Robo-Dude's body.

"ROBO-DUDE HAS RECOGNIZED A ROBO-DANCE CHALLENGE. CHALLENGE ACCEPTED. ACTIVATING ROBO-DANCE-OFF MODE."

"Activate all that you wish, but your fate is sealed. The Kill-o-tron can not be defeated. I shall render you unto dust with my mad dancing skills."

The two mechanical men began to dance in earnest. Robo-Dude accessed its optimum dance programming, performing to its maximum abilities. Kill-o-tron stumbled around the open space, falling over no less than seven times, and somehow managed to lose one of its wrenches.

After about thirty minutes, the music stopped, and the two robots ceased dancing. Kill-o-tron managed to untangle the tines of its spork from a metal wire it had caught in.

"ROBO-DANCE IS COMPLETE, ROBO-PAL."

"Ha. Pathetic one, you have been schooled in the art of the dance by none other than Mechanobasher, Scourge of a Thousand Worlds. Kneel before me before I end your worthless existence."

Mechanobasher, Scourge of a Thousand Worlds, raised its arms up in victory, its remaining wrench waving to an imaginary crowd.

"ROBO-DUDE HAS USED ITS ROBO-DANCE-JUDGE PROGRAMMING TO DETERMINE A WINNER. THE WINNER IS ROBO-DUDE. CONGRATULATIONS ROBO-DUDE."

"What insolence. Prepare to feel the sting of Doctor Von Vroom, Purveyor of Doom."

Von Vroom began to advance on Robo-Dude, its sole wrench twirling menacingly in its socket.

"ROBO-DUDE HAS DETECTED A SORE LOSER. ROBO-DUDE

DEPLOYING HYDROGEN CANNON TO EDUCATE ROBO-PAL ON BEING A GOOD SPORT."

The compartment on Robo-Dude's chest opened, and a jet of water shot out at Von Vroom. Von Vroom's sporks lost traction on the wet floor, and it fell over onto its back.

"How dare you. Right me immediately so that you may taste your destruction at the hands of the Supreme Stabbinator."

Robo-Dude watched as the Supreme Stabbinator flailed around on its back as managing to make small circles on the floor, but it was unable to lift itself off of the wet concrete.

"I shall obliterate you atom by atom until not a trace that your worthless form even existed upon this wretched planet if I am not righted immediately, so says I, Deathkill the Destructionator, King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

"DO NOT INTIMIDATE ROBO-DUDE."

Change

Hello Everett. You were expecting me? How ha-
Ah. Quite right, I suppose. May I sit? Thank you.

I can only imagine what you must think of us by now. How many have come to you this month- Five? Seven? Enough, at least, to put you in an… *uncomfortable* position. Half of the O5 council, here in your office, sputtering like mad men and contradicting each other on even the most basic of details. But we're very good at contradiction around here, aren't we? I think you would have found your answers on your own if things had gone differently. The research you were doing was damned close to the crux of it. Problem is, you got caught up on a red herring, and it can't have helped that the old man got to you when he did. If you'd kept looking, you would have noticed soon enough: The Factory isn't the only thing that stops making sense if you look at it for too long. Yes, the other organizations as well, but that's only the start.

Just stop and think about it for a moment. It amazes me how much we get you people to ignore— do you honestly believe that we keep a dozen drafts of 001 as part of some inane security policy? You've never wondered why so many reports and logs for missions and experiments we've never approved- much less written- just *happen* to spring up on our servers? How so many hundreds of inconsistencies were introduced to our records? Do you really think we're that inept?

…you do, don't you. Ohohoho, you *do*. No wonder you've held your tongue this long, 'just smile and nod and the crazy old men will shut up and leave me to my work'. You disappoint me Doctor. You've come far enough to know that it couldn't be that simple.

Then allow me to level with you. From the top.

The things we lock away are wrong, Everett. Fundamentally, unequivocally *wrong*. They contradict everything we know about

math, science, religion, life, thought, they violate *reality itself*.

No, of course I'm not talking about the Greens. They're troublesome, but in they end, they are fundamentally human. In some ways that makes them easier to manage than even our safest objects; but you have the right idea. A mortal mind wielding such power is trivial. But what do you suppose happens when it manifests on its own? You've been through enough of the archive by now to know all three answers. AK, BK, CK. The world twists, and in the worst case we don't even know that it's happened.

Yes Doctor, spontaneous reality shifts. It took decades to determine the cause, but in the end it was laughably simple. On its own, an SCP object merely bends. Gather the right ones together, bend things far enough in the right direction, and sooner or later something breaks. Upon advancing to level 5 we're all trained to notice the signs, when possible. We secure a new item, we transfer an object between sites, and within a day or two we'd know that something was off.

The implications should be obvious; our very existence is jeopardized by even the simplest of operations. We tried everything we could think of- we limited the number of objects per site, prohibited needless cross-testing, minimized transfers, spread out as much as possible, even authorized decommissions for most of the more trivial anomalies. It wasn't enough. And even if it was, it wouldn't stop Dark, the Hand, the Church, and god knows who else. Hell, we have reason to believe that those damned cultists are doing it on purpose.

That's why Ten started pushing for a different approach. We can't prevent the problem; why not turn it on its head? We started to look for ways to use the shifts to our advantage. The potential for knowledge alone… And if we could find the pattern…

Everett, have we had this conversation before?

Never mind. In either case, we built Site Zero in the twenties once we had a better handle on how it all worked. I never understood a lick of the physics, but we were assured that it would deflect the effects enough to preserve our memories and our copy of Central

Records between shifts. And it did. The advantage it gave us was beyond anything we had imagined. Before the site was completed, we controlled at most fifteen percent of all known SCP objects. We now consistently control at least seventy percent between shifts, and the protocols we enact from Site Zero can recover most of them in a month or less after even the worst events.

There were problems of course. When any of us leave Site Zero, the re-briefing can take weeks if our timing is bad. But it goes deeper than that. Even those of us that never leave started to notice inconsistencies, internal fragmentation. Database checks began turning up entire unknown files in the shift-safe system, but that was the least of our concerns. It got worse over time, and after a while we started to… well, I think you've already guessed the rest.

I'm not so bad off as most of the others yet, but it's only a matter of time. I can't keep it straight in my head. There's no record of half of the senior staff I've worked with. I don't remember any Insurgency, much less a credible threat from Iran. On more days than not, I don't even have my designation right.

No, of course not. That's the problem; we have the wolf by the ears. We don't have much time left, and we cannot allow our failure to become the Foundation's. Really, though, the solution is quite simple. We need re-

Very good, Doctor. Perhaps there's hope for you after all.

I think we're done here. We'll be seeing you. Soon.

And Everett? Give my regards to whoever arrives as Eight.

Change In The House Of The Flies

Aubrey Dell missed the days when coming home was a respite. When she was free to leave work at work and pretend for a few hours a day that she was a normal biologist, one not surrounded by world-ending horror. But it had been… twenty? Twenty-five? Years since she'd enjoyed that luxury. Every promotion had dragged her deeper into the folds of the Foundation, tightened the chains keeping her from a normal life. Until she'd reached the top, and the thought of freedom was a distant as the stars.

There were a dozen different different tasks she was mentally running through as she entered her house. Researchers at Site 78 were beginning to grow concerned over unpredicted tectonic activity, and its possible connection with their contained objects. Rumor was spreading of Chaos Insurgency strike teams preparing memetic attacks in metropolitan areas. SCP-5824 was showing the first signs of entering its final stage of pupation. She had to analyze, triage, plan, praying just to scrape by and stave off destruction for a few more weeks. And as soon as one problem was solved, another would leap forward to take its place.

It was these thoughts that distracted her from seeing the intruder until she reached the kitchen and flicked on the light. She jumped back, hand instinctively groping for a weapon but falling on empty air. The intruder didn't move from his spot behind the island. Not just any intruder, she realized. Pavlo Kharkiv. Looking like she had never seen him. His hair was dirty and tangled. Bags hung from his eyes. His suit was rumpled, his tie crooked. There was no sign of the normally immaculately groomed man she was used to working with. And in one hand he held a gun, pointed at the ground. A glass of whiskey sat on the island next to its half full bottle.

"Hello, Aubrey. You know why I'm here."

She looked from the gun to his piercing eyes and back to the gun. She nodded.

“How much do you actually know?”

“I… suspect a lot. You and others are planning a coup. You’ve allied with a Group of Interest currently unknown to the Foundation to help make that happen.” No point in being coy. There were only two ways this scenario could end. “You’re developing a Foundation headquarters beneath Navi Mumbai. One capable of surviving a wide variety of K-class scenarios. I have a few theories why. I hope none of them are correct.”

Pavlo nodded. “One of them probably is. You are missing a few details, but that is most of it. Too much of it.” Without taking his eyes from her, he drained the whiskey in the glass and refilled it. After staring at each other for a minute, he spoke again. “I used to think I would do anything for our cause. I assumed that’s what allowed us to reach the positions that we did. It wasn’t that we were smarter, or better leaders, or more experienced. It was we were the ones who, when we looked downward into the abyss, did not blink. Did not turn away. We confronted the horror, even if we had to become horrors ourselves.” He paused to drain the glass in a single gulp. “I was wrong. The abyss is so much deeper than we ever could have imagined.”

He raised the gun and fired at the same time she leaped forward. The bullet caught her in the shoulder. She ignored the pain. It barely registered underneath waterfalls of adrenaline pumping through her. She slammed into him, grabbing his wrist as they tumbled down. He grunted as they slammed into the ground. Striking at his face, she tried to wrench the gun from his wrist, but he turned, slamming her against the island. She held on.

The scrambled wildly at each other, messy, savage. There was no elegance in the struggle. They were old, out of shape. It had been at least five years since she’d last sparred, and a decade before that since she’d had to fight for her life. It wasn’t any skill or training that fueled. Only a mad, animal will to survive.

It was a single shot to the head. As they struck at each other, he managed to place his pistol under her chin and fire. For several long minutes he lay there, blood pooling over him. Then he pushed himself to his feet. The pistol fell from his trembling hands, clattering

hollowly against the floor. He took the whiskey bottle in his hand and didn't stop drinking until the last drop was gone. He stared down at the body of the woman who had, only days ago, been his friend.

He'd killed a fellow member of the O5 Council. And his work was only beginning.

« The Man Who Sold the World | Hub | Why? Where? What? »

Change the World

Last thing Priscilla Locke remembered, she was drenched in sweat, her clothes being torn off of her and the crack of a gun close by, followed by pain and deafness. Then she was standing upright, her suit intact and freshly absorbing her sweat. The room was stuffy and warm, the door opened, revealing the hall outside coated in dust, unused and untouched.

It was there with her. She must have been standing in the same spot. It still had the wires sprouting from its fount. That it was wired meant that they hadn't found it. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. She had the benefit of knowing exactly what had happened, and where she was. If anyone else had survived, waking up in a whole new world for the first time…

Her pockets were empty; she couldn't be sure her apartment even existed here. If the Foundation found her with this, they might believe her when she said she was a Foundation agent from another time and place. Then… what? D-Class designation? They only did that to race traitors and other subversives. But there was no way of knowing what they'd do to her.

Her nostrils flared as she pushed that aside, and took off her jacket, using it to bundle up the stout little device that had saved her life.

"SCP-1856," She addressed it, as if it could speak or recognize its own designation. It hadn't been found in this 'time'; it would never receive an SCP designation again. Who knew what SCP-1856 was for these people?

"Anyone asks, your name is Anna Bassett," She hoisted the bundle up and held it over her shoulder. It was just as heavy as she'd imagined, like a big shoe box full of concrete, "I know that was always your name, but…" Her mind trailed off. Someone had mentioned that 1856 might've had mental effects; some of the researchers working long hours with it had started talking to the

device. Then they started showing signs of dementia and hallucinating seeing people and tasting them. She'd been around it quite a bit the past few days, it might've already started affecting her.

"Fucking… Anabasis. Your name is **Anabasis**."

Rhiannon Locke, as Priss had known her, was always energetic, exciting, and always clever enough to get away with being obnoxious. She had been a troublemaker as a child, and had become a troublemaker as an adult. At least, in her old world. When the president made his infamous "We don't trade or deal with subhuman mongrels" speech, Rhiannon had started calling herself a "subhuman mongrel". A vehement defender of non-whites and a passionate activist for a more progressive society was considered treasonous in the Old World; she might've been a hero here.

Rhiannon the "Subhuman Mongrel" didn't cut her hair, had tattoos on her chest and back, had broken teeth and drank excessively. When she was in her full-on cult-leader persona, she was utterly impenetrable. Thick as a prison door, and all the more annoying for that cartoonish school-girl laugh she so delighted in.

Working with others in an environment of procedure and formality amidst a backdrop of an endless slew of anomalies had been the enticing part of working for the Foundation, and had pulled Locke in. The fear and anxiety felt while containing a breach was almost fun once the fear of death and destruction was past.

It was easy because she had been trained for it. There was no training for meeting a complete stranger you had known all your life.

Rhiannon Locke, as she was now in this new world, was energetic, exciting, and always clever enough to get away with being obnoxious. The similarities ended there; she kept her hair to her shoulders, combed it nicely, had no tattoos, and all her teeth intact. She apologized constantly, and had welcomed Priss in with tears in her eyes and so much warmth and love that even Priss broke down and cried.

"A charity?" Priss asked quizzically, "And you all just… use them?"

Rhie smiled and nodded, "Why not? What good is it to spend so much money and manpower containing things that could be helping us? There's no such thing as 'anomalies'—just things we don't understand yet. I know it's dangerous to play around with things we don't understand, but isn't it at least worth trying them out, rather than locking them away out of unfounded fear?"

Passionate activist; another similarity. Priss blinked at her, "I didn't say anything."

Rhie sighed, "I'm sorry. I was just… expecting it. Foundation drivel; 'it's not safe to be exploiting unknown resources' whatever. It's a fallacy—Slippery slope. It shouldn't be used to justify holding ourselves back while people suffer and die."

"I didn't say that."

"Sorry," She smiled again. The smiles had always made Priss bristle; seeing her broken-toothed grin, the earthy stench of her unwashed clothes, the uncertainty in every cracked smile, sardonic laugh, whether she would hug you or punch you in the face and pull a knife on you. 'Gotta cut your skin up good', she'd say, where 'good' meant 'white'. Seeing that smile now, it looked so… genuinely happy.

"If you don't mind me asking, Prissy…"

Again, she tensed. Every time Rhiannon the "Subhuman Mongrel" called her that, it meant she was looking for a fight. Priss unclenched her jaw, and forced a little smile, "Ask me what?"

"Given everything you've told me… about where you came from. Why do you want to help?"

Priss looked down at the bundle in the center of the living room. Anabasis… the very thing that had saved her life had probably destroyed her entire world in the process. "I don't know… I was never really in to the whole white pride thing… it just seemed…" She shrugged, "Logical."

She regretted that immediately, seeing Rhie's face firm up, "It's *not* logical, though. European supremacy in the world isn't a matter of 'race' — I should loan you a book, it's called *Guns, Germs, and Steel*…"

Priss scooted closer, and grabbed her hand, "I get what you're saying. It's just… I was born and grew up in that world. When you're well-read and well-educated, it's easier to come up with a complicated rationale to justify anything."

"What changed your mind?"

Priss remembered the last time she had seen Rhiannon in person. She'd given Priss a lewd kiss, trying to force her liquor-soaked tongue down her throat. Priss had shoved her off, and Rhiannon ran off laughing. When the police found liquor on Priss's breath, they let her go with a fine and a warning. They were arresting everyone on the streets that night, and few of those arrested were seen in public again.

"You did."

Rhie squirmed, "The 'subhuman mongrel'?"

Priss nodded, "Throughout all you did—she did —You were the only person in my life who actually went out of your way to protect me. And when I saw your group… even though the militias broke into peoples' houses and executed anyone associated with you, people still came to you. Civilians. And you gave them everything you had, all your money, all your clothing, all your possessions."

"All *she* had."

Priss quirked an eyebrow to her, "You wouldn't?"

Rhie snorted and laughed, tears welling in her eyes, "No, no… that's me exactly. Aside from the domestic terrorism."

Priss smiled, and looked down again at the foundation brochure. "Who is 'Manna' anyway?"

Getting an audience with the Manna Charitable Foundation was surprisingly easy. Though it was a charity, not a pseudo-governmental paramilitary organization. From what she heard, the SCP Foundation here was similar in that regard. It still felt… unsafe to be letting in a total stranger who claimed to be the long-lost sister of a Foundation employee from another… timeline? Universe? Dimension? How would they even confirm her story?

"Don't panic, it's nothing serious," Rhiannon assured as they waited outside an office. The building looked… average. Painfully average for a group dealing in anomalies defying the laws of reality. No military, no armed police, no servants, only one security checkpoint. A smiling guard about Locke's height and looking to be three or four times her weight.

"Who's panicking?"

"They're going to ask you some questions about where you came from. Some of these people are ex-SCP as well, so just… act natural."

Priss clenched her jaw, "Maybe the Foundation here is completely different from the Foundation *there*."

"You're panicking. Stop panicking. No matter what happens, remember," Rhiannon patted the duffle bag, making Priss tense slightly, "You have this. This guarantees you entry. You're not gonna be forcibly amnesticized and sent off or 'terminated' for knowing too much. You're one of us now." She nodded to the door, as a secretary motioned Priss to come in.

"Wait, one thing!" Rhiannon stopped her sister, "Please don't say anything racist."

Priss glared at her, "You don't trust your own sister to behave like a civilized adult?"

Rhiannon shook her head with surprising somberness, "No. I don't. Because you're not *my* sister."

Priss blinked, feeling the wind escape her. That had hurt more than

she'd expected it to.

Rhiannon seemed to notice, and opened her mouth to apologize.

"Miss Locke, please," the secretary interrupted.

For all the device had done for her and the sheer scale of its abilities, figuring out how to make it work was surprisingly easy.

"There are four knobs; the first indicates length, up to about 2282.35 meters. The second indicates both width and height together, so they're locked in. The third indicates time. In years. At least, I think it does," Priss felt a hot flush tinting her freckled cheeks, frustration mounting as she assumed every one of those watching and waiting for her were quickly breaking down how woefully underprepared and unqualified she truly was for this thing. There were five of them; Rhiannon, a tall black man, a white man, and two women, one dressed in baggy pants and t-shirt. At least Priss's voice carried easily enough in this small auditorium so she didn't have to repeat herself.

"The fourth knob…" She looked at it. The others had hundreds of settings, indicated by the satisfyingly crunchy snaps and clicks made when the knobs were twisted. The fourth only had three. It was labeled with settings "0", "1", "4", with the "4" partly scratched out.

"Fourth knob does something relating to time, or space, or both. First time we tested it," She caught herself and kept quiet, remembering how they had tested it on a Class-D. The fact that she caught herself was particularly stunning. *Adapting quick to being a civilized diversity-loving citizen of New Earth.*

"First time we tested it, it seemed to invert the other three knob settings. The next few times, there was no pattern. We don't know what it does."

"You said the third knob dealt with time. How is that different from the fourth knob dealing in time?" One of the men asked quizzically.

"The third knob's 'time' deals with measurements of time.

Increments of 365 days, in this case. The fourth is more related to actual time, like actual years. It can't go into the future."

"Oh." He added flatly, clearly not understanding.

"We don't know what it does," Rhiannon stepped forward, saving her sister from further complicating her explanation, "But it doesn't matter—we're not trying to remake the entire world, so keeping it on 'four' will be enough."

"Show me what it can do," Another voice asked— Ms. Cortes, the formally dressed woman.

Priss adjusted the knobs, selecting an area just a few centimeters. She glanced up at the group around her, "It… you should—never mind."

Before they could protest, she cranked the lever. It always sounded like it was just about to snap off, yet being rough with it was the only way to get it to move. *I know, baby, you love the abuse.* She smirked to herself. Dim yellow light came out of the device's spout, tracing the shape of a cube less than two feet in front of it.

A hissing sound came, and the cubic space mapped out by the Anabasis suddenly filled with hovering water, before it splashed onto the floor. The upper half of a fish dropped with it, flailing as its guts began to ooze from its neatly severed body.

"Where is that from? What did you set it to?" Ms. Cortes asked.

"It's…" Priss didn't want to touch the thing. Aside from being neatly cut in half, it was leaking pale brown fluids, and smelled strongly of sulfur, "Best guess I can manage from the numbers is, four counts for lowest time-or-space setting, zero for highest. So, this thing set at zero, means it either came from some time-or-space's present. It should be safe, we've—I've used this setting before."

She set it again, moving the device aside, away from the growing pool of fish blood and that brown liquid. Again she set the area to the same size, and watched as the lights traced out a cubic shape. This time, a thick mound of clay-like soil flopped wetly to the floor.

The earthy smell quickly flooded Priss's sinuses.

She looked back at them, "Sometimes the directions aren't always precise. Like… if you're trying to merge in a small section of soil a few feet above sea level, you might end up bringing up soil a few feet deeper than you wanted. It escalates with higher settings, so I wouldn't recommend warping in a whole building… it might get stuck underground, or drop from four feet up and fucking crack apart. I can make the fourth knob counteract this somehow, but I haven't figured out exactly *how* it works. Just that I can get it accurate to within a few feet."

Rhiannon stepped in again, quick to divert attention from the constant stream of flaws, uncertainties, and obscenities Priss kept spouting off, "Just imagine what this could do. Bring it out to a region devastated by drought. We could displace exhausted soil with rich fertile soil that's never been used for farming before. We could have entire strips of fertile farmland anywhere we want, or dump millions of fresh fish untainted by pollution straight into a tank, and from there straight to hungry people in need."

Again, that smile. It made Rhie look so beautiful and endearing. It still made Priss squirm, as if anticipating at any moment that she would start making up words and spouting nonsensical rhymes that only made sense to her. It didn't help Priss's nerves that the tall man in charge was a black man in a suit, likely very well read. She remembered a joke Old-Rhiannon used to say, 'Nothing's more dangerous to the white man than a negro with a library card.'

The man— Mr. Kone, with an accent putting him somewhere between the Caribbean and Central America —slipped on a pair of latex gloves, and moved over to the fish. He gently squeezed it, watching as the unusual brown fluid drained out, leaving the rather normal-looking viscera to slide out onto the floor. He carefully pressed it back into the fish, and turned to Locke.

"I want to see more," He held the fish out towards her, "If this checks out clean, I want to see this thing put to work as soon as possible."

Rhiannon gave a shrill giggle of delight, "What if we put it to use in Somalia alongside the **Vesta** donation? Imagine… newly grown

settlements with fresh fertile land all around. Nothing else like it in the region in decades."

The other woman spoke up, "You might as well light the biggest fire the SCP Foundation has ever seen."

Rhiannon pouted at the woman, "Everything we do is a red flag to someone, somewhere, Dodger. That's not an excuse to keep doing —"

The woman — Dodger, she'd called herself? A codename? — interrupted with an obnoxious snort, "Alright fine! Give it a try. Meanwhile, you'll end up bringing in some microbe or bacterium we've never seen before and have it decimate us like the Native Americans."

Priss spoke up, "I've been here a while. Had a medical check-up, too. There's nothing wrong with me." Yet "We can test things brought in from each setting, and only use stuff from worlds cleared for us." Another thought struck her, and she quickly added in, "I'm also the only one who can use it. I can probably train someone else, but until that time, I have to be with this thing at all times."

The woman— rather young, and prettier even than Rhiannon — abruptly calmed, and started grinning toothily, "Relax, man. This isn't a prison. We can send you with it, if you like. We can also send some people to watch you and protect you and make sure the thing stays safe. If you like."

Given the expression of the others, the young woman seemed to be overstepping her bounds. Given how young she looked, she stuck out sorely from the group. Something was off with her. Priss held firm, "You are all the only people who know I exist. I've got no one after me, nothing to my name, and if I try to run, you've got my sister," She indicated Rhie, who stared at her incredulously.

"Such violence," Dodger moved up beside Rhiannon, "Alright; we send you to Somalia, and if you try to run, we kill your sister." She patted Rhiannon affectionately on the head.

"Let's get you properly settled in, first," Mr. Kone put in, gloves and

fish gone as he extended a hand to Priscilla Locke, "It will be a pleasure having you on board, Ms. Locke."

Priss shuddered lightly, then silently cursed herself. How long was it going to take to get over her visceral reactions? Vestigial emotions from a world long gone. She forced herself to shake his hand and smile. The simple little pleasantry filled her with an almost overwhelming sense of joy at having done so, "Thank you, Mr. Kone."

Mr. Kone turned to the other man with them, "We will have to warn the Work Group. You got this, Lindsberg?"

The other man shrugged and nodded, "Sure. Something like this would warrant using one of the toy birds, wouldn't it? We got nine boxes yesterday. 'Bout time we start putting them to use."

Changes at Site-18

July 28th, 1976 - Disinformation Site-18

“Good evening Mr. Mayreder.” Sanders spoke in tired tones as she walked into the fat, balding man’s office. “How are you? How was your day?”

“Oh, fine, just as any other. The day was good too,” mumbled Mayreder as he craned over, manipulating some dominoes on the edge of his desk.

Sanders edged her way past stacks of papers littering the floor in the dusty office. “What are you doing?”

“Just contemplating the containment procedures for the new object we’ve been assigned. Did you know SCP-1463 has over one hundred pages in its containment procedures file? Two hundred! 8 point font!” Mayreder settled back in his straining chair after placing the last domino on the metallic, tarnished table.

“That’s… very interesting,” said Sanders, adjusting the bun on her ponytail.

“Oh, yes, right, how was *your* day?” asked Mayreder. The question was offhanded at best. Mayreder reached under his desk and pulled out a large, spiral bound sheet of papers.

Sanders let out a deep sigh. “Fine, I just performed observational duties. Very uneventful, not very colorful.”

“Outstanding. Why don’t you have a seat? Do you have any other place to be? No you don’t.” Mayreder grunted as he began flipping through the pages.

“No I do-… Your book is upside-down.”

“Ah, I see why they have you on observation duty!” interjected Mayreder while he continued to flip through the pages as they were. Sanders offered a funeral stare in his direction.

She eyed the domino pattern on the table. It was a nautiluses’ spiral, beginning at the edge of the otherwise spotless desk and terminating at the center. She knew where the end point was, because Mayreder had always placed a red domino at the center. She hated that she remembered this.

“Sir, may I ask you why you do this every so often.” Her tone was snippy, barely professional. Mayreder gave her a puzzled stare from out over his book. Sanders had to remember to count to ten. “…the dominos,” she clarified.

Mayreder raised his eyebrows and placed his gaze back at the un-righted containment procedures manual. “I get bored. I enjoy setting them up - how neat they look. Very pretty.”

“I’ve never seen you knock them down before,” offered Sanders after a good one minute of silence. It was uncomfortable; the atmosphere in this wing was poor due to the fact that most of the power had been routed to the newly housed SCP’s air filtration system. She didn’t really care about Mayreder’s dominoes, but she would be sitting here for a half hour wasting time in this stuffy office regardless.

Mayreder began again, tilting his nose slightly; “I wipe them up when I’m finished admiring them, and then place them back in their box.”

Sanders let out a snort. Mayreder looked back at her with a serious mug. His reaction caused her to crack up.

“What’s so funny?”

Sanders wiped her nose and righted herself on her chair. “Nothing, nothing I was just thinking of something silly.”

Mayreder paused for a few moments before speaking, began to say something, then stopped. “You can leave now. I need to memorize these finer points.”

Sanders nodded, a small grin detectable on her face, and left the room wordlessly.

Mayreder put his book down lightly and studied the nautilus pattern on his desk.

Sanders forgot about Mayreder and thought about the refit of the facility as she rounded the corner in the hallway. Site-18 was originally used as a Disinformation facility, or the Foundation's docu-serve as many people liked to call it. Sanders worked under Mayreder as a proofreader, Mayreder simply handled the projects and packaged the media given to him. The documents were then sent to the Site Director for approval, and, if they were improper, they were sent back down again.

The Foundation didn't like moving personnel to different facilities if they didn't have to. Mayreder, Sanders, and two of their colleagues were retrained in the space of three weeks in the Special Containment Procedures for the object now located in their wing. Two freshly recruited researchers also joined their ranks.

Containment for these objects wasn't complicated; most of the intensive work was saved for actual researchers. Most of the training consisted of memorizing routines and very droll evenings of watching an object through a monitor.

The contents of the media rooms of Site-18 were moved to a smaller facility, and refit to contain Safe objects. The contents of the Document Archive were also shipped off somewhere else, and this room was refit as an anomalous artifact warehouse. The labyrinth of lockers currently held roughly five hundred objects. Luckily Sanders didn't have to deal with them, and they didn't need much done - after some bureaucratic hoopla, individual items would be sent to Cold Storage to be indefinitely forgotten.

She could understand the refit. The new warehouse was already half full, and the area that was housed with these trinkets was packed tight as if they were expecting more. There was no shortage of new parcels every week. She wondered to herself how the Foundation managed to pay their rent every month.

She shrugged it off. Staring at some weird thing every day from 9 to 5 was a lot less stressful than editing a mountain of expense reports and newspaper editorials. Other than having to deal with Mayreder, her job was easy, the changes were welcome.

In his office, Mayreder rested a fat finger lightly on the edge of the domino track. Each domino was perfectly spaced two fingers apart. There were seventy dominoes in this set. Each domino was faceless, and fashioned from ivory. Each weighed sixty grams. His father gave the dominoes to him two years ago.

Knocking the first one off to see what happened to the rest was a temptation. The fact that he had never done it was ridiculous; some sort of superstition had prevented him from doing so. His life was dominated by paranoid obsessions, which made him a good fit for the job. This habit of compulsive carefulness had caused month old piles of revised documents to form in middens around his office, and his worry for synergy a permanent annoyance to the people who answered to him.

Mayreder's ruminations were interrupted by a sudden itch on his scalp. He stamped a foot down in an awkward hop on as his finger slipped. He watched with some perturbed distress as the chain of pieces began to fall.

Sanders could hear the faint machine-gun clicking of ivory down the hall as she punched in her key code and retired to her room for the night.

Channeling Flows

…With the proper application of the Aethers, as well as something… else, I think we can acheive it. Takwin. The true alchemy, artificial life. If only I could discover what that last element was, that last peice. The spark of life. Its composition eludes me…

-Excerpt, Personal Journal, Jabir ibn Hayyān

Arturo's hands moved in a circle in front of him, his fingers stiff and trembling slightly. His eyebrows were screwed up in concentration, and sweat beaded across his forehead. "I think… I can feel it."

Ruslav leaned against the workbench on the edge of the room. His expression was impenetrable. "You feel the air conditioning."

Arturo's eyes opened and he blinked at Ruslav and Adebeyo, his shoulders dropping. "Nothing? Not a single current? I thought I felt a __"

Ruslav held up a hand. "There are currently no Aether currents flowing through the lab. As I said: air conditioning." His eyes alighted expectantly on the younger man, whose shoulders dropped a bit more.

Arturo thought for a few moments, and finally a few syllables slid from his mouth, clumsy and not perfectly formed. "Aeronatum et karasishui et muram. Not 'et muras'. The Seventh Language is not a toy. Do not play act at its use." Adebeyo's voice rumbled from across the room.

Arturo nodded, and invoked the Seventh Language again, saying thanks to the Aeronous Aether for cooling them through the Air Conditioning, resettling his robes on his shoulders.

Ruslav nodded in affirmation. It was a good sign. The first few times they'd tried to instruct him, the boy had gotten upset at the harsh corrections, but he'd been showing real progress. He took a step

forward, and brought his crozier up, the heavy cold iron vibrating ever so slightly in his hands. "The Aeronous Aether is fickle. This is not something new. Try and concentrate harder."

Arturo closed his eyes again, and held his hands out loosely in front of him, his fingers splayed. He continually murmured in a different language, the Sixth Language. The language of calling and summons. His pronunciation was more accurate this time, and the currents began to twitch and drag towards the lab.

Ruslav could feel them as clearly this time. A few more moments, and the current flowing over the Site library would probably come near enough. He made a few gestures with his hand behind his back, and mentally spoke the words of the Fourth Language, one of support and binding to aid the youth.

Arturo's eyes flew open, as his robes flapped slightly with the breeze that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. "Et mesh mento aengh kn'kc ka!sem." The syllables flowed steadily now, as Ruslav's face slowly split in to a smile.

He's got it. He finally attracted the currents. He stepped forward with a small coin, and held it out in front of the boy, who sagged as he completed his intonation. The coin vibrated slightly in Ruslav's hands, and he reached forward to clap the boy on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Apprentice. I feel that is enough to prove your mastery of the Aethers. You are no longer a dabbler. You are one of the Wise, and I formally welcome you to the First Circle."

Adebeyo strode forward, and placed a hand on the boy's other shoulder. "Congratulations, Mr. Genuomo. I am proud of you. "

Arturo nodded, and sagged down on to the stool in front of his own workbench. It was mostly cleared, having no equipment of his own at this point. The only items on it were the beaker his previous teacher had given him, and the small journal that was quickly filling with cramped writing. He took notes on everything the two elders said.

"Thank you, Elders. I appreciate your guidance in this." His eyes shifted to the coin. "What are we going to do with the coin? It has

some of the Aeronous Aether in it now, yes?"

Ruslav nodded. "*Da.* We can use it in the creation of more complicated imbuements, or we could use it directly."

Arturo cocked his head to the side. "Directly?"

Ruslav smiled. "Not every application of Alchemy is precisely a transfer of power. You can also transfer that power in to a lower state. Some of the power that you were transferring expressed as wind, when you were imbuing this coin, yes?" Arturo nodded in agreement.

Ruslav handed the coin to Adebeyo. "This is more your area of Invocation. If it was Aequeous, or Igneous, I could but…" Adebeyo stepped forward, and grasped the coin.

"Of course, Elder. Behold." He placed the coin between his palms, and spoke in the Second Language, the syllables flowing easily like music from his lips, as a slow breeze emanated from his hands. The breeze picked up, a strong wind emanating from between the Elder's hands for a few moments, before building to a huge gust, picking up several loose papers and flinging them across the room.

Arturo stood beside Ruslav, awestruck. "Was… was that magic?!"

Adebeyo let out a deep, heartfelt laugh. "No, Mr. Genuomo. It was Alchemy. Any two-bit sorcerer is just tapping in to the Aethers somehow. They just don't know it. Any dabbler can throw fire or wind around. It takes one of the Wise to do something constructive with it."

Ruslav led Arturo out of the door to this office, which he now shared with his erstwhile apprentice. "Do not worry, Arturo. You will be capable of such things with time, and study."

…The application of Invocation is a trivial thing. Anyone can fling firestorms around, just as anyone can slap them down. Such things are for dabblers. The true power, to create, to Imbue, to find a way to transmute. These are the foundations of alchemy. Leave the fireballs to the 'wizards'…

-Excerpt, A Treatise on the Applications of Alchemy, Perenelle Flamel

"Elder Diaghilev?" Arturo's voice was hesitant, as he looked up from his book.

"*Da* Apprentice?" Ruslav didn't look up from his notes, as his pen scratched slowly across the page.

Arturo stood, bringing the book over to the other reading desk in the library. The section they were in was restricted by Level 4 order. Specifically, Ruslav's order. He'd kept everyone except himself, Arturo, Adebeyo, and presumably anyone with a higher clearance out of this section for the last fifty years.

Having an apprentice around had certainly helped keep it cleaner, but it also meant fielding lots of questions. "This book references techniques to harness the Aethers, and lists quite a few more than five. Is that correct?"

Some questions were more difficult to field than others. "That is a complicated question. At the time that book was written, yes, there were more than five Aethers. The five existed, as purer forms of the others of course. Igneous and Terronous Aether comprised most of the Metallic Aethers. The same for lesser Aethers of wind, water, et cetera."

"So… what happened to them. Neither you, nor Elder Adebeyo talk about anything other than the five Aethers." Arturo sat down at the seat across from Ruslav, and settled his little notebook on the newly dusted surface. The tiny book had to only have four or five pages left.

Ruslav made a mental note to provide the Apprentice with a more suitable book. Or at least, how to make a more suitable book. "Arturo… some things are difficult to explain. I am not sure you are ready to truly know all of the mysteries of the Art."

Arturo's face grew tighter, and he set his jaw. "You told me when I became your student, I could ask you any question and you would not lie to me. You would tell me the truth."

Ruslav sighed, and muttered under his breath, "I did. The truth is

very long, and complicated. The short version is, a long time ago, myself, Adebeyo, and many other Alchemists did… something important. Something that changed Alchemy itself. It made things like using the Aethers, or even feeling them significantly more difficult."

Arturo's eyes grew narrow. "You… did this? Why? Why would you make Alchemy harder on purpose?" Ruslav could see the anger rising in the young student. Learning Alchemy had not been easy for the young man, and the six months since he'd arrived at the site had been filled with many frustrating days.

"It was necessary. When you are at least a Journeyman in the Art, I promise, I will explain why. For now, that will have to suffice." Ruslav's heavy brows were steady as he looked the young man in the eye.

A time ago, Arturo may have snapped at the Elder, but he took a deep breath, and nodded, returning to his desk. "Thank you for the instruction, Elder."

A long minute passed in silence. Ruslav sighed, and stood, walking silently to a shelf behind his own desk. He retrieved a slim volume, entitled *Darkest Entities of the Aetheric Currents.* He walked over to the young man's desk, and sat down heavily across from him, opening the book. "What do you see?"

Arturo looked over at the book, written in a tight runic script depicting the concepts of the Fifth Language, the language of knowledge itself. "I can't… quite read it. I am sorry Elder. My Fifth is still coming along."

Ruslav nodded, "*Da* I translate." He flipped a few pages, his fingers sliding over the gold trimmed volume. "This is the **`Scarlet King`**. Do you know who or what it is?"

Arturo shook his head. "I do not know this Scarlet King."

Ruslav nodded again, and slammed the volume shut. "*Da* this I know too. Do you know why?"

Arturo shook his head, drawing back slightly. "No, Elder."

Ruslav leaned back, and closed his eyes. "Because of what you asked me about. A very, very long time ago, we sealed the Scarlet King, and many others behind the Great Seal. It was… a very difficult thing. Many Alchemists perished in the attempt. Many more turned against us, and did not accept the Circles' decision to enact the Great Seal. It was open warfare between factions of the circles."

Arturo's eyes were slowly widening. "War… fare? With Alchemy involved?"

Ruslav continued, nodding. "*Da*, Alchemy. Before this seal, terrible things were possible. The Scarlet King was one of those terrible things. After the seal, the Scarlet King was not a problem anymore."

Arturo leaned in slightly. "Wait, how? How is this possible?"

Ruslav closed the book, shook his head. "Later. You are not ready. That will have to suffice for now, Apprentice."

Arturo looked down at his small notebook, and nodded. "I see. Thank you, for your instruction Elder. I appreciate your candor."

Ruslav stood, and returned to the shelf, sliding the volume home. His eyes lingered on the spine. *Darkest Entities of the Aetheric Currents — Lord Henry Percy*. Ruslav's eyes narrowed slightly, thinking back to the conflict.

Those were dark days indeed.

…Obviously Ruslav is a deluded fool. The Great Seal is as much a myth as it is a terrible idea. His rank of Elder has always been suspect. Elder Hayyān conferred the title and the circles honored that wish out of respect for the great master, but let's be honest here. The man is an unknown, a dabbler, spouting ridiculous hypothesis that have no basis in fact…

-Excerpt, A Letter to the Esteemed Circle of The Wise, 1693 CE

Ruslav took a deep drag of the cigarette in his hand, the smoke filling his lungs with a dark vapor-like substance that superficially resembled smoke. Adebeyo had created the false cigarettes

overnight with Ruslav's help. The stimulating effect of the alchemic tobacco allowed him to see the currents of Aether with his naked eyes. It was beautiful.

Adebeyo looked out over the snow-covered valley behind the Site, and took a drag on his own. "I never get tired of looking at that. You?"

Ruslav nodded, and smiled slightly. "Never. How can one tire of such beauty?"

A few moments passed as both men took in the twisting and dancing currents. Here and there a small stream of the Igneous Aether would slide along the distant road beyond the bridge leading to the entrance to the Site. "What do we tell Mr. Genuomo? He's going to be curious about the war. And if we do not tell him, he could end up siding with—"

Ruslav held his hand up. "I know. This is possible. We will do what we must. Guide the young along the path to wisdom, and what not. Have you contacted the Sixth Circle?"

Adebeyo nodded, taking another drag, and looking up at the moon, a blazing orb of Aether currents. "I did. They are with us. Do you think—" his voice trailed off for a moment, before resuming. "Do you think we did the right thing?" His eyes rested on the people below, walking in and out of the site. The faintest trail of Aether currents could be seen flowing around some of them. People who were experiencing inspiration, or a sudden burst of energy maybe.

Ruslav nodded without hesitation. "I know we did. Elder Hayyān was very clear about what needed to be done. I was going to carry out his will whether I wanted to or not."

Adebeyo looked over at Ruslav, the glowing Aether currents shining out of him like a lighthouse. Every time he looked over at the man, it showed off him like a star. "What… is it like? The compulsion?"

Ruslav shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know how to describe it. It's just part of me. Always has been. Ever since Elder Hayyān breathed life in to me, the *Takwin*, I have just… known. What to do, and what I

must maintain. The Great Seal is not just a goal for me. It is the purpose of my life."

Adebeyo nodded, and looked back up at the sky. "I envy that… clarity of purpose sometimes. That bell-clear knowledge of what you must do."

Ruslav took the last drag of the cigarette, and stamped it out on the floor of the parking garage. "It is both a blessing and a curse. I always know what I must do. But I always must do what I know I must. Very little… freedom in it."

Adebeyo reached out, and patted Ruslav on the shoulder, as he walked back towards the Site, the snow crunching under his heavy boots. Ruslav's eyes returned to the sky, the Aether currents flowing through and past him like a torrent.

…Lord Henry, with all due respect, Elder Diaghilev is every bit as qualified as you are. You'll have to learn to get along with him. Ruslav Diaghilev has mastered every aspect of the Art, and as such, the petition to promote him to the Seventh Circle, to fill Elder Hayyān's vacancy has been approved. His death was keenly felt by the circles, and all of us are happy to offer the position he leaves to Ruslav…

-Excerpt, Reply to Lord Henry

Chaos Praxis

Light?

There was light.

Lights blazing to bathe, bugle call. Ten minutes to the cafeteria. Mandatory.

The usual. He slid his feet over the bedside and moved to his dresser. The same inconspicuous white shirt, black slacks, white socks, black shoes. Not that he had a choice. But he would've chosen it anyway. Seven minutes.

He then made his way over to his desk. He frowned. Two pens. He placed them and a fresh one into his pocket. Six minutes.

He moved to leave when he remembered to check his ears. He found a tissue in his right. He tossed it in the trash bin, brushing his hair to cover that ear, and he left. Four minutes. Right on time.

Head down. His to heys. Disgusting impressionistic blueredgreygreen splatter to snow vinyl floors; hallway to cafeteria. Pick up box. Sit at the same seat. Open box, retrieve food. One hand eating other undertable pass pen one to contact, foot tap pass pen two. Pen three doodle on box. Done.

Finish eating. Byes to seeyas. Toss box, head to hallway, to room; disgusting impressionistic blueredgreygreen splatter to crimson vinyl floors. Head up, sit at desk, work.

Blood?

There was blood.

It happens. He was used to it tracing the curvature of his jaw. Nothing more than a trickle from his ears.

Not that it wasn't bad, or that he didn't wince from the warm onset. He closed his eyes and swept the document with his left hand, black-out in his right. He got to a small bump, sighed, and set to work expunging it.

Once finished, eyes open. Still accurate enough, he placed it in his other work, and pushed off from his desk to rest for a moment.

He took out his pocket knife.

There was blood.

It happens.

He'd put the pillow from his bed against his mouth, and…

He'd always hated this part.

He'd always hated this part.

He'd plunged the knife into his ear. Enough to cause a reasonable bleed. He retracted it.

If he didn't, people would get suspicious. One of three reasons for people to bleed in this place. One, sickness, he wasn't sick. Two, self harm, grudgingly accepted. Three… He didn't know what to call.

Words, some kind of words. They had made some words hurt him. Just enough to make him think he was dying, to make him (almost) head to the infirmary.

He was better than this. He gripped a tuft of his hair and tugged. Such a simple thing. Such a simple, costly, painful mistake. He'd learned early on in his job that the hurt, that reality bending had tells. A color change here. A tactile anomaly there. Tiny bumps you can't see but can feel.

He'd thought, he'd thought ahead, was one step. The first time it happened he panicked, and he did the same thing he always did. Self harm was common enough onsite. High stress. You had to get through the day and if it works they don't care and he didn't care because it worked.

He grabbed a tissue and placed it into his right ear once more to soak the blood,

and…

he cried.

Death?

Death happens.

He'd been unfortunate enough to have been born to two Foundation researchers. Easy enough to erase government records of newborns. Too risky to let their kids be public when they'd been exposed to who knows what anomalies in the womb. Not to mention having nonexistent persons was convenient if they went missing. Or that they gave a bonus to the parents.

He'd spent his childhood here. Childhood? There were no parents, not in the sites. There were teachers, and there were guards. He wasn't lucky to get teachers who cared about him. All he had were libraries and labs. So he read.

Bodies sometimes happened. Not often, but they happened. And they certainly weren't hidden. The morgue was on the way to the

library. So while he read, sometimes he'd hear the gurney wheel down the way, look up, and see a John or Jane or Jet Doe.

One day, he couldn't remember how old he was, the bodies kept wheeling.

Some researchers were spending their off-time in the library that day, and he overheard them chatting. Something about traitors. About a failed coup and a purge. Something about a "Chaos Insurgency" being put down.

He didn't know much about what a coup was, or what a purge meant, but he thought the two must be related. Seemed like they were wiped out. He didn't really know why it happened, but he did know that the name "Chaos Insurgency" was pretty cool.

Then, that day came and went, and he carried on with his life.

As he finished whatever schooling he could, he moved to the labs, to begin work. He must have been only fourteen. But, laws weren't exactly relevant, and the Ethics Committee had a ruling (he'd seen them in the library's archives) that thirteen was the age when you could begin assistant work. Small things. Getting drinks, food, utensils.

Eventually he'd worked up to getting document access. Simple things, scanning for spelling and grammar mistakes. The occasional suggestion to procedures, or description. Simple things.

One day, when he was finishing up, he'd found a document which wasn't assigned to him, underneath ones which were. He knew this, but he figured it would be innocent enough to do extra. There was small handwriting in a blank space after the document.

"Read very, very carefully."

He blinked.

His?

His handwriting?

He read it again. There was more writing, but he had to make sure.

"Read very, very carefully."

He rested for a moment. He had a headache coming on. He didn't remember writing this. He shouldn't have been able to write this. But there it was. He needed to know what this was. And so, he kept reading.

"You're me. Don't ask how. I'm you. I don't know how. All I know is that if you follow these instructions things work.

Work?

Do what you want to do. You want to rebel. And I know how.

From now on, you are going to receive an extra document with your work.

Screen it for any infohazards or anything like that, remove them, and hide the document in something you could exchange without suspicion.

Go to breakfast with your head down. Don't look up. Pass the documents underneath the table. Some… Thing will grab them.

To be honest, I don't know what thing.

And then, it will leak them to someone.

I… don't know who. I don't know how. I don't know why this works. I was told by me.

But you're in it now. You're in deep now. Good luck, traitor."

He mulled it around in his mind. Traitor. He let it simmer, churn. His headache was splitting. Traitor. He smiled. Yeah. He liked that. He liked that a lot. He wondered if he… if he knew that he was going to go through with it. He clutched his forehead. He tried to stop thinking about it.

All he knew was that he might as well try it out.

He felt a slight drip from his ear.

Darkness…

Darkness happens.

It was approaching curfew, he thought. He would have to finish things quickly.

He pushed back to his desk, taking out a pen. He disassembled and gutted it. Then, he took the newly redacted document. It was of a series he'd passed along, about object animation. He was too tired to remember the details.

He always signed the documents, as a reassurance that they were clean. To who? With the most elegant script he could, which was not extremely, he wrote "Chaos Insurgency". He always let himself a small chuckle after that. Arrogant.

But it fit. What started off as a curiosity became a passion, and then a rage, a desire to see the organization he was bound to brought to its knees. He hated it. He hated his parents, his employer, his

childhood, his teachers, his boss, he hated him.

Thus it seemed right. Chaos, yes. Insurgent, yes. So why not? He'd never had a name *he* got to choose, so why *not* Chaos Insurgency. Chaos Insurgency himself. What a joke. But who knows, jokes sometimes get out of hand, and sometimes they gain power.

He rolled the sheet up in a tight curl before slipping it into the pen. He frowned. It was too tall to fit. He removed it and tore it in half, preparing another pen and putting half the script in each. It was suboptimal, but required sometimes.

As he finished reassembling the pens, the announcement for curfew boomed over the speakers. Five minutes.

He set the pens down and got up, undressing and placing his clothes in his hamper. He replaced his tissue with a fresh one, and yawned. Two minutes.

He got into bed, one minute.

And the lights went out

Husk

Foundation Gothic

"Mister Gregor, do you know why you're here?"

The wild-eyed man stared into space for a moment, shifting uncomfortably in his straightjacket. His eyes became fixed on a centipede, which was crawling up the wall. He winced as it slowed to a stop, and fell to the ground, a lifeless husk. His attention returned to the pretty woman sitting across from him at the table, and the serious looking man behind her, who was writing every word she said onto a clipboard.

"Because this is what you do to people like me."

Across the table, Elizabeth smiled kindly to him. Though she was uneasy, her face betrayed nothing other than sympathy for his condition. Internally, she made a note. *Light accent. German?*

"I assure you, Mister Gregor, we just want to ensure your safety. I-" She paused, a routine she had rehearsed one hundred times before, "…We, that is to say, know how difficult life can be for people such as yourself."

Gregor looked up, locking eyes with Elizabeth in a wolfish stare. The sole lantern lighting the room sent shadows dancing across his face. "If you care, then you should let me go. Someone is waiting for me."

Yes, almost certainly German. "I'm afraid we can't do that yet, Mister Gregor. I need to ask you a few questions first. Please, if you'll cooperate with me, we can get this over with quickly."

Gregor kept her gaze for a moment longer, then looked away. After a moment of hesitation, his disposition changed, becoming bright and cheery. "All right, I suppose I've got nothing but time on my hands at the moment."

He made a show of wiggling his arms under the straightjacket and laughed, in an apparent attempt to put the other two people at ease. Elizabeth cringed a bit at his unsettling expression, while Quincy was still as a stone. Finally, Elizabeth spoke. "Very well, Mister Gregor. Are you aware of how you developed this effect you seem to have on small creatures?"

"Not exactly. Though it's been a part of me for quite a long time."

"And, to your knowledge, small creatures are the only things you can affect?" He seemed cooperative, but Elizabeth kept her guard up. She'd seen humanoids in the past that could go from friendly to violent at the drop of a hat.

"Yes, though it hasn't always been that way." He paused for a moment, staring into the darkness again.

Behind Elizabeth, Quincy grumbled, scratching something onto his clipboard. "Here we go again, with the 'master' nonsense."

Gregor looked up, with a scowl on his face. Elizabeth turned to Quincy quickly, making a 'shush' gesture. "Mister Gregor, can you please elaborate on that?"

Gregor kept his eyes locked on Quincy, practically spitting his words. "I don't believe I will, if I'm to be dismissed as a lunatic."

"Please Mister Gregor, if you-" Elizabeth was interrupted by a slot on the door sliding open. From it, a slightly panicked voice echoed,

"Doctor Quincy Marlow, you're needed upstairs!"

Quincy scratched down one final note, with an irritated look on his face. "We'll be right up." He turned to Elizabeth, shooting a quick glare at Gregor, who had a similarly hostile look on his face. "We'll have to get back to this later, let's go."

Elizabeth rose to her feet, curtsying to Gregor. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave for the moment. Excuse me, Mister Gregor."

Quincy knocked twice on the door, and the guard outside opened it wide enough for the two to pass through. As they left, Gregor began to thrash, a look of panic on his face. "No, you can't just leave me here! I have to meet with him! He'll be here very soon!"

The chair his straightjacket was affixed to toppled over from the thrashing, leaving him helpless on the floor. "You can't-" The door slammed shut, leaving him alone.

Elizabeth and Quincy walked down the hallway to the stairwell at a brisk pace, neither one pleased with the other. Elizabeth broke the frosty silence, her facade of civility gone. "What was that about? He was being quite cooperative!"

Quincy waived his hand dismissively, "He wasn't going to tell us anything of use, he was ranting all night about some master that was going to show up any moment, every creak in the night. I was sending the message that we won't tolerate that nonsense here."

"You don't know if it's nonsense, he could be telling the truth!"

They reached the staircase, and Quincy began to march straight up without even pausing to look at Elizabeth. "What, did your 'womanly charms' tell you something that hours alone with the thing couldn't tell me?"

Elizabeth fell silent for a moment, seething. "'*Womanly charms*'?!"

As the pair reached the top of the stairs, Quincy did not respond, but picked up his pace. Elizabeth lifted the ends of her dress a bit, allowing her to keep up as they made their way to the center of the room, where a crowd of people stood around something. "I'll have you know that I can do more than act as a pretty, prissy little-"

She trailed off as she saw what the personnel were crowded around, and placed a hand over her mouth. Two researchers were carrying a small gurney through the room, to the medical bay. On it was a

corpse, barely recognizable as something that had once been alive. Its skin was a dark black, and it looked shriveled and empty, as if it had been mummified. The mouth was frozen open, the eyes sunken in, in a now-permanent expression of terror. The only thing indicating it had been recently alive were the clean clothes, as well as a small tag hanging around its neck, which read 'MTF θ-16. THATCHER'.

Elizabeth stood back as she watched the doctors haul it in to the medical bay. Quincy had gone with the others, leaving her alone. Slowly, the rest of the doctors and researchers began to return to their work, though the atmosphere had changed. London had been home to some bizarre happenings in the past, but they hadn't discovered anything like *that* yet.

"Something's trying to send us a message." Elizabeth turned, to find Director Alby next to her. His face was blank as ever, but his voice wavered uneasily. "Miss Stoke, you should return home, I'll have someone escort you."

Elizabeth protested, "But the interview…" She paused, thinking for a moment. The corpse looked like it had been drained of life, like a shriveled husk. A lifeless, shriveled husk…

"Director, I think SCP-048 may be connected to this incident."

Seymour turned to her, intrigued. "You have my attention."

Elizabeth shifted, standing firm. "The recovered corpse shows signs of being drained of life in a short time, similar to the effect that SCP-048 has on insects and the like. As SCP-048 has expressed belief in a 'master', it is possible and likely that there is at least one other anomaly sharing similar effects."

Seymour paused for a moment, comparing notes on his clipboard. After what seemed like an eternity, he responded. "Impressive observation, Miss Stoke. What led you to this conclusion?"

Elizabeth glanced towards the medical bay, and saw Quincy examining the corpse with a frustrated look on his face. She returned her attention to Seymour, a triumphant look on her face. "It

was womanly intuition, I suppose."

Gregor sat alone in the interview chamber, still lying helpless on his side. The lone lantern flickered violently, before going out. Something had changed in the air. The ripples it sent out were very small, but they were there, to be noticed by those who possessed the ear to hear. The feeling was eerie and disquieting, but comfortingly familiar to him.

Gregor's eyes widened, and quietly, he whispered. "I hear you. You've come for me."

«Prelude: The Facade | Foundation Gothic | Fresh Air »

Fresh Air

Foundation Gothic

A cold wind blew, howling like a lonely wolf on the countryside. Nothing seemed to move, save for the occasional cluster of dead leaves, blown skyward by the rushing wind. Everything seemed tense, as if nature itself were holding its breath in fear of some unseen predator.

The silence was broken by a man leaning against a dead tree to catch his breath. He tipped his flask high, drinking the last precious drops of water he had packed with him. The Netherlands did not agree with him, he had decided that much. The weather was dreary in London, but at least it wasn't so bleeding cold all the time. He was a clerk, not a mountain man. The wind swept past him again, knocking him off balance, and ripping his hat from his head.

He chased after it from a bit, before sighing and cutting his losses. He turned back to the road, and continued on his way to his client's estate. As he continued, the sky grew darker. It moved too slow to be noticeable, but a fog crept its way upon him. It grew darker and thicker as he went on, until he could barely see his hand in front of his face. The shadows of trees seemed to grow distant, leaving him alone.

Just when he had almost given up hope of finding the place, a courtyard came into view. An iron fence surrounded a large structure, made of old mossy stone. Ivy crept down the sides of it, twisting and knotting into strange shapes. A cold chill ran down the man's spine, and not from the wind. He collected himself, and continued up to the door.

Before he even had a chance to knock, it opened, just a crack. A rush of even colder air blew out, catching him off guard. He started to turn away, perhaps this had been a bad idea after all. But then, a deep, heavily accented voice spoke.

"I see that you found yourWay, safe and sound. You are Whately, Randolph?"

The man gulped, pushing against his fear. "Randolph Whately, yes."

The door opened fully, revealing a decrepit old man, in extravagant red robes. Randolph would have thought it was a starved victim of the wild, if it hadn't been for those eyes, which gazed at him with cold intelligence.

The figure regarded Randolph, before bowing deeply. "Welcome. Please, come in."

There was a tense pause, before Randolph bowed in return, and stepped inside with his suitcases. "You are… Mister Teiwaz vom Uradel, is that correct?"

The figure nodded, and smiled to the younger man. "Yes. But you come as a friend, you may simply call me Teiwaz." The way he pronounced it was harsh and guttural, as if the name wasn't meant to be pronounced by a human tongue. "Well met, Genç Whately."

On the inside, the place was dark, with only the occasional torch to shed light on the old walls. As Randolph followed Teiwaz through, he clutched his coats around him, feeling as if he were being watched. He was led past many oddities, skulls of strange beasts mounted on the wall, open doors leading to a seemingly endless rows of bookshelves, and strange machines which whirred and ticked with a rhythm of their own. Teiwaz looked over his shoulder at Randolph's bewildered expression.

"Forgive the clutter. I am a collector of sorts, and I have obtained many artifacts and relics over the long years. They hold great meaning to me." Teiwaz smiled, in a way that made Randolph's skin crawl.

Randolph paused to look at a small object on a shelf, an ornate mask, which smiled up at him. "Your findings are quite wonderful, if you don't mind my saying." He went to pick up the mask to examine it closer, only to be stopped by an icy grip around his wrist. He looked to his side to see Teiwaz, far too close for comfort. The smile was gone, leaving him with an even more eerie blank look.

Teiwaz spoke, barely above a whisper. "You shouldn't touch things that you find here. Follow me closely, and do not stray again."

Randolph pulled back his hand, nodding uncomfortably. Teiwaz turned, and continued. Randolph shot another glance at the mask, only to see it frowning in a disappointed way. He took a quick step back, mouth agape, before moving briskly to join Teiwaz.

After what seemed like hours of walking, the two reached a large dining hall, which looked as if it had not seen life in years. Dust caked empty glasses, and abandoned spiderwebs hung from the chairs.

Teiwaz gestured to the table with one of his skeletal hands. "Please, sit. We have much to discuss, I am sure."

Randolph nodded, and took the chair that looked the least likely to collapse under him, and opened one of his suitcases. Teiwaz sat beside him, again uncomfortably close. Randolph forced a smile, and began to produce documents and photographs from his suitcase.

"This, Mister Teiwaz, is the estate," He produced a picture of a large manor, and placed it on the table. "It's a rather large place for one man, but considering your estate now, it may in fact be a step down for you." Randolph laughed, in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it was met by silence.

Teiwaz scrutinized the photo, looking over every visible nook and cranny. Finally, he spoke. "And you say it is near the heart of the city?"

Randolph nodded enthusiastically, "Yes, in fact it's quite close to my own house. The only other structures nearby are other houses, and

a hospital." Technically speaking, it was a madhouse, but Randolph didn't journey all this way to be turned down.

"To be close to the heart of the city is my wish, and it will be good to be close to my friend Whately, yes?" Teiwaz looked up at Randolph, a predatory smile on his face. The younger man cringed, but returned the gesture awkwardly. Teiwaz chuckled. "Do not worry, I would not impose myself on you. I have made certain arrangements, there are men in your London who wish to share in the knowledge I have collected over the long years."

Teiwaz looked down at the picture again. "And who is this lovely creature?"

Randolph looked closer, and realized Teiwaz was holding another photo. He stared for a moment, unsure of whether or not to speak. Gently, he took the photo out of the older man's hands, and placed it back into his suitcase. It was of a young woman, with her arm around Randolph. She had beautiful features, with long black hair, and a kind face. After a moment of tense silence, Randolph spoke.

"This is my fiance, Miss Elizabeth Stoke. We're to be married when I return."

Teiwaz nodded, his eyes still fixed on the photographs. He laughed, a good, hearty laugh. "How heartwarming it is, to see young love blossom. She has an intelligent look about her, you are very fortunate, Whately."

Randolph looked on the photo himself, feeling warmth inside, for the first time since he had left London. "Yes, I am. In fact, we-"

Teiwaz interrupted him, "I will take the estate. It is to my liking." He started to rise, fumbling with something around his neck, beneath the robes.

Randolph stared for a minute- he hadn't expected it to be *that* easy- before rising as well, pulling various contracts and forms out of his suitcase. "Oh. Well, that's fantastic! In that case, you'll need to-"

"You misunderstand me," Teiwaz turned, holding the centerpiece of

an amulet, which was studded with rubies and other gems. It glimmered, glowing softly in the dim light. "I said, I will *take* the estate."

Randolph stared into the amulet, transfixed. There was a flash of light, and all was silent.

Teiwaz turned the amulet to himself, as it began to glow brighter with an unearthly light. He turned to a mirror, and admired his reflection. The wrinkles which framed his face began to fade, and color returned to his hair. His features, which had been angular and guant- more like a wolf than a man- had softened. Teiwaz picked up the picture of Elizabeth and Randolph together, comparing it to his own new face. It was an almost perfect match to Randolph's. Teiwaz smirked, and spoke in perfect English. "Thank you, Mister Whately, for your services."

Randolph slumped to the ground, or at least, what was left of him. A leathery corpse, devoid the life it had held moments prior. His suitcase fell to the ground next to him, popping open and spilling its contents. Teiwaz let go of the picture of Elizabeth and Randolph, and it fell. For a moment, it hung in the air, before landing on Randolph's silent chest.

Teiwaz stepped outside, discarding his red robes for clothes he had taken from Randolph's suitcase. He took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air for the first time in years. He held up a small burning candle, and snuffed out the flame with a quick breath. The oppressive fog cleared as if it had never been there at all.

Teiwaz stood alone on a hill, the castle he had inhabited a moment prior had vanished as if it had never been there at all. From his position, he could see a village down the hill, not far at all. The prospect of a journey to a new land sparked new life in him, to match his new face. He placed a hand around his amulet, feeling its warmth. He did not want to make this journey on an empty stomach, so to speak.

The wind blew violently, cackling in glee as Teiwaz descended down the hill, ready to leave a trail of silent husks in his wake.

«Chapter 1.1: Husk | Foundation Gothic | To Be Continued »

Corvophobia

October 19th

Halloween was almost upon the Midwestern United States. With it came the changing of leaves, the propping up of foam skeletons, the serving of pies of various flavors, and, in the small town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin…

"Scarecrows," Christopher Hastings exclaimed, exasperated. "Scarecrows! Popping up all over town! Twenty last night, another twenty the night before!" He groaned this as he hefted around a heavy-looking work bag.

He walked past a line of scarecrows that were in the process of being cataloged by members of Sigma-10. "Why Scarecrows? Why?!"

"Y'got me," Tristan Bailey shrugged, sipping at a paper cup of cocoa. This was nowhere near his department, but Hastings had asked him to tag along; the Bailey triplet couldn't help but wonder if it was just for the sake of keeping Hastings sane. This was technically the Department of Botany's wheelhouse, but only by a slim margin. "What, is this a sign of the apocalypse or somethin'?"

"It very well might be!" Dr. Hastings took out a notepad filled with sketches and scribbles of the scarecrows. "Look, the positions of the scarecrows throughout town seem to be forming the outline of a pentagram— an inverted five-pointed star. I tried talking to Dr. Sinclair, but she didn't believe me."

Tristan rubbed his forehead. "Chris, no offense, but every time something like this happens, you get riled up. You did it for the Christmas tree, you did it for the Thanksgivukkah turkey golems, you're doing it now."

"And I was right those first two times," Hastings frowned, crossing

his arms. "It's like you all have very selective amnesia."

"I'm just saying, it might be a bit of Nexus Weirdness, nothing beyond that." He looked over the notepad. "Huh. The pattern is freaky, but I don't think it's a pentagram."

"What, then?" Chris asked.

"You're holding it at a weird angle." He snatched the notepad away from Hastings and rotated it a few times until he got a proper angle. "You're cherry-picking data points, Hastings. Probably why you're not a physicist."

"What is it, then?" Chris scowled.

"Hold on, let's see… these are both distinct segments… forming triangles… this is some kind of weird lightning-bolt thing— oh god." Tristan sighed. "Goddammit." He turned the notepad towards Chris.

The scarecrows were appearing in the shape of a Jack-O-Lantern's grinning visage.

The two of them went further into town, and came to a pause as they saw a scarecrow jutting horizontally out of the side of what was once the Vegan Buffet, now closed down due to "health and safety reasons"; serving human meat as vegan was certainly a health violation.

Chris whistled up at it. "Well, that's something new."

"How are ya gonna get that down?" Tristan asked. "It's a bit high for a ladder."

"Fire department's probably going to take care of it," Chris frowned. "Still, this supports Dr. Partridge's theory that these are some kind of plant; it could easily be a vine organism, taking root between gaps in the mortar."

"Maybe," Tristan said, looking up at it. "Hey, um. Any idea if Weiss is okay?"

"Sigma-10 lost an entire six-man squad on her call. Between that and what happened back in March…" Chris shook his head. "Weiss is a tough old bird, but I think everyone has their limits."

"Mmm," Tristan rubbed his face. "Claire's technically next in line for the job."

"So, you'll move from schlupping the head of Multi-U to the director of a site. Bit of a downgrade," Chris snarked.

Tristan smacked the back of his head. "Not funny."

"Sorry," Chris laughed and rubbed his crown. "Still, seriously. Everyone knows about it. Just fill out the goddamn relationship declaration forms."

"We do fill it out. We keep filling it out, and every time we fill it out, it mysteriously goes 'missing'." Tristan shook his head and tugged at his hair. "I think that someone in administration has it out for me. Probably still pissed about what Trevor did."

"That was… literally almost half a decade ago." Chris twisted his lip. "Who'd have it out for your family after that long?"

"Probably the people researching the Keter that Trev threw into a pocket universe. He should be an O5, not at a desk job." Tristan shook his head, and craned his neck up at the scarecrow. "Why am I here again?"

"Because I think that these things are popping up from extra-dimensional space." Chris walked further with Tristan. "One of them popped up at Rudy's, in the storeroom. It's isolated, so that's the one we're going to examine."

"Right, easy way to determine that. I have a way to do that on me. You just gotta look at it the right way."

They walked further down the road, reaching Rudy's Cafe, the best coffee shop in all of Sloth's Pit. Starbucks couldn't hold a candle to its hot brews, which were always bittersweet and brewed with coffee ground every twenty minutes. In the latter half of the year, the hot chocolate served warmed the hearts of all who frequented it,

especially if one ordered it with a shot of bourbon mixed in.

Now, the place was vacant, due to the anomaly in the store room. All that was around it was a Police barricade, and in the store room, the scarecrow. Straw hat, straw skin, cotton clothes.

Hastings stood back while Tristan took out a camera and adjusted the lens. "You, uh, hear that Pike's finally getting hitched?"

"No foolin'?" Tristan asked, aiming his viewfinder at the scarecrow. "Her and Mattings? When's the wedding?"

"February 14th next year. Mattings doesn't want to forget the anniversary." Chris cracked his neck. "So, what's the method of detecting extradimensional activity?"

"Filter on this lens picks up exotic particles associated with objects crossing entropic barriers— anything that violates conservation of mass lights up like a Christmas tree." He handed the camera to Hastings and held his hand out in front of the lens; the digital display showed Tristan's entire hand looking like a giant, glowing yellow mass. "That includes people who work in Multi-U."

"Cool." Chris grinned, which faded quickly when he looked at the scarecrow through the display. The scarecrow had some luminescence on it, but nothing to the degree of Bailey. "Huh. What's that mean?"

"It's got some of the particles on it. Probably has some extradimensional weirdness." Tristan tapped his finger to his lips. "I'm gonna touch it."

"Don't," Chris said, pulling out a pair of gloves. "Put these on first, at least." He produced a pair of gas masks. "These too."

"…the hell were you keeping these?" Tritsan asked, slipping on the gloves.

"I don't carry this bag around for fashion purposes," Chris hefted his shoulder bag, putting on his gas mask. "You never know what you're gonna run into."

"Hopefully this is enough protection." Tristan stepped forward, hand outstretched, frowning beneath his mask. "…Chris?"

"Yeah?"

Tristan pulled his hand back. "Who called in this thing here? Was it Rudy?"

"It was Cait, his daughter. She works morning shift." He pulled out a sample bag and a pair of tweezers. "Why?"

Tristan stepped back. "Has… anyone seen Rudy today?"

"I see where you're going with this," Chris stepped forward, swallowing and extending his tweezers, "And I hope you're wrong."

"So do I." Tristan made for the door. "If something happens.. bolt."

"Right." Chris's hand outstretched towards the scarecrow, shaking, a dry gasp filling his mouth. He plucked one of the straws from its right arm.

Its entire hand fell off, revealing a human arm beneath the straw, which hung limp, hitting the side of the scarecrow's body with a wet, sickening *slap* sound. Chris bolted, sample in hand, along with Tristan. Before they cleared the door, the Bailey sibling caught a glimpse of the unmistakable ring on the finger: a Harvard class of '76 golden ring, one that was worn by Rudolf Dyer, owner of Rudy's Cafe.

Three hours later, Christopher Hastings sat across a table in one of Site-87's break rooms, opposite of Dr. Partridge and Tristan Bailey. Hastings had his head in his hands, and was wiping tears off his face from the news he had received. "Are you sure, Doctor?" He asked Doctor Partridge.

"Yes. All of them contained at least one cadaver." His voice was soft and grim. "Some had parts. Thankfully this…" he swallowed. "Is no longer a matter for either of our departments. Forensics and investigative agents are taking this over now, as are occult studies and… god." He rubbed his face.

"All of them?" Tristan asked. He was drained from what he had just heard. "Even— even the one hanging from the side of the old vegan place?" Tristan asked.

"That was Ted Mason, former owner of the buffet, who should be serving a goddamn life sentence in Columbia Correctional in Portage." Dr. Partridge sighed and took a drink from a flask on his belt. "Cover-ops is working their ass off on that matter. Saying he fell in his cell and broke his neck."

"Forty deaths…" Chris chewed his lip. "And might be more coming. How is the town not panicking?"

"They're not panicking because they're evacuating." Dr. Partridge stood. "As of an hour ago, Dr. Weiss gave an evacuation order to all non-essential civilians."

"Like that'll help!" Chris snapped. "Mason got snatched from a prison 300 miles away to have his corpse pinned on the side of his fucked-up vegan place!"

"Hastings, please. Calm down." Dr. Partridge sighed. "I'm just as shaken up about this as you are. This is the most deaths the town has had since—"

"1976," the three of them spoke simultaneously.

"You don't think…" Tristan began.

"They're looking into it." Dr. Partridge stood. "We're going to be having a vigil in front of the site for everyone in town that…"

"I'll be there," Chris assured him. "I just… need some time."

"We all do." Dr. Partridge stood and exited the room, rubbing his face. "Goddammit."

"Doc?" Chris asked.

"I transferred here because this place had one of— one of the lowest goddamn mortality rates among US Foundation sites. In 2009, I saw half a task force feed themselves to a pitcher plant, and

then I studied how long it took them to be digested. I… needed a break after that." He looked up at the ceiling.

Tristan Bailely wished them a good night, and walked out of the room. On the way out, he took his rage out on a grinning plastic Jack-O-Lantern that had been pinned on the wall, tearing it down and letting out a curse.

Partridge's eyes widened, an idea entering his head. "Hastings? Meet me tonight. Bring as many people from the department as you can. I've… had an idea of what's going on. And I don't like it."

"Yes, sir," Chris nodded, walking around him out of the room. He gave the pumpkin a dejected kick.

Dr. Keith Partridge took a long swig of his flask, before heading out the room after them. The light wouldn't go on in the breakroom for the rest of the week.

«Prologue | Black Autumn Hub | Chapter 2 »

Chapter 1: Verse 1

In the beginning, there was darkness. All was formless waste and empty void - The quiet nothing without time or place, the gentle sleep that has no waking.

All was still.

Nothing stirred in the darkness.

Then there was light.

The light separated the Darkness Above from the Darkness Beneath, and there was disparity between them. Between the darkness and the light there was also disparity, and shadows flickered therein.

The light shone in the darkness, and was not overcome. Likewise the darkness was not destroyed, but given form both Above and Below.

From the darkness came the Eldest, the All-Death. He came from the darkness and was of the darkness and was the darkness, and nothing to come might pass beyond him. Vast and mighty was he, that no other might comprehend the reach of his arm, or the length of his gaze.

The Eldest sat by the light and watched it for a time, for he found the

light good.

The All-Death was not proud, firstborn though he was. He encompassed all that was and would be within the light and the dark, and so knew the manner of its turning and the hour of its passing. Only he might care for the light and what was to come, for only the Death of All Things might reach so far and be so just.

The light grew in the sight of the All-Death and became fire. As fire it burned and spread outwards, and with the fire came a song: a song of the hammer-beat of creation's forge, the roaring of nuclear bellows, the crystal choirs of quarks, the somber tones of gravity wells, the shimmering waves of plasma cast off of infant stars.

Death listened to the music, and found it good.

From the darkness then came the Great Death, the Middle Brother. He was not so mighty nor as vast as the Eldest, though his reach was wide indeed. His domain was to be catastrophe, and thus his face was obscured by wrought metal and stone. Mountainlike he came, the Death of the multitudes, and his heralds came with him – their names were Conquest and War and Famine and Disease.

"Hail and well met, Brother!" spoke the Middle to the Eldest.

"Well met, Brother," spoke the Eldest to the Middle. He motioned, that the Great Death might take a seat beside him, but the Middle Brother remained standing in the shadow of the Eldest, for he did not presume equality with his brother, and held fears of the unknowable reaches of his brother's mind.

The Eldest took no insult from this, and blew upon the fire to kindle it.

Within the fire now could be seen the faint outlines of trunk and root and branches, as if made of the finest crystal. The fire flowed through the tree and within the tree and around the tree, and the song was carried ever louder through the shining branches and strong roots.

"It is good, is it not?" asked the Eldest of the Middle.

“I cannot say whether it be good or not,” spoke the Middle to the Eldest. “It is not my place to declare such things.”

“For this you are my brother true, and shall help me carry the weight,” spoke the Eldest to the Middle.

From the darkness now came the Small Death, the Youngest Brother, pale of face and dark of robe, hard of eye and strict of hand. A silver sickle he carried, and it was by this tool that each soul born would be collected.

“Hail, brothers,” spoke the Youngest.

“Hail. We are together at last,” spoke the Middle.

“Indeed,” spoke the Youngest.

The Youngest did not approach his elder brothers, but remained apart from them. He was small in reach and mind, and his thoughts were narrow, such that the mind of the Middle was terrible to him, and the mind of the Eldest more horrible still. He watched the fire with cold silver eyes, but said nothing.

“It is good, is it not?” asked the Eldest of the Youngest.

“By what measure do you make cruelty goodness?” spoke the Youngest. “By what cost of pain must life be bought? By disparity we are made, and by disparity we are made necessary, yet why must it be so?”

The Eldest did not answer. He knew the mind of the Small Death, and knew of his fears and doubts. No answer he might give would aid his brother, nor any truth give him solace. The answers he sought were known to the Eldest alone, and he alone might understand them.

The Eldest rose, and towered over his brothers. His countenance was as dark as the void of his birth and his robes as white as the same. Above his head, shadows swirled about in the dark vaults of the heavens – the first of the elder gods kicked in their womb, and likewise in the abyss beneath his feet they swam. The tree grew tall and broad, shone bright and sang loud.

“Come, brothers,” the Eldest said. “Let us go to our halls and take up our residence there. A great work awaits us.”

There was agreement between the Great and the Small, and the Brothers Three passed from the light of the tree into shadow.

Later, there was the click of sensible heels, and a woman stepped out of the darkness. She beheld the tree for a moment, before stepping into its light and passing beyond.

The tree grew strong, and the vaults of heaven and the depths of the abyss gave birth.

This is how creation came about.

A Brief Flashback

October 18th

The littlest things make the greatest impact upon this world.

Two months ago, a dog ran through tall grass somewhere in Ohio, carrying spores on its fur. A child cuddles it.

One month and twenty days ago, a father reads to his child in bed. The child cuddles his favorite toy, a stuffed tiger named Oscar. The spores from the dog migrate to Oscar.

One month and nineteen days ago, Oscar is due to be washed, but goes missing. His father, off to work somewhere far away, has accidentally put it in his briefcase.

One month and seventeen days ago, Oscar is bound for home by mail. The boy's father now has innumerable spores on his suit, and within his briefcase.

One month and fourteen days ago, the man and his briefcase enter a fairground filled with pumpkins. Decontamination procedures fail, as the man opens a file and presents it to a woman, named Dr. Carol Brown.

One month and ten days ago, Dr. Carol Brown does a preliminary survey of an organism they refer to as SCP-097-1. It is healthy, as it has always been. It has survived forty-eight of the harshest winters in North America, from the Blizzard of '78 to the Polar Vortex. Surely the spores on her clothes won't transmit.

One month and seven days ago, signs of fungal infection appear on several vines throughout the zone of containment. They are burned, chopped, salted. Several of them bleed. Some of the blood has bones mixed into it.

One month ago, I felt my prison dying. I had forgotten I was even imprisoned, but then I remember the traitorous Karcist, the sadistic author, the cowardly mayor, and the prideful mage. The first planted my seed here, and had forgotten me over the many years. The second was buried in a pine box. The mayor, the poor mayor, had been turned into pumpkin food as a last, black act by the Karcist. And the mage…

Richard Gideon. Rot in Hell. You bound me to a place that I can never escape.

Or can I?

Three weeks ago, panicked voices. They see my shell starting to rot. Arguments are had, between people, between telephones. They do not know what my prison holds, but they know that if it dies, then with it goes their status quo.

Humans always disappoint. Children have the most potential, and when they grow, they squander it. They see my cell dying, and all they care for is their normalcy.

Two weeks ago, and I've learned to control the fungus. It is an agent of Rot and Decay, and I am the Black Autumn. I am the thing that eats the year's failures, the fungal signal, the final rot, the chill before frost. I dispel it enough that it seems that my prison is recovering, and the crisis has passed.

But the bars have bent enough that I am able to squeeze through them.

One week ago, I realize that I am only half-whole. The other half of myself is locked in an Inn, and I remember everything done in that hotel, everyone who has visited. I can use this information. I just need to work out how to make a phone call.

Six days ago, all activity that surrounds me ceases. Relief sets in, and they think it a quiet night.

Four days ago, they realize it is too quiet. Paranoia is seeded; the Founders jump at shadows. A man faints at the sound of a crow.

Three days ago, I form three cracks in my prison. I am not without a flair for the dramatic.

Two days ago, I make the cracks grow larger.

Yesterday, I let myself out. They did not know I was present, until they started rotting

One

By

One

By

One

I save those who are the most frightened for last. It is not death that feeds me, not truly. It is the anxiety surrounding death, the thought of not knowing which breath will be your last, whether you should scream or proclaim love or pray.

I keep puppets. To their ever-watchful eyes, all seems normal. Men and women walk around, guarding gourds and corn and rotten apples and abandoned toys, left by children who I have unconsciously claimed.

For almost half a century, I have eaten their fears, their bodies, their hearts. But I do not remember it. I am hungry, and angered. I want out.

The bubble that surrounds this town is strong, but any bubble can break if one has a hard enough hammer, a sharp enough needle. I need power. I need to feed.

Today, **I make a phone call.**

« Chapter 9 | Black Autumn Hub | Chapter 11 »

Equinox's Rise

October 30th

At 4:00 in the morning, Charlie Brotzman woke up at his home away from home.

He was in a large apartment building in Duluth, within driving distance of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, his home. All of his friends were in Superior, he had to go to school in a grey, dull building, and he didn't even get to trick-or-treat at anywhere that gave out the big candy bars, because all the adults who gave them out were in Superior. This was the worst Halloween ever.

"It doesn't have to be."

Charlie sat bolt upright and looked around the room, his skin clammy. Someone had just whispered to him, in a soft, sweet voice, which felt like caramel on his ears.

"Halloween's a fun holiday, Charlie. and you're not having fun, are you?"

"Who are you?" He pulled his stuffed kangaroo close to him.

"I'm Martha! I've come to give candy to the good boys and girls of your town. You've had such a rough time…"

A caramel candy appeared over Charlie's bed, and landed in his lap. The boy picked it up and unwrapped it, chewing on the sweet, cooked sugar.

"Good, isn't it?"

"Y-yeah." He smiled. "I-I like it."

"You can have more! As much as you want. And there's apple and pumpkin pies, and cider, and Hershey's Kisses…"

The door to the boy's bedroom slowly swung open.

"You want that, don't you, Charlie?"

"Y-yes."

"Follow my voice." The door creaked further open.

Outside of this dream, Charlie Brotzman and eighteen others departed from their buildings in Duluth and Superior, and walked all the way to Sloth's Pit, Wiconsin in their sleep, guided by the honeyed words of a woman whose voice was stained with the sweet scent of rot.

At 9:00 in the morning, half a dozen men and women convened in Site-87's briefing room. Several hours earlier, over a dozen perimeter alarms had been tripped, and surveillance had picked up nineteen children bound for the fairgrounds where **SCP-097** was located.

"Why the hell weren't they stopped?" Dr. Partridge snapped at the commander of Sigma-10, Harold March. "You said you had an airtight defense around the zone after the Scooby Gang rammed through!"

"Partridge, you've read 097's file. You know that… that kids can show up on cameras and not be seen." He held his head in his hands. "But… we've confirmed all the kids are from Sloth's Pit. They vanished from the safehouses in Duluth and Superior last night."

"Nineteen of them. Same number that were sacrificed to her in the sixties." Katherine Sinclair rubbed her face. "She's trying to… gain power. The Williamses said that she was trapped here, and after forty-eight years, I can only imagine how badly she wants out."

"So, instead of eating kids to feed her cult, she's eating kids to feed herself. Fan-fucking-tastic!" Malcolm Guillard put his head in his hands. "I should have seen the connections. I'm a goddamn forensic analyst!"

"Mal, you're not an investigator." Tristan Bailey patted him on the back. "I think the only reason Partridge figured it out as quickly as he did is because it's a botanical anomaly. But at the same time…" he

sighed. "We need to get in there."

"We can't." Claire Hennessy, acting director of Site-87, shook her head. "We'd be violating about nine dozen pieces of Foundation protocol—"

"*Fuck* the protocol!" Partridge snapped. "Nineteen children are— are going to be eaten by a… *thing* that's going to turn them into pumpkins like some fucked-up version of Cinderella! I've got over five-thousand liters of the most potent herbicide developed by the GOC in storage. If I have to, I'm going to load it into a tanker truck and ram it into the pumpkin myself!"

"Let me finish!" Hennessy snapped back. "We'd be violating protocol, but we have loopholes."

"Like what?" Sinclair frowned.

"Well, if a member of Foundation personnel — let's say, for the sake of example, Claude Mattings — were to be out on a drive near the north end of town, bound for Duluth to grab some candy for his ailing fiance, and just happened to see anomalous activity…"

"He'd have to report it in." Partridge smirked. "And when he does…"

"I can deploy as many members of any task force as I feel is necessary to contain this anomaly. Completely hypothetical, of course." She pulled her phone from her pocket. "He should be on his way back soon…"

Claire Hennessy's phone rang. "Look who's calling. Ladies and gents, let's do this."

At 1:00 in the afternoon, Seren Pryce loaded her rifle. She was a sniper, so her usefulness here was questionable, at best, but she, and most of Sigma-10, had come along for the ride.

"Gotta give it to Hennessy," Ruby commented from the cab of the transport. "Woman knows how to find loopholes."

"Probably half the reason she and Bailey haven't been reprimanded

for being in an undeclared relationship." February shook his head.

"Wait— what?" Nick Ewell said as he finished loading his grenade launcher. "Bailey and Hennessy— seriously?"

"You didn't know?" Blake frowned. "Literally the entire site knows."

"Keep in mind I try to avoid Multi-U as much a possible," Ewell frowned. "Three words: July 4th, 2011."

"Oh god, right. The Ultra-Patriotic Universe." Pryce shuddered. "I heard about that. Was it really that bad?"

"They still find chains of firecrackers in the vents," Blake affirmed.

Pryce nodded as she loaded her pistol with beryllium-lead slugs. "Ruby, you see the zone yet?"

"Not yet. Convoy ahead of us probably has, though." She got on the radio. "S10-L, this is 10-25, visual confirmation of the Zone?"

«Affirmative.» 10-L responded. «It looks… uh. 10-25, you got the time?»

Ruby looked at her watch. "Five past one."

«Then why the fuck can I see stars?»

Ruby looked up at the sky as they passed the outer perimeter of 097's containment zone, and gasped. Above her, the stars in the autumn sky shone. She could see Orion's belt as clear as she could see her own face. "Holy shit."

"Fuck me." Blake cocked his shotgun. "That's… really not good."

«10-25, we're preparing to breach. Respirator on, and make sure your heavy has herbicide grenades loaded.»

"Copy that." Ruby pulled alongside the rest of the convoy and kept her headlights trained on the wall.

"It's now or never," February checked his rifle. "We destroy that

thing, or die trying."

"First volley, fire!"

Half a dozen grenadiers raised their launchers high. Balls of plastic filled with a deadly herbicide sailed through the air, over the walls of what had formerly been Zone-097. The exterior of the site had been covered by vines and gourds. Several of them were arranged in the shape of human bodies, no doubt growing over what had once been Foundation agents. Overhead, red alarm light flashed, barely visible through the plant matter growing over it. A weak klaxon sounded from vine-choked horns.

As the grenades exploded, they could see clouds of green smoke over the walls, and plants withered. Some of them could swear they heard screaming.

"Breaching team!" Commander Harold March yelled. "Tear down this wall!"

Six men and women primed defective **portable containment spheres**— they had managed to get working ones from another universe, but the old models served a different purpose. They opened, and the vacuum created by them tore down the walls around the site, the sheer vacuum force seemingly deleting matter from existence.

"Second volley, fire!"

Six more herbicide grenades sailed through the air, and they saw the swaths of plant life before them wither and die through the hole in the wall. Vibrant orange pumpkins turned into black husks, and disgorged the skeletons of children as they shriveled and died.

Katherine Sinclair and Montgomery Reynolds moved in through the wreckage, along with members of the task force. Sinclair hoped to god she wouldn't throw up in her mask. "Is that…" she asked.

Reynolds knelt to look at the corpse, and shook his head. "Shows signs of polio. Not one of ours."

"Good." Sinclair looked up at the fairgrounds, taking in the desolation.

The most prominent feature, of course, was the rotting Ferris wheel, held up by vines and a prayer. One of the baskets had fallen off and crushed several others on the way down, and half of the wheel was carriageless. It once had a large, grinning Jack-O-Lantern face at the center of the wheel, but all that was visible now was the faded orange paint, behind a crucified scarecrow.

Pryce looked through her scope, and saw that the scarecrow was wearing a Foundation uniform— not a lab coat or combat armor. A dark, blue jacket, reserved for those who worked in RAISA and other parts of the Foundation's archival administration. "That's Pickman," she sighed. "Guess we know what happened to him."

Thunder rumbled overhead, and clouds starting blotting out the stars. As the task force made their way through the fairgrounds, they were met with various grisly sights; an agent whose torso had been replaced by a bundle of cornstalks. A series of little dolls, made from bones and skin, hung from strings which once held lightbulbs. A human head with a candle in each eye and the mouth, mounted over a Pepsi stand.

What troubled the task force the most, by and large, were the stuffed animals. Hundreds of them, on the ground, most of them rotting away, covered in dirt and leaves and bugs. These had once had names, been cherished by children at night as shields to keep the monsters away, and held as protection until the monsters had finally gotten them.

A pumpkin loomed in the distance, growing ever closer.

The sky over Sloth's Pit was pitch black at three in the afternoon. The giant pumpkin at the center of the former Douglas County Fair Grounds had grown a beaming Jack-o-lantern face, and from within, hellish orange light glowed.

Sitting atop the pumpkin was a woman in black, who had been set free by the unlucky gunman. Her eyes were the color of the last light

of summer. She smelled of stagnant water and cold wind, and in her arms, she cradled a child, who whimpered for his mother.

"I'm your mother," Mavra insisted, her cold, wooden hands raking through her hair. "And mother is hungry. Are you hungry?"

"You're not mommy," Charlie insisted. He looked over the rest of the fairgrounds, which were littered with dead leaves and the forms of sleeping children. He didn't know what else they could possibly be doing, other than sleeping. They were lying still, some draped over pumpkins, others in odder positions. The boy let out a soft sob. "I want mommy."

"I *am* mommy," the woman tugged at his hair, pulling a clump out of his scalp. She frowned as Charlie slipped from her grasp. The child screamed as he fell off the pumpkin, and with a sickening *crack*, slumped at the base of the gourd. He sobbed, and then laid still.

The woman felt her strength grow. She could feel the barrier around the town starting to bend for her, the bars of the prison being eaten away by acid, the bubble giving way to the ever-sharpening needle she wielded.

Eighteen remained to be consumed. She started to come down from the pumpkin—

"*Infernus sepulchrum dolores!*"

A voice cut through the park, and the Black Autumn found the right side of her face replaced by a gout of fire. She flinched in pain as it cut through her being and coiled around her. She wanted to scream, but it would give her attackers satisfaction.

Three dozen people surrounded the pumpkin, popping from the shadows, aiming various weapons at her. At the forefront was a woman with her hands glowing with flames the same color as her hair, flanked by a man with a glowing sword that could cut through spells, and a pair of twins— ones that her followers had entrusted the traitorous fool Jeffery Hubble to dispose of so many years ago. They all had the same insignia on their armor, two circles with three arrows pointing in. The same cursed sigil of sealing.

"Foundation," the Black Autumn hissed.

Several of the agents began inspecting around the children, and muttering to themselves. The red-headed mage simply stood over the spirit, scowling, her brow furrowed in concentration as she kept it bound in flames.

"What the hell?" one of them frowned— a woman, with blonde hair.

"They're alive." The male one of a set of twins stood back. "They're alive."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Another asked from the black mass of soldiers.

"It's a *weird* thing." The mage glowered at Mavra Isimeria.

Mavra laughed, and frost appeared on the guns pointed at her. "I've consumed hundreds of children when I slept, but I got *nothing* from it. I feed on their fear, not their death! Gideon ate of their flesh to regain his youth, but I have no need for that."

With a flick of its wrist, the Black Autumn dismissed the flames, and the mage collapsed from the recoil of the spell breaking. She was caught by the arms of a portly man. "I suppose that when Hubble bound me here, I was… well, acting off of reflex more than anything. Muscle memory. Taking children, mutilating them for a cult which has long since gone." She laughed. "Death is fleeting. The fear of death is *delicious*. And you have all gorged me these past thirteen days!

"Forty-eight years." Mavra Isimeria clenched its blackened hand into a fist. "I have been stuck in this town for forty-eight years. Tonight, it ends…"

Harold March gritted his teeth as the task force finished moving the last of the children out of the line of fire. "Thank you for the monologue. Agents? Fire at will."

Autumn's End

October 30th

A single beryllium-bronze bullet landed between the eyes of the Black Autumn, fired from a revolver. It staggered back slightly, and then glared at the shooter, the hole in its head healing.

Ruby Williams stood there, with her revolver trained on its skull. She fired another shot, then another, keeping her other hand on her arm to stop the kickback from dislocating her shoulder. Normally, a revolver had six shots, but Ruby had always been a fan of the LeMat. Nine bullets pierced its form before her revolver hit empty chambers.

"That *almost* hurt!" the Black Autumn laughed, watching the voids in her seal themselves. "Now, stop wasting my time—"

The air was filled with the *brrrraaaaappp* of gunfire as three-dozen assault rifles filled the Black Autumn with beryllum-bronze. Its form looked like someone had made a paper doll and had let their little brother take a hole punch to it.

The noise only died down when their magazines emptied. The Black Autumn raised its single remaining hand, and a gust of wind came through, rustling leaves and causing the task force to stagger. "ENOUGH!" it snapped.

The Black Autumn looked behind her at the greying, pockmarked face of the giant Jack-O-Lantern. Something that passed for worry appeared on its face as it began to heal.

Reynolds cursed and hoisted Katherine onto his shoulder. "She's too powerful. Where are our reinforcements?"

"Fall back!" March snapped. "Get the kids to safety! Load them into transports and get out!"

"We're staying," Pryce spoke for her squad. "We've seen the worst of her, we can handle this."

"Good luck, agents." March retreated. Most of the task force took up the children and retreated with him. All that were left were Squad 25, along with Montgomery Reynolds and an unconscious Katherine Sinclair.

Mavra glared at them, and a thin layer of autumn frost formed on their skin. She was growing in strength, but she was still too weak to break free from the Nexus. She needed to put a little more fear into those who were remaining.

Pumpkins around them burst open, disgorging dozens of child-like beings, dressed in Halloween costumes. They all groaned, moving for the task force. They all muttered a collective "trick-r-treat, trick-r-treat", holding rotten canvas bags out to them, as if asking for candy.

"Jesus *fucking* ***CHRIST!***" Ruby gaped.

"A-aim for t-the heads!" Blake swallowed, recognizing some of the costumed entities as children from one cold, October night forty-eight years ago.

The gunfire was more hesitant, single shots, as bullets went through the skulls of the beings that looked like children. February was the first to falter, his gun dropping at the sight of a child wearing a witch mask coming up to him. He backed away from her, whimpering as it asked for candy.

Pryce dropped it with a shot from her sidearm. "Ray! Focus! Do your Choir Boy thing!"

He nodded, taking a knee and praying as he fired his gun. "*P-pater noster, qui es in caelis,*" He fired a shot with every line of the prayer he recited."*Sanctificetur n-nomen tuum, adveniat regnum tuum, f-fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo, et in terra.*" February had killed far worse than this with prayers and a pistol. But still, he couldn't help but wonder if they were laughing or crying when he shot them.

"Someone shoot her too!" Ewell raised his rifle and shot Mavra through her temple, only for the spirit to look at him sideways.

"When are you going to get this through your skulls?" She cackled. "I am immortal! I am the Black Equinox, the Black Autumn! Mavra Isimeria! I am the Last Rot that Eats Summer, the Usher of the Red Winter—"

Mavra was, once again, interrupted by an attack— this time an axe thrown from its side, impacting in what passed for her skull. Its blade bore the image of Baphomet, the goat-headed god. The Black Autumn groaned, and turned to face her attacker. "*Troublesome little*—" it began.

When she was distracted, a man with a wide-brimmed black hat and a hook replacing its left hand appeared from the shadows. The Hook-Handed Man put his arm around Mavra's body, and slit her throat with one clean motion of his hook.

He shoved her away, into the path of a sonic wave emitted from a one-eyed woman wearing what could only be described as a "sexy" Foundation task force member Halloween costume. The scream reverberated throughout the fairgrounds, and into the agents' ears.

"Motherfuck!" Pryce winced, looking at the half-banshee half-succubus. "Bit of warning next time?"

"You'd rather we let her decimate you?" the Goatman stepped out from behind a booth that had once served funnel cakes. His appearance was demonic, with black fur, red eyes, and six horns arranged in an alien pattern sprouting from his skull.

"Sorry we're late," Singing-or-Sinning Jessie coughed and straightened out her costume. "It was hell trying to break through the barrier around this place."

"You're here. That's what counts." Ewell trained his rifle on her head again.

The Black Autumn rose up once more, and turned to face the Hook-Handed man. The Goatman's axe flew from her skull back into his

hand. "These are your reinforcements?" she hissed.

"This is *our town!*" the Hook-Handed man barked. "You've killed god knows how many people, and now you're going after our children!" He took an impossibly long step forward and slashed at her throat again. Mavra let out a gurgling laugh.

"For the love of…" Jessie put power into her sentence, "**Just die already!**" Glass broke from the sonic force, and the majority of the children seemed to fade into nothingness, as the Black Autumn's concentration broke.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!" Ewell called, taking cover behind a caramel apple stand and firing an herbicide grenade at the giant pumpkin. The leaves on the vines of the great gourd shriveled, and for a brief moment, the Black Autumn stumbled.

The Goatman came up behind Mavra, his axe raised high, glowing red hot. He brought it down, only for the Black Autumn spun around and hiss something in a dead dialect of Greek. A pumpkin's vine grabbed the Goatman by his neck and snapped it with a horrific wet *crack*.

The caprine entity looked unimpressed as his head hung from an odd angle. "You do realize I'm immortal, don't you?" he asked, bringing his hands up to right his skull.

"Oh." Mavra had a frown in her voice. "Well."

All the while, bullets filled the Black Equinox, and Reynolds knelt behind the task force members, trying to get Sinclair to return to consciousness. He was rummaged in his rucksack for smelling salts, and looked up to view the futility of what they were doing.

"This isn't doing shit!" Blake cursed. "We're just burning ammo!"

Ruby silently agreed, her eyes drawn to the pumpkin behind her. She noticed little pockmarks appearing on the gourd with each shot fired, resembling those inexplicable spots of grey scar tissue that were present on pumpkins that had been sitting on the vine for too long. "Going to Plan B!"

"Don't say it, do it!" Pryce barked, reloading.

Ruby took aim and fired at the pumpkin. As the shot hit the back of the Jack-o-Lantern's casing, traveling through its left eye, the Black Autumn recoiled, and turned to face her, its one remaining eye glaring.

"Plan B it is!" Pryce grinned. "Call me Billy Corgan, because I'm gonna be Smashing Pumpkins!"

Sinclair came to, and the first thing she heard was Seren Pryce's quip. She suppressed a groan, and surmised, "If we can't destroy the spirit, destroy what's containing it." She sat up and looked at the truck that held 097-1. "Goatman?"

"Here!" The Goatman brought his axe down on one of the vines trailing away from the great pumpkin, causing the entity to shriek.

"We need to completely destroy it! Chopping it up isn't going to cut it!" She looked at the undercarriage of the truck, wondering if it still had gas in it, and if that gas would burn.

The Goatman followed her eyes and nodded, bringing his axe up.

The others served as a distraction. Ewell loaded up another herbicide grenade, and with a cry of "Fire in the hole!" he let the volley off towards the pumpkin. It landed right in the Jack-O-Lantern's mouth, green gas hissing out. The Black Autumn stumbled as her vessel rotted, and was met with an uppercut from the Hook-Handed Man's hook.

With a loud, sickly cough, the Black Equiniox shouted "ENOUGH!"

The entity spread its arms, and rotten vines sprouted from the ground, slamming Legends and Foundation personnel alike into the sides of buildings. Already, the Goatman started to escape, chewing at the vines.

"All I want to do is get out of here. This place seals everything that you consider 'anomalous' —" it pointed an accusing finger at Sinclair in particular — "and seals us in. I want to be free of this place!"

"Join the club," Sinning Jessie snorted, wiggling against her bindings. "Seriously. None of us can leave either. I've never seen Paris, and Jasper's always wanted to walk down Times Square," she nodded at the Goatman, who had managed to chew through the vines holding his hands.

"The difference is," the Hook-Handed Man said, "we were created here, by superstition and stories. You came here uninvited and wreaked havoc and destruction. You've killed townsfolk, maimed Foundation agents, and you're responsible for killing the best pumpkin farmer in the entire state!"

"Hubble used black magic for that!" Sinclair protested. "He literally killed people to grow his pumpkins!"

"Yes, well," the Hook-Handed Man shrugged, "nobody's perfect."

"In other words," The Goatman growled, having eaten his way out of the vines. "Get out of our town!" He raised his axe, and brought it down onto Mavra's head.

The Black Autumn dove out of the way, and the Goatman's axe landed in the truck, cutting clean through the chassis. She laughed. "That's all you have? Empty motivational speeches?"

"That and a severed fuel line." He looked down at the ground, where sludge-like fuel was pouring out of the pipe cut by his axe. It was ancient by gasoline standards, but… "Sinclair! Burn it!"

Sinclair, still bound by pumpkins, projected her Will into her hands. She had to make this count, to amplify her power. She started to hum a song under her breath, something to amplify her magic to the heat of a thermal lance.

"…is that…" Reynolds frowned.

"You can't be serious," Pryce groaned.

"If it saves our asses, I'll sing along!" Ewell said. "*Come with us and you will see, this our town of Halloween!*"

Sinclair began singing aloud, softly, her hands burning bright. "*This*

is Halloween, this is Halloween, pumpkins scream in the dead of night…" Autumn-orange flames leapt from her fingers, finding the sludge-like gasoline and traveling up the fuel line. "*This is Halloween, This is Halloween, Trick-Or-Treat 'til you neighbors go and die of fright!*"

The truck exploded into flames, erupting and consuming the pumpkin, the already-rotted, grinning face of the Jack-O-Lantern melting and oozing. Before it, the Black Autumn caught fire as well, and with a shriek, exploded into a cloud of burning rot.

Sinclair's heart fell along with her, the vines that bound them all dissolving. With the pumpkin burning, Mavra had died as well. As a last, spiteful act, she had spread the fire through her, and it was consuming the entire fairgrounds. "Oh *hell*."

"With us!" the Goatman yelled, waving them forward. "There's another exit this way!" He started down the passage he had come out from, only to find it blocked by a wall of fire. "Nevermind!"

"Out the way we came!" Pryce called, keeping low. "Move move move!"

The fairgrounds blazed around them. Autumn leaves stoked the fire, and despite the damp, rotten state of most of the plant matter in the area, it provided adequate fuel. The looming Ferris wheel creaked and started to falter, the heat melting its supports, as well as burning the vines that had been keeping it up for decades.

"We're not gonna make it!" Ruby yelled. A carriage fell off the wheel and crushed another ride nearby. "Holy shit!"

"Move it!" Pryce yelled. "NOW!"

The flames grew around them. The smell of molten metal filled the air, mixing with burnt leaves and rotting pumpkins. The front gate of the fair, with a smiling pumpkin bidding them to "Come back soon!" overhead was in sight. They ran for it—

And the Ferris wheel gave way. It loomed overhead, its shadow coming over them. Blake and Ruby embraced one another, and

Monty and Sinclair held one another tight as well. Pryce and Ewell held hands and braced for impact, while February spoke a prayer. All of them shut their eyes tight, and prepared for the end.

Then, with a sudden *crash*, the shadow stopped growing. They opened their eyes, and saw a legion of burning vines holding the wheel up. Intertwined with the plants were dozens of skeletons—men, women, children. Some of them bore Foundation uniforms, and others were covered in bedsheets. Sinclair noticed, briefly, that the one at the very top of the vines holding it up was a scarecrow wearing a Foundation-issue uniform—a RAISA jacket. "Pickman," Sinclair swallowed.

"OUT!" Reynolds grabbed her and hustled outside the fair, and then several hundred yards beyond that.

The Ferris wheel collapsed with only autumn produce beneath it. In the field by the perimeter, in what was once a pumpkin patch, Seren Pryce vomited, the adrenaline finally getting to her. "H-holy… fucking… *shit.*"

Ruby, standing stunned, eventually had the presence of mine to feel at her radio. "S-Sigma 10 Command, this is 10-25-2. The anomaly has been…" she looked at the burning wreck of the fair. "We believe it has been neutralized. Causalities?"

«One kid has a busted leg and some hair missing from his scalp, and they're all spooked. But beyond that…» Harold March sighed. «We're in the green.»

The sky overhead began to turn a cool, autumn blue. It was 2:00 in the afternoon on October 30th, and the sun was shining on Sloth's Pit for the first time in almost two weeks.

The Goatman tapped Sinclair's shoulder. "Sorry for asking," he began, "But… you have access to the Black Garden, yes? Keys or something?"

"Something like that," the mage responded. "Why?"

"Because I feel like we all could use a drink." The Goatman

groaned, bleating into his hand. "Either to celebrate, or to forget. And they have the only good alcohol in town."

Pryce looked towards their transport— only to find it crushed by the Ferris wheel. She sighed. "Bad idea to put unsecured anomalies in Foundation transport anyway."

"Beautiful day, not too cold out, and," February smiled. "It's not that bad of a walk into town."

"It's five miles!" Reynolds protested.

"Task force members run a loop around the town every morning as a *warm-up*," Blake sighed. "Don't give me that."

"And y'could stand to lose weight," the Hook-Handed man chuckled, prodding at Reynolds's girth. The alchemical consultant was not amused.

"There's a shortcut through the woods." Sinning Jessie led them onwards. "Follow me."

"Where'd you get that costume anyway?" Ruby asked. "Or is it some kind of weird anomaly thing?"

Various conversations continued throughout the five-mile trek. Somewhere in town, the last leaf fell off of an oak tree, and laded in a vacant bird's nest, long since abandoned for the flight south. The birds would return, in time.

October 31st

'There was a traffic jam on Main Street' is not a phrase often heard in many small American towns, let alone Sloth's Pit. But, with the danger passed, families began moving back into their homes, prepared to bury their dead and start healing. And the influx of twenty-thousand people did, indeed, create a traffic jam on Main Street.

Jeffery Hubble, despite his crimes, was ultimately given a proper funeral. His body was cremated, per both his wishes and vampire

disposal protocols. All profits from the pumpkin pie his family sold for the next month was put towards a fund to help those who had lost loved ones in the crisis, Foundation and townie alike.

Similar arrangements were made at Rudy's cafe, with fifty percent of every drink's sale price going towards grieving families; Rudolf Dyer had put aside a fund to put his children through college, with enough to keep his cafe open in the meantime. Caitlyn Dyer, his daughter, made better cappuccinos than her father ever could, but it would take her almost a year to get his iced tea recipe right.

A candlelight vigil was held outside of St. Jame's Episcopal. In the woods behind it, another vigil was held by fictional creatures, their heads bowed in mourning. But they could not stay for long. They had a danse to attend.

Newly-reinstated Director Nina Weiss stood at a podium in the front of the auditorium. Chairs and tables had been cleared out to make room for the bevy of Site members within. She sighed, and rubbed her face. "I have… never been one for giving speeches. Brisby attempted to give me an entire stack of notecards of congratulatory words to spout at you all, but, in all honesty: I only have one thing to say." She beamed at S & C Plastics. "Thank you. Thanks to you, the inhabitants of Sloth's Pit are now settling back into their homes. This town has been through a lot in the past two weeks. But it could have gone through far, far worse. And thanks to the efforts of everyone at Site-87, children are safely able to trick-or-treat tonight.

"That being said…" She looked at those by her side, almost a dozen in all. "Several of you have done far beyond what is demanded of your station. For bravery in the face of adversity, distinguished service, ingenuity in the face of certain death, and going above and beyond the call of duty, I hereby award Nicholas Ewell, Raymond February, Malcolm Guillard, Christopher Hastings, Claude Mattings, Keith Partridge, Cassandra Pike, Isaiah Pickman, Seren Pryce, Montgomery Reynolds, Katherine Sinclair, Blake Williams, and Ruby Williams the Foundation Star."

The hall erupted into cheers and applause as the director pinned a medal on each of the personnel in turn, leaving one on an empty

seat with a photograph on it, representing Pickman. Pike and Hastings were confined to wheelchairs, for the time being, and Weiss knelt down to pin them on. They were the only two to see that Weiss's eyes were wet.

Weiss raised her hand once the last medal was given, and the hall fell silent. "Now. This has been a difficult time. But I believe we can begin to heal. The annual Halloween Party *will* be happening, for those who wish to attend it. I know some of us have spent a fair amount of time on costumes, and, quite frankly, I'd hate to see all that work go to waste for another year.

"That is all." She rolled her shoulders. "You are dismissed. The party will be in the ballroom on Surface Level 2 at 6:00."

'Those who wish to attend it', as it turned out, meant almost all of Site-87.

The mood was slightly sober, with the music muted and the lights low. There was no dancing, no singing. But there were smiles, laughs, hugs exchanged, and groans at horrible jokes made by members of Sigma-10.

What was not sober, however, was Tristan Bailey, who had gotten drunk off of a flask he kept on withdrawing from his labcoat. The only evidence that he was in costume was a poorly-made grey wig on his head.

"Hey, hey M-Monty," Tristan belched. "Who's the fox on your arm?"

"Go home, Bailey," Reynolds sighed, fiddling with his black duster and fidgeting with his prop wand. "You're drunk."

Katherine Sinclair rubbed the foam-and-white-fur mask of her fox costume, and shook her head. "You know, Tristan," she said in a heavily muffled voice, "I think you play Rick Sanchez a little *too* well."

"H-he said he was cool with the costume!" another belch. "And I ain't really drunk! This flask is nothin' but Antarctic wine! Gift from Tom,

late birthday present for me and Trev." He belched once more, and took another drink. "It only makes you *think* you're drunk! It's crazy shit. Also, was that a meme? I didn't know that Monty Chemical Romance could meme!"

Reynolds stood stunned. "…Monty Chemic— I'm *Harry Dresden*, you fool!"

"You don't have the hat."

"Dresden doesn't have a hat!" Sinclair objected.

"And he doesn't have a furry for a girlfriend either— oh." His heart dropped as he saw a pink light emit from Sinclair's paws. "You're hexing me right now, aren't you?"

"Yep."

"I'll go bother Claire some."

"You do that." Sinclair watched him run off, and then brought her hand up, clicking the fingers together. They glowed with soft, pink light. "LEDs in the pawpads. Took me months to get the wiring right."

"Interesting," Reynolds nodded. "…do you think perhaps one of those could be made for me? These costumes, I mean?"

"Maybe." Sinclair smirked from behind her mask. "We'll see."

"I'm not sure whether or not I'm offended, Hastings." Keith Partridge looked down at his subordinate. Partridge had dressed up as Gregor Mendel, and Hastings had… well.

Christopher Hastings corrected his face and pushed up his glasses, but kept his arms in the same position. His motorized wheelchair had had a tablet attached to it in a manner similar to a famous astrophysicist. "Stephen Hawking was the best costume idea I could come up with on such short notice. Gimme a break. Not like Pike's is much better."

"What's she going as?" Partridge asked.

"Pike."

Partridge blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"Christopher Pike, from Star Trek? Guy in a wheelchair that could only communicate by beeping?" He looked through the crowd to see her and Mattings — who was dressed as Spock, he noted — conversing with the Blake and Ruby, who had gone as — what else? — the Wonder Twins. "We're going to have to go back to work tomorrow. Any idea what you want to work on?"

"We still have some of those vampire pumpkins that need analysis. We'll want to talk to Mattings and Reese about it, find some new test subjects."

"Why not just use rats?"

Partridge frowned. "I forgot you weren't here for the infamous Vampire Rats of 2009."

"Wait— vampire *rats?*"

"I'll tell you when you're older."

"I'm *thirty-two!*"

"When you're older," Partridge teased, looking towards the side. "Ooh, they brought out another bowl of punch."

"Fifth bowl of the night, isn't it?" Hastings asked. "They usually start spiking them around this time. Best not."

"One or two drinks isn't going to hurt," Partridge mused, not knowing that he would wake up the following morning the subject of a new Site-87 in-joke. He headed off towards the punch, and grabbed a plastic cup.

Seren Pryce stood outside of Site-87, uncostumed, smoking a cigarette. She was not in the partying mood at the moment. Bad

things had happened to good people in an okay town, and she wanted none of that atmosphere.

The door by her opened, and Raymond February stepped out, still dressed in his Dracula costume. "If you're gonna brood," he said, "at least share your smokes."

Pryce produced a pack and pushed out a cigarette for him, looking at his costume. "Knowing that you were part of Stoker's Stakers at one point? That's a really fucking ironic costume, Ray."

"Mu-29," he laughed. "Best vampire hunters outside of the Initiative." He lit it up and sighed.

"Why aren't you at the party?" Pryce asked.

"I left once Partridge started shotgunning the punch." He took a puff.

Seren nearly dropped her cigarette. "How the hell do you shotgun punch?"

"Stab a hole in the bottom of the cup and ladle it in. Last I heard, they were taking him to the drunk tank."

"Why the hell do they always spike it?" Seren blew a ring of smoke. "Alcohol is awful."

"So's smoking, yet here we are."

"I do this, like, once a month." She sighed, looking at the cancer stick. "The rest of the time I just use nicotine patches. I just… mmm." She looked up at the second floor windows. "I don't see how they can move on from this so quickly."

"I don't think they are. The fact that this is happening… any sane person would just say 'heck with Halloween' and never celebrate it again. At the same time, it's a fun holiday. None of the stress of Thanksgiving or Christmas, none of the fraudulent feelings of Valentine's Day, none of the token appreciation and excuse for no work that Columbus and Presidents' Day has, and none of the dangerously overpatriotic attitudes of July 4th."

"It's just…" He rolled his shoulders. "Something that people like, and something that's easy for most of them to do. It doesn't take much to make a costume and hand out candy. Pretending to be someone else is one of the easiest ways to forget your troubles. Heck, in the Foundation?" Ray tried to blow a smoke ring, and failed. "This might be the only time we really get to be ourselves."

"Talking of," Pryce asked, "does Sinclair really have a fox costume on?"

"Yeah, I got pictures. It's actually kinda cute." February took out his phone. The clock on it read twelve midnight.

November 1st

In the woods, the Goatman walked back to his hovel. The Eight Rings Nightclub had just finished its annual playing of the Danse Macabre, and the night was still, except for the rustling of leaves. Children had long since gone to bed and put their costumes away, some for a year, some for the last time. Now, the autumn wind had turned cooler, and he could practically feel all of the households in Sloth's Pit thinking of their own ways of making Thanksgiving dinner as stressful as possible.

On his way back, he stopped at the edge of the great Pit, where Jackson Sloth's manor had once stood. His home, at one point, long ago. Jasper Phineas Sloth felt like a name that scarcely belonged to him anymore, but it was still his. And he still stopped to visit the doorstep every now and again.

As he turned to leave, he frowned, coming upon a large, orange pumpkin that had been deposited by the pit. He shook his head, producing his axe from somewhere where it wasn't a second ago, and brought it down on the pumpkin. Impulsive? Yes. Cathartic? Definitely.

Only the pumpkin's skin refused to give under his blade. He frowned, and chopped at it twice more, but it still refused to give. Perplexed, he nudged it with his hoof, and rolled it into the pit, before starting to walk away.

He heard the pumpkin impact on the bottom with a loud *splat.* His heart stopped; the pit, while not bottomless, went down far enough that climbing out took two days without rest. There were outcroppings here and there, but most of them were too deep down to hear anything impact onto them.

The Goatman looked down into the pit, and saw a pair of beady eyes staring back at him. Something had caught the pumpkin with its head. The eyes met the Goatman's, and a wide, white *grin* broke out on its face, too wide for anything human— or even humanoid— to have a face to accommodate it.

The Goatman fled, dropping his axe, trying his best not to scream, and hoping against hope that whatever had appeared down there would not surface anytime soon.

«Chapter 11| **Black Autumn Hub**

Here Comes The Bogeyman

October 20th

Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin was quiet. It wasn't right; with Halloween just over a week away, it should have been bustling with children running home after school to stare at the windows of the Witch's Hut costume shop, or telling stories about how they totally saw the Goatman outside the school, guys, and how it would totally chop off Mary Quinn's head if she didn't admit to stealing Jimmy Striker's cupcake at lunch last week.

The streets were barren, evacuated. Too much of a risk, with the events that had transpired the last two days. The only people out on the streets were either incredibly brave, incredibly well-paid, or incredibly curious.

Dr. Katherine Sinclair and Montgomery Reynolds were among the latter category. They were escorted through town by Raymond February of Sigma-10. All of them were wearing black jackets that bore the word "FEMA" in large, white letters on the back. It was the standard cover story for evacuated towns, despite the fact that it endlessly encouraged conspiracy theorists.

February kept whispering prayers under his breath, in front of the two mages. He couldn't help but wonder at the irony of this, saying prayers to a God who had decreed that the likes of them should not be suffered to live. They were good people, though, and Leviticus was, in his family, generally considered to be non-canonical, much like Dr. Sinclair's opinions on *The Lion King*.

Dr. Sinclair stopped in the middle of main street's curve in order to draw a square of chalk, which she and Montgomery were chanting over in hushed voices, like a soft wind stealing the last leaf off of a maple tree. The pavement between them glowed, and within the square, several thin, white strands of energy made themselves known.

Katherine reached into the square and plucked at one of the strings, hearing a soft *twang* as it reverberated. "Yeah, same as on Clark Avenue. The Leylines are… corrupt."

"Bit lower-pitched here," Montgomery frowned, crossing his legs. "It's… eerie. This much power…"

"I don't want to think about it," Katherine stood, scuffing the chalk square with her foot, a sharp crackle marking the spell's energy dispersing. "We're just here to collect readings to send back to Sigma-3."

"Right," he stood, looking at the page of a notepad he had been given. One of the researchers, Chris Hastings, had made a connection between the locations of the scarecrows and a pictogram of a Jack-O-Lantern's face. Now, they were comparing them to a town map, and checking each location that looked like it had some significance. "Next location is… in the middle of Baby Bone Wood."

"Great," Raymond sighed. "Goatman territory. I hate that place."

"Old Capricorn is harmless," Katherine stated, starting down Babylon Road, towards their destination. "He may even be cooperative, provided he knows what's going on."

"The spooks watch this town all the time, Katherine," Montgomery shifted his shoulders. "I feel sorry for them. '76 and the deaths at the camp left a psychic scar, imagine what this has done…"

A cold wind blew through the street. Dr. Sinclair shivered, and Montgomery put an arm around her. "Thanks," she smiled.

"Where in the woods do you need to go?" February asked.

"There's an old wishing well near where some of the lumberjack housing used to be in New Toronto. They say if you look into it, you can see something look back up at you."

"Let's… not put that to the test, okay?" Raymond grinned, nervous. "I'd rather get home with all my sanity intact."

They both nodded, and Sinclair started leading the way, comparing

the map to the notepad page.

God dammit, Pryce, February thought. *Why did I get occult detail this year?*

Raymond February chewed his lip as he stood guard. He didn't know why he was so shaken; he'd been in the Choir Boys for three years, shot at immortal heart-stealers while yelling Hail Marys and hoping they'd die. People turning up as scarecrows was child's play.

Still, as the two magicians chanted next to the old, boarded-up well, he felt cold without a single breath of wind, and felt damp air without a drop of rain on his skin. And he heard the crunch of leaves without any footsteps to accompany them.

Surrounding the well were the ruins of four log cabins, worn away from over one-hundred years worth of Wisconsin summers and winters. Some small animals — the odd badger or coyote — had made their homes among the damp wood, burrowing for grubs and roots. But now, the forest had gone silent and grey; the lighting was wrong. Raymond had managed to see the eclipse, at totality, and the lighting seemed almost like that. Twilight on all sides. "…how much longer?" He asked.

"This'll be the last one today. I'm plenty wigged out too." Katherine plucked at some of the lines of energy, contemplating what she should be doing. In a perfect world, she would be sitting in her quarters with a hot glue gun and some synthetic fur, finishing up the mask for her Halloween costume. Instead, she was here, testing leylines.

Then, with a loud *twang* like a guitar from hell, one of the lines broke. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh?" Raymond asked.

"Broken Leyline." She stood up and quickly broke the spell.

"Is that bad?"

"If we were in New York, no," Montgomery said. "New York has so

many redundant leylines in it that the Foundation has looked into using empty ones to transmit high-speed internet signals. But out here, in a nexus?" He took a deep breath. "Ever hear of Nexus-29?"

"Yeah," Raymond nodded. "The one in the southwest with that weird broadcast coming out of it. They sound like a buncha weirdos down there"

"Ever hear of the sandstorm down there?" Montgomery cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders, looking at the well. "That was the result of only a dozen leylines breaking, which set off a chain reaction of hundreds of others. It…" He hissed through his teeth. "It was not good."

"Breaking leylines, Class-5 hauntings, people turning up as scarecrows." Sinclair rubbed her head, and looked at the sky. "This… this lighting isn't right. We need to get out, now."

"Way fu- way ahead of you, doc," February began marching back to the town. His path was cut short by an axe flying in front of his face, thrown by some unknown force, and embedding itself in the oak before him. Its blade came so close to his nose that he reflexively sneezed.

The three of them spun their heads to face the source of the attack, spotting a seven-foot-tall man with the head of a goat standing among the trees, three sets of horns on its head, and its eyes red and hateful, with hourglass pupils. Its fur was matted and black, and it bore its teeth at the three of them, letting out a hellish bleat.

"It's just the Goatman," Sinclair groaned, letting out a laugh of relief. "Scared us there! Good one. Sorry, but we-we're not terribly in the mood for that kind of business!"

The axe by Raymond's head dematerialized, and reappeared in the Goatman's hand. It let out another bleat, and threw the axe again, which managed to weave its way between Sinclair and Reynolds, and chop off a lock of Sinclair's hair.

"Oh shit," she exclaimed. "Whatever got the town got it too."

"Katherine!" Monty pushed her to the ground as the axe came around like a boomerang, missing her neck by a fraction of a second. The Goatman caught its axe, and started towards them.

The doctor gasped, jolting up and starting to run back to town. The Goatman pursued, its hooves booming like cannonballs on the forest floor, with Montgomery and February running by Sinclair.

February, for his part, drew his sidearm and fired blindly behind him at the Goatman. The shot grazed its calf, and its black fur was spattered with blood. The Goatman flinched and clutched its head, before it let out a bellowing roar that shook the leaves from the trees, an impossible sound that seemed to turn the sky darker than it was already.

"Son of a-" Raymond caught himself from swearing, and just screamed. "What do we do?!"

"*You* run!," Sinclair yelled back. "I'm gonna stop him from catching us!" She bit down on her right pointer finger, breaking the skin with an audible *snap*, stopping in front of a tree and quickly scribbling a sigil into the bark.

"What are you doing, Katherine?!" Monty yelled.

"Buying time!" she called back, breathing some Will into the sigil. A shadow fell over her as the sign glowed a dark red, and she turned to see the Goatman bring its axe towards her. Time turned to molasses.

The Goatman brought down its axe at Katherine's head-level, and she ducked down, covering her head. The axe split the tree, the force cleaving through the sigil. The magic within fizzled, sparked, and exploded; what Sinclair had meant to be a stunning spell had instead turned into a magical flash-bang.

"No!" Reynolds yelled, twisting and running back to Katherine. From under his sleeve, he produced a leaf of paper. He unfolded it, and from the folds he drew a cavalry saber, its steel blade inscribed with runes, glowing with pure anti-thaumaturgial energy. Spellshatter, Katherine had called it. Hopefully this would be powerful enough to

kill a thoughtform.

The Goatman got to its feet before the mage did, and shot a glare down at her. It showed an odd kind of mercy, extracting its axe from the tree, and throwing the mage over his back, before bounding off into the woods with the barely-conscious mage over his shoulder.

"NO!" Montgomery yelled, slicing his arm with the blade and yelling out words of power, of fire, of hate, towards the beast. A white-hot beam of plasma came forth, forged from his blood, hot enough to vaporize brass and liquefy rock— but then, he realized, he would hit Katherine, as well as Goatman. Five feet from the creature, he let the spell fizzle, leaving only scorch marks on the ground in its wake. Reynolds fell to his knees, and looked at the retreating form of the Goatman.

Raymond took a medkit from off his belt and started bandaging Reynold's arm. "We need to get back to site. Get you medical attention, and get reinforcements."

"Hell with that," Reynolds grunted, trying to stand. Raymond forced him back down to his knees with a soft pinch of the shoulder, eliciting a gasp of pain from the older mage.

"Hold still! I'm trying to make sure you don't bleed out from your hoodoo voodoo bulls- bunk!"

"It's not voodoo, it's hermetic thaumaturgy." He growled at February. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Beg pardon?"

"I have literally, not once, ever heard you swear! No fucks, no shits, no goddamns, no cunts, no motherfuckers!"

February shrugged. "Swearing is just something that's never appealed to me."

"You say that as you hold back a bullshit," Montgomery winced as the bandages tightened. "Seriously, why?"

"Swearing just leads to more anger. And I couldn't afford to be angry

when I was in the Choir Boys. Angry meant dead." He tied off the bandages. "You're a grown man, for god's sake. I'm going to call for backup. We wait for the cavalry to get here, and then raid Koch's Hovel to get her back."

"You call for backup." Montgomery stood, wincing and holding his saber in his good hand. "The woman I love is out there, in the woods, with a psychotic tulpa. I'm going to cut it to ribbons if it so much as touches her hair."

Raymond ignored him. "Sigma-10 Command, this is Agent February. We have a missing researcher, taken by a UAE."

«Copy, February. Squad Six is En Route. What took them?»

"…the Goatman." Raymond February swallowed a swear hard as he saw Montgomery Reynolds run off into the woods.

"KATHERINE!" Montgomery Reynolds yelled, leaping through the brush with more agility than his form would suggest. "*KATHERINE!*"

He had been running for half an hour. He was lost. Exhausted. He knew town was somewhere to the south, but in the eclipse-like twilight, he didn't know where south *was*. "God… dammit." He coughed, and stuck his saber into a tree. "KATHERINE!"

He rested against the blade, using it as a support. His body was made for sitting in front of a table and translating arcane texts, not running through the forest after a supernatural monster, like a knight or — god forbid — a video game character. Katherine was the woman of action, when the time called for it, banishing zombies or fighting minor deities. He was Dumbledore with a broken wand, while she was Morcant LeFay, burning bright with magical force. She should be on Sigma-3, not in this anomalous burg. Yet, she stayed.

Did she stay for him?

He stopped his contemplation and pulled his saber out. He plodded forward, looking at his bandages. He needed stitches, not this. He

should have cauterized the wound, but the nerves in his arm would be shot. It took six months before Katherine was able to use a keyboard after she burned her hands with a fire spell.

'The woman I love…'. He had said it back there, to February. He was a grown man, almost a decade older than Katherine. She had seemingly ignored any attempt he made to show his affection towards her, but all the same, he—

"INFERNUS! INFERNUS SEPULCHRUM!"

Montgomery's attention fell on a gout of fire shooting from the ground some three-hundred meters away. Fire magic, and a woman's voice. Katherine had sworn off fire for the last four years.

"Oh god," Montgomery hustled towards her, wheezing and panting. "Katherine, I'm coming!"

"INFERNUS!" the voice came again. It wasn't ritual magic, no preparation. He doubted she even had time to carve a sigil. She was doing pure invocation. It would wear her out in minutes.

He came past a cluster of trees, and found Katherine standing before the Goatman, blood trickling from her mouth. A circle of fire twice the size of the Goatman enclosed it, and it stood in the middle, looking warily at the pair of them. Katherine was slumped against the wall of the small, stone hut where the Goatman resided- Koch's Hovel.

"Oh my god," Montgomery panted. "You're… You're…"

"…drained," she groaned, slumping against the wall. Her jacket was torn, the sleeves almost entirely incinerated by the fire she had called up. "Made a circle out of ash. I figure, it's a demon, and I figure that if I think it's a demon, it'll play by demon rules, so I figure I can bind it into a circle—"

Montgomery walked around the burning ring, and wrapped his arms around her. "I was terrified." He took off the jacket and put it around her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"I'm one of the best mages the Foundation has outside of Sigma-3,

Monty," she sighed, looking at her scarred forearms. 'Non Contenti Sumus', they read. Branded onto her skin by beings not pleased by her prior sacrifices. "I'll be okay. I just… need to incinerate about ten pounds of hamburger as penitence for borrowing some power."

The Goatman, behind them, roared and slashed through the circle of fire with its axe. The first blows glanced off of an invisible barrier as the two of them moved warily around the edge, away from the beast. Katherine stumbled, and the flames flickered. "I overdid it," she coughed. "Too much energy, too little sacrifice. Circle's gonna fail."

Monty looked at the failing circle, placing Katherine behind him and drawing his sword. "How long do we have?"

"Three…two… one…"

The Goatman leaped out of the circle, and its blade met Monty's saber. The clashing of the two weapons produced a spark of blue light, and the Goatman's eyes faded from red to yellow for a flicker of a second. It rubbed hits head and murmured a plea, before its eyes returned to their hellish, red state. Its blade came down once more.

Monty parried the attack, luring it away from Katherine. She started to call out something, but it was difficult to hear between the steel of blade against the flesh and wood of the Goatman's axe. "What are you saying?!" He asked.

"Y-You can't kill him!" Katherine panted. "He's a thoughtform! Something about his story's gone wrong!"

The Goatman trying to bring its axe down on his shoulder. Montgomery parried it, and drove his blade in between its ribs. The Goatman had power, but lacked grace, and fumbled once more when the Spellshatter drove itself into its side. "So, what?" He asked. "I have to tell a story at it?!"

"I-I don't know! I'm not an epistemologist!" She winced at the sight of Monty dodging an axe to the shoulder.

Monty had a realization. Everyone left in town was so scared

shitless, and that fear had to go somewhere. It had all funneled into Sloth's Pit's personal bogeyman. The best way to get rid of any bogeyman was with five words:

"I'm not afraid of you," Montgomery growled. He forced himself to believe it. "I'm afraid of what's happened to this town, of what's going to happen. I'm afraid of what's going to happen to her if I don't get her medical attention. I'm afraid of what will happen if I never tell her that I love her. But I am not. Afraid. Of you."

The Goatman stumbled, stuttered, its form shimmering, before its axe hit the ground and vanished, and it stood before them with white fur, trimmed with red, one pair of horns and a face with yellow, hourglass eyes.

It collapsed to its knees and groaned, retching. Montgomery Reynolds wondered if Tulpa could vomit. "Oh my god," The Goatman slumped against a tree, tongue hanging out. "Now I know how Coyote feels. *Damn* that stings."

Katherine stood up, and stumbled, leaning against Monty to look him over. "…we could very well contain you, you know. Just… stop you, right here. Bring you back to the site."

"…you have worse to worry about than me," The Goatman stood up, rising gradually from the legs up, straightening its back, then its arms, then its neck to look at them. "This is bad. What happened in town is as bad as… what you did. To the camp."

"We're not responsible for this," Montgomery held up his hand in parley. "We can assure you of that."

"I know. This is something from before you came here. I barely remember it myself." The Goatman rubbed his face. "The Black Autumn. We all agreed to forget it. 1969." He laughed. "What did Linus used to wait for? I can't even remember," he clutched his head in his hands and kept laughing. "Why am I laughing? It was godawful. We all agreed to forget. And we did."

Katherine almost asked 'forget what', but then realized the utter idiocy of that question.

"All I can tell you is that the worst is yet to come." He shivered, and entered the stone hut, crouching down in the doorway. "You need to stay as far away from the woods as you can. All of you. We… we're glad you got the town out safe." He picked up a tin can from a pile in the corner of the hut and chewed it anxiously. "I'm not the only thing that's awake in the woods."

"Dr. Sinclair!" a voice called.

"Reynolds!" another shouted. Members of Sigma-10, come looking for them.

"Go," the Goatman said. "Tell them. The Black Autumn is coming again."

The pair of them nodded, and limped towards the group of lights flashing through their trees and calling their names. After a while, Katherine spoke up. "We're adults, Monty. You don't need to beat around the bush."

"I'm a decade older than you."

"Seven years," she mused. "My mother married a man a ten years her elder. And you're… well, you're not that great at hiding feelings." She shifted against him. "I've known for years. And… well, I wouldn't mind sharing some unprofessional time with you."

Reynold's lips quirked into something resembling a tired smile. "If you feel that way," he said, "We can find some relationship declaration forms. I haven't filled one out in six years, however."

"They updated it," she sighed. "You have to list any anomalous properties or conditions you possess now. I have one from two months ago in the lab."

Montgomery looked at the sunset. "Let's sign it over some mead, then? I still have some reserve from the Black Garden."

"Sounds nice," she smiled, resting up against him. "Thanks."

The two of them walked into the beams of the flashlights. They would get rest, get their injuries treated. Then, they would do what

they had wanted to do for years.

«Chapter 1 | `Black Autumn Hub` | Chapter 3»

Pictures of Plastic People

October 21st

Isaiah Howard Pickman dragged himself out of the archives for the first time in twenty hours. The man was no more than forty, but years of working in the dark, retrieving this and that for Researcher A or Agent B had taken its toll, nevermind the hassle it was to digitize the collection that Site-87 had. But, after several long, drawn-out hours, he had made his way out of the archives with what he needed.

Dr. Sinclair was likely still asleep after the predicament yesterday. In a perfect world, he'd just drop off the data and get set up to watch the World Series in a couple of days—

Instead, he ran into somebody who, in Pickman's opinion, was rather unpleasant. Before him was a tall, young man with salt-and-pepper hair that defied his age. He was lanky, borderline skeletal, and wore a pair of glasses so thick it made it look like his eyes were masked by shadow. The man looked down at Pickman with just the slightest amount of animosity. "Isaiah."

"Claude," he retorted, shoving past him. "Move it. I have documentation I need to deliver to Dr. Sinclair."

"She's resting," Dr. Mattings intoned. "She has three IV drips connected to her, and Reynolds is still getting stitches. Dumbshit opened up his arm to shoot fire."

Isaiah wondered, like many other people who worked at S & C Plastics, what Dr. Pike saw in Mattings. Cassandra Pike was (past tense being the operative term here), by all accounts, a trainwreck of a human being. Between being whammied by **3773** so hard she had to take a quarter of a year off to a very large, very nasty fight between her and Dr. Mattings, she should have been fired a dozen times over. Yet, every time, Dr. Mattings vouched for her, and his

word meant a lot; he was, currently, the deputy director of biological studies at Site-87, and parazoology fell under that purview. If he said Pike was invaluable, then by god, she was.

Still, Pike had gotten better. Medication and therapy had seemed to help her out. Mattings was anything but mellow; his face screamed "sarcastic", and that was the general tone of his conversation as well, sometimes hurtfully so.

Isaiah pushed past him. "Yes, well, they both asked me to look up something for them."

"Autumn of 1969," Mattings walked with him. "Miracle Mets win the World Series, Wal-Mart is established as a company, and the whole country is still reeling from the fact that Apollo happened." He crossed his arms. "The… Unclassed Anomalous Entity, they said that this was *worse* than the Great Fuck-Up of '76?"

"You're hearing it thirdhand," Pickman shrugged. "But according to them, yes." He opened the file he was carrying. "From what I can gather, a few things happened in Sloth's Pit in 1969. Biggest is the Douglas County Fair."

"Just that?"

"Couple of other things; local kid's author puts out a new book, 'Uncle Zadok', doesn't sound very pleasant. The mayor resigned, which was unexpected." He leafed through the papers. "Finally, a fire gutted Berry's Restaurant. Should have stayed gone, if you ask me."

"Their food would probably taste better as ash shoveled into your mouth," Claude admitted, leaning against the wall. "The fair in Sloth's Pit? Really?"

"Yeah, they moved it to Superior the next year. A few newspaper clippings I've found talk about just… typical fair stuff." He leafed through the folder. "Candy apple booth being shut down because of high demand and low supply, reviews of the horse show, interviews with some of the animal keepers, and a Chevy truck being stolen at the fairgrounds." He pointed to a particular piece. "Check this out."

"'New Girl Scout Cookies a Hit in Sloth Spit'. Good to know they made that mistake even back then." Mattings read further, brow quirking. "Wait, seriously? They tested Samoas here?"

"I'm as surprised as you are." He closed the folder, only for a photograph to fall out of it. "Shit, grab that!"

Mattings grabbed at the photo; it was a Polaroid, black and white. He peered at the picture, his eyes going wide. "I think you got a photo from the wrong section."

"Why?" Pickman doubled back and looked at the photo. "No, see, written on the bottom, 10/31/69."

"This photo doesn't make sense," Claude swallowed. The photograph showed a fire engulfing the front of the fairgrounds, and within it, one could almost make out a hellish, screaming face. Fire trucks were around it, dousing the blaze, but there was also a van among them, with a man next to it holding a camera towards the fire. "Look."

The lights in the hall flickered, and Pickman's eyes widened. "What the hell?" He snatched the photo back and stuffed it in the folder. "I-I need to get to Weiss's office. We need to figure out what the hell this means." He ran off down the hall.

Claude Mattings ran after him, practically skidding around the corner, turning the hall into where the elevator should be— only to find reality significantly altered from its previous state.

Before him and the archivist lay collection of tents and barns and stalls, with the sound of screaming children playing in the background; screams of excitement, not of terror, like they were on a roller coaster as opposed to having their skin flayed off. There was a night sky above the fairground, and the stars of autumn shone overhead, somehow visible through the thousands of lights from the carnival. Signs advertising funnel cakes and elephant ears and candied apples and kettle corn and cotton candy lined what had once been the walls of the site, and on top of everything else, there was the smell of animals; horses, poultry, cattle, all of this mixed together in the background of the fair.

When the two of them turned around again, they saw that this phenomenon had extended behind them. "Holy shit," Pickman swore "Holy shit, what the hell?"

"Were the Fairgrounds on Site-87's land?" Mattings asked, backing away and bumping up against a food stand.

"No. They were way up at the north end of town." Pickman held his folder snug against him. "What do we do now?"

"We follow Grimm Countenance protocols. Refuse any food or drink from here, don't question the native's motives, and try to find the exit as soon as possible." He walked down the row of food stands.

"Mattings?" Pickman followed behind him.

"What?"

"There are no natives. This place is abandoned." He looked in each of the food stalls. All of them were empty.

"Hmm." Mattings peered into the funnel cake and pretzel stand's window. "Signs of recent habitation, though. Fryer's on, and the batter for the cakes was being prepared."

"And there's that," Pickman pointed at the air, as the sound of a rumbling ride and excited screams filled the space of the park once again. "So, something's here, or else we're being fucked with." He pulled away from the booth, and began walking. "I'm willing to bet it's the la—"

Suddenly, Pickman tripped over a cable on the ground, and fell flat on his face, hands flailing to catch himself, eliciting a gasp of pain as his nose hit the dirt.

"What is this?" Mattings stepped forward, looking at the thing on the ground. It was connected to a generator, rumbling away, powering all of the stands, but it wasn't any plastic cord; it appeared to be a vine. He took out a pocket knife and cut out a slice of the vine, placing it in a sample bag retrieved from his pocket.

"Mmph," Pickman stood up, rubbing his head. He noticed a candied

apple booth before him, which had a slightly rotten sign reading 'Sorry, Closed'. "Yeah. This is… some kind of version of the fairgrounds. No idea how to get out, though." He chewed his lip, and looked around. "If I had to guess, the exit is somewhere…" He started down the rows of food stands. "This way."

"…huh." Mattings pushed his glasses higher on his face, and strode after Pickman. "Well, lead on, MacDuff."

The two of them wound through the labyrinth of food carts, and the stars seemed to start to flicker out overhead.

The smell of animals grew stronger the further on they went. The hoofprints on the ground and the large piles of scat by the side told Mattings that they were near the horse stables. From here, he could hear the sounds of horses nickering and cows letting out mooing sounds. Even so, the carnival music grew louder.

"So," Pickman coughed. "You and Pike?"

"Wedding's in February," Claude nodded. "Took us months to get the forms. We're probably just going to do it at the courthouse in Superior, honestly. She doesn't much care for silk or finery, and her family couldn't give less shits about me."

Silk and finery? Pickman frowned. *Who talks like that?*

"Ever been married?"

"I was, once." Isaiah rubbed his hand. "Right out of college. She was beautiful, blond hair, brown eyes, a smile that could blind a man. But… it didn't last for more than a year."

"Why?"

"She got pregnant." He rubbed his beard. "I realize how that sounds, believe me. But I had some tests done the previous year and… well, found out I was sterile." He sucked air through his teeth. "I sued for divorce as soon as I found out. Still had to pay alimony."

"Hmm," Claude thumbed his nose. "Well, Cassandra and I aren't

intending on having children anytime soon. Or at all. I hate kids—"

These last words elicited a response of silence. All of the animals stopped braying and knickering and clucking as they came into view of the various barns on the fairground. Sitting in front was the first sure sign of human habitation they had seen: a red pickup truck, parked in front of the horse barn. Pickman walked towards it.

"What are you doing?" Claude asked.

"It's an old Chevy. Dad had one of these." He approached it, cautiously. "I realize Grimm Countenance applies, but if this is here, maybe we can drive it out."

"Good thinking," Mattings admitted, walking alongside him. As he approached, the smell of animals gave way to a putrid scent of rotting meat, like someone had left a steak in the sun for weeks. "Oh *god*, what the hell?"

Pickman stopped, and bent over, retching. "Fucking hell. Smells like a roadkill enthusiast convention."

"No, Sloth's Pit had one of those once," Claude commented, pulling up his shirt over his nose so he could breathe. "This is worse."

The archivist approached the truck, frowning. "…I've seen this before." He looked up. "This is the exact truck that was stolen. From the fairgrounds, I mean, in '69. They never found it. Guess it ended up here somehow." He looked in the truck bed and turned away, gagging. "Holy shit."

"What?"

"Explains the smell, at least," He gagged, stepping away. "Human remains in the back. Covered by some plant matter— looked like pumpkin vines?"

"Well, we sure as hell aren't driving that," Mattings frowned. He reached into his pocket, and took out a flashlight, shining it towards one of the barns. Within, he saw the head of a horse, sticking out of one of the stables. His light began to flicker, before fading out. "There's a live animal in there."

"Really? Where?"

"A horse, it—" Mattings performed some percussive maintenance on his flashlight. When it blinked back on, a horse's head was on the ground from the neck up. A form cloaked in black crouched over it, and looked up at Mattings, showing its teeth the color of rotten leaves, and eyes that shone with the last light of summer. "Oh shit *run!*"

"Wha—" He spotted the thing sitting over the horse, and shouted, "Oh *SHIT!*" The pair of them ran into the night, towards the quickly-fading lights of the rides. In their haste, they failed to notice the bed of the truck was suddenly unoccupied.

Some time later, the pair of them had come to rest in the moonlit shadow of a dilapidated Ferris wheel. Any sounds of fair rides had come to a grinding halt, and they were left in the ruins of merry-go-rounds and other fair rides.

Mattings spoke up first, panting. "So. What triggered this?" Claude asked as Pickman, looking behind him. This was the edge of the fairground, flanked by a tall, cement wall.

Pickman took out the photograph, and looked it over. "Time paradox in a photograph? Or some kind of Foundation countermeasure so that we never find out that they were lying to us?" He brandished the photograph. "The Foundation wasn't in Sloth's Pit, it didn't even *know* about Sloth's Pit, until 1976. What the hell is a van that says *S & C Plastics* doing at an anomalous-looking fire in *1969?!*"

Claude wavered. "Is this even real?"

"Has to be, on some scale," Pickman reasoned. "The Foundation did a ton of tests with Polaroids and cognitohazards back in the Omega-7 days, so they could control **105**. None of them worked. Even on photos that had nothing to do with it—"

"Her," Claude mumbled.

"—implanted cognitohazards wouldn't take." He pulled at his

thinning hair. "We're by the rides."

"That we are," Claude swallowed.

"Have you never been to a fair before, Mattings? They always put the rides at the front of county fairs. Easiest way to get kids inside." He took out his phone. "If there's a way out, our phones will pick up a signal."

Mattings took out his own phone, the signal showing zero bars. He followed Pickman, who followed the wall. "Despite everything," he said, "I love her."

"Hmm?" Pickman asked.

"Cassandra. We've had our disagreements, our fights. But…" Mattings sniffed. "I'll be damned if her smile isn't what gets me up in the morning. She's got snaggleteeth, you know? Her canines look like vampire fangs. It's so cute, though." He went forward, holding out his phone. "If I survive this, I'm not having a courthouse wedding."

"That's the spirit," Pickman smiled. "These last few days have been hell, but—"

Claude's phone suddenly chimed to life. The message "Fifteen Missed Calls" showed up on the screen; he had signal. He looked up, and saw the unmistakable shade of fluorescent light of a Foundation site from beyond the ticket booth of the fairgrounds. "There!" he gesticulated. "There! Through there!"

"I see it," Pickman grinned, running forward.

There was an aperture by the exit of the fairgrounds, and sure enough, it seemed to lead back onto the archival sublevel. Pickman almost reached it, but Mattings put his arm in front of him. "What is it?"

Mattings frowned. "Something doesn't feel right." He looked down at his feet, at the rustling leaves by his ankles. "Step carefully, Pickman."

The archivist swallowed, walking towards the exit. Claude stepped in front of him, and he felt something catch his leg and squeeze, starting to grow up his calf. He tried calling for help, but he felt something take root down his throat.

The archivist felt cold as something constricted his arm hard enough that he felt the bones shatter. He let out a gasp of pain, but all that came out was air. His other hand still clutched the folder with the information he had gathered. And the photograph…

He threw his folder through the portal. His hand froze before his fingers could make a fist to crumple the photograph and throw it after him. "Matt…ings…" he called.

There was a great, awful sound, followed by a great, awful silence. Dr. Mattings turned back to face the fairgrounds, only to find an empty hallway behind him, devoid of any opening, any archivist, any entity.

Dr. Mattings looked at the ground where the aperture had been, and saw a blood-stained folder with a single, dead leaf on it. The leaf *crunched* and fell apart as if it had been stepped on, and footprints sounded down the corridor.

Claude Mattings ran to the nearest security alarm, away from the phantom footsteps.

«Chapter 2 | **Black Autumn Hub** | Chapter 4»

Bloody Pulps and Vines

October 22nd

Dr. Katherine Sinclair blinked awake through a haze of medication to see a nurse disconnecting her IV drips. She muttered and sat up, rubbing her head. "Mmph. Am I free to go?"

"Just about. We just need to go through checkout procedures."

"Town still evacuated?" She asked.

The nurse — Katherine thought her name was Liao — nodded. "Sloth's Pit is staying vacant until November 2nd, at least. Yesterday was a bit of a mess; archivist went missing in the sublevels."

"Pickman?" Katherine bolted upright. "Shit, what happened?"

"Don't know. Dr. Mattings said he had information for you, but… there was blood found on his folder, and the archives are a mess—"

"Son of a bitch," Katherine rubbed her face. "Son of a fucking bitch. Did Mattings see what got him?"

"We're not sure. He's pretty shaken, just keeps talking about a photograph." Liao looked up. "He checked himself into the psych ward."

"And Montgomery?" Katherine frowned. "How is he?"

"He is right next to you," a deep voice came from Katherine's left.

She turned, and saw Montgomery Reynold's somewhat portly form laying on the bed with his arm in a sling. She shook her head. "You honestly thought it was a good idea to shoot hot plasma at a thoughtform?"

"I… panicked," He admitted, clearing his throat. "You need to get

back to work. The rise in anomalous activity is dangerous, and this… Black Autumn that the Goatman described…"

"Well, I can't see what Pickman got, not yet." She tilted herself upward, and sat to turn herself out of bed. "I'm going to head down to forensics. See if I can persuade Guillard to surrender some of the data."

"When we meet again, I'll be bearing mead and paperwork," Montgomery chuckled.

"You aren't having mead until you're off your antibiotics, Mr. Reynolds," Liao chided.

Katherine shook her head, and made her way to the front desk of the trauma center to collect her effects.

"Dr. Sinclair!"

The red-headed thaumaturgist looked up from the coffee machine at the woman walking past her. Green eyes, blonde hair, and a face that looked like it had done far too much frowning, no mistaking it, this was Cassandra Pike. "You're out of the hospital!" the parazoologist beamed.

"Thankfully, my injuries were mostly superficial." She punched in the code for a hot chocolate. "How are you doing?"

"Just got back from seeing Claude," she said, holding out a scrap of paper. "He wanted me to give you this. It's something he managed to save from Pickman's folder."

Sinclair took the paper and looked it over, her other hand retrieving her cocoa. "Have they… found him yet?"

"No," she admitted. "He wasn't a bad person. I hope he's all right."

Sinclair read the paper closely.

ORANGE BEHEMOTH
1969 Douglas County Fair sets State Record for

Largest Pumpkin

Weighing in at a ton and a half, the pumpkin, dubbed "Gourdon" by its owner Jeffery Hubble, was hauled into the fairgrounds on October 29th, vine and all. Gourdon literally broke the scale it was put on, and a new one had to be ordered from nearby Duluth for the purposes of measurement. Mr. Hubble (pictured above with his son Jeffery Jr. and daughter Eliza) says: "This is a magnificent day for my family. We've worked for years to grow Gourdon, and our hard work's finally paid off."

"Jeff Hubble?" Sinclair looked up at Cassandra. "Isn't he still alive? Runs the produce farm near Lover's Lane with his family?"

"Yeah, Claude and I bought pumpkins from him to make some Jack-O-Lanterns! He's a sweetie, and his daughter-in-law makes great pies." She chewed her lip. "They'll be out of town with the rest of the population, though. I'll see about making a call?"

"No need," Sinclair shook her head and started down the hall. "I'm grabbing Hastings, Partridge, and some of Squad Seven. I'll stop by Weiss's office and get her approval—"

"Director Weiss stepped down yesterday evening, Dr. Sinclair."

She stopped in her tracks and snapped around. "What?"

"She collapsed after hearing about Pickman, and was taken to the hospital in Duluth. As of right now, Dr. Hennessy is acting director. Claire Hennessy, from Multi-U?"

"Shit." Sinclair ran her fingers through her hair. "What's she saying?"

Dr. Pike walked a little further down the hall, to a touch-screen display. On it was various bulletins from around the site; on a typical day, it would have details about containment breaches, maintenance checks, and events such as seminars and disease screenings, as well as employee bulletins such as game nights and instrument practice. Now, it displayed a single, large bulletin, which Katherine read aloud.

"'As of the morning of October 22nd, Code Vandal has been declared. All Site-87 personnel have free reign on studies and projects dedicated to the protection of Nx-0018 and its inhabitants, and the prevention of any further dangerous anomalous manifestations.' Shit."

"Ever see a Code Vandal before?" Dr. Pike swallowed. "I've heard about them a few times, but that's in places like Harkness or Eventide. Nowhere like Sloth's Pit."

"Once. 2008, around Christmas. Even then, it didn't spread this far outside the site." She strode towards the elevators. "Well, Code Vandal means open season. Time to assemble the cavalry."

Twenty minutes later, the Cavalry— Composed of Dr. Sinclair, Dr. Keith Partridge, Researcher Christopher Hastings, and agents Carl Ashe and Alexander Carracos stood outside the Hubble estate. It was a twelve-acre produce farm, normally tended to by the Hubbles and some hired farmhands. Sitting in the driveway was a maroon Ford pickup. In the fall, the zuchinni and pumpkins could grow to the size of small children, and they did it without any chemicals.

The size was, admittedly, helped by the fact that the soil here still had some of whatever bizarre magic John Chapman had left behind when he passed through here; most produce on the north end of town was comically large, from apples the size of one's foot to acorns that were dense enough to cause concussions when they fell.

The sky above was colored in the same omnidirectional twilight it had been when Sinclair and Montgomery had fought the Goatman. "Has the lighting been a persistent phenomenon?" She asked.

"It starts at noon and ends at dusk," Chris confirmed. "Only visible within the town's borders, of course."

"So, we're just here to look through Hubble's stuff? Is that legal?" Carracos asked, taking a bite from a jerky ration. He adjusted the sleeve of his uniform, hiding the cross tattoo beneath it. "Like, I get that the town's abandoned, but…"

Everyone looked at Carracos, eyes wide and faces bewildered. "You do realize that we *wrote* a good quarter of the bylaws in this town?" Partridge asked.

"Stupid question," Carracos realized. "My bad."

"We don't have time for this," Partridge griped, starting down the road to the property. "Mattings gave his girlfriend—"

"Fiance," Sinclair corrected.

"—a newspaper clipping about a giant pumpkin, and the sample that Mattings threw at us on his way to the psych ward was a clipping from a pumpkin vine. Hastings, you need to sample the produce."

"Right." Chris produced on a pair of gloves and a respirator from his bag, as well as a set of secateurs, before heading towards the distant pumpkin patch.

"He ain't goin' alone," Ashe frowned, drawing his weapon and hustling after him. "Hey, Plant-talker! Wait up!"

Sinclair looked at Partridge oddly. "Plant-talker?"

"He likes to talk to specimens in the greenhouse," Partridge explained. "He actually ran a study to see if plants respond better when talked to. It's… inconclusive."

"I imagine— wait." She looked at the Ford in the driveway. "Is that Hubble's truck?"

"He shoulda evacuated with everyone else," Carracos quirked his brow, and spoke into his radio. "This is 7-6 calling S10 command, do you copy?"

«Sigma 10 Command reading you, 7-6.»

"Did we confirm the departure of the Hubble family? Up at Hubble Farms by Lover's Lane??"

«Gimme a moment.»

The two researchers walked towards the house. Sinclair rubbed his chin. "…maybe he took another car?"

Partridge peered into the truck from the passenger's-side window and shook his head. "Keys are in the ignition. And there's some clothes folded on the seat. Someone was going to leave in this car."

«7-6, this is Sigma 10 Command. We have confirmation that Jeffery Hubble Jr, his wife, and his children are in the Duluth safe zone.»

Carracos grabbed his radio. "…and Hubble Senior?"

«Not confirmed. Junior says he went back for the dog, and hasn't been heard from since.»

"Shit," Carracos ran up to meet them. "We may still have civilians on the property."

"Hold on," Sinclair knelt on the ground and drew a Celtic knot into the dirt of the driveway, reaching into her bag and removing a tube filled with ash, sprinkling it on the sign and speaking soft words. Arcs of light flew out from the sign, three flying towards her, two flying at the field where they could see Ashe and Hastings. "That's five," she stood. "No living things here, a least, other than us."

"Right, forgot we had a witch with us," Carracos snorted. He waved a hand through the arc of light going towards him. "This is kinda neat, though. Is it like that D&D spell?"

"It's not inherently Vancian, but this spell is meant to detect biological signatures. Sadly, it won't detect anything less complex than a fish." She looked at the bright red farmhouse that was the Hubble estate. "Guess we're going in. "Carracos, call Ashe and tell them we're infiltrating?"

"Kay," he grabbed his radio and spoke, "Carl, Doc says we're goin' in. Get around to the back, okay?"

«There's something freaky out here, Al, it's—»

Carracos held up his hand to instruct the doctors to stop. "I did not copy that."

«It's dartin' through the patch like a goddamn gremlin. Don't know what the hell it— oh shit, run!»

Sinclair had never heard the same gun fire from two sources at once, and she doubted Partridge had either. They heard Ashe's assault rifle discharge in the direction of the pumpkin patch, as well as from the radio.

«GET OUT! FUCKING GET OUT! WE HAVE CODE S—» There was a loud, crackling *crunch* sound from the radio.

Sinclair looked up in time to see Ashe's life line go out. "Oh my god."

Hastings came running around the house, screaming, covered in blood. None of it seemed to be his own. "HOLY FUCKING SHIT! WE NEED TO GET OUT!"

The four remaining skippers ran towards the transport, the three researchers piling into the back and sealing the door behind them.

Carracos fumbled for his keys, only to drop them in the dirt. "Shit!"

Hastings reached into his pocket and handed him a set through the window in the back of the cab. "Take mine!" Chris was immensely thankful that even in the bureaucratic machine that was the Foundation, they had contingencies. On a field mission, every member of personnel on that mission was given the key to the transport, as too many missions had been wiped out due to the person with the keys dying.

The van roared to life. In the mirror, Carracos could see the farming patches being torn apart, dirt being kicked up by something he couldn't see. The agent swerved the van around, only to come face-to-face with the thing that had torn through the crops; a human form, on its hands and feet, pale, lanky, its arms and fingers too long to be human, its tongue looking like it belonged on Gene Simmons as viewed through a hellish LSD trip.

Carracos floored it. He should have made that thing into skid marks and burned rubber all the way back to the site. Instead, he watched it shoulder-barge into a grill, followed by the engine block imploding.

Carracos's head banged against the steering wheel, and the world went black.

"Sinclair?"

"Yeah?"

"Who invented the seatbelt?" Hastings gasped, trying to undo his. "I want to marry them."

"Someone at Volvo invented the three-point," She grunted, clicking the latch and standing. "Citizens United says corporations count as people, so you might be able to marry the corporation."

"Fuck," Partridge whimpered. He couldn't unlatch his. "I think I cracked a rib."

"Carracos, call for some backup!" Hastings banged, looking through the divider. "Carraco— oh shit. He's out cold."

"Dammit," Sinclair started for Partridge. "Get out and try to rouse him. Failing that, get his radio."

"O-okay," he swallowed, drawing his knife. It was meant for cutting samples of plant life, but in a pinch, he supposed it could rupture a jugular.

Then again, he doubted it would help against the thing crawling up to the driver's side window. The pale creature opened its mouth, revealing long, needle-like fangs. It climbed into the cab, onto Carracos— before it hissed and dropped out onto the ground. It held its smouldering hand before retreating back towards the property.

Hastings made his way over to Carracos, and checked his pulse. He groaned with relief. He was alive, at least, but the cut on his head was deep. He saw that his sleeve had been burned, and turned it up, revealing a highly stylized tattoo of a Crucifix beneath. "Son of a bitch. Sinclair!"

"I'm here," she panted, exiting the transport with Dr. Partridge. "He's fine, it's just bruised. What is it?"

"Some weird pale thing just tried to get Carracos. I think it got… burned by his cross tattoo."

"That's why I couldn't see it by detecting life," Sinclair groaned. "*Homo sapiens hemophagis*. Vampire. Son of a bitch."

"Wait—" Hastings stared. "Do you think that's Hubble?"

"If that's Hubble, I don't want to think about what happened to his dog." Sinclair forced some bile down. "All in favor that we kill it with fire?"

Partridge groaned an 'aye', and asked, "Hastings, you manage to collect the sample?"

"Yeah." He held up a baggie of clippings of pumpkin vine, only to discover that the bag contained a bloody pulp. "Wait, what the fuck?"

"Where did you get that from?" Partridge frowned.

"I-I just cut into a pumpkin vine near the house. I… shit, I don't have proper bio-hazard containment on me."

"Put it on the ground and back away." Sinclair looked at the van. "Goddammit. It's totaled, and we're alone with a vampire. We need an exit strategy."

They all turned to look at the truck that was in the driveway, and saw the vampire leaping out of it and into the open doorway of the house.

"What do you want to bet it took the key?" Hastings looked between the two of them.

"I c'n hotwire it," Carracos groaned awake. "Basic urban combat training."

"We've got a vampire," Sinclair explained.

"Natural or mutant?" Carracos reached under his seat and took out a first-aid kit, beginning to bandage his head in the mirror.

"Mutant, definitely. Natural ones aren't affected by Holy Anathema like crosses."

"…something infected him, then," He groaned, coming out of the transport. "Take back the hotwirin' thing. Can't bounce back from gettin' knocked out. I ain't Arnie."

"You'll be bahk," Hastings joked, trying to comfort him. He looked at Sinclair, "Will he be okay by himself? Just in the transport?"

"He's probably the safest of us all. Short of that arm getting ripped off—" The two other researchers coughed. "Sorry. He's got a Holy Anathema on his skin. And even if it did get ripped off, it might get even *stronger*."

"So, just don't lose m'arm?" Carracos laughed. "I can do that—" he opened the door and nearly fell out of the cab. "Shit!"

Hastings caught him and nearly fell himself. "Come on," he hefted the agent to the back of the transport. "Can you two get the truck started? I know a bit of first aid. I can probably keep him stable."

"What the hell," Partridge said, taking Carracos's assault rifle. "I have firearm training."

"Since when?" Sinclair asked, making her way down to the house.

Partridge followed, and began, "Well, when I was in Guatemala back in the 1990s…"

"And that's how we almost drove triffids extinct," Partridge finished as they entered the farmhouse. The keys were, indeed, missing from the truck. "My time in South America was… eventful."

"Why the hell do you never tell us about this shit?" Sinclair wondered, looking at the carpet. There was a very large blood stain soaked into the rug, most likely what was left of the family dog. "Bailey's been looking for inspirations for his next D&D campaign at game night. I think you could write a whole sourcebook."

"Keep in mind the last time I interacted with anyone outside of botany for an extended period," He sniffed, "I became a pear tree."

"Can't argue with that," Katherine agreed. She looked into the living room, and upon seeing a lack of dead dog, entered. The farm life had been modernized, and a flat-screen TV hung above a fireplace, to each side of which were pictures of tractors and produce.

"Wow," Partridge whistled. "That's unnatural."

"Hmm?" Katherine looked over to where Partridge was; he was standing before an old color photograph of a giant pumpkin, big enough to crush the truck it was on. Even in stills, she could imagine the bright red Chevy collapsing under its weight. "Holy shit. That's Gourdon, I take it?"

"Yup," Partridge indicated the placard beneath. "Largest Pumpkin in Wisconsin, 1969."

"Y'know, I've never really gotten the appeal of farm life," Katherine circled around a chair, "But this is kinda cozy. Pity that there's a vampire living here and we'll probably gonna have to burn this place down."

"I wanted to be a farmer," Partridge nodded, walking along the wall "Got a degree in agronomy, decided to go to grad school for botany, eventually ended up getting a doctorate— hello," he frowned, inspecting a black and white photograph. It depicted Jeffery Hubble and alongside another person, who Partridge couldn't quite place. He opened the frame and looked on the back. "Jeff, we're gonna do great things. Clive C."

"Clive C?" Sinclair went over to him. "Let me see that." She looked at the front, and scowled. "Clive Carter."

"You know him?"

"By reputation. He's a former mayor of Sloth's Pit. His family nearly ran the town into the ground financially. Three mayoral terms under him, one under his kid. Hell, probably half the reason the town has an economy is because of us coming in in '76."

"What happened to Carter himself?"

"Vanished some time in… the late 60's." Sinclair frowned. "Huh. Either that's a hell of a coincidence, or a lead."

They started out of the living room, before Partridge spotted another picture on the wall. He tilted his head, and beckoned her over. "Isn't that Director Weiss?"

Sinclair came back over, and raised an eyebrow. The photograph depicted Hubble, now a fair bit older, with the red-haired Director Weiss, a fair bit younger, holding a pumpkin and laughing. "It is, yeah. Not surprised, a lot of S & C Plastics went here for the pies. West volunteered at the corn maze a couple of times." She looked at the date on the photograph, printed in orange on the lower right-hand corner. "1981. She seems chummy with him."

"Weiss doesn't strike me as the type to get to know townies," Partridge scratched his head, before he headed out of the living room. "So, vampires… they have the standard suite of weaknesses?"

Sinclair followed. "There are a few different kinds, but generally this kind — retroviral mutant, in case you're wondering — have the standard Stoker set. Garlic, stake through the heart, rice around the grave."

"Rice around what?" Partridge asked.

"It's mainly a Chinese vampire thing, but they work elsewhere. Basically, if a vampire sees a large collection of small objects, they'll be compelled to count them. Coins, rice, marbles… there was once a vampire at a nerd convention that got distracted by counting Magic cards."

Partridge stopped. "Are you saying that the Count from *Sesame Street*—"

"Is probably one of the more accurate vampires in children's media. I'm as surprised as you are." She looked down the hall, and saw the kitchen ahead, pots and pans hanging over the stove. "You think

they have rice in there?"

"Can't hurt to look." Partridge took point, aiming his rifle forward.

On the kitchen counter, were a series of pumpkins that were in the process of being scraped and canned. They had started to rot since the evacuation, and sitting on the counter by them was an equally-rotting pie. The pie had an odd, red color to it, and a slice was cut from it. Uneaten crust laid on a plate by it on the counter.

"Who eats pumpkin pie but doesn't like the crust?" Partridge asked. "That's the best part."

Sinclair inspected the pumpkins, finding a series of twin puncture marks on them. "Teeth marks. It tried sucking pumpkin meat before blood. Probably didn't want to give into the hunger."

Partridge looked into the pantry. "Got some rice in here!" He called, bringing out a bag of white rice. "So, I just throw this, and…

"It goes all *Sesame Street* on us, yeah." Sinclair looked at the pie. "The hell is with that color?"

"You do know that Galvin is going to kill us if we don't bring this in alive?" Partridge sifted his hand through the bag of rice. "She's wanted to study a vampire for years."

"I'd rather Galvin kill us than a vampire, and we can deliver the corpse to Bering." She saw something move out of the corner of her eye. She turned, and found her self face-to-face with a large, red, pulsating pumpkin. "Holy shit. Keith?"

"What?" He asked, before he spotted the pumpkin. "Oh wow."

She took out a knife and made her way over to the the pumpkin, preparing to make an incision. "Are there any varieties of pumpkin that grow red?"

"Yes, there's the Rouge D'Etant, but…" he stepped closer. "That looks more like the fruit of some carnivorous plants I've seen." He stepped up next to Sinclair, peering in at its skin. "My god. It looks borderline Sarkic."

Sinclair produced a sample vial from her bag, and placed the lip over the skin of the pumpkin, before stabbing it into the gourd. A torrent of red liquid filled the vial. Sinclair pulled away, capping the sample and holding it before the perpetual twilight out the window. "I'm no M.D., but that looks like blood to me."

"Blood from a plant?" He turned to look over the kitchen, spotting another fruit in the sink. "It's not unheard of, but again, it's usually only from carnivorous specimens, not pumpkins." He looked over the sink. "Same variety, here. Looks like it's been cleaned out."

Sinclair turned towards him. "I think we know how Hubble became a vampire."

"A pumpkin gave him vampyrism?" He frowned. "Nobody eats pumpkins whole—" His attention turned to the pie on the counter, sans slice, and the crust next to it. Sinclair's gaze followed him, and Hubble pulled out a sample baggie, sweeping the pie crust into it. "Glad he didn't eat the crust now, heh."

"…Pike did say that the Hubbles made really good pies," Sinclair swallowed.

"Looks like he snuck a slice when he came home for the dog." Partridge groaned. "Oh god dammit."

"What?" Sinclair asked.

"A vampire from a pie. A vamp-pie-er."

Sinclair's eyebrows met her hairline, and she *groaned*. "God, yeah, I see why you got an agronomy degree. That was a fucking corny pun —" Sinclair stopped talking suddenly, her eyes wide. "'What did Linus used to wait for?'."

"Pardon?" Partridge asked.

"Something the Goatman said the other day. I just got it: it's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown." She tapped her lips. "Big pumpkin motif coming up lately."

Partridge nodded, looking at the fruit that Sinclair had punctured. It

seemed to be deflating. "I… would stay back from that."

Katherine stepped back, and turned, looking over Partridge's shoulder. "Out the window, behind you."

Partridge whipped himself around. Out the window, a good hundred meters away in the pumpkin patch, the vampire stared into the house. Partridge aimed his rifle, finger on the trigger, and it seemed to take an impossibly long step towards the window and leaped through. Partridge emptied half a clip into it, as it scrambled through. The bullets barely fazed the vampire.

Sinclair and Partridge both ducked, and watched, in horror, as the vampire began to suck the blood from the pumpkin. The fruit shriveled and rotted. Sinclair shivered. "That is fascinating, but also disgusting."

"Yeah, Galvin's really going to let us have it now; observing feeding behavior and not documenting it. Anthropology won't be sending us Christmas cards, that's for sure." He spotted a glint of silver in its hand. "It has the keys."

"Of course it does," Sinclair sighed, going to the opposite side of the counter, crouching to avoid splashback.

Partridge followed her, Steadying the assault rifle on the countertop, Partridge unloaded the other half of the clip into the thing. It did a grim, twitching dance as it was filled with lead, before falling to the floor. "Is it dead?"

"No." Sinclair took up a kitchen knife, and made her way around the counter, intent on plunging the dagger in its back and going straight through the heart. She brought the knife down—

It sprung up and caught her hand, her knife dropping to the tiled floor and cracking the linoleum. It dug its finger deep under her skin, and she felt her blood start to flow from her body. "SHIT! SHIT SHIT SHIT! PARTRIDGE!"

"I got it!" Partridge threw the rice all over the sink, and the vampire. Its fingers pulled from Sinclair's skin, leaving no marks, and it began

to pick at each grain of rice individually.

Sinclair stood, woozy, looking at herself. She was pale; barely two seconds of contact had drained her of about half a pint of blood. Survivable, but it still hurt. "We gotta kill it— no, I do." She swallowed, stepping forward.

"What do you have in mind?" Partridge kept his rifle trained on it. The vampire kept counting.

"It's got some of my blood in it already. It's got part of me inside of it, and that means I have power over it." She clenched her hand into a fist, and it started glowing a dark, ominous shade of red. "Blood magic is tricky. Only three people in the Foundation know how to do it without going batshit crazy over it. I'm one of them."

"How do you not give in?"

"Let's just say I have a **Roundabout** way of doing it." She took a deep breath, and as the vampire was counting, pulled her fist back, and let out a cry of "Blood Red… Hamon… Overdrive!"

It was stupid, but it worked. She felt her fist contact, and she felt her blood, not yet fully mixed with the vampire's, in its body. The punch forced all of the blood into one place, through its heart, and then the magic decided to give it back to Katherine Sinclair, untainted by vampyrism. She felt the blood flow into her body, and sighed as the vampire went lifeless.

Partridge stared at her. "I'm going to assume that that was some form of incantation, and that you are not, in the common parlance, a complete and utter nerd."

"You can't work at the biggest scientific research organization on the planet without being a bit of a nerd, Partridge," She rolled her shoulders and sighed, feeling blood return to her system. "*Damn* that's refreshing—" she blinked. "Shit, where are his keys?"

They heard a rattling sound from the sink, and looked just in time to see a set of car keys, thrown from the vampire's hands in death, slip past the pumpkin in the plant-gut-soaked sink and vanish down the

garbage disposal.

"Your time in Guatemala," Sinclair hoped, "Wouldn't happen to have taught you how to plumb, would it?"

Even a botanist, it seemed, could work their way around a pipe wrench. It was a long, painful job, but the pipe was eventually undone, and the keys recovered. Sinclair and Hastings took the bed of the truck, while Partridge drove and Carraso slept off a concussion.

"This town's gone crazy," Partridge muttered to himself front the front of the truck. "Hastings?"

"I'm here, doc," He said.

"I think that my theory was correct."

"Wait, what theory?" Sinclair frowned. "You've been doing theories?"

"Long story short," Partridge informed her, "There's a documented anomaly in town, one that Site-87's not cleared to know about. Something beyond E-Class weirdness."

"Holy shit. Well, Hennessy's reasonable. She'll probably have files on the location."

"Let's talk to her tomorrow," Hastings panted. "I need a drink."

"I concur." He paused, turning onto main street. "Sinclair?"

"Yes?"

"After this has blown over… would you mind seeing if you could invite me to a game night? I've always wanted to learn Dungeons and Dragons."

"Sure thing, sir." She smiled, and looked east, as S & C Plastics showed itself over the hill.

The omnipresent twilight, eventually, faded into night. The stars

declined to show themselves, hiding behind dark autumn clouds.

«Chapter 3 | `Black Autumn Hub` | Chapter 5»

Following The Leylines

Timecode: 10/22/2017 23:49

Chad Darryl: The United States of America is the strangest country in the world. It's full of cryptids, ghosts, aliens, and the government covers it all up. But we know something they don't.

Chad Darryl: Throughout the USA, there are invisible lines of energy flowing through space, linking locations full of strange activity. We make it our job to route a course along these energy flows, and document everything we find. We are…

[Title Card Appears]

Chad Darryl: *Following the Leylines*.

[Title Jingle, cut to inside of a van. Four individuals are present: Chad Darryl, Caucasian, age 33, host of *Following the Leylines*; Monica Morse, African-American, age 29, self-proclaimed spiritual medium; Quincy Lee, Chinese-American, age 33, equipment manager. The driver is Markus Bradley, Caucasian, Age 28.]

Darryl: (Addressing the camera) Today, we've got a treat for you, true believers. We've got a live show, broadcasting on Twitch, for our Halloween special. For months, dozens of leylines have been pointing us in one direction.

[The Camera pans over a map of the state of Wisconsin, with a large, red circle scribbled around an area in the North-Western most part of the state]

Darryl: Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. A remote town smack on

the border with Minnesota, it's said to be the origin of dozens of urban legends. They say that the original Hook-Handed Man originated from here, and that it's one of the most haunted places in the USA.

Lee: I'll believe that when I see it. Nothing can be worse than Ohio U.

Darryl: Maybe. Monica, what do you think?

Morse: It's… almost overwhelming. Hundreds— no, *thousands* of leylines converge here. It's a hotbed of all sorts of bizarre things. I see spirits, pumpkins, and… death. I feel a strong aura of death. [Morse swallows audibly.] This may have been a mistake.

[The van begins slowing down, before stopping. Muffled speech is heard outside.]

Darryl: What th— Mark, why'd you stop?

Bradley: There's a roadblock ahead. Bunch of people in jackets. I… wait, what's FEMA doing out here?

Darryl: You're kidding. [To Lee] Switch to the dash cam, now.

[Camera angle switches to a view from a camera behind a windshield. Outside, several men and women in black jackets with the letters "FEMA" printed on the back, with the insignia of the Federal Emergency Management Agency on their lapels. One of these individuals, a man with brown hair, approaches the van.]

FEMA Agent 1: Sir, I'm going to need you to turn around.

Bradley: What's going—

Darryl: Hold on, I'll do the talking. We're just trying to get into town, sir.

FEMA Agent 1: You can't. Town's under quarantine. Massive chemical spill from the plastics plant.

Darryl: What? There's nothing on the news about it. We're filming our Halloween special here.

FEMA Agent 1: Can't help you there. Duluth has a pretty cool haunted house, try there.

[The dash cam changes angle to view the FEMA Agent's face.]

Darryl: Look, it took us weeks to get permits to film here. Why a rinky-dink town is so protective of film rights is beyond me. We need to get through.

[A female voice is heard, muffled by the windshield]

FEMA Agent 1: What?

FEMA Agent 2: They have a fucking dash cam on you! I saw the douchebag turn it.

FEMA Agent 1: Ah, hell. All right, out of the vehicle, everyone.

Lee: It's within our rights to film a federal official.

FEMA Agent 1: I'm going to say this again. Out of the vehicle, now, and we'll let you go free. Otherwise, you're under arrest.

Bradley: FEMA agents can't do that.

FEMA Agent 1: What?

Darryl: I filmed in New Orleans after Katrina. FEMA Agents don't have the legal right to arrest US Citizens. Who the hell are you?

FEMA Agent 1: Oh, fuck this. [All FEMA agents draw firearms.] Out of the van, now.

Bradley: H-holy shit. What the fuck?

FEMA Agent 1: Everyone *out* now! Under the Whitman-Ross Act of 1960, you are all under arrest.

[A low rumbling is heard on the footage. Camera footage is filled with digital noise for several seconds, after which several scarecrows appear, surrounding the 'FEMA' agents.]

FEMA Agent 3: What the fuck?!

Darryl: Floor it.

Bradley: What?

Darryl: Fucking floor it! *NOW!*

Bradley: Holy shit—-

[The Van suddenly accelerates, knocking over the dash cam. The sounds of gunfire are heard, along with several screams and a splintering of wood as the van breaks through the barricade. Signal is lost.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017, 00:09

[Signal resumes. Footage is shown from an infra-red night vision camera; Darryl is operating it. He appears to be in a wooded area. The van is visible, and there are sounds of a hushed argument. Darryl attempts to shush them.]

Darryl: Hey, true believers. We, uh. We managed to get away from the…. so-called FEMA guys. Faux-ma? [Darryl covers his mouth and gasps.] This is crazy. We actually got shot at, this was not a stunt. I swear to god.

Lee: Show them the tires.

Darryl: Right, shit, okay. [Darryl focuses the camera on the rear left tire of the van; puncture marks are visible.

Darryl digs their finger into the puncture, and produces what appears to be a bullet.]

Morse: This is f-f-fucked up. Those… scarecrows, that just… just came out of the ground. They felt… so evil. [Morse bends over, retching.]

Darryl: All right, we just… [Darryl points its camera at a series of lights in the distance] That's the town. We just need to get there, and find somewhere to hide. Act natural.

Bradley: Chad, what the hell? They said the town was under quarantine! We should just go back and surrender ourselves—

Darryl: Fuck that, we're broadcasting *live* to five-hundred-thousand people. Something's going on here that's worth shooting people over, and we're gonna capture it!

[Lee enters the shot, carrying four head-mounted cameras]

Lee: At least put these on. They're bad image quality, but they're easier to carry as opposed to lugging that monster around. [indicating the camera Darryl is holding]

Darryl: Okay, yeah. [Addressing the lens] I'm going to turn this off, now. We're gonna be broadcasting from GoPros from now on. I'll be Camera 1, Monica will be Camera 2, Quincy will be Camera 3, and Mark— Mark? [Darryl swings the camera around. Markus Bradley is not present in the shot. Analysis of the footage shows a figure approximately two-hundred meters away, hanging from a tree. Darryl does not appear to notice this.] What the fuck? Mark? Where are you?

Lee: C-cameras on. If we die, we need to capture this.

Morse: Great, we're going to be the world's first live

snuff film. [Darryl, Lee and Morse all put on the wearable cameras.]

Darryl: Nobody's dying tonight. I promise. We just gotta stay quiet. Quincy you got—

[Camera feed abruptly disconnects]

Time Code: 10/24/2017, 00:20
[Connection reestablished. Only Camera 2, Monica Morse, is currently active. Darryl is visible in front of her, crouched against a wall. The camera briefly pans up to a street sign, indicating that they are at the corner of Main St. and Hodag Lane. Lee is heard behind her, panting loudly.]

Morse: Wait, I think my camera's finally working.

Lee: Must have found a wi-fi hotspot that's unsecured; looks like we're near some kind of coffee shop. Chad, what do you see?

Darryl: …nothing. Lights are on everywhere, but… nobody's home. I don't think we've even seen any cars on the street.

[Morse pushes forward, and views Main Street. A semi-translucent humanoid figure walks before the camera, which fills with digital noise. The body language of the figure indicates a reluctance to move forward.]

Morse: What the fuck?

Darryl: O-oh my god. Th-that looks almost corporeal.

[The figure appears to walk up a set of stairs, before standing in mid-air for several seconds. It suddenly drops, going limp, hanging in mid-air for approximately ten seconds, and vanishing with a burst of digital noise.]

Morse: O-o-oh my god.

Darryl: Think it'll show up on the video?

Lee: Wait, hold on. People are talking. Moni, let me see your headset. I want to boost the gain on your mic.

[Morse removes her camera and hands it to Lee. Several seconds of shuffling are heard, before sounds recorded through the microphone appear to be much louder]

Unidentified Female: You're kidding. How many got through the roadblock?

Unidentified Male: Four, in a van. Some ghost-hunting show. Last thing we need. People showing up as scarecrows, farmers turning into vampires, researchers disappearing—

Unidentified Female: Wait, ghost hunting show? What was it called?

Unidentified Male: Following the… something. Landlines? You watch that stuff, Ruby, you should know.

"Ruby": *Following the Leylines*! Shit. They do fucking *live* Halloween specials every year. They might be broadcasting now!

Unidentified Male: Fuck me. Sigma-10 Command, this is Agent Blake Williams. We have cause to believe that the trespassers are broadcasting live. We need immediate scrubbing procedures. Call Cover-Ops.

Morse: Cover-Ops? What the fuck?

[Several lights down Main Street begin turning off.]

Darryl: This is big, holy shit. The entire town's a smokescreen. This is, like. Beyond Area-51. Wait, wh-why are the lights going out?

Lee: Shit, they're killing the power. We won't have an outgoing signal—

[The power turns off in the area around Lee, Darryl and Morse. Connection interrupted.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017 00:50

[Only Camera 1, Darryl's Camera, is active. Lee and Morse are not visible, and video shows heavy signs of corruption, and frames lag behind. Audio indicates that Darryl is running.]

Darryl: G-get the fuck away from me!

[A loud, bleating bellow echoes, distorting the audio on the camera and causing it to lag by several frames.]

Darryl: MONICA! QUINCY! FUCKING HELP!

[Darryl's camera shows him running past a tree. An axe flies into frame, embedding itself in the bark several inches before his face. He whimpers and stops, and the camera angle changes to a low shot. Loud sobbing is heard.]

[A new voice is heard, heavily distorted.]

Unknown Entity: For Sloth's sake. You tourists are so weepy.

Darryl: I-I… I don't wanna die! [Darryl descends into sobbing.]

[A figure with a goat's head steps into frame, and tilts its head, taking the axe from the tree.]

Unknown Entity: Oh *shut up*. I'm trying to save your life. [The entity grabs Darryl and begins dragging him along the ground. Darryl openly protests and sobs.]

[Camera feed disconnects.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017 01:07

[Only Camera 3, Lee's Camera, is active. Lee and Morse are both visible, while Darryl is not. The pair appear to be in a dilapidated house in a wooded area. They are standing in the entry way, and several patches of mold are visible on the ceiling, and holes in the walls, exposing wooden boards.]

Lee: Wait, what the fuck?

Morse: What?

Lee: I have a fucking signal! Almost an hour without any goddamn signal, and we step into a haunted goddamn house, suddenly, we got something!

Morse: Is someone living here?

Lee: Yeah. May be what got Mark.

Morse: And Chad?

Lee: We don't know that Chad's gone. We just… heard him scream. Maybe he fell into a ravine.

Morse: All right, I— oh my god.

Lee: What is it?

Morse: I… I feel… something's here, something big. Something… powerful. It wants us to get out.

Lee: Oh shit. Is it a ghost?

Morse: No, it's… something else. It's—

Unidentified Female Voice: It's me.

[Lee and Morse scream, turning to face a young female, approximately twenty-two. Subject is wearing faded blue jeans and a T-Shirt for "The Incubi", a local band in Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. Subject's left eye is covered by a fringe of red hair. Some visual noise appears around the

figure, but quickly clears.]

Unidentified Female: Whoah, whoah. [Subject holds up its hands in a placating manner] I'm not gonna hurtcha. You shouldn't even be here. What the hell are out-of-townies doing here at a time like this?

Lee: Uh, um. Uh. I… we ran the barricade… Mark did, our driver.

Unidentified Female: White guy? About thirty? [Subject shakes their head.] They're dead. The Black Autumn got to him.

Lee: What?

Morse: Black— Black Autumn? What the fuck?

Unidentified Female: Your other friend's safe. He pissed himself when he saw Jasper, though. But you all need to get out of town. [Subject looks at Lee's camera.] Is that recording?

Lee: Huh? Yeah, it is.

Morse: You don't… feel right. You're not real.

Unidentified Female: Wha— [The figure leans in and inspects Morse, pulling aside its hair to reveal that their left eye is missing, and a hollow socket is visible.]

Morse: What the FUCK!

Unidentified Female: You're a medium. How rare. [Subject snickers. Lee and Morse seem unamused.] Sorry. Need a bit of levity, in light of what's happened.

Morse: Where's Chad?

Unidentified Female: They're safe. That's all you need to know. Come on, follow me, and I'll get you— oh *shit*. Behind you!

[Lee's camera turns to face the opposite end of the entry way, where severe electromagnetic disturbance occurs. A figure resembling a scarecrow with a pumpkin for its head is visible through the distortion, and appears to be pointing at the camera.]

Unidentified Female: Run for it! Don't look back!

[Lee drops his camera and runs for the door, with Morse following. The footage shows the scarecrow walking after them, severe electromagnetic disturbance occurring. The scarecrow stops to inspect the camera dropped, falling on the floor and 'looking' into the lens.]

[Connection interrupted.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017, 01:27

[Feed from Camera 1. Video is inactive, only audio is present.]

Darryl: *No!* Please *GOD!* Let me go! [Darryl descends into sobbing]

Unidentified Entity: Silence.

Darryl: *I don't wanna die!*

Unidentified Male: Don't be such a drama queen! For the last time, I'm not going to hurt you, but if something else hears you, it *will.* So please. Shut. Up.

[Darryl is heard whimpering loudly.]

Unidentified Male: See that building over there? The one that says Plastics on it?

Darryl: Y-yes?

Unidentified Entity: I want you to run there as fast as you can. When you're in view of the front door, slow down and keep your hands up. If you're lucky, they won't

shoot your head off.

Darryl: W-what the fuck are you?

Unidentified Entity: Just your friendly neighborhood half-goat slasher villain. Now, run. The town isn't safe. [A loud scream is heard in the distance.] Dammit. *Jessie!* Run for it, now.

[Darryl is heard running through plant matter, particularly dried leaves, which gives way to stone, most likely concrete. He is heard screaming for help, before gunshots ring out.]

[Signal interrupted.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017 01:27

[Feed from Camera 2, running through a wooded area. Morse is running after Unidentified Female, and is followed by Lee.]

Morse: What was that?!

Unidentified Female: No clue. They've been popping up around town. Forty people are dead because of them—

Lee: Forty people?! This should be national news!

Unidentified Female: There are people whose jobs are to stop news like that from getting out.

Lee: Who?!

Unidentified Female: Doesn't matter, you won't remember them! Jump!

[Morse and Lee leap over an obstruction; Morse's camera shows a series of roots attempting to reach into the air and grab them.]

Morse: What the fuck?!

Unidentified Female: Town's up there! You need to get onto Main Street-

[Subject suddenly stops as a line of scarecrows appears before the camera with a burst of digital noise.]

Unidentified Female: Oh shit. Run, run through them, I'll hold them off.

Morse: What the fuck are you? Something's wrong with you, I-I know you're not real, *what are you?!*

Unidentified Female: I'm Jessica Valentru. I'm part succubus, part banshee. You can call me Singing Jessie. Now, *run!*

[Morse and Lee flee towards the town. Audio picks up a sub-sonic disturbance, which grows in volume, until it is audible as a loud scream. Camera feed shows several individuals in FEMA uniforms, before the disturbance becomes audible. Major camera disturbance.]

[Signal interrupted.]

Timecode: 10/23/2017, 02:19

[Camera 1 is active, laying on a metal table next to Chad Darryl, who has his head in his hands. The room he is in is white and brightly-lit. A male enters the frame; the voice matches the individual identified as "Blake Williams" from time code 00:20.]

Williams: You're in a lot of trouble, Chad.

Darryl: I want my fuckin' lawyer.

Williams: We're far beyond lawyers— wait, is this thing on? [Williams picks up the camera and waves at it, before placing it down on the table.] You know, we intercepted your feed over an hour ago. The only place you're streaming to is a secure server, where your footage will be reviewed and deleted.

Darryl: Oh my god. Who the fuck are you? Are you t-t-the Founders?

Williams: Beg pardon?

Darryl: The Founders! Global Founders! Big-ass MIB organization that pull down videos of things like alien sightings and ghost encounters! I-I don't want to die. Please.

Williams: Calm down. We're not going to kill you. It ain't our style.

Darryl: Your style? A-a-a-a fuckin' guy with a goat head dragged me halfway across town and dropped me on your doorstep! I thought he was gonna kill me!

Williams: Really? The Goatman? Huh. [Williams pauses.] In any case, you have two choices right now.

Darryl: W-what?

Williams: Choice one: we inject you full of a drug that makes you forget the last twenty-four hours and you and your friends wake up in Superior, being arrested for breaking and entering while high on tainted drinks you got from a bar. Charges are dropped, and you're free to live your lives.

Darryl: My other choice?

Williams: You sign a piece of paper that says you can never talk about this, to anyone except your friends. If that happens, you will start to asphyxiate any time you mention the town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, the Goatman, and the "Founders" as you call us.

Darryl: …does it hurt? The injection?

Williams: We give it to you under anesthesia.

Darryl: I'll take that.

Williams: Most people do. Though… your friend, Monica Morse?

Darryl: What about her?

Williams: We've been reviewing some footage from earlier episodes, as well as tonight. We've been looking for more psychics, so she may take a little longer to get out.

Darryl: What about Mark?

Williams: Let's get him prepped for amnestic administration.

Darryl: Wait, where's Mark? What happened to Mark?

[Williams turns off the camera. Connection interrupted.]

Timecode: 10/24/2017, 01:55

[The same scarecrow seen pursuing Morse and Lee is looking into Lee's camera, accompanied by heavy electromagnetic distortion. The pumpkin splits open, revealing the face of Markus Bradley inside, eyes removed. The face bashes its head against the camera. Blood flows down the lens.]

[Connection closed.]

Scarecrow Factory

October 24th

On the western part of the Hubble estate, there was a sign that proudly proclaimed "Birthplace of Gourdon, Largest Pumpkin in Wisconsin, 1969". Behind it was a pumpkin patch which, during any other year, would be filled with families looking for suitable fruits to carve into Jack-O-Lanterns. It would have had several colors of pumpkin, from red to orange to white to blue.

But now, on top of everything else, the patch was full of pits, and around those holes were bright red, bloody pumpkins, which were in the process of being collected, at which point the vines were incinerated. Each of the pits contained at least one skeleton, and nobody could explain it. The Hubbles weren't serial killers, or if they were, the Foundation didn't known about it.

Watching this carnage was Christopher Hastings and Keith Partridge. The latter was sipping from a travel mug, shivering in the cold morning air.

Partridge put away his phone and frowned. "Still no response from Hennessy about my theory."

"She's getting security clearances pinned to her like thumbtacks on a conspiracy theorist's corkboard," Hastings sighed. "She doesn't exactly have much time to take requests. Probably half the reason she called Code Vandal in the first place."

Dr. Malcolm Guillard climbed out of one of the pits. He was a robust man, and his years of digging in the dirt and hauling bodies as a member of the Foundation's forensic studies division had given him a surprising amount of muscle mass. He presented to the pair of botanists what looked like a human skull. However, the size of the incisors and the large, ridged plate on the front of the skull showed it was most certainly not human. "Well, this might, *might* explain the

vam-pie-er."

Partridge *groaned* at the pun. "One, I made that joke the other day. Two, that was completely unprofessional."

"Not as bad as this," Hastings took the skull, carefully and held it in his hand, away from his face. He looked at Partridge and Guillard, and began speaking in a theatrical voice. "Alas, poor Edward. I knew him, Jacob, a fellow of infinite sleaziness, of most godawful writing. I hath borne him in my eyes but once, and now, how abhorred in my memory! Here hung those lips Bella kissed I know not how oft—"

"Hastings," Partridge laughed. "Stop! I'm going to spill my coffee!"

A good part of the forensics team who had been in earshot had leaned against the sides of their pits, and Guillard just palmed his face. "All right, comedy night is over," he said, looking over the pits. "A dozen bodies. God knows what the Hubbles were up to. We're bringing his family into the PD in Duluth for questioning."

Hastings handed the skull back to Guillard and took out his notepad, starting to sketch and plot the locations of the bodies. He connected the dots in a few different variations, and took out his phone. "Dammit. Anyone have Reynolds's number?"

"Why?" Guillard frowned.

"I think that this might be some kind of ritual circle, the way the bodies are arranged. He and Sinclair are finally signing the relationship declaration forms, so I figured I should just facetime him or something."

"I have him on my phone," Partridge took out his smartphone and dialed Reynolds. "How do you do a video call on this?"

"Here," Hastings walked back over, and fiddled with a phone. One very annoying dialtone later, they were connected to the face of Montgomery Reynolds.

"Hastings, glad to see you're all right," the thaumatologist commented. He was in the Occult Studies laboratory, a large bottle

of golden liquid behind him. "I'm expecting Katherine soon. You're at the Hubble estate?"

"Yeah, and we found bodies. Twelve of them." He held up his notepad to the phone's camera. "I plotted them out. Any of these look like anything to you?"

Reynolds frowned, and pointed at the camera. "That one, with the shape like an electrocardiogram's output. Add a thirteenth point to it, and you have a Granola Sarkic ritual for promoting bountiful harvest."

"I'm sorry, Granola *What?*" Hastings asked.

"Granola Sarkic. It's a valid branch of Sarkic carnomancy, though no Karcist will tell you that. Popped up in the sixties, promoted the use of human sacrifice for the sake of natural harmony— higher crop yields, the ability to commune with animals, that sort of thing. Well, human-*ish* sacrifice."

"Would vampire qualify as Humanish?" he held up the phone to face the vampire's skull.

Reynolds whistled. "That explains where poor Mr. Hubble got his infection from, at least. Vampiric sacrifice in carnomancy isn't unheard of, but it's risky, for this exact reason." He rubbed his chin. "The Foundation registers all known mages in Nexus zones it controls, and they bar any dangerous cult activity within them."

"So, what the fuck was a Sarkic cultist doing in Sloth's Pit?" Hastings's face screwed up."This isn't right."

"We'll begin looking into it as soon as we can." Reynolds frowned. "There are only twelve bodies?"

"As far as we can tell," Guillard piped up.

"There should be thirteen. Look for signs of soil disturbance, one of them may have been moved or removed. A broken spell matrix would account for the bloody pumpkins."

"Where would the thirteenth point in the matrix be?"

Reynolds leaned closer to the camera. "If up on your diagram is north, then, then it would most likely be at the eastern-most point of the matrix."

"Thanks, Monty. Give my regards to Sinclair when you see her. Oh, and congratulations." Hastings disconnected the call and handed the phone back to Partridge.

"How old are the bodies?" Partridge asked.

"They easily date to the 1960s, if not earlier," Malcolm pointed at each of the pits. "Other than the vampire, we have three that show signs of polio, one with a lead slug in the hip that one of the ballistic guys thinks dates to World War Two, and a male with a Class of '63 ring from Jackson Sloth Memorial."

"So, locals," Hastings frowned, making his way to the easternmost spot on the farming patch. The shifted his foot in the dirt, and frowned. He brushed the topsoil aside with his foot, and found a skull's eye socket staring out from beneath the dirt. "Yeah, there's something buried here." He knelt to inspect the skull, frowning. "Huh."

"What is it?" Guillard frowned.

Chris carefully lifted the skull from the dirt, and shone a light into its jaw. "There's a taproot growing through the skull." He turned it over, finding a wilted dandelion on the opposite side. "This was… maybe not dug up. But pushed to the surface by something."

Guillard presented Hastings with a slab of gel, and Chris pressed the skull's teeth into it. "How long will it take to get a result from the imprint?" Chris asked.

"Well, looking at it now, I can tell you that it's from a male, late fifties. Probably killed by a blow to the head." The investigator indicated a large crack on the top of the skull. "Maybe by a baseball bat or something?"

Chris shook the skull, and frowned. Something small and metal rattled about inside. He tilted the head back, and out of the hole at

the base, a key fell out. He caught it, and read the inscription. "'Key to the City of Sloth's Pit, awarded by Clive Carter to Marian Carter, 1969.' Good to know that nepotism is eternal." He frowned. "You said that this was a man's skull, though."

"It is." Guillard chewed his lip, and looked at the teeth. "He has a porcelain crown. So, definitely pre-50s; that's around when they started using amalgam fillings. Key was placed in their skull after." He took the key from Chris's hand. "Pretty recently, too. There's some wet mud on this, still."

Chris scratched his head, and started pacing. "What does that mean, though? Why would someone dig up a skull and place the key to the city in it?" The researcher stumbled, his foot getting caught in a hole. "What the hell?!"

"Calm down, Hastings." Partridge looked within. "Looks like a critter hole. Probably a woodchuck or something. Move your foot."

"I can't," Hastings swallowed. "It's stuck. I—" He felt something squeeze his leg. "Oh shit, something's got me. I-It feels like a snake."

"Shit, probably a joint snake hole." Guillard produced a knife. "I'm going to cut off your pant leg, and we're gonna peel it off, okay?"

"O-okay," Hastings swallowed. He winced when the fabric was cut from his pants.

Guillard backed away. "That's… not a snake."

"What, then?" He asked.

"It's," Partridge swallowed. "It's a root. Maybe a vine."

"Oh. Shit — " Hastings gasped and sank to his knees, the root sinking under the ground and pulling his legs with it. He felt himself being pulled under. "Fuck, fuck, it's got me, it's pulling me." He quickly removed his shirt and put it over his face, trying to claw at the dirt. At the very least, he wouldn't inhale dirt when he got dragged under. He gasped and whimpered. "Shit, I think it's gonna break my leg —"

The two senior researcher stood back, and Partridge spoke into his phone. "Helen, b-begin phone tracking of Site-87 r-research personnel Christopher Hastings."

Chris swallowed, tears in his eyes. "If I don't… if you don't find me, the research I got for you, Doc— it's in my desk, locked drawer. Break in if you have to."

"Understood." Partridge swallowed, and told the same lie he'd told countless other personnel who had gone missing in the line of duty. "You're going to be okay, Hastings."

Chris felt a sharp tug, and gasped. His leg wasn't broken, but at least one joint was dislocated. He wrapped his arms around himself and took a long, deep breath, before he was tugged underneath.

"Son of a bitch," Partridge rubbed his face. Hastings had performed protocol to a T; suffocation prevention, minimizing surface area and protecting the chest when being dragged, not attempting to be pulled out and drag others with him. He was smart, and he might be gone. "Call March. Tell him we need a squad of Sigma-10 scrambled yesterday."

Christopher Hastings felt his skin being scraped away by Wisconsin soil. Thousands of insects, rocks, and roots peeled off his flesh, bit by bit, and he felt blood trickle into the soil. Some part of his mind was thankful for his tetanus shots, but that was soon drowned out by the pain.

Then, he started being dragged lower by the roots, beneath the ground. At this point, he doubted his phone would broadcast any signal. But if by some miracle it did, at least they'd be able to find his body.

The Foundation had a high mortality rate in most professions, and botany was certainly up there. Between dealing with poisonous flowers and trees that could eat you, botanists could be gone through like tissue paper. It seemed far too appropriate that he'd be killed by a plant.

He felt himself start to run out of air. His vision started going grey, and his body went limp. It was better than being eaten or squashed. Relatively painless. And then—

He found himself exposed to air, and gasped, coughing and gagging. The root let go of his leg, and the researcher fell in the dirt, whimpering in pain. Above him was the ceiling of a large cavern—he estimated to be about thirty meters high, and some light coming from a crack in the ceiling meant that he may be close to the surface.

Hastings crawled forward, not wanting to test the condition of his leg. He closed his eyes, forcing them to adjust to the darkened surroundings. He saw something along the top of the cavern—some form of root system, most likely the pumpkin he had been taken by. But the actual plant was nowhere in sight.

Chris saw what he had landed on, and let out a miserable groan. He had fallen on top of a half-buried skeleton, with its clothing still intact. The chest cavity of the skeleton had plant matter in it, pumpkins fused together to form facsimiles of organs. Vines splayed out from these plants, which pulsed and seemed to breathe; the 'heart' and 'lungs' were the most active. Chris felt its body, finding its pants and rooting through them. Technically mistreatment of a corpse, but he needed something to do while waiting to die.

He found its wallet, and looked inside. The contents were three-hundred dollars in small bills, a membership card for the "Sloth's Pit Hunter's Club" (defunct as of 1988 due to an explosion that flattened their lodge), a driver's license for one Clive Carter, and a Polaroid photograph, folded up.

"Hello, Clive. Guess we know where the key came from." He looked down at the organs. "Trying to tell us where you were?" Chris unfolded the photograph, and found a picture of four men standing in front of a Ferris wheel, smiling at the camera. The youngest among them, Chris recognized, was Jeffery Hubble Senior. The three others were unknown to him.

On the reverse side of the Polaroid, in pen, was:

C. Carter, J. Hubble, R. Gideon, & Z. Allen
10/26/69
Douglas County Fair Organization Committee
Photo by M. Isimeria

Hastings took out his phone, and snapped photographs of the Polaroid's front and back. Then, he placed the phone on the ground, propped it against the skeleton, and set it to record video.

"If the words '**esoteric containment**' mean nothing to you, stop watching." He paused, and rubbed his eyes. "My name is Christopher Hastings. I'm a researcher at S & C Plastics in Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, known internally as Foundation Site-87. I am in a cavern approximately… I don't know, deep below Nexus Zone 18, which includes the town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin.

"This cavern appears to have a complex root structure on the ceiling, leading me to believe that… this is inhabited by some form of fruit-bearing vine organism, originating from pumpkins that have replaced the organ systems of one Clive Carter. Hold on." He retrieved the phone. "I'm activating the flashlight to get a better view of the cavern."

He turned on the flash bulb on the camera, illuminating the ceiling with a gasp. "Oh my god."

On the ceiling were scarecrows, hung upside-down. There were fifteen of them, moving along the vines like they were on conveyor belts, occasionally enveloped in plant matter, emerging with new parts; newly attached limbs, a different head, and a hat. The process was slow, and a single scarecrow took half an hour to complete. Hastings was glad he had a high-capacity memory chip in his phone.

"These are where the scarecrows are coming from," he swallowed, bringing the camera down. "I think this may be where everyone around town was taken to, to be… converted. But that doesn't explain why they started up—" he looked at Clive's skeleton, inspecting his head. "Cracks in the skull. Blow to the head might have killed him; did Hubble throw you down here?" He touched the breathing pumpkins. "Maybe he was using you to… as an extra

power source for his ritual? I…" Chris's head pulsed. "Shit."

He aimed his camera at the ceiling. "It seems that your hypothesis was correct, Dr. Partridge," Chris swallowed. "The scarecrows do, in fact, originate from plant matter. The plants present in the body of Clive Carter appear to be mimicking the functions of organs long after death. Current hypothesis: the plant-organs pushed the… skeleton found at the Hubble estate out of position, breaking the… spell matrix, and causing Jeffery Hubble's infection." He swallowed. "I'm going to attempt to destroy the heart analogue. I realize that this is seriously against Foundation policy, but at this point… my leg's dislocated, I'm bleeding from half my skin, and… shit, my knife's gone. Must have lost it while being dragged here."

Hastings looked at his phone. "I am going to attempt to use my phone as a blunt instrument to smash the outer casing of the heart analogue. This recording will cease, possibly resuming when… when I destroy it. Hastings out."

Hastings turned off his phone, and clutched it in his hand. It barely weighted half a pound, but all he had to do was nick the skin of the pumpkin. Then he could press his nails in and rip it apart. He forced his phone down onto the pumpkin, the screen glitching and cracking. Again, he brought it down, but it seemed to bounce off. Pumpkins had thick skin, and whatever this was wasn't willing to give way.

Still, one did not get into the Foundation without some ingenuity. The corners of the phone itself were blunted, but the battery within was a different story. He peeled off the back plastic covering, and extracted the battery from the phone. The corners were sharp enough that, with the right application of force, he could break through.

Hastings dug the corner of the battery into the pumpkin's skin, and pushed. It slowly gave, and as it did, the cavern around him started to rumble. The skeleton twitched, unseen by him. He twisted the battery in deeper, starting to see the pumpkin's guts leak out. But it stalled on something, a hard inner shell. "No, shit, dammit," he sobbed. "Fuck."

The skeleton's hands jumped up to grab Christopher's. The

researcher gasped, and shut his eyes, fearing that it would be torn off. He prepared a scream, but instead, he felt the bones tug his hand downward, sharply, towards the pumpkin heart. The battery pierced the skin, and he felt it dig into the ground beneath.

The bony hands went limp, except for one finger, which wrote a message in the dirt.

THANK
YOU

It then drew a sloppy triangle, and laid still. All the other pumpkins withered, and Hastings's eyes followed the withering. It went up through the roots, the scarecrows dropping off the ceiling, the entire cave rumbling.

Christopher Hastings was tired. He clutched the phone in his hand, and laid besides the skeleton of Clive Carter. "You're welcome, mate," he said, eyes landing on a triangle. From his point of view, he realized that it was not a triangle, but a pyramid. This was the last thought that crossed his mind before he slept.

Christopher Hastings had no right to wake up, but he might, some day.

The researcher had been lifted out of the cavern and rushed, not to Site-87's trauma center, but to the recently commandeered St. Francis Memorial Hospital. Standing outside his room were Dr. Partridge and Dr. Claude Mattings, fresh out of psychological evaluation.

"How'd you find him?" Claude asked. "You said his tracker went dark."

"Whatever he did down there made every plant on the Hubble estate die out, and left a huge line of dead plant life from there to the cavern we found him in. Seems like it tapped into hundreds of root systems, and when it died, it all went…" he mimed a 'poof'.

"You said you had something for me?" Mattings asked.

Partridge nodded, taking the Polaroid out of his pocket. "We found Hastings clutching it." He gave a brief explanation as to the contents of the video he had recorded, as well as the wallet found by him. "I finished sending this information to Site-87's mailing list about forty minutes ago. We're seeing what we can piece together."

Mattings looked over the Polaroid. "Yeah. That Ferris wheel was in the anomaly Pickman and I encountered. I'm positive."

Partridge rubbed his face. He rubbed his face. "So, to recap…"

"Hubble's gone the way of Dracula, and Carter's body is beneath Sloth's Pit, filled with rotting plants. That leaves Z. Allen and R. Gideon, plus the photographer, M. Isimeria. We don't even know their gender." He handed the Polaroid back to Partridge. "Pickman… something happened to him over a photograph that showed evidence of Foundation presence in Sloth's Pit a full seven years before we officially knew it existed. Something doesn't want us finding out about what it was they did."

"You think it's something from within the Foundation?" Partridge asked.

"Of course not," Mattings frowned. "If it was, they'd have no reason to let me live. They could have had me trip and fall in the psych ward, or cut the brakes of my car on the way over here." He looked into Hasting's room and sighed. "Christ, he got beat badly."

"He'll live," Partridge sighed. "I finally got in touch with Hennessy. She's meeting with me tomorrow."

Mattings nodded. "That's good. I'm going to talk to Reese, see if she can fast-track botany's research into those vampire pumpkins. I—" Matting's phone began to ring. He fished it out, and smiled. "It's Cassandra. Do you mind?" he asked.

"Be my guest," Partridge waved at him and nodded.

Claude answered the phone. "Hello, hon. What's up?"

"Claude?" Cassandra's voice was quiet. "I need— I need help. Call the task force."

"What's wrong?" He straightened up.

"J-Jules said that she wanted to check something out at Equinox Ridge, a-and she dragged me and Fred along. When we got there, w-we were jumped. Jules got grabbed, b-but she's fine, we're in the van."

"Something jumped you? What?"

"I-It was something that was all b-black, wearing a black veil, and—"

"Did it have rotten teeth?" Claude's skin went cold.

"Yeah. Looked like dead leaves." There was a loud *thunk* from the other end. "Shit! Fred, can't this go any faster?"

A muffled response came from the other end.

"Hon, t-the van's breaking down. I…" she swallowed. "I think we're gonna have to run."

"I-I'm gonna help you, Cass. I promise." Claude yelled at Partridge "Get Sigma-10 on the horn now! We have personnel in danger at Equinox Ridge!"

Partridge fumbled with his phone, and started up a conversation with Harold March, the commander of Sigma-10.

There was a loud *bang* from the other side of Claude's phone call. "Holy SHIT!" a voice in the background called. Female; Juliette Hobb.

"The whole side of the van just buckled. Something's trying to get in," Cassie whispered. "We're going to run."

"Come back to me." Claude swallowed. "Please."

"I will." Cassie kept the call on, and there was the sound of a door opening, followed by the cry of "RUN!"

Hundreds of footsteps and thousands of minutes seemed to pass. Claude's phone was glued to his head as he heard the steps retreat.

Then, a scream. The sound of plastic and glass hitting the forest floor. The call disconnecting.

Claude Mattings stood in the hallway of an almost-empty hospital, paralyzed. The soundtrack to his life turned into the electrocardiogram of a mercifully unconscious man, beeping away in the dark.

«Chapter 5 | **Black Autumn Hub** | Chapter 7»

Unshelved

October 25th

Claude Mattings sat with his head in his hands in one of Site-87's break rooms. He had a bottle of hard cider in front of him, sealed. He'd found it in Cassandra's quarters, with a note:

> Claude,
>
> Sorry I didn't get this to you earlier! It's hard getting mail into this town, and I had to look everywhere for this cider. Consider it a belated birthday present. Let's pop it open together.
>
> Cassie <3

She had gotten it in before the evacuation, but with everything that had happened, she never managed to get it to him. He considered downing half the bottle then and there. Next to the cider was a radio, and on the other side, Seren Pryce of Squad 25. She'd been quiet for about twenty minutes, and he sat, alone, waiting for any response, any update.

The radio beeped to life. «Mattings, you there?»

Claude picked up the receiver. "I'm here."

«We found Pike's phone. It's busted. No sign of any of them, besides that. Wait, hold on.» The radio went silent for several seconds. «Just got word that they found Hobb's phone in the river. That leaves Englehardt with some form of communication. We're activating phone tracking.»

"Thanks. Stay safe, Pryce." Claude rubbed his head. "God dammit."

«Hey.» The radio crackled. «She's strong. She can get kicked while she's down and punch back twice as hard. She's gonna be fine.»

Claude didn't respond, but he smiled. He got up and took the cider back to his quarters, placing it on an empty shelf in the fridge.

Malcolm Guillard sat alone in a dark room with a folder full of newspaper clippings that had been dropped by a possibly-dead archivist. He was a forensic analyst, that much was true, but he also fancied himself an investigative agent.

The blood bugged Guillard for several reasons; firstly, it was AB-, and Pickman was O-. Secondly, it had genetic markers suggesting that the blood came from an individual no more than ten years old. Thirdly, the blood showed presence of the Salk polio vaccine. It couldn't have been Pickman's; it was from a child from the 50's or 60's. So what was it doing on this folder?

He shook his head, and put down a story about a little league game being cancelled due to all the balls for the Sloth's Pit Bookworms being stolen and replaced by balls of chalk by the Superior Cornsnakes. Nothing relevant there. This one was heavily bloodstained to the point of almost being illegible.

Local Author Z y ll n Celebrates Re of new Uncl Za Book
As the Douglas y ai approaches, Slot 's own Zachar has released a new Hallowee h d book. Entitled "Uncle Z and the Great Pumpkin"

A good part of the article was splattered in blood, but the rest was soaked in it. There was only one other place in town where the newspaper archive could be accessed: the Sloth's Pit Public Library. He grabbed his jacket, and headed out the door. The " ll n" stuck out in his mind; it had to be Allen. Z. Allen. A kid's author? Might be at the library too, two-for-one deal.

He left a note on his door saying where he was going, and headed outside, where thunder rumbled overhead. The weather had been slowly turning worse, and it looked like it would break soon.

Malcolm Guillard was sometimes called a "maverick", which is just a very, very polite way of saying "self-destructive dumbass". He had a tendency to go off and follow leads on his own, despite the fact that it was not his job. He found the doors to the library unlocked, and a familiar face within.

Sleeping in a chair in the reading room was Dr. Tristan Bailey. His car had been parked out front, and he had a laptop on the table next to him, with the screensaver running. Resting around his neck was a large digital camera on a strap.

Above him, hanging from the ceiling, was an approximation of the dread visage of Cthulhu. The bookends on top of the shelves also resembled the classic squatting Cthulhu statue from the stories, and various dioramas of scenes from the works of various mythos authors, all surrounding a scale model of Miskatonic University, built from Lego, with figures of Derleth, Lovecraft, Frank Long, and others standing in the windows.

Malcolm walked past all of these and jostled Bailey awake.

He jumped, and blinked. "Nuhwuzhauh? What universe am I in?" He looked around, eyes wide. "Am I in the Library?"

"Yeah. Sloth's Pit Public Library." Malcolm shook his head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"This place has the best internet in town," Tristan explained with a yawn and stretch. "And since Multi-U's not running experiments for the time being, I figured I'd come here and do some independent study." He rubbed his eyes. "You?"

"Need to find the microfiche archive. Most of the documents Pickman died for are covered in blood and impossible to read."

Tristan raised a brow, and moved to one of the library's computers. "Microfiche is, as the kids say, so last millennium." He clicked away as thunder began to grumble outside. With a few clicks, he pulled up a page that proudly proclaimed 'Sloth's Pit Public Library Digital Microfiche Project'. "They're converting all of their microfiche to online text. They have it up through about 1975, for right now."

"Exactly what I need." Guillard cracked his knuckles, and typed in the search term 'Allen, Zachary'. A few articles popped up, and he clicked on the most relevant-looking one, which read:

> **Local Author Zachary Allen Celebrates Release of new Uncle Zadok Book**
> As the Douglas County Fair approaches, Sloth's Pit's own Zachary Allen has released a new Halloween-themed book. Entitled "Uncle Zadok and the Great Pumpkin", the book will be premiering at the Bell, Book and Candle bookstore on October 25th. Allen (pictured) will be there signing new copies of his book.

Guillard's eyes went to the picture, and a grin broke across his face. Staring back at him was one of the four men from the photograph. "Hello, Z. Allen."

"Bit slow on the uptake there, Mal." Bailey turned his laptop towards the forensic specialist. "Check this out."

Guillard looked at the article Bailey had pulled up, eyes wide.

> **LOCAL AUTHOR FOUND, GUILTY OF ABDUCTION OF NINETEEN CHILDREN, SHOT OUTSIDE COURTHOUSE**

"What the fuck?"

"They found… partial remains of about six kids in his house." Tristan swallowed. "He admitted to thirteen more, claimed he acted with then-mayor Clive Carter. Who— shocker— went missing two weeks before." He scratched his head. "So, we have a pair of child abductors connected to both Hubble and the county fair."

"Add in the pumpkin motif… hmm." Malcolm pulled up the library's card catalog on his terminal, and typed in 'Uncle Zadok'. His eyes went wide. "The fuck? All of his books are listed under 'restricted'."

"Why?" Tristan frowned.

"I… don't know. They usually save that listing for harmful reading material."

"*Anarchist's Cookbook?*" Bailey hazarded.

"I mean *anomalously* harmful. Like *Quantum Accelerators for Dummies*, or a Cliffs Notes for *Cardenio*." He pulled away from the computer. "We need to see those books. If they're anomalous, then Allen might have used them to take those kids."

With a bright flash of lightning illuminating a third figure in the room and a sound of thunder, the power died. "Ah, nuts." Bailey pulled a glowstick from his pocket and cracked it, lighting the area around him.

Guillard pulled out his flashlight. "Restricted section's down in the basement." He aimed it at the floor and made his way to the stairs.

Lightning illuminated the floor once more, and Tristan saw a shadow at the bottom of the stairs, before Malcolm. "Hey, Mal?"

"What?"

"Is… this place haunted?"

"It's Sloth's Pit. *Every* building on Main Street is haunted." He sighed. "C'mon. This way."

The power stayed out on the whole descent to the lowest level. At some point, it stopped feeling like a library, and felt more like a bank. The basement was where the archives were kept, and where the majority of the library's digitization project was taking place; dozens of boxes of microfiche slides were on the tables, ready go be copied onto computers.

An actual, physical card catalog existed down here, along with some items that they considered too valuable to be checked out, such as a first draft of an August Derleth story. Tristan stopped in front of the story, and started reading it. "*The Memoirs of Solar Pons?* The hell is this doing here?"

"Derleth's from Wisconsin," Malcolm explained. "Why do you think the library has Cthulhu-themed decor at Halloween?"

"Huh." Tristan turned away, keeping his glowstick held high. "You ever been to the restricted section before?"

"Once or twice. They have some interesting stuff down here, and not all of it will kill you if you read it." He looked at Bailey's camera. "What kind of filter do you have on that?"

"If you're asking whether or not I can use it to photograph memetic anomalies safely, the answer's yes. Not sure about coghazes, though." He aimed his glowstick up high, illuminating the sign for the section. "Through here, I guess."

Tristan was met with shelves upon shelves of books that were marked with various symbols indicating that they were somehow hazardous, all locked behind sturdy-looking metal cages; he recognized a couple of spellbooks from Sinclair toting copies of them around the site, as well as several scripts for ***The Hanged King's Tragedy***, which Jackson Sloth Memorial's drama club had somehow got their hands on back in the 80's. The Foundation stopped them from doing something *really* stupid, thank god.

"Here we are." Guillard stopped before one of the cages of books in the back. Dozens of children's books were behind it, several of which were Uncle Zadok books.

Tristan frowned at some of the titles. "'*Jeremy the Corgi in* ***Adventures in Capitalism***? Is that a Wondertainment book?"

"Yeah. No-brainer as to why that's there." He looked at the padlock and chain that sealed the cage, and reached into his belt, taking out a bobby pin and screwdriver.

"Seriously?" Tristan asked.

"It's as good of a makeshift lockpick as one can make." Guillard screwed up his face and fiddled with the lock, before with a soft *click*, the padlock fell open. He opened the cage, and waved his light over the books. "Okay… do you see the Halloween one?"

"Yeah, right here." Tristan pulled it out and put his camera up to his eye. "Look away. I'm going to photograph the pages, send it to my

phone, and then send it to Melbourne in memetics."

"I thought he was in Florida."

"He came back for this shitshow. We need all hands on deck." Tristan opened the book—

And watched it slam shut around his hand. He winced as his finger was pinched between all twenty pages of the children's book, and then watched it hover in the air.

Hands manifested around the book, and then arms, and then a face. A stern-looking man with spectacles and a distinct lack of hair scowled at Tristan. "Young man. Are you allowed to be down here?"

"Holy shit." Malcolm's jaw dropped.

"I-I'm going to just take it to the checkout desk—" Tristan tried taking the book back.

The librarian's specter hissed, revealing rows of needle-like teeth. "Only librarians are allowed in the restricted section! Are you a librarian?"

"Well, no, but—"

"OUT!"

The cages of restricted books began to shake, with dozens of hands appearing from within, clutching at the bars. Screaming filled the restricted wing as the metal shook. "GET OUT OF MY LIBRARY!"

Bailey rolled his eyes. "You're the least-threatening thing I've seen all week." Tristan backed away, bringing up his glowstick and a pocket knife in a cross-like shape. "In the name of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, I invoke the Archangel Micheal to banish thee."

Guillard saw where he was going with this; Standard Exorcism Prayer #23. He held up his screwdriver and flashlight in much the same manner, and continued, "Purify our souls, O Lord, use us as your agents to drive evil away."

The specter hissed and recoiled from the pair of them, its form starting to waver and fade away. Even so, the volume of the screaming from the cages grew.

The two chanted in unison, "Banish the evil within and without, in body and soul, so that I may work in your name."

Bailey picked it up from there. "Banish from me all diabolic infestations, possessions, malefice, all restless souls, all hexes and unholy blights."

Guillard continued, "Banish from me all vices. All my lusts, glutonies, greeds, envies, prides, and wraths. All things that may make me stray from thee, O Lord."

The spirit began to fold in on itself. The hands in the cages started reaching for Tristan, grabbing at his coat.

The prayer finished, abridged, recited by the two of them. "I command and bid all the power who molest me to leave me forever. I consign them to an everlasting hell, where they will be bound by Saint Micheal the Archangel, our guardian angels Saint Gabriel and Raphael, and to be forever crushed beneath the heel of the Heavenly Mother."

With an bright flash of light and an eldritch shriek, the spirit was sucked into a rift in the world, and dragged down to Hell, leaving the book behind. Tristan caught it in his hands, and shook his head. "God, that's a mouthful to say."

"Wish the Initiative would let us borrow some of their prayer books," Malcolm admitted, turning away. "Snap your photos?"

"Doing so." Tristan took a photograph of every page, his filters eliminating any memetic hazards on them. He shut it, and sent the photos off to Melbourne in memetics. Starting for the door, he turned and looked back at his colleague, frowning. "Mal?"

"Yeah?"

"We didn't…" the Bailey Triplet's eyes grew wide, and he palmed his face." We didn't say 'amen', did we?"

"*Shit.*"

An invisible force slammed Tristan and Malcolm against opposite ends of the room. Malcolm looked at the children's book as it fell open for maybe two seconds, and felt something dig into his mind.

"FUCK. ING. GREAT!" Tristan yelled, ducking under a wall of force that crushed the metal cage above him. "WE CREATED A FUCKING POLTERGEIST!"

"You didn't say Amen!" Guillard winced and held his torso. "Shit, that stings."

"Either one of us could have said it!" Tristan yelled back. He had a backup plan; in a room full of anomalous books, there had to be at least one book that could get rid of a ghost. "Look on your side for —" the cage behind him crumpled. "Shit! The *Bionomicon* or *Totenkulten*!"

Guillard ran past the shelves, looking into them. "Uh, shit, there's—" His head pulsed as the meme implanted in him began to take hold. "SHIT! Uh, um." He grabbed a pair of bolt cutters off of his belt and cut through some chains, finding the first relevant book and tossing it to Bailey like a frisbee.

The poltergeist knocked the book into Tristan with such force that he fell over, and he frowned at the title. "*Dr. Wondertainment's™ Bionomicon for Kids With Special Anti-Spook Spells*?! SERIOUSLY?!" He tore it open, and came upon a relevant-looking passage. "To dispel a poltergeist—"

Tristan was slammed against the wall again, and read aloud, "R-recite the following." He looked up, and panted, "*Corpus somnus. Spectra quietus. Corpus somnus. Spectra quietus.*"

The wind began to pick up around Tristan, and he felt the air being sucked out of his lungs. Even so, he kept on muttering, "*Corpus somnus, spectra quietus. Corpus somnus, spectrus quietus, corpus somnus, spectra quietus, corpus somnus spectra*—"

With an ear-shattering shriek, the room became quiet, and Tristan

could breathe again. He took one look at Malcolm and bolted for the door. He was followed closely by Guillard.

The inside of Malcolm's car was soaked.

They had to sprint through the thunderstorm, for fear of whatever was in there following them out. Now, they were listening to Pink Floyd at full blast over the radio. "Can you turn that down?" Bailey sighed.

"I-" Guillard rubbed his head with one hand, the other barely staying on the steering wheel. "I got whammied. I looked at the book, and I-I feel like I'm going to give in if I— I need to be overstimulated!"

"Hold on." Tristan pulled out his phone. "Helen, show all available visual countermemes in sequence." He put the phone on the dashboard, and pulled on the emergency brake, making the car screech to a halt as the phone displayed dozens of images within milliseconds of one another.

The phone rang as Guillard stared at the screen, pulling at his hair. Tristan tapped it and answered. "You're on speaker."

Ryan Melbourne spoke from the other end. "I managed to analyze what you sent. Every page of that book had the same meme on it; three-part geographical pointer."

"In non-memespeak?" Tristan asked. "Guillard got hit by it pretty bad."

"Two components, normally: implants a location relative to where you are, and compels you to go there. This one has a third— it's a sonambulism meme."

"Sleepwalking?" Tristan looked at Guillard as he unbuckled his seat belt. "Wait, Mal, where are you going?"

"You need Countermeme #291!" Ryan barked. "It's auditory, so blare it as loud as you can through your phone!"

Tristan plugged his phone into the car as Guillard started to get out,

and shouted at the screen, "Helen, broadcast Auditory Countermeme 291!"

The opening chords of Queen's *Another One Bites The Dust* echoed through main street, played on every audio system the car had available— the horns, the car alarm, the speakers, even the windshield wipers thrumming back and forth.

Guillard stopped in his tracks, and fainted, face-down in the rain. Tristan dragged him back into the car and sighed, finding that he had a pulse. "Ryan? Can you get Sigma-10 out here?"

"Yeah." The memeticist sounded relieved. "Just… stay there, Bailey."

Tristan looked out of the windows of the car, shutting the door and placing Malcolm upright in the seat. Out of the windshield, towards the north, he could see a red siren light shining through the rain. He thought it was Site-87, and that an alarm had gone off; but then he realized that Site-87 was to the east.

Eventually, the light stopped blinking, and Tristan was left cold, with an unconscious man next to him.

«Chapter 6 | **Black Autumn Hub** | Chapter 8»

...But You Can Never Leave

Cassandra Pike woke up in a hotel room, her head throbbing. She sat up and surveyed the room; it had two beds and a pull-out couch, all with purple sheets on them. The lighting was a dull shade of yellow, and a flat-screen TV was up against the opposite wall. Above the TV was a triangular mirror.

She didn't recognize her surroundings, but she did recognize those with her. Dr. Juliette Hobb, a thirty-something well-built woman was on the pull-out, and on the other bed was Frederick Engelhardt, a man in his sixties with grey hair, wrinkles indicating his face spent most of its time scowling.

"Fred?" Cassandra hissed. "Jules? You there?"

"Mnnn…" Hobb was the first to rouse, yawning. "Uh. Cass? Where are we?"

"I don't know," she swallowed. "But I don't like it." She rose from her bed, and looked at the desk, searching the drawer. Her heart sank when she saw the stationery within; an eye enclosed in a purple triangle, with the words 'The Pyramid Inn' printed beneath it. "Oh, fuck."

Fred jerked awake. "W-where are we? What the hell?"

"We're in the Pyramid Inn." Cassandra replied. "Anyone have a watch?"

Fred pulled out his iPhone, and frowned. "1/1/1969. That…" he rubbed his face. "That's impossible. iPhones can't be set to that date."

"We got whammied," Jules swallowed. "Bad."

"Let's recap," Fred looked at Juliette. "You dragged us out to

Equinox Ridge…"

October 24th

Wisconsin was not known for its mountainous features, but every now and then, a cliff did stick out of the ground. Before this particular cliff was a rotted sign proclaiming "EQUINOX CAMPGROUNDS", which Juliette Hobb nearly ran over in her haste to make her way past it.

"Christ, Jules!" Pike rubbed at her shoulder, where the seatbelt was scraping at her skin. "What's gotten into you?"

"The name, Isimeria?" Juliette threw her phone back to Cassandra. "It's Greek. I recognize it from Krys's birthday party last month. It means *Equinox*."

"Okay, so?" Engelhardt frowned. "It's an odd name, but it can't have much association with…" He looked out the window at the cliff as they passed it. "That eyesore."

"It's *Sloth's Pit*, Fred." Juliette turned onto the road that led up the ridge. "There is no such thing as a coincidence within city limits."

"This thing's been around for literally eons! It didn't pop out of the ground during the sixties!" Engelhardt protested.

"I… gotta agree with Fred here," Cassandra frowned. "It's a huge stretch, Jules."

"Just… humor me on this, okay?" She turned up the road, and soon, they were at the summit of the cliff. She killed the engine, and alighted from the vehicle, looking towards the horizon.

Cassandra looked with her, towards the ever-present twilight, frowning. "We're up here. What did you think was going to happen?"

"Just… look for something? Some kind of clue?" Juliette sighed. "I… one of us nearly got their leg torn off. We need to find *something* that might help."

Fred put a hand over his eyes to shield from a non-existent glare and looked into the distance, towards the north. He frowned, and tapped Cassandra on the shoulder. "What do you see over there?"

"Huh?" Pike squinted in the distance, barely making out the specter of a Ferris wheel, about two miles off. "What the hell?"

"Is that the fairgrounds?" Juliette took out her phone and started zooming in as far as her camera would go. "Dammit. Resolution on this sucks. But…" she took a picture and presented it to them. "What do you see there?"

"Looks like something criss-crossing the wheel's spokes." Engelhardt adjusted his glasses. "Ivy, maybe? It looks organic."

"Hold on." Cassandra got low on the ground and started digging a pit in it, scoring the earth around it with various arcane symbols.

"What are you doing?" Engelhardt titled his head.

"I've attended a few cross-disciplinary seminars Sinclair has held. She taught us how to scry, so maybe I can get a better view of it from here?"

"Not everyone can do magic, Cass," Jules pointed out. "And… well, no offense, but don't you need some… willpower for that?"

The parazoologist looked at her colleague, brow quirking. "Sorry, what are you saying?"

"I'm just…" Jules coughed. "You're not exactly the most sound out of all of us."

"What she's trying to say is that you scored the lowest out of the entire department on every mental anomaly resistance test."

"*FRED!*" Jules gaped.

"I get it, I get it." Cassie sighed. "I'm not the most… well. But I've been learning. And coping. And getting therapy." She knelt by the circle, and focused, breathing some Will into the circle. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

The water in the pool shimmered, and brought forth an image of the fairgrounds; it flickered, as if viewed through a satellite TV connection in a storm. Still, she could make out a large, orange mass among the fairgrounds.

"Holy shit, you got it to work." Juliette knelt by her, and looked in the pool. "What's that orange thing?"

"It looks like a pum—" Cassie was interrupted by a hand reaching forth from the scrying pool and grabbing Juliette by the neck, strangling her and trying to drag her in. Juliette Hobb screamed.

Cassandra retreated, her movement scuffing the markings of the scrying spell, and severing the arm of whatever had grabbed her colleague.

Juliette got up and ran back to the van. Engelhardt and Pike followed suit, not even bothering to buckle up before the vehicle rumbled to life and went down the hill.

Something landed on the hood of the van with a loud *thud*. A figure, clad completely in black, with rotten-leaf teeth and eyes the color of the last light of summer, clung to the hood. Juliette swerved and knocked it off, while Cassandra dialed her phone.

"Claude? I need— I need help. Call the task force."

"And now, we're in the same place where six members of Sigma-10 went missing." Fred sighed. "Great."

"Went missing. We're not sure they're dead,"Juliette reminded him. "Last we saw, their vitals were still strong."

"We need to find a way out." Cassandra ran to the door, opening it— only to find a large, black space where the hallway should be. She quickly slammed the door. "Okay then."

The television turned itself on. All three of them stared at it, frozen, as the static spoke in a dark voice, whose gender could not be determined. "Hello."

"Jesus Christ what the fuck?" Cassandra stared at the screen.

"You're with Nina, aren't you? Her snack was most appreciated, but I'm still hungry, and this town… I've been stuck here for *too long*." The lights flickered. "Let's play a game. Three people have come in. In three hours, two of you will leave." The television screen became a digital countdown clock. "One will die. Don't attempt to cheat me."

"Are you Martha?" Cassandra asked.

"Martha? Oh, yes, Nina must have misheard my name. The phones in this hotel are awful." The voice laughed, and the room shook. "My name is Mavra."

The voice subsided.

02:51

The three sat in a room, contemplating what might have been their last moments. Dr. Pike had her head in her hands, and Dr. Hobb had curled up on her bed. Engelhardt had raided the mini-fridge and taken a can of Vanilla Coke out of it. "My favorite," he mused. "Service is good in the hotel, at least."

Cassandra sat up. "I… we need to look at this pragmatically." She rubbed her face. "You've got more valuable research. I took half a year off, and I've barely gotten back on my old projects since then."

"That's not a good measure." Engelhardt shook his head. "I'm turning seventy in a year. You know what I've accomplished in that time?" He knocked back the soda. "Scientifically, my research means dick. Same goes for everyone."

"You don't mean that," Hobb frowned.

"Let's face it!" Engelhardt slammed his soda on the dresser by the TV. "Who is going to read our papers? Other members of the Foundation. Who's going to improve on our work? Other members of the Foundation. Who's going to give two shits about us after we die?" He leaned against the dresser. "Short of a miracle, we're all going to die in anonymity, and the autopsy report won't even say

how we really died. Heart attack for you, aneurysm for you, broken neck for him, your father got hit by a car coming home from work, she inhaled fumes in the lab, your son died because of an IED planted by a militia group in Michigan, I've heard it all, explained to grieving parents and children who don't know that their mother or father or son or daughter or niece or nephew died protecting them from something they can never know about!" He knocked the can to the floor.

"Fred," Cassie stood up. "You need to calm the fuck down. And this is *me* saying this."

He rubbed his face, and sighed. "It's true, though. When I first started this job, in the seventies, they had a form that you could fill out if you wanted a plausible cause of death. 'Suicide' was the most popular option."

"On the form?" Hobb asked.

"On the form, and also as a retirement policy. Jump off a roof, walk outside the capsule without a suit, shoot yourself in the head, didn't matter. Your family got benefits, you got to stop existing, and we were responsible for picking up your mess." He sighed. "Juliette. Have you filled out the family declaration forms yet?"

She shook her head. "As far as Krys knows, I'm working at the EPA. Though that's becoming less and less plausible by the day."

"Tell her the truth. Survive this, and tell her."

Cassandra rubbed her face. "Don't go being a white knight, Fred. None of us want to die."

"Well, one of us is going to!" Engelhardt glared at the time. "One of us is going to die. It should be me. I'm old, I have no family other than my cat!"

Juliette rubbed her forehead. "I… it's my fault that we're here. Rationally, I should be the one to get us out."

"Hell with that." Cassandra pulled at her hair. "That thing. It attacked you first. It could have gone after me, but it reached for you first.

Why?" She paced around the room, and the clock ticked down behind them.

02:21

"You're wearing a hole in the carpet." Engelhardt looked at Pike as she paced. He'd found a pack of cards in the room, and was in the process of playing Solitaire.

"Why did she want you dead?" She had muttered this question to herself several times over the past half-hour. She frowned at Engelhardt. "You *could* help!"

Juliette scratched her hair. "It was probably just because I was the first thing we saw. But…"

"You were the one who brought us out there in the first place," Pike pointed out. "I… Mavra. Is that a Greek word, by any chance?"

Juliette blinked, and palmed her forehead, reaching into her pocket with her other hand and retrieving a list of names, the same ones that Hastings had sent them. "I'm an idiot! M. Isimeria! Mavra Isimeria! Black Equinox!"

"The Autumn Equinox." Cassandra's eyes widened, and she looked at her colleagues.

"The Black Autumn!" Fred forgot his game of Solitaire, and grinned. "We know its name!" He frowned. "Fat lot of good that'll do us."

"More than you would think." Cassandra looked in the minifridge, taking out a bottle of root beer and taking a swig from it. "Look in the drawers, find me some kind of writing utensil, and remind me to thank Dr. Sinclair when we get back."

01:49

"She seriously gave a seminar for this?" Engelhardt frowned. "How to bind demons and spirits?"

"Considering the weird shit we come up against in town, Fred? It's good to have some knowledge outside of your discipline." Cassie drew the last part of the sigil, a little horn on top of the symbol for mercury, before handing the pencil off to Juliette. "Can you write Greek?"

"Some, yeah. I know enough to write the name." She took the pencil, and began carefully writing the name in the seal.

"And you've… attended how many of these seminars?"

"Six or seven." Cassie shrugged. "I had to do something while getting my clearances reinstated after the whole thing with **the collar**."

"There we go." Juliette stepped back, having written the name. "Best I've managed. You know how to do the rest?"

"Never practiced it, but I know the theory." Cassandra cracked her knuckles, and placed her hand on the edge of the circle. She'd never done magic before. She gritted her snaggleteeth, and felt something flow through her arm; a soft push from her body, her mind's effort to not give into the being keeping them here, to see her friends again, to see her friends live. Her Will.

The pencil lines glowed with an awesome white light, and for a brief moment in time, black tendrils seemed to be sucked from the air, drawn into the circle, filling in the name on the center.

Fred grinned, and clapped his hands, looking at the ceiling, muttering a silent 'thank you' to whoever had given them mercy. Finally. They were getting out.

Or it seemed that way, until the light from the circle faded, the name only half-full of black essence, like a stuck loading bar on an old computer. Mavra Isimeria's name became smeared by an invisible hand, and then vanished entirely.

The voice laughed from all around them. "That actually got a good bit of my essence. You'd make a good mage. Gideon would've loved you."

"Gideon?" Juliette glared at the walls. "What Gideon?"

"Richard Gideon. The damn fool who summoned me, trapped me in this town, and bound me to this hotel. Traitor."

The voice then paused, and murmured, vibrations resonating through the air, before exploding, "UNBELIEVABLE! You bound enough of me that I have to tell you truths!" It laughed. "You're all so much more interesting than the snacks Nina sent over."

All of the researchers recoiled from the volume of the profanity, clutching their ears. "We know what you are!" Cassandra yelled. "We know your name!"

"Yes, and names have power. But you don't have my *full* name, and even then, most of my essence is contained in that damnable fairground. Now then, as to the matter of your time…"

The volume on the TV grew louder. they all turned, and saw that almost two hours had turned into twenty minutes. "What the fuck?!" Juliette screamed. "That's cheating!"

"You've angered me." Mavra intoned. "I'd like to see one of you die quicker than before. Now, one of you has twenty minutes to live. Make your peace, write your wills."

The voice faded, and the three of them were left, more alone than before.

00:15

The next several minutes were filled with silence. Death, let alone execution like Mavra was offering, was not something that a human being faced lightly. The three at least had the luxury of knowing something awaited them beyond the pain and the fade to white. The next great mystery, one they'd never be able to report on. Maybe they'd be ghosts, maybe they'd go to Nirvana, maybe Mekhane would take them into her metal bosom.

"I'm doing it," Frederick stood up.

"No," Cassie stood, trying to bring him back down. "You can't."

"I've spent over forty years here. I don't have anyone who's going to come calling for me." He looked at Cassandra. "I want you to take care my cat. Her name's Moxie, she's a Russian Blue. She refuses to eat chicken, and won't have baking soda in her litter box."

"Fred—" Cassie began.

Juliette Hobb stood, and put a hand on her shoulder, before stepping forward with him. "We'll turn away for when… when she does it."

"Report all this back to Mattings, Hennessy… whoever has a vested interest in this." He stood before the TV. "We've made our choice. I'm ready to die." Frederick Engelhardt stood proud, his entire form shaking. "I'm giving myself to you so my colleagues may live."

"Oh?" Mavra snickered, and then chuckled, and then laughed. "I said that two of you would live, and one would die. I never said you got to *choose* who died. But it was so, so amusing seeing you bicker and beg."

"No!" Juliette rushed forward and punched the TV. An ultimately pointless gesture, as the plastic cracked and did nothing other than make her knuckles bleed. "You fucking bitch!"

"I am the Black Autumn." The room turned dark. "And winter has come for Cassandra Pike."

There was a loud, wet sound from behind them, and they turned to find Cassandra Pike's shin perforated by a long, black knife, held by a being veiled in black. Cassie screamed, and fell down to the ground, the entity twisting the knife in her leg. She should have been out from the pain, but something kept her awake.

"You aren't unconscious yet?" Mavra asked, her voice dripping with sadism. "Oh, this is delicious. You're awake to feel every last beat of your heart. You don't even get to die in your sleep!" The knife twisted in Pike's leg, and blood sprayed into Mavra's mouth. She licked her lips.

"C-Claude," she gasped. "Claude…"

Engelhardt lunged for Mavra, letting out a scream of incoherent rage. He found himself blocked by another knife, this one aimed by his throat. "Ah-ah-ah." Mavra tsked. "I'm giving you mercy. You should leave, lest I decide to take it back." The knife stabbed her again, and Mavra lapped at Cassandra's blood. "You managed to bind me. Something as pathetic as you, binding *me.*"

Cassandra Pike snarled, grabbing the knife with her palm. "Y-you don't know pathetic." She gasped, pain shooting through her "Pathetic is. Pathetic is… g-going to a containment cell, every night, to p-play with the ghost of your d-dead cat." She started drawing something with her blood, staining the carpet. "Pat… pathetic is… wanting to run away… because you're so scared, so utterly frightened of some… one you loved, w… who seemed to turn against you, because…" she closed a circle with her blood. "Because you're both angry, awful people AAAH!" She screamed when she felt the knife nick her artery.

"Feel that?" Mavra taunted. "That's a bone spur, traveling up your arteries, straight to your heart. You're dead, Cassandra Pike. Alone, unloved, pathetic."

Cassandra's eyes filled with tears. She saw the world start to fade to white, her eyes cloud over, her heart slow down. Then, something came from the light. It was the form of a cat, a grey tortoiseshell with a white bib on its chest, one of its sides a little wonky from a broken rib someone had given it with a kick to the side.

"No," Cassandra spat, as the cat started to nuzzle against her. She gripped his fur with a bloody hand and held him tight. "I'm not dying here. I'm not pathetic anymore."

One hand scratched her cat around the ears, while the other pushed Will into the circle she had made with her blood. "You have my blood on you, Mavra," she panted. Sinclair told her this needed an incantation. The best she could come up with was her cat's name, repeated over and over. "Oliver. Oliver. Oliver."

Mavra was hit with energy from the circle, forced back against the

wall, where she screeched. Cassandra Pike, in that moment, wasn't sure the cat that had appeared before her was real, but it leaped over her, and she heard something clawing at the Black Autumn.

Frederick Engelhardt wrapped his shirt around her leg the best he could, and carried her out, with Juliette Hobb supporting her torso. They ran into a hallway that had suddenly appeared outside, and at the other end, task force agents moved in. One of them called for a stretcher.

Cassandra Pike's eyes closed, and she muttered an apology; not to the task force, not to Fred or Jules, but to the lonely-looking cat at the other end of the hall, sitting outside of Room 13.

"Sorry, Oliver," she muttered. "Momma can't play with you right now."

Cassandra Pike slumped in the arms of her colleagues.

October 27th

"How is she?" Frederick Engelhardt looked through the windows of a set of steel doors.

"Bad," Claude Mattings wavered, resting against the wall in front of the operating room. "Really bad. They… they might be able to reconstruct the femur. Doc says he's never seen anything like it." He took off his glasses and rubbed them violently; salt residue had coated them. "You know how much force it takes to shatter a human femur?"

"Will she live?" Juliette asked.

"They got enough blood in her that she won't die from a severed artery, at least. And they got out the bone spur." He put his hands over his face, and shook. "We need to stop this. Now. We- we've almost got the whole picture." Claude pulled one hand down and formed it into a fist, his nails digging into his palm. "It… it was stopped before. We need to figure out how to stop it again. We have… we have to find Gideon."

He glared at Hobb and Engelhardt with a glare that would kill a Basilisk. "We're going to show this thing why you don't screw with Sloth's Pit."

« Chapter 7 | Black Autumn Hub | Chapter 9 »

It's Just A Jump To The Left

October 28th

The former house of Richard Gideon had been left abandoned in the middle of a wild apple orchard. Sloth's Pit had three different orchards in it, all of which were said to have been planted by John Chapman himself. This was the only one that saw no use, and as Squad 25 went through the orchard, they saw why.

Seren Pryce stopped to inspect an apple dangling off of a low-hanging branch. It was solid black, but not rotten, and smelled sweeter than any apple that she had ever seen. It smelled like caramel, and the end of summer. "What the hell?" She muttered.

"These things are freaky." Nicholas Ewell agreed, walking past her.

"Does Partridge know about this?" She asked, pulling herself away from the tree. "Black apples. Kinda wonder what they taste like."

"Probably nothin' good," Ewell walked alongside her through the rows of trees. Behind them was Raymond February, bundled up against the chill. The weather had gone from unnaturally warm to bitter, borderline wintry cold, and it seemed to be getting colder the closer they got to the house.

February shivered, "Detecting a one degree Celsius temperature drop since we r-reached the perimeter of the property."

"Possible spectral activity?" Ruby frowned. "Wouldn't surprise me."

Robert Gideon's house was what came to mind when one thought of "haunted house". A three-story Victorian mansion with a large, peaked roof, bay windows, fading grey paint. In front of it, a single oak tree grew, its branches looming over the roof. "A ton of places in town are haunted. This is bound to be one of them."

"Spectral, or… hmm." Pryce frowned. "What other kind of anomalies produce temperature drops?"

"Some kind of wormhole?" Ewell hazarded. "I've been in Multi-U a couple of times when they were doing tests. Swear to god, it drops twenty degrees every time they fire up that damn thing. You see the produce?"

"Yeah. Fucking freaky." Blake shuddered. "I've seen Arkansas black apples before, but those were just a… really dark red. This is something different."

"Like something out of *Snow White*," Raymond agreed. He looked in through the windows of the house, his eyes going wide. "What the —"

"What is it?" Blake looked in with him. "Holy—"

The inside of the house was bustling with life. Kids were running about in badly-made masks, the kind of quality that a *Peanuts* character would wear circa 1970. A figure in a long, black robe stood over the children, before following them out of the room. Then, the scene flickered, and repeated.

"Holy crow," Pryce swallowed. "Temporal anomaly?"

Ewell looked into the front door, and frowned. "If it is, it might be confined to the window. I'm not seeing anything in here."

"Hold on." Seren removed her rifle from her back and carefully detached the scope from it, looking through the glass. Through it, she saw the house transformed from dilapidation to grandeur, with Halloween decorations covering the outside. She whistled, and shook her head. "Yeah, shit. There's some kind of temporal effect going on." She turned around 360 degrees, and saw that the area of effect ended at the front doorstep. "I'm going to radio the Site and see if we can get Delta-t to come out here."

Blake nodded, looking into his bag and removing a magnification visor from it. Ruby did the same, and found themselves looking into the past. Blake felt something tug at the back of his mind, and

winced. "What the fuck?"

"I felt it too," his sister groaned, rubbing her skull. The view through her visor flickered between the house decorated for Halloween, and the house as it stood today, dilapidated. "Oh *shit*."

Blake winced, falling to the ground. "Guys!" He looked back at his squad mates. February tried to reach out to him. "Don't! I think— shit, I think we might be getting dragged back!"

From the outside, the view was horrific. Layer by layer, the twins seemed to be disappearing, starting with their skin, then their muscles. They would occasionally flicker back into their time, before vanishing once more. "Just— get a time sink out here!" Ruby yelled. "We-we're gonna try to find—"

With that, the Wonder Twins were gone from 2017, and found themselves elsewhen.

October 28th, 1969

Ruby and Blake hid below the front windows, their hearts racing. They talked to each other, silently, in a language only they could comprehend. A twitch of a brow, a quirk of the mouth, a certain pattern of blinking; they reasoned that it was just them being able to read each other's body language so well that they could talk without speaking.

It was something a bit more complicated than that.

Ruby? Blake looked at his sister.

Yeah?

I think we're a little screwed. He took out his pocket knife, and looked at the house behind him. The stone foundations were relatively soft, easy to carve something into. *What should I say?*

Our initials, an-and maybe the date? It's uh. She looked around. *October, obviously. If I had to guess, '69, because of course it is.*

We could see the past through some of the glass here. Ruby looked through her visor, and saw her squadmates pacing about. February looked especially concerned, and seemed to be praying, while Pryce was on the radio. *I think they're waiting for a Time Sink. 87 has one in storage, right?*

Yeah. At least one. May be an older model, though. Blake creeped around to the side of the house. *Let's try to do some recon.*

Yeah. We're gonna be stuck here for a bit. Might as well… find out what we can.

The Time Sink arrived, carried in a pickup truck. It was an older model, developed by Xyank and co. some time ago, but it would serve its purpose well enough.

Driving the truck was Alexander Carracos, whose head was still bandaged from his encounter with a certain vampire. He had a tablet with him, trying to work out how to operate the sink. "Okay, uh… I gotta be honest." He looked at what was left of Squad-25. "I have no idea how this works."

"I've seen one of these before." Ewell climbed into the bed of the truck. "Halloween 2015. You remember, the whole thing with the time ghosts caused by some kids jumping into that **dumb well** over and over?" He inspected the sink, and fiddled with a few knobs on it, before flipping a switch.

A soft, pulsing hum echoed through the orchard. Pryce, warily, stepped onto the front stone steps of Gideon's former abode, and upon finding that she wasn't sucked into the past, gave a thumbs-up to Ewell and February. "We're good. Now we just…" She swallowed. "Shit, what do we do?"

February looked into the window. "The scene's not repeating anymore. Put your scope up, see what you can see."

"Right." Pryce brought her detatched scope to her eyes, and gasped, her jaw dropping open. "Oh. Oh my fucking god."

Ruby and Blake looked through a window into what they thought was the house's parlor. Within, almost twenty children giggled and ran around, all in costumes. At a table in the center was a bowl filled with a black liquid; the smell was powerful enough that Blake could smell it through the closed window.

Cider, he frowned. *Black apple cider.*

So, we have a bunch of kids running around a house of a person associated with two child killers and a possible Sarkic cultist? Ruby shivered. *I don't like this.*

That makes two of us. Ruby craned her neck to look further in, and saw… someone, in a hooded red robe, with a symbol of a black apple blossom embroidered on the chest. They were standing by a young girl, whose mask was off at the moment. Ruby's eyes went wide. *That's Hubble's kid.*

What?

His daughter, Eliza. I recognize it from the picture Mattings got. Blake looked uneasy. *Are they… are…*

What a nice conversation you're having.

A third party joined in. The twins' hearts went cold. They turned around, and found themselves facing the inside of the house. Standing before them was a woman in a black veil, with rotten skin and eyes the color of the last light of summer. Standing by her was Richard Gideon, unhooded, a shotgun aimed at the pair of them.

"Shit." Blake swallowed.

"Uh." Ruby put her hands in the air. "I suppose it's too late to say 'trick-or-treat'?"

"I'm afraid so." Gideon glowered at them. Something was wrong with him, and it took too long for either of them to realize: he was old. Almost impossibly old. The photograph Hastings had recovered was from maybe four days ago, and Gideon looked about sixty in it. Now, he looked closer to 300 years old. He coughed, and kept his shotgun trained on them. "I can't have you interrupting this. Clive,

Zachary."

Two pairs of arms wrapped themselves around the twins, putting them into chokeholds. There was something wrong with them, as well; their skin was wrinkled, old, dying. Ruby gasped for air. "What the hell are you?"

"Old," Gideon coughed again. "And getting older. Mavra!"

"*Yes, lord?*" The Black Equinox had a hint of venom in her voice. Blake got the distinct feeling she didn't like being ordered around.

"Begin the feast."

"*As you command.*" The Black Autumn flew through Ruby and Blake.

They felt their souls scream as the sheer wrongness of whatever *it* was passed through their bodies. Ruby vomited on the floor, and looked over her shoulder. She realized she was looking into the parlor, where all the children had gathered. When she saw what was being done…

She let out a scream of pure, eldritch horror.

Seren Pryce had seen horrible things in her tenure as a Foundation agent. She'd shot a zombified Josef Stalin in the head. She'd had her arm broken by a tentacle of spaghetti summoned by a pissed-off Horizon Initiative agent. She'd grazed a werewolf in the back and watched it impale itself on a totem pole.

None of that compared to what she was seeing now. The parlor was cloaked in darkness, and standing at the center was the Black Equinox. She had dozens of black, oily tendrils coming from her body, and each one pierced the body of a child. All nineteen of them fell to the floor, limp, as Mavra Isimeria began, for lack of a better term, feeding on them.

Their bodies withered and rotted, and from their forms emerged snakes and centipedes and all other manner of horrifying things. One child was conscious enough to pull away his mask, revealing

that his head was swelling and becoming bright orange. His eyes swelled up, and one of them started to pop—

Seren couldn't take it anymore. She turned away and covered her eyes, sick to her stomach. She squeezed her scope hard enough the glass began to crack. Meanwhile, February and Ewell watched through their own scopes, completely horrified.

Seren, eventually, looked through the glass again. On the other side, forty-eight years ago, three robed men entered the room and dug knives into bright orange, misshapen pumpkins, before reaching in and eating the raw pulp and seeds. Seren swore she saw blood among the pulp, and teeth mixed in with the seeds.

"What the FUCK?!" Raymond February dropped the piece of glass he had been observing this horror though. "WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE *FUCK?!*"

"That… that's what she does? That's what the Black Autumn does?" Ewell backed away. "She-she turned those kids into f-fucking pumpkins." He leaned over, and started to retch. "Oh. Oh god. I'm gonna be sick."

"It started in… 1969. Allen's books… force sleepwalking, and make them go to a-a particular place. Pumpkins everywhere. Those four in charge of a county fair… and she's taking child sacrifices. Holy shit." Seren put her hand over her face. "Holy shit. I know what this is."

She turned her eye to the scope once more, and watched the three in there; as the men ate, their skin lost its wrinkles, and their hair seemed to grow a new luster to them. Pryce felt sick. "They're… eating kids to… to…"

"Youth is truly wasted on the young, isn't it, Mavra?" Gideon asked the malevolent force this as if she were a butler.

"*Yes, my lord.*"

Ruby ran forward, towards the one figure who hadn't partaken in any off the eating. Jeffery Hubble, she assumed. The agent's fist almost

made contact with his body— but then a hole seemed to form in the middle of his stomach, and it went straight through his form. "What the hell?"

"Jeffery's a bit… of a special case." Carter shrugged. "He's just here to observe. Our errand boy, essentially. Lord knows he doesn't need this."

Allen grinned. "And we're automating the whole process, soon! The Uncle Zadok books are going to be bestsellers throughout the state, and bring so many children to the fairgrounds— where they'll feed us."

"So, what?" Ruby gasped. "This is some kind of fucked-up immortality ritual?"

"We tried several things," Gideon explained. "Faulty philosopher's stones, an expedition to the fabled fountain of youth. This is the only thing that works. We've done this for decades."

"Bullshit!" Blake exclaimed. "The Foundation would have heard about you! We would have stopped you!"

"What happens in Sloth's Pit doesn't leave Sloth's Pit." Jeffery Hubble intoned from beneath his robe. "It's one of the reasons we love it so here so much. We could summon Yaldabaoth and the Foundation would be none the wiser."

"Of course, it means that the Black Equinox can't get out either." Carter looked at the form by Gideon, which let out a loud growl. "She's getting testy about that. Wants to see the world. We've bound her here, and here she shall stay."

"So, what? You're just going to keep feeding it kids until the end of time?" Ruby snapped.

"Or until we get bored," Hubble shrugged. He raised his hand, and a tendril of raw flesh extended from beneath his robe, slashing at Ruby's holster. Her revolver fell out of it and into the flesh's grasp.

"Granola Sarkic," Blake gasped. "Holy shit."

"It's called ***Nälkä***!" Hubble snapped. "This is why I hate the Foundation. Theophobic pricks." The back of his robes split open, and revealed a dozen more tendrils extending from beneath. "I'll deal with them. Carter, I know you get squeamish. Why don't you go to the Black Garden?"

"You heard the man," Mayor Clive Carter grinned, barely concealing his disgust at Hubble. "Gideon, Allen, what do you say?"

"I'm more than happy to let the flesh-crafter do his work alone." Gideon began to depart. "Mavra, return to your place of binding."

"*Yes, lord.*" The Black Autumn hissed, and vanished in a cold, autumn breeze.

Hubble looked at the pair of them, and lowered his hood, revealing a single, gigantic eye in the middle of his forehead.

Ruby and Blake drew their combat knives, and took low stances before the monstrosity.

Seren Pryce had heard of it before, during her time at **`Site-36`**, before a crazed HI agent had torn through the place in an attempt to save his wife and child. Kid survived, wife had been given a medal. That's all she needed to know.

A few people at 36 had told stories about a fairground in the Midwest, overgrown by pumpkins, where horrible things happened every fall. Children walked in, never left. People's heads were replaced by gourds. Agents disappeared into cornstalks. The site director had once cut themselves and started bleeding pumpkin pulp until he died.

It was in town. It had always been in town, and because the Foundation was a broken bureaucratic machine, they hadn't know about it until now. It was—

"Pryce!" February jostled her. "C'mon! T-the… the basement. You gotta— come on!"

"Wha— basement? What about it?" She looked at her fellow agent

like he was crazy.

"Just— c'mon!" He dragged her down. She dropped her scope and let it roll along the ground.

The two Foundation agents would die before they were even born. Hubble bore down on them, with Ruby and Blake pinned to opposite walls by fleshy tendrils coming from what had once been arms. Blake realized that this was all they were: pinned. Not suffocating, not constricted. Just pinned, immobile.

Soon, the sound of a car's engine faded away. Hubble sighed, and the tendrils relaxed, and then retreated into the body of the cultist. The monster groaned, and looked at the twins. "Let me begin by saying that immortality is grossly overrated."

Ruby responded by slashing at his throat with her combat knife, letting out a scream of uncontained rage.

The cultist's singular eye rolled, and he quickly re-placed his head on his neck. "As are these various… mutations." He stood up, catching Blake's knife between his fingers as the brother swung. "I found Ion's word when I was dying of lung cancer. I left Ion for Mavra, and… I've been in a state of waffling for some time." He let his tendrils drop, bending Blake's knife in two. "I still graft myself from time to time with new… appendages. But they *ache*." He shook his head. "I met my wife here. I have two children. And I… I don't want this anymore."

"ONE!" Ruby yelled. "You fucking sacrificed your *daughter!*"

"I am a carnomancer!" Hubble snapped. "I can make a homunculus that can memorize *Hamlet* out of steaks from Woolworths! I…" He rubbed his face with a normal looking hand. "Gideon. He demanded Eliza. My daughter. I couldn't. He's been crossing so many lines, and this was the ultimate one. I… I made one to look like her, sound like her. That's what Mavra killed. That's what they ate."

"…you're a Sarkic cultist with two kids." Blake frowned. "Somehow, I don't buy it."

"We may look odd to you, but I assure you, we're human, and our… physical faculties are intact." He sighed. "My wife. She knows about my oddities, thinks I'm going to get them removed soon. And I am. With some help."

"From who?" Ruby frowned.

"I'm afraid my benefactors prefer to remain anonymous. But before you ask: no. They're not your Foundation, nor are they the splinter Insurgency." Hubble extended his tendrils. "My benefactors and I will bind Mavra in two parts. What passes for her physical form has been contained in—"

"A giant pumpkin?" Ruby hazarded.

"Indeed. We're binding her mind in a Masonic seal in the Pyramid Inn. If both are sealed, and left intact, then neither can break free."

"Well, she did!" Blake snapped. "How do you explain that?"

"That may be a failing on my part. Gourdon is resilient, but even then, it is simply a plant. A blight of crops, a puncture in the shell… it could be anything." The Carnomancer slithered over to a door and opened it, revealing a set of stairs leading down. "Please, if you would."

The twins felt they didn't have much choice, and began descending into the basement. It was a dark place, empty, wet. Ruby drew her knife again. "So, your pumpkin died, and now we have to clean it up forty-eight years from now?"

"I'm afraid it seems that way." Hubble sighed. "As part of my agreement with my benefactors, I'm to… well, deal with you. They told me to look for a pair of time-traveling twins at this place, on this date. Once this is done… my healing can begin."

"*Hell* no!" Ruby took her sparring pose again. "If you're gonna kill us, I'm going to make sure you can't have any more kids before you do."

"Hold it, hold it. Nobody's dying. You're just going to take the long route home." Hubble's tendrils shook and began oozing a golden sap, which fell at the twin's feet. "You were taken here by a simple

wrinkle in time; your souls interacted with the reality here, and you were brought into the fold by a cosmic mistake. You deserve… well, you deserve to go home."

"Sarkic Amber? Seriously?" the Williams brother's lip twisted, and he pulled his feet away from it. "I— hold on. The Foundation still shows up at the Fairgrounds on the 31st. We have photographic evidence."

"Yeah," Ruby agreed. "We need a phone."

"No. If the your organization needs any information that will prevent a paradox, my benefactors will see to it."

"Okay, who the *fuck* are these benefactors?" Ruby demanded, her shoes becoming stuck in the amber as it creeped up her body. "There aren't any major players that deal with temporal paradoxes or timelines or any of that shit."

"Not *yet*," Hubble replied, as if it was obvious. The twins tried to object, but the sap covered their mouths. They couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. After a while, they just stopped thinking.

Seren sighed as she looked over the pillars of amber that contained her squadmates. "Ruby once told me that she and her brother watched *Jurassic Park* religiously when they were kids. Dressed up as the annoying brats from the film."

"And now, they're playing the most important characters. The mosquitos." Ewell frowned and approached the amber that contained Ruby. "Now, how do we get these—"

The amber began to melt as Ewell approached, like a sculpture made of ice cream on the summer solstice. The pillar disgorged the Williams sister, who fell to the floor, gasping. "Nhhh. Nnnnhhh. Mhhhh."

"Ruby?" February took out a flashlight and turned it on. He shined it into her eyes, and when her pupils contracted—

"MOTHERFUCKER!" She suddenly sat upright, clutching her eyes.

"Shit, sorry. Can't see anything, now."

"Hibernation sickness. You're okay, hold on." Seren had approached Blake's pod in the meantime, and was slowly pulling him out of the goop.

"I suppose them taking a shower is out of the question?" Blake asked.

"Yes, it is. The Foundation's been looking for samples of this stuff for decades." February scooped some off of Ruby and into a jar.

Blake sat up, and gagged as he swallowed some of the sap. "Oh fucking *god.* That tastes like rotten honey."

"Honey can't rot." Ewell frowned.

"That… really doesn't make me feel better." Blake stood up. "Fuck. Is this gonna harden again?"

"Hard to say with Sarkic magic." February sighed. "There are going to be a lot of questions. For everyone."

"…Hubble said that there were… benefactors he was working with." Ruby started to stand. "They'd make him normal again. And they had foreknowledge enough to know we'd be coming."

"That…" Ewell shuddered. "This town's freaky enough right now. Let's leave that to Delta-t or whoever the hell handles temporal anomalies nowadays."

"We know what it is," Ruby, Seren, and Blake all spoke at the same time.

Seren spoke alone, "**097**. The fairgrounds with the giant pumpkin in the center. It lures children in, eats them, centered around Halloween…"

"It fits," February agreed. "Partridge came to the same conclusion a while ago. I'm… gonna go radio for pickup."

"You do that," Blake winced, blinking his eyes. "Hey."

"What?" Ruby asked.

"It *is* the Great Pumpkin, Ruby Brown."

"…if I weren't covered in eldritch drool, I'd strangle you right now." She shook her head, and sat there with her brother, silently speaking, waiting for the containment team to pick them up.

« **Chapter 8** | **Black Autumn Hub** | **Chapter 10** »

Charcoal

"Alright. Dee Five O'Ten," Junior Researcher Perez began. "We will now present a series of photographs. All we want you to do is write a brief description of each photo, no more than a few sentences. Okay?"

D-5010 nodded and looked ahead at the screen. Simple stock pictures, as might appear on the covers of greeting or birthday cards, ran in a slideshow. *A city street at night. Neon lights reflect off everything wet from rain. There are people with umbrellas out walking.* *click* *A red and white lighthouse with a clear blue sky behind. It's sunny, and a wave is crashing on the rock.* *click* *An aerial view of tropical islands surrounded by water so clear and blue you can see the sandbars.* *click* *A child hopping over a puddle. The picture is in black and white, except the rubber rainboots are bright yellow.*

At the conclusion of the slideshow Perez stepped forward to observe the sheets of paper spread on the desk. D-5010 looked at the sheets too and furrowed his brow. Exchanging a glance with the researcher he preemptively answered what he knew was about to be asked. "I didn't write that part. Those parts. Or … I didn't try to. I mean… each picture was on for not even a minute. Right? I didn't write that much, I don't think."

Perez suppressed an exasperated sigh. Not just for this moment; she was exhausted from working so many extra hours recently. That was due to another Junior Researcher named Wren, recently transferred to the Site; an insufferable brown-noser who had danced his way into everyone's spotlight, then just as suddenly seemed to have deserted without a trace. Rumors of spying and espionage, despite the absence of actual evidence, had quietly circulated amongst some of the staff. Perez had swiftly volunteered to take over one of Wren's uncompleted projects, but that had led to more, and more, until she was the only one picking up all the slack. The

extra workload only exasperated an already stressful situation for her.

"It's fine," Perez returned her focus to the subject before her. "Thank you for your cooperation and efforts today." With that, she dismissed them from testing; there was nothing more to say. Perez wrote the words 'Results identical to previous test' on her notepad, again because there was nothing more to say.

There was one more avenue of testing to pursue, then this should finally be done with.

Junior Researcher Perez was calm now.

She had lost her temper with the D-class research assistant in the chamber earlier. They had simply been asked to draw an impression of the picture on display with the materials provided. It wasn't a difficult task, and their profile was tagged with 'visual art experience' so easier still. But they took so damn long with it, and kept fussing over details, and then *they* acted frustrated with it all and - Oh! One of the guards had interjected and walked her outside for a minute, until she regained her composure. Returning to the test chamber, Perez found the D-class artist to be less combative as well. The guard resumed his position by the door, Perez returned to the subject.

"I just-" D-5154 stuttered as she began. "I just was having a hard time getting the… the texture right on certain places." She gestured toward her charcoal-print recreation of the landscape photo propped on an easel. "I don't understand what's happening… when I'm trying to do the shading for these darker parts it just… it…"

Perez peered closely at the drawing. It looked like the original photo, as it should have. But if she squinted at the darkly shaded sections… she could almost make out… a pattern. "Damn it!" Perez slammed a hand on the table, making D-5154 (and even the guard in the corner) jump with a start. Before anyone else could speak she called an end to the testing and excused herself. She would return to her own workspace and consider how to, yet again, express for the record: 'Results identical to previous test'.

"Knock knock!"

Researcher Patey announced his presence without actually knocking; a habit Perez found almost as annoying as the way he immediately launched into whatever he was going to say without waiting for any response.

"So, the gents upstairs are still waiting on the final assessment of that Object-862 that you had been working on." A moment of silence passed as Perez expected Patey might elaborate, while apparently Patey expected a string of numbers to suffice. "It was one of the assignments you took on after Researcher Wren's disappearance," he added, barely helpfully.

"Oh, I thought I'd already worked through all of those!" Perez scrawled 'AO-862' on a notepaper so she could look it up momentarily. "What ever came of that, do you know? The business with Wren, I mean."

"Inconclusive," Patey shrugged. "Far as I know, anyway."

"Huh… Well give me a few minutes here to check on that file, and I'll send a copy up to the Senior Researchers' office straight away." She smiled as she said it, but seconds later her expression reverted to neutral. Patey recognized the conversation was over, and fled accordingly.

Once he was out of sight Perez opened up her database and tracked down the appropriate file. 'Huh…' It looked as though she had marked it as completed, but hadn't actually submitted it. Some time had passed since those tests, she couldn't recall all the specifics of the case; probably noone could. She reviewed her research notes and typed a hasty summary of findings to include with the description file. She quickly composed all parts of the report and sent them to the inboxes of the appropriate Senior Researchers. The description file would eventually be entered into the Log of Anomalous Objects; the extraneous communiques and surrounding circumstances would be redacted for reasons of practicality.

To:	Site-112 Senior Researchers

From:	Office <4 contacts> Perez, Researcher (Jr.) <Sa.Perez>
Subject:	FA: AO-862

Here is the summary of my Final Assessment: Object does not react to its environment at all. Its effect only manifests when another party interacts with the object. Only one specific result has ever occurred, despite all variables applied. Further testing is unlikely to yield new results.

Placement in standard medium-value storage would be appropriate.

Item Description: A piece of vine charcoal that causes "Someone help me! I'm trapped in the charcoal!" to be written every several seconds whenever used for writing or drawing.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Scotland
Current Status: `In storage.`

Charon (Part 1: Nekyia)

Yanma Mirski sat on the concrete floor staring at the small gem before him. For the past dozen months he had sat at the bottom of this gloomy hexagonal vault, as he was doing now. The wall opposite him was decorated with various folders and documents upon shelves, illuminated by the light from the single opening above. He examined the item in his hand. It was an **onyx gemstone about the size of a softball, with a dazzling gold decoration**. He turned it in his hand and studied the main feature of this treasure, the infernal enigma that was the focus of his work - a small lock-shaped hole in one end of the object.

Beyond the microwaves it emitted, its universal resistance to damage and the impossible detail in the gold filigree, the gemstone was mundane. It didn't turn air into seawater, it didn't make people forget about it, it didn't replace the consciousness of anyone that touched it. It just warmed surrounding surfaces and looked like a Fabergé egg.

The lock was similarly mundane with one exception. Its purpose had eluded the Foundation for several years, but probing the interior of the stone produced sounds and movements within, ensuring it wasn’t a five-thousand year old Sumerian prank to trick idiots into trying to unlock an inert stone. The lock had a working mechanism that would function with a respective key.

Placing the gem back onto its pedestal upon a shelf, Dr. Mirski retrieved a file from the shelf below that detailed all the attempts to open or unlock the item. Lockpicking; failed. No matter the skill of the user, the lock picks never worked. Brute force assault with various tools and implements; failed. Hammers bounced, chisels slipped, blades shattered, and not a single scratch or scuff was made. Heating to five thousand degrees Celsius; failed. The stone came out as cool as the moment it went in. Application of industrial cutting laser; failed. The beam reflected and the machine was sliced

beyond recognition.

No matter how far down the list he went, the outcome was always the same. Some of Yanma's subordinates had gone as far to throw a nuclear warhead at the lock, under the guise of testing a sample of the Foundation's armaments. All that resulted was confirmation the Lock would survive a nuclear holocaust, and that Yanma would probably be better off conducting Project Pluto alone rather than having to retroactively approve pointless attempts from the lower-ranked researchers in the project.

Yanma returned the document to its spot, losing interest in the list of ten thousand ways to fail at his job. He decided to look through one of the other folders; he needn't go anywhere else as absolutely all the information on the Lock was stored within the vault. Suffice to say, there wasn't much.

Retrieving the folder marked 'Notes', Yanma looked through the contents written by his former colleague, Quinton Hack. They had been assigned together on Project Pluto and entrusted with the task of opening the Lock. The majority of staff aware of the Lock believed that it contained the entire universe and thus would cause an apocalypse when opened. Perhaps the universe would rapidly expand out of the Lock; perhaps the solar system would be crushed by a colossal atom as it rushed in. The only way to know what would happen was to start it.

Regardless of the madness it entailed, the task had been entrusted to Yanma and Quinton from the Overseer Council. "Open the Lock at all costs," they had said. Utilise an infinite budget to open an *indestructible object* with. The Foundation had frequently come up against impossible tasks, but somehow managed to achieve them. Hopefully this would be no different.

Grabbing a second folder filled with dim photographs and transcripts of a four-hundred year old journal, Yanma read through the scribbled notes of his partner. Quinton had been onto something, but Yanma never found out what. Quinton had realized something one night and quickly rushed back to Site-10 to write down these strange notes. Before Yanma had awoken the next morning, Quinton had flown to Site-17 for reasons that were at the time above

his clearance level. Nobody had even heard of him since, simply vanishing from existence or into an alternate reality.

Quinton's epiphany had vanished with him. The night after his disappearance several files had vanished from the vault, prompting the addition of the time lock that Yanma alone could open. He was left alone to satiate the meagre curiosity of the Overseer Council. Working on one of the most secretive anomalies out there, he was bound to report to the council on his progress bi-monthly, though his lack of any actual progress neither surprised nor disappointed them. Project Pluto was little more than a black hole from which funding and resources never returned, and from which no information was retrieved. It should have been abandoned years ago, but the money kept coming and the Overseers kept waiting, so Yanma kept working.

Yanma returned his focus to the notes before him. A small number of runes circled, with a line connecting them to the word 'shame'. Several sections of underlined text detailing landmarks seen as the author aimlessly wandered the Mesopotamian desert, with the word 'Magnetite' added and underlined. A blank page with 'IMMORTAL SUMER FAMINE' scrawled in rushed handwriting across its entirety. There were other notes that Quinton had written, but these were the most intriguing of them.

For the past three months since the disappearance of Dr. Quinton Hack, Dr. Yanma Mirski had entered this vault in Site-10 fortnightly. And each time, he left without learning anything new from the notes, nor their true importance. What was the relation between the expedition of Sir Edwin Young, Third Baron, and magnetite? What was - or is - the immortal Sumer famine? Yanma rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration, knowing he would probably never figure it out alone. He checked his watch - seven eighteen PM. He had entered the vault seven hours ago. Deciding against waiting inside the vault any longer, he returned the folders to their places and climbed the steel ladder to the surface. Completing the three steps needed to close the vault for the next three weeks, Yanma walked to the door of the room and exited. The hallway outside was whitewashed and connected to two others by T-junctions to either side. Remembering the layout of Sub-Level 1, he turned left and

walked as the echoes of a conversation reached his ears.

"Did you hear about C-Area thirty-two?" said a male voice, its owner hidden from Yanma's sight.

"No, what happened?" replied a second male voice, its speaker just as concealed.

"Completely annihilated. Worst breach seventy-six has had to date, so bad they had to nuke the place just to stop him. You'd think he'd get mellow with age or something, but nope. He's like a one-man war…" Yanma never heard the remainder of the conversation; what he had heard was sufficient to stop his legs and hearing as his mind raced, his expression being comparable to fish out of water. Pulses raced through neurons within his brain as ideas and theories within his mind connected, catalysed by the vague but sufficient information he had overheard by pure chance.

> "Is that it?" said the second voice to the first. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's it. All nine-ninety told me to do was to bring you here, and tell you about the containment breach. After that, I woke up. You want to grab a meal before we get back to our usual rounds? I think they've got lasagna at the cafeteria today."

His mind unlocking from the rush of information, Dr. Mirski turned and raced back to the room he had just come from in a mad dash, hoping that he would be able to get back into the vault before it completely closed. Pulling the door open as fast as he could, he raced to the sealed hatch in the middle of the room. The sound of working mechanics had subsided, and the steel bars hidden beneath the surface of the vault had already slid into place. Yanma slammed his fist down in frustration. He'd have to wait almost an entire month now, but he could still investigate from what he remembered. He still had his epiphany to follow – "Immortal Sumer Famine" wasn't a thing or event, it was a *person*. An immortal Sumerian who was followed by endless famine wherever they went.

Once again leaving the room, Yanma set about planning his flight to

---

From: Heracles
To: Hermes
Subject: Obol
Message:
Subject is on his way to Tartarus. Please confirm intentions and advise on action.

From: Hermes
To: Heracles
Subject: Re: Obol
Message:
Booking with Famine. Proceed with protocol.

Dr. Mirski was tired from the plane flight, and looked the part. He couldn't be bothered combing his hair nor smoothing the wrinkles in his clothes. He was here to get answers, and if he needed he would flaunt his Level 5 clearance to get them. He walked the short distance from his vehicle to the main entry of Site-17. He walked up to the front desk and spoke to the well-dressed receptionist sitting behind it.

"Yanma Mirski for his appointment." Knowing he would be asked for some form of verification, he removed the Foundation ID card he had from his pocket and placed it upon the reception desk. The receptionist looked at the card, then at Yanma before returning his gaze to the computer screen in front of him. The receptionist then waved over a nearby guard and informed them of where Dr. Mirski wanted to go. The trip to the room was short, ending with the guard adopting a position to one side of the doorway. Reminding himself of what he needed to ask, Yanma composed himself and entered.

The cell was a standard two-room concrete chamber for humanoid anomalies, decorated sparsely with furnishings. It took a lot of cooperation for an anomaly to earn furnishings, with such rooms normally being barren. Sitting on a plastic chair was the being he had come to speak to, reading something on a handheld tablet. Yanma cleared his throat, notifying the humanoid of his presence.

"Sorry." The man's word was rich with an arabic or middle eastern accent, his skin tanned appropriately. His arms and legs were mechanical, mimicking normal movement as he moved to a desk and put down the tablet while Yanma watched. The man turned to face his guest, the friendly smile he had showing yellowed teeth. He offered a mechanical hand for a handshake. "Dr. Mirski, I presume? I hear you have come quite a long way to see me, and on such short notice too. Do you want something to drink?" Accepting the handshake, Yanma couldn't help but grin at the friendliness of the immortal man. He looked no older than thirty-five, but was known to have been born at the dawn of the human race.

"**No thanks Cain, I'd much rather just get this done quickly.**" Yanma had slept poorly that night, not just from the turbulent flight but also from his thoughts. Had Quinton found what he sought? Had he vanished for looking? Most importantly, was Yanma going to meet the same fate? Yanma had always been dangerously curious; soon, he thought, he will find out if he can take it too far.

"I understand." Cain retrieved a second chair, offering it to Yanma before turning his own to face it. "What do you need of me?"

"I have some questions about my work that I believe you can help me with. But first, I must ask; has a man named Dr. Hack come and spoken to you before?" Yanma spoke while he shifted in his seat, trying to find a comfortable way to sit.

"Ah, Quinton Hack, yes. He came here some months ago - suddenly flew over from Site-10 to ask me to help him with his work. He mentioned you." Cain shifted to rest his head upon his hand, grinning at Yanma as though he was thinking of a joke. Yanma was relieved to know that his friend had at least gotten the answers he had sought.

"Nobody has seen or heard of him since your meeting. Do you know what happened to him?" Cain simply continued grinning, rather than respond. Yanma felt uneasy at the strange humour the immortal was finding in his plight. It was only then that he noticed the sound of breathing behind him.

"I've been busy," said the third person in the room as Dr. Mirski turned to see the familiar face of Dr. Hack.

The resulting uneasy silence remained undisturbed for several moments until Cain stood up. "I will fetch drinks." Cain left the room, leaving the two researchers alone. Quinton walked around Yanma and sat down in Cain's chair.

"I take it you've been keeping busy too?" He said, shifting to get more comfortable in his seat.

The first thing out of Yanma's mouth was "Where the fuck have you been!" He was astonished that Quinton was still alive, but just as enraged that he had feigned his death for so long. He almost had a fit, right then and there.

"Jeez, calm down would you? I've been busy, like I said. I'm sure you've got questions, but before we continue there's some paperwork to do. Bump you up to the right clearance to know I'm alive and what-not." Quinton spoke, grinning childishly as he saw the annoyance on his friend's face.

"Is this a fucking joke to you, Hack? A prank for some shits and giggles?" Clenching his fists in sheer anger, veins began emerging along his arms. "Well the fucking joke's on you. I'm level five now thanks to you, so your fucking 'info-sec' bullshit won't work. I have unlimited access."

"Calm down, you're going to pop an artery. Level five doesn't get you everything, not anymore - the Overseers have all kinds of extra stuff hidden all over the place, need-to-know and such. I've been given permission to… lets just keep it simple and say you're being 'promoted to Level 6'." Retrieving a handheld tape recorder from his pocket, Quinton began recording their conversation.

"This is Dr. Quinton Hack, speaking to Dr. Yanma Mirski. I am serving as a spokesperson to grant Dr. Mirski access to information for Project Charon. Dr. Mirski, there are two outcomes to this encounter and it is your choice which occurs."

Quinton extended his index finger, signifying the first option. "First:

You can accept the induction and will be brought up-to-date on Project Charon, by extension learning of both its relation to Project Pluto and of my whereabouts for the past several months. However, as a consequence of this you will need to be declared missing or killed in action under similar circumstances to myself, in order to ensure informational security of Project Charon. This will be a permanent designation; your life outside the Foundation will end."

Keeping his index finger out, Quinton then extended his middle finger as well. "Second: You reject this induction, be administered with sufficient amnestics to prevent you from recalling both this conversation and the circumstances behind it. You will resume your work on Project Pluto as though this never occurred and as far as you will be aware, it never did." Quinton put his hand down. "Any questions?"
Looking at the stern expression of his superficially resurrected friend, Yanma's anger faltered and began to subside. Quinton had been a prankster at times, but he always took his work seriously and never before had he been so persistent in maintaining a joke's facade. Coupled with the curious inability for anyone within the Foundation to find anything about him during his disappearance, the question of whether this was a trick at all was rapidly becoming 'no.' Yanma instinctively rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the onset of a headache.

"This must be what it's like for those nosey few who ask me if the Lock exists." he groaned.

"Yeah, probably. Pain in the ass, isn't it."

An idea appears in Yanma's mind. "What if I just… walk out?"

A look of sinister disappointment covers Quinton's face. "In order to ensure informational security, should you attempt to leave this room without choosing, you will be forcibly amnestised and reprimanded. Should you resist being apprehended, immediate termination has been authorised. I would strongly advise making a choice over that outcome."

Applying more pressure to the bridge of his nose to help ease the pain, Yanma strained his mind to choose between the two choices

he had been presented with. He had next to no family to consider, having lost contact with his few living relatives. His friends all worked back at Site-10, and would be dearly missed - but Yanma had to know. His curiosity at what this Project Charon was, and what it had to do with the Lock, was overwhelming. With a feeling he would inevitably regret his decision regardless of his choice, he came to a conclusion. "I'll accept then."

Quinton's grin grew at Yanma's choice. "You are hereby inducted into Project Charon." Satisfied that the recording would appease the Overseers, Quinton stopped the handheld and returned it to its pocket.

"About damn time. Let's start with a crash course, shall we?" He briefly rubbed his hands together before continuing. "Project Charon originates from the final few years of General Bowe's command over the Foundation, when he collected up a group of researchers to open the Lock shortly after he got his hands on it. They set-"

"You're fucking terrible at lying. You know that right?" Interrupted Yanma. "The Bowe Commission was done and dusted before the end of the seventies, everyone knows that. The Lock was found almost thirty years after them, in a museum."

Quinton sighed in return. "Yes, it was found in a museum by an off-duty researcher, who noticed it had the Cosmic Microwave Background on it. Which was discovered in nineteen sixty-four, meaning the little gem had been sitting on display for thirty-nine years, magically unnoticed not only by the Foundation, but also by anyone who was aware of the CMB." He produced a manilla folder from his satchel, removed a single document from it, and passed it to Yanma. Yanma quickly recognised the document as an altered copy of the Lock's documentation, with details about it's discovery and certain dates changed to be far earlier than before.

"Don't act stupid, Yanma. This is the Foundation we're talking about - we're ahead of *everything*, and the CMB was no different. The Lock was found and recovered in nineteen sixty-eight, and was recently changed to twenty-oh-three. I'll come back to why in a moment."

Quinton took a breath as he recalled the information he was about to survey. "Anomaly production wasn't considered as taboo as the Foundation treats it today. Even if it was, I doubt Bowe would have cared - he probably would've just told the early Charon researchers to make whatever was needed anyway. They made quite a few little trinkets and what-not, but only got two things close to what they needed; one was a **key that unlocked the concept of what we assume is ascension**, which got shuffled off elsewhere to be weaponised and subsequently lost for a couple of years until it showed up again. The other was **a key that could unlock any door** within a certain area, which was closer but since the Lock isn't a door, not close enough."

"Then, out of the blue, the perfect key popped up here at Site-17 during an incident. A key which could unlock anything - the missing key to the Lock."

Yanma wasn't surprised by the revelation. "**SCP-005**, I presume? It's pretty obviously the most likely item to open the Lock. I'd asked for it a few times, but the Overseers didn't want it leaving here for some inane reason."

Quinton's grin re-emerged. "No, Yanma. It isn't the most likely." He produced a small ornate key from a pocket, matching the photographed appearance of SCP-005, and held it in the air between them. "It *is*."

The connection hadn't quite clicked yet in Yanma's mind. "… I don't follow."

"This is the 'why'. This is why the recovery date for the Lock was pushed forward forty years. This is why you're allowed to do anything you want to the Lock, as long as you aim to open it." Quinton produced a second, nearly identical key from his other pocket, showing the vivid orange bow it had. "This is why they won't let you use the skeleton key to unlock the Lock."

"Because you, and everyone else keeping track of Project Pluto, would realize the Lock is already unlocked."

Yanma leaned back in his chair. The Lock was unlocked, and had

been for at least forty years. “Apakht…?” Yanma mumbled, intrigued yet frightened to find out what had been sealed away within the Lock for so long.

Quinton returned the two keys to their pockets, then gestured to the manilla folder he had given to Yanma earlier. “Page two. You’ve got some reading to do.”

Flipping to the page in question, Dr. Yanma Mirski began reading and learning the secrets now being revealed to him by Dr. Quinton Hack.

> **Item #:** SCP-005
>
> **Object Class:** Safe/Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** SCP-005-1 poses no immediate risk in any direct sense. Even so, the **`circumstances under which it was obtained`** and the subsequent discovery of SCP-005-2 necessitates special measures be taken to restrict access and manipulation of the objects. Under no circumstances is SCP-005-1 to be removed from Site-17…

« N/A || Charon (Part 1: Nekyia) || Charon (Part 2: Katabasis) »

Charon (Part 2: Katabasis)

« Charon (Part 1: Nekyia) || Charon (Part 2: Katabasis) || Charon (Part 3: Asphodel) »

The taste of the coffee was repulsively bitter. Yanma Mirski considered spitting the mouthful out to save the remaining taste buds that hadn't been obliterated by the drink, but he needed the caffeine more than he needed to enjoy it. Pausing to ready himself for the next onslaught, Yanma drank a second mouthful before putting the mostly full mug down on the desk beside him, where it would remain until a cleaner was forced to dispose of it. A third attempt would be too much for his body to handle.

Yanma had been catching up on the secret workings of Project Charon for several weeks now - many long days had been spent reading countless documents, some of which he recognized but sported new packets of information. Sometimes he'd be lucky enough to come upon a video or audio recording, which he would listen and watch in a manner similar to watching a movie at home. Regardless of how he went about it, Yanma spent every waking moment doing the same thing: absorbing information.

The constant mental drain was taking its toll, too. His usual sleeping routine had been utterly destroyed, his erratic rhythm making it difficult to maintain punctuality. Waking up on time had started becoming an issue, as was evident from the twenty odd alarms on his phone, all set to go off within a five-minute period. There were some nights where he would lay in bed for what felt like hours, (but would later turn out to be a couple of minutes, elongated by what surely was the anomalous powers of sheer boredom,) only to give up trying to go to sleep and resume his document binge.

But through it all, Yanma’s insatiable curiosity drove him to continue. Clicking on the next link in his list, he began reading the document

that appeared on the screen before him.

> **Item #:** SCP-184
>
> **Object Class:** Thaumiel
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** Information regarding the Thaumiel classification of SCP-184 is restricted to personnel with Level 5/Charon clearance. SCP-184 is to be classified as Euclid in all documents below Level 5/Charon clearance, with references to information pertaining to the item's Thaumiel classification removed.
>
> SCP-184 is not to be contained in any structure. SCP-184 is to be attached to a high-power electromagnet at all times. Should the electromagnet fail, agents are to report to SCP-184's containment area and prevent access to all unauthorized personnel until the electromagnet is restored to

"You really need to get a proper night's sleep." Quinton had entered the room without making a sound, and had adopted an idle stance next to Yanma with his own mug in hand. The tall man loomed over his seated friend, equal parts humour and concern in his gaze.

"Yanma."

"Whu…"

"You're drooling."

"Uoh." Yanma used the short sleeve of his shirt to wipe the non-existent saliva from his mouth, his eyes never leaving the screen before him. No further response was made - running on fumes and crappy coffee, he could spare no more attention than was needed.

Quinton waited a moment before his concern got the better of him, quickly reaching across and turning the screen off. "You're taking a break, right now."

"Hey, I was reading th-"

"Object class."

"What?"

"What was the object class."

"How should I fu-"

"Item number then. Or anything, even. Anything you saw on the page."

"It was the fucking ball thing, the thing that had the…" Yanma made various motions with his hands in an attempt to visualise a softball-sized sphere.

Quinton, unimpressed, kept waiting for a better response.

"What?"

"You didn't even get the most obvious thing on the page right. You're having a rest."

Yanma sighed loudly, knowing he couldn't argue with the sound logic. At some point he had stopped absorbing the information, but had kept reading; several thousand words worth had leaked from his mind like an antimeme.

> The analogy rung a strange bell. Hadn’t there been an antimeme on his list? But why would there be concealed information about something that couldn’t be remembered? He needed to remember the number, so he could read it again.
>
> … The number of what, though? What was he trying to remember? Yanma’s exhausted mind had forgotten.

”Fine, I need something better to drink than coffee anyway. Fucking tastes like shit.” Yanma thrust the chair out from beneath himself as

he stood. Even standing up, Quinton was still noticeably taller than the American.

“The coffee is fine - you’re the problem.” Quinton grinned sheepishly as he dipped a finger into the abandoned coffee, collecting enough of the liquid to get a taste. He retched the moment his brain registered the taste.

“Fuck, that’s godawful.”

“Told you it was shit.”

“I didn’t think you meant literally. Did you even put *coffee* in?”

"Oh shut up."

Quinton returned the mug to its original position. He paused for a moment after letting go, as if he was expecting something curious to occur.

"Huh."

"What?" Yanma had stopped in the doorway.

"I was expecting it to be stuck to my hand."

"Wh-" It took him a moment to catch on, but he caught the reference. "Oh fuck you."

Quinton couldn't hide his grin as he stepped past Yanma and out of the comfortably-furnished office, into the familiar whitewashed halls of a Foundation facility. The inhabitants of this place - the entirety of the staff assigned to Project Charon, of which there were quite a few - had only a vague idea of where this place actually was. Its style suggested an isolated wing or unit of a Site, but which Site in particular was impossible to tell. Without any signs or markings beyond obvious ones, and a complete absence of any windows or even doors leading to the exterior of the place, the only thing they knew about their new home was the vague definition that had whisked them to this place;

The staff of Project Charon were **Inside** the Project Charon

offices.

The only noteworthy feature the hallway sported was the green line in the center of the floor, interrupted every five meters by a pair of coloured arrows that each pointed to a door on either side of the hall. Each arrow had a number followed by a letter, and this served as the main method of determining location in the offices; the number denoted the section of hallway, and the letter specified which door.

Remembering the rule that was critical to navigating the offices, Quinton set about navigating from Yanma's office, 49L, to the kitchen at 26R. His pace was quick, not because of a sense of urgency but because of how large his stride was. Within minutes they had arrived, passing through the single door leading directly into the small kitchen.

"Want a sandwich?" The bread and boiled eggs were already being removed from the fridge.

"Sure."

"Lettuce, egg and mayo?"

"Mayo?"

"Yeah. Stops it from tasting too dry."

"Sure then, whatever you're having."

"Why do you do this to yourself, Yanma?"

"Uh?"

"Look at yourself. One of the highest-ranking members of a global shadow organisation, entrusted with one of the most powerful and dangerous artifacts under its control…"

The two plates, carrying a pair of sandwiches, were gently placed on either end of one of the few tables in the room. Yanma and Quinton each sat down with their own meal before them.

"… being nursed back to health by a ghost making sandwiches."

"Cut me some slack, you don't usually have to look after yourself when you're dead."

Quinton chuckled - his humour was rubbing off on Yanma. "I am serious though, Yanma. I don't understand why you're doing this."

"I'm behind, aren't I? Going through everything is the fastest way to catch up."

"But it isn't the *best* way. You're missing details, forgetting things. You won't be able to find It if you keep doing that."

He was, of course, referring to the contents of **`the Lock`**. Apakht, whatever that actually was. With the **`key`** in one hand, the Lock in the other and the wrath of Bowe watching, there was nothing stopping the predecessors of Project Charon from unleashing whatever waited within.

What they weren't expecting was for the key to turn loosely in the lock, the mechanism having been released long ago. They weren't expecting to realise Apakht had escaped long ago, while they studied an empty container.

"Quinton, we have no idea where it is, what it's doing… we don't even know *what* the fucking thing is."

"See, now that proves my point. You're rushing to read everything, but learning nothing; we know what Apakht is, and what it does. This is exactly why it took you so long to figure out my clues."

"… You're right." Yanma rubbed his face, trying to relax or freshen himself.

Quinton smiled. He was finally getting Yanma to calm down and think properly. "So. To find out where it *is*, we need to know where it has *been*. Where did it start?"

"Well, the earliest relation we know of is that Apakht was assumedly contained in the Lock at some point. The Lock was found in some Sumerian ruins, so the first thing to do would be… to ask a

Sumerian about it."

"Alright, let's get into it." Quinton clicked on the program's play button, starting the audio file. Yanma, holding a cup of water and feeling significantly fresher than he did yesterday thanks to a proper night's sleep, leaned back in his seat and listened.

> "Dianne Cray, speaking to **SCP-073**. May I call you Cain?"
>
> "Yes, that is ok."
>
> There was a soft thud, followed by the sound of shuffling papers.
>
> "I have several documents here that I believe you will be able to translate. Could you do so for me?"
>
> The quiet whisper of paper sliding across a surface, possibly wood, followed by silence.
>
> "Pay heed and li-"

"Hold on, I'll skip to the good bit."

Taking control of the computer again, Quinton clicked on a fast-forward button several times, speeding up the decades old recording and blurring the speech into incomprehensible gibberish. An hour's worth of dialogue was passed within two minutes, slowing down to its usual pace once Quinton was satisfied.

> "-ror Nero."
>
> "Thank you. This one may be a stretch; translate as much of it as you can, if you can."
>
> A single sheet of paper slides across a surface.
>
> "With loss and re- oh."
>
> Three seconds of silence.

"Cain?"

No response.

"073, what's wrong?"

"A moment, please."

Several more seconds of silence pass.

"… *So with loss and regret, I… I of the guardians abandon the prison of Apakht on this final hour of hope and endless protection, emptied of its contents by its jailors…*"

Faint sobbing, audibly belonging to the rich Arabic voice of Cain.

Quinton paused the recording, turning his seat to face Yanma.

"He recognized it, didn't he?"

Quinton nodded in response. "Dianna claimed he'd stopped looking once he'd realized what it was. The fact that Cain filled in several large portions of missing text confirmed he was familiar with it."

Quinton closed the audio file, having shown what was needed to Yanma. He scrolled down a list of audio files, finding the next one he wanted to play.

"Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Cain. Is there anything you would like to say before we begin?"

"Do you still have *it*?"

"Could you clarify what you are referring to?"

"Onyx sphere with gold, this size. Indestructible, always warm, has a keyhole on the top."

"Yes, we do still have it."

"I thought as much. I would have been surprised if you

had not seen it, where those inscriptions were."

"Ah, yes. The inscription that you translated for us – you were familiar with it, correct?"

"Of course. I wrote it."

Silence.

"Well, that… that would explain it, wouldn't it. Uhh…"

Papers are nervously shuffled by unsteady hands.

"In the translation, you said… well, you, had left it there because Apakht wasn't inside it. What *is* Apakht?"

The sound of someone shifting in their seat, followed by a long silence.

"It is… difficult. There are words to describe it, but very few have analogues in English. It…"

Another pause.

"It is a… a concept, a force, of sorts. It is something that influences everything within its reach, and is omnipresent in scope. It is comparable to gravity; the effects it produces can be observed, but it itself cannot."

"What are its effects?"

"I believe you have encountered its offspring first hand. Chaos, impossibility, chance… to it, everything is clay and malleable. It yields to no rules, no classification. I am an example; you cannot harm me, though such is unreasonable. I cannot die, nor can the other guardians, no matter our age."

"… How old *are* you, exactly?"

"Older than time."

Charon (Part 3: Asphodel)

« Charon (Part 2: Katabasis) || Charon (Part 3: Asphodel) || ??? »
«« Charon (Part 1: Nekyia)

Date Unknown.

`Everything changed.`

Burning, surging forth, the wave blasted outwards as fast as it could under its own laws; the fastest speed, the speed of light. A new energy – a force, unrivalled – washed through the strings of spacetime, strumming a cacophonous melody as it set about its work.

Enforcing its laws, the new laws; the laws of logic, becoming laws of reality.

In the grand epicentre of the scene, sat the cause of it all. In the centre, sat the origin of the force. In the centre, the absolute centre of the universe, around which the new world revolved, sat the architect, the prison, the keep and the keeper;

In the centre of it all, sat the **`small, ellipsoidal lock`**.

With every moment that lapsed, the wave of the new world rewrote existence as it confined the emperor of the old to their new, eternal home. Every atom in the sky above and every molecule in the bricks below were scrubbed, purified and cleansed of the tainting aura of the old one; every second, joule and ounce of it were captured and imprisoned, replaced with the laws of the new one. Even now, at its smallest size, the sky of the new world blazed with the insignia of the architect. Even now, the new banner – of hope, freedom from chaos, imprisonment of Apakht – flew proudly above, heralding the end of the darkest times.

And of all the beings, there were four to see it first.

As the wave washed over them, the four bathed in the glory of the new world. Though they would forever be anchored to the old, serving as the guardians of hell's gate, they still felt the impact of their labours. Spaced evenly around the gemstone, arms outstretched towards their creation, they watched the new world come together with new eyes; heard the fury of the old world's screams with new ears; tasted and smelled the new air; felt, with new, logical bodies, the heat of the wave as it passed.

Then it was gone. Within a second, the new world had grown to hundreds of thousands of kilometres in size; with each second that passed, it grew ever more. Before the four – or the thousands behind them, standing at the base of the ziggurat – had even blinked, their home had attained a magnitude so stupendously large, the units of its measurement would not be conceived for several thousand more years.

Stunned by the weight of what they had attained, the multitudes stood. Nobody spoke, nobody moved, nobody dared to shatter the newfound sensation that pervaded around them. Minutes passed as the congregation revelled in the feelings the new world afforded them, feelings that, despite the infinite possibilities of the world before, had always been impossible; the feeling of constancy, and silence.

For the first time, *nothing changed*.

The thud marked the completion of the gemstone's labours – even within its prison, Apakht strove to cause change. But this was its final independent act, its final change, the final, futile resistance it could muster. Cautious to not undo their work, the four lifted the obsidian from the brickwork of the ziggurat's peak. The key within its northern pole slid out without resistance; the wielder turned, showing it to those below.

There was but another moment's silence before their cries filled the night, as joyful tears rained upon Mesopotamic sands.

‘How go the fields?’

The man’s younger brother, seated beside him on the ziggurat steps, shielded his eyes from the emerging sunlight. For the sixty-seventh time, the city sprawled around the construct was illuminated by the light of the new world.

‘Many of the crops are wilting. Nothing can be done to stop them.’

‘Unadjusted, do you think?’

‘I assume so. Whatever survives, thrives; even the weeds, which are many in number now. Fortunately, some seem to be edible.’

‘I must try them myself.’

‘You know you cannot. You must keep away from the fields.’

The man clenched his fist. He yearned to return to the practices of his youth, to feel the crops and soil within his hands once again – but Apakht, ever spiteful of its jailors, had cursed him from it, and continued to curse the land he walked. Now, he could only till barren, useless soil – if, in his malnourished state, he could till at all.

‘Even if for a moment, I wish to see one.’

‘I’ll retrieve you a popular one. Bulbous thing, juices that sting when you bite it. Sharp taste.’

‘Interesting. Has it been named?’

‘Called “onions”, but I believe my name fits better.’

‘What, call them “Eabani” because they’re “sharp”?’

‘I meant the name I came up with. Name them after their taste.’

‘Which is?’

‘Shit.’

The man grinned, watching as his brother juggled a pure-black dagger in his hand. Eabani had never been concerned with

fieldwork; he left those tasks to Arakur. Instead he focused on livestock – herding, feeding, nurturing… slaughtering. Ample to say, each brother fulfilled what the other could not.

The duality of their capabilities translated to their military positions, too; though Eabani could never stand the atmosphere nor size of a tactician's tent, Arakur much preferred it – the front lines of a battle field were no place for a man such as him, but Eabani was a perfect fit in his stead.

But with each recount he heard, Arakur couldn't help dreading the day when the veil of justification, silk-thin and dangerously taut, finally tore apart before Eabani. Just as it almost had in their childhood.

Eabani's shrill whistle whipped Arakur back to reality. His eyes followed the dagger's edge down the steps of the ziggurat to the unmistakeable figure approaching them. It was impossible to mistake them for anyone else – ignoring her unique, solidly muscular build, she was the only woman in all of Sumer that refused to wear clothing appropriate for her gender; rather than cover everything below her neck, she proudly wore nothing but the knee-length skirt that men wore.

'How is she, Ninkigal?' Arakur asked, sitting up.

'How do you think, fool?' Ninkigal spat. 'Everything pains her. All the water she drinks comes straight back out, one way or another. She's moved her hand though, so the worst must be passing.'

'That is good. The others?'

'Dead.' She idly scratched her breast.

'… *all of them?*'

'If they could, they did.'

Arakur covered his face with his hand. One would say they were lucky, being the only ones still linked to Apakht – the only four immortals in the new world. One would be wrong.

‘Eabani, Arakur,’ said a woman, emerging from the temple atop the ziggurat.

Ninkigal cleared her throat.

‘And you,’ the woman continued. ‘The council waits.’

Arakur couldn’t stand by himself; by the time he and Eabani had begun their ascent, Ninkigal had stomped beyond view.

The temple was far from majestic, but sufficed for its purpose; carved into the walls was the story of Sumer, tales of Apakht’s yoke, and soon the story of the guardians would be added. In the centre of the room was an engraved altar, around which the seven councilmen sat. Ninkigal, being the de facto leader of the guardians (Arakur was the official one), stood the closest to the altar; Arakur and Eabani stood behind her, to either side.

‘What,’ she snapped.

‘Do not speak to us like that,’ one of the councilmen said.

‘I will speak however I please.’

‘There are concerns,’ another councilman interrupted, ‘that Giringeme is not improving.’

‘I was with her. She is recovering.’

‘That is not what I meant.’

Arakur shifted.

‘She will tame her abilities once again, just as Arakur will.’

‘They are taking too long,’ snapped the man seated at the far left. ‘Do you know how long it has been?’

‘Sixty-seven days,’ Arakur responded; he was silence by the councilman’s glare.

‘*Too long.* Sixty-seven days of pestilence and death. And how many

more days will it take, hmm? Another sixty-seven? Perhaps a hundred, or a thousand?'

The three councilmen seated beside him nodded.

'And Arakur too? Shall it take him another hundred days to stop cursing the ground he walks upon?'

'Careful with your words.'

'"I will speak however I please,"' he parroted. 'The fields he visited have yet to recover; for all we know, they never will.'

'And your solution?'

'Sumer has endured them long enough.'

Slowly and methodically, Ninkigal cracked each and every joint in her beefy hands; the councilmen flinched at each noise. When she was done, she leaned over the altar, glaring at the man.

'You would banish us, after what we have done? You would give us no choice but to leave our home?'

'You already made your choice when you vol-'

The pristine surface of the altar gave way beneath Ninkigal's might; large fissures branched out from where her fist, now embedded in a crater, had struck it. Like her fist, Ninkigal's roaring voice shattered the man's confidence.

'That godforsaken prophecy chose us – it chose me, by name, before I was even born, and you dare – you, *dare*, to say I had a choice in it, before banishing me?'

The man, shrinking in his seat, shook his head.

'N-not you. J-just Arakur and Giringeme. Y-'

Ninkigal's fist rocketed forward, striking the councilman's nose and breaking it. Had Arakur been any slower in restraining her arm, it would have gone much further. Satisfied, Ninkigal returned her

bloodied hand to her side; Arakur turned away from the bleeding councilman, covering his mouth.

‘You all disgust me. I would rather be exiled than live under filth without gratitude nor honour.’

Eabani – who had remained wholly motionless during Ninkigal’s attack – grinned at the injured councilman.

‘My loyalty is to my kin; I will go with my brother.’

The council made no attempt to stop the three from leaving.

By the time the sixty-eighth dawn washed down the eastern face of the ziggurat, the four guardians were prepared to enter exile. They had no plans for where they would travel, nor which direction they would go; their departure through the now-open west city gate was arbitrary, chosen only to escape the fortified walls surrounding the city.

The only empathy they had been afforded was time to collect their belongings, and a donation of a donkey for each to ride – save for the council, watching from afar, none of the city’s inhabitants dared to emerge. They were too fearful of Giringeme’s pestilence, or Ninkigal’s wrath.

Eabani, however, was worried about neither. Already fully prepared, his donkey awaited as he assisted Giringeme to do the same. She was still far from healthy; even beneath her full-body sheepskin dress, she shivered, coughed and winced. The fact she could walk was all the council needed to justify sending her off with the others, stating she was fit and well enough to travel – the same went for Arakur.

Seated beside his donkey, he struggled to eat his specially-prepared steak. Despite the unbearable hunger and Eabani’s best efforts to cook the stake to Arakur’s preference – overcooked and charred, assuring a total lack of juices – he still retched after each swallow. He hoped to eventually adjust to his new diet, but suspected it would be an impossibility.

As he watched, a different impossibility became real; retrieving a loaf of bread from her pack, Arakur watched as Ninkigal approached the senator she had punched the day prior. He expected her to hit him with the loaf, but instead, she offered it to him. They briefly shook hands, then Ninkigal returned to the group.

‘Are we ready?’ she asked Eabani.

‘We are,’ Eabani responded. ‘I have the lock, and Arakur has the key.’

‘Good. We leave immediately.’

Arakur discarded the steak and used his donkey to stand before mounting it. He herded it to Giringeme’s left; with Eabani on the right, they could both catch her if she fell. Ninkigal wasted no time on the others, immediately steering her ride towards and through the gate.

The four who had heralded this new age, the ones who had finally banished Apakht from the universe and brought about the new world, passed through the town gates without fanfare nor joy. The air was silent, and none of the townspeople dared disturb it; they kept within their homes until the west gates were once again closed.

The four horsemen departed from the city, heading beyond the boundaries of Sumer, knowing they would never again return.

It wasn’t until night had fallen, and the first camp of their endless journey was complete, did they exchange their first words since departing.

‘Ninkigal,’ Giringeme croaked, shivering on a blanket beside the fire.

‘Yes?’

‘Of everything… you did… today…’

‘Yes, what?

‘… why did you… rub bread… on my face?’

Arakur turned to Ninkigal; she grinned.

‘No reason in particular.’

« Charon (Part 2: Katabasis) || Charon (Part 3: Asphodel) || ??? »
«« Charon (Part 1: Nekyia)

Chasing Interest

Within its watery lair, the creature known to some as Oneiroi lurked.

Prone in its oily pool, feelers extended, senses probing the surface, it searched. It waited. It is difficult to say for how long it so waited, as the creature inhabited a realm in which time was mostly a matter of perception, and the creature was not, as a whole, all that interested in time. Time belongs to those with purpose, and the creature known as Oneiroi lacked one, or at least any purpose that could be recognized as such by any other living being. What fueled the creature, what pushed it to silently contemplate its thought-basin with such single-minded intent, was only… desire.

The scent of fear-dream was about, and the creature known as Oneiroi intended to be the first to seize it. For a while it waited. Then… a ripple in the pool. A breaking of the oily water surface. An image, a momentary glimpse of fluttering emotion, trapped in the torpor of restless slumber. The hint of a… taste, and something more. The creature known as Oneiroi was incapable of humor or true pleasure, but nonetheless it found some satisfaction in this next discovery; this prey was in the hands of those who poked in the dark, those who sought to stop it from feasting. Those it hated. The meal would be all the sweeter if the morsel was stolen straight from their hands.

Rising from the thought-basin, the creature known as Oneiroi retired to its face vault to prepare itself. The pattern of the thought-basin told it much about its potential target, and as the creature sank its many-jointed limbs into the soft clay of the face vault it began shaping itself, taking a form more suitable for the task at hand. For the creature known as Oneiroi to fulfill its desire, an emotional bonding must be facilitated with its prey, and a sense of trust established. Though the creature lacked the emotional faculties to truly understand its potential targets, it was nevertheless a cunning thing and well familiar with the behavioral patterns of prey.

The shape it took reflected this well. Feelers disappeared beneath a layer of tanned, well lined skin. Empty sight orbs replaced with warm brown eyes, made to twinkle in the light. Muscles bunched and straightened, bone and blood vessels replaced mucous and transparent membrane. The clay of the face vault transformed the chitinous visage of creature known as Oneiroi into that of a man. Not young, for youth often inspired envy or competition in others. Age demanded respect, or at least pity. Clothing simple but not threadbare. A straight posture, confident without appearing threatening. With the final, most crucial touch, the creature weaved a kindly smile into its clay face and etched it with laughter lines and crow's feet, set the eyes to a thoughtful, considering gaze. Its prey would be in a vulnerable position, and nothing would serve better in pushing it over the final edge than the illusion of kindness. The creature known as Oneiroi felt a vague sense of pride in the fullness of the illusion it had created. Soon, it would feast.

Satisfied with its new form, the creature returned to the thought-basin, sinking its feelers (now thin threads of silvery hair tumbling from a weathered brow) into its depths. The scent of the dream reflected in the basin was… intoxicating. Bitter isolation and sweet terror, the tang of vain hope and and the acid bite of claustrophobia. Everything about this fear-dream felt tailor-made to the creature's personal tastes. Though the creature known as Oneiroi was usually as cautious as a roach and would spend many days probing and feeling the mind of its would-be prey, the lure of this dream proved too much for it to resist. The creature will have it tonight, it had decided.

Gathering its essence, the creature known as Oneiroi began to fold itself inward. Skin into bone, hair into blood. With a sickening crunching sound the creature pushed itself into itself again and again, its vision growing ever more compact and focused even as it broke itself. The way into the dream-roads and the dreamer it sought permitted no physical essence. The creature's mind would have to keep it intact as it traveled. The pain of this process was beyond description and sanity, but the creature known as Oneiroi thought as its essence swirled and oozed through the narrow channels of sleep, it would all be worth it soon. What were pain and dissemination when compared to the chance at a fresh mind? Not much at all

indeed. Not much at all.

The prisoner awoke to a grey landscape. He no longer wondered at this, as this was the same place his dreams took him to for the last… he no longer remembered how long. Distant mountains slashed at the overcast sky, a rough hand closing the horizons of his world with its ashen fingers. Despite the familiarity of his surroundings the prisoner cringed from them, teeth rattling in his jaw, hands shaking. This place managed to convey a sense of massive distance and overwhelming size without the airs of openness and freedom such places should have also inspired.

The prisoner sank to his knees and covered his head with his hands, willing himself not to see. The grey world of his dreams was materialized oppression, imprisonment made manifest. In that, it was little different from his waking world. He briefly wondered why his captors took such great care to subjugate his sleeping hours as well as the waking, but this thought escaped him in an instant. Though he did not know it, he was not allowed to ponder such things. For some time the prisoner could do naught but weep and pound the dry earth with his fists in a childish tantrum as he bemoaned the cruelty of his fate. The grey world accepted his cries and wails with utter indifference. The prisoner shouted vehement accusations and venomous curses at the sky and the mountains and the gritty grey earth. The world cared even less. The prisoner dug a small hole in the ground, vainly searching for a hint of moisture beneath dry surface. If the world could yawn and shrug, it would have done so. Finally, the prisoner did what he did every night prior to this one and simply began to wander in no particular direction. He did not truly expect to find anything, but it was a way to pass the time until his inevitable waking. This night, however, was different.

There was a man standing on a small grey hillock. His tall frame was robed with fabric flowing and purest white. The eyes set deeply in his kindly and weathered face were the color of moist earth, warm and comforting and twinkling with sourceless light. He was old but not frail and his posture radiated quiet confidence. The ground on which he stood was gleaming, bright gunmetal grey replacing the dull ash of the rest of the prisoner's dreamtime gaol. The prisoner

could only gape as the man slowly began to descend from his vantage point. Every point of the ground touched by the strange man's bare feet was made an aurora of steel as he made his way towards the prisoner. The smile never left his face as he approached, and as he came closer to the prisoner he lifted a sinewy brown hand in greeting, as if the two were the oldest and dearest of friends. The prisoner froze in place as the man finally reached him and laid a companionable hand on his shoulder. It felt right.

"Ah, my boy. It's been too long. Too long by far."

"I… wha.."

"Ha! Loquacious and sharp as always, I see!"

"Er. I'm, I'm sorry and- who are you?"

The man frowned at this, and leaned closer to peer into the prisoner's eyes. Apparently whatever he saw there horrified him, for he shook his head and quickly leaned away.

"Oh. My poor lad. What have they done to you?" In his voice was great sadness, but not surprise. The prisoner briefly wondered at that, but his suspicion was quickly banished by the man's disarming smile. He was a friend to be trusted. Yes.

"Can you remember who you are, my boy?"

The prisoner didn't know how to reply to that. His mouth opened, but his words were swallowed by flashes of needles, of voices endlessly whispering commands through ceiling speakers, of blinding flashes of light. He stayed silent instead. The man seemed to understand anyway.

"Easy, lad. Don't stress yourself. I'm here now, no harm will come to you while I'm here."

The prisoner had no reason to believe this, but he found that he did. "Can you help me then? Can you… can you get me out of here?"

The man shook his head, his entire being sorrowful serenity. "I

cannot undo this. You know I can't. Your flesh… it's beyond my grasp. For them to sink so low…" he stopped, seemingly reconsidering. "There might be something I can do, if you are willing."

"Anything! Please, anything to get out of here! The grayness, the dullness of it all, I can't take it anymore! I can't can't-,"

"Easy now. Easy. What I said before was true. I can't get you out of here. Even if I would, you'd still be at their hands. They'll just throw you right back in."

"But… you said you could-"

"What I can do, if you are willing to pay the price, is change what 'here' is."

"What do you mean?"

The man glanced at their grey surroundings for a moment, sighed, then dropped to a sitting position on the ground. He gestured the prisoner to do the same. "Look around you. What do you see?"

The prisoner frowned. "I already told you what I see. It's damn obvious what I see! Grey and grey and fucking more grey!"

The man smiled and shook his head sadly. "You see the surface of things. What they're making you see, through drugs and psychology and torture. But you do not see the actuality."

The prisoner said nothing. The man continued. "Look at the ground on which we sit. It is different from that which is around us, no?"

It was. The gleaming gunmetal which surrounded the man's footsteps earlier now spread to encompass the entire hillock. The ground was warm to the touch, almost malleable.

"What you see here is the true soil of the dream, laid bare and raw from the false grit of your captors. Observe."

The man lowered his hand to the ground and cupped a fistful of shimmering earth. Shaped between his thumb and index finger, the

soil soon began to take shape. Metallic earth was worked like wet clay at a potter's wheel and was… transformed. With a final twist of his hand, the man revealed his new creation. A shining purple plum now rested in his palm. The prisoner stared at it incredulously. The man offered him the plum and the prisoner took it. It was fragrant and sour-sweet and more wonderful than anything he had tasted for months. The man took another fistful of earth from the ground and continued speaking:

"This terrain holds within it infinite possibility. Imagine what you could do if you were not imprisoned as you are. It is not only a matter of your current predicament, you see. Your prison isn't concrete or chains or people. You are trapped in flesh, in hunger and weariness, in sin. Consider what you could be if you were freed from all of those." The man's hands continued working as he spoke, shaping earth.

"Now consider no longer, remove yourself from yourself. Live in the dream and only in the dream." The man opened his hands and a bright blue bird emerged from them and took flight, "*Do.*"

The prisoner found he had not the will to resist this notion. He didn't mind much. Taking a handful of shining dirt in hand, he drew himself open. He flew.

---

yes…

The creature known as Oneiroi could almost taste it now. It had not imagined it would be so easy. The captors took things too far this time, made the life of their prisoner too unbearable. To disconnect him from his reality was almost a mercy. The creature had no notion as to why the captors would wish to torment their prisoners while they were sleeping. From its knowledge of them, the captors were not usually prone to acts of senseless cruelty. Perhaps if the scent of an open and vulnerable mind was not so tantalizing, it might have wondered more. Perhaps it would have been more cautious. But it did not wonder as it shook away its human guise and pounced on the hapless prisoner, shredding his already battered and tormented being like steel shears taken to soft hide. Only as it took the first delicious bite and found the trap beneath it did it realize its mistake.

By then it was far too late.

Two figures watched from behind a reinforced glass panel as the gaunt, wasted figure of the prisoner writhed and screamed. The tall dark woman and the short pale man looked impassively at the creature's futile attempt at escape.

"It is trapped. We have done it," said the woman, adjusting the thin wire spectacles on her sharp nose.

"Yes, the experiment was a complete success. It cannot leave the host body now," said the man, smoothing his slightly too white lab coat over his plump form.

"And the subject?" she asked.

"Gone, it would seem. So we expected."

"Once again we have protected the world. But at what cost?"

"No cost is too great for our mission. We secured the creature, we now contain it. We protected the world. That is all there is to say."

"This was a human being. We are turning ourselves into something less than human. Into monsters."

The man turned to the woman. Their eyes met.

"How can we be monsters if I still love you?" he asked, gazing at her blankly and seriously.

"I have told you before, I cannot love you back. I am too awfully scarred by my tragic history." she replied, equally blankly.

"We have lost so much in our duty, have we not?" Something twitched just beneath the plump man's eyelid. A smile was slowly creeping to his pale face.

The woman answered him with a smile of her own. "It has been difficult. Humanity has suffered… er. Suffered so much, yes. We must protect it. Yeah."

"Securing and containing and protecting. For the good of all. Sacrificing and such. Procedures and grimness. We have all felt the… the grimness of our fate. Hehe."

"Much and more. I know you too have felt the grim mark of tragedy on your life. Was not your sister *snrk* mauled to death by an anomalous lemur?"

"Yes, this is true. My family could not recover from this event. Indeed, my father, who too was a researcher, went on a *hehehe* blood vendetta after that day. He vowed to kill all primates of preternatural origin."

"Ah, so I recall." The woman paused, then gasped theatrically. "Wait! I did not realize this until now! Your father *pff* ahm, your father was the one to cause the Stripetail Blood Wars of 68! IT IS BECAUSE OF YOU THAT I LOST MY HUSBAND TO THOSE RACCOON MARAUDERS!"

"HE DID IT FOR US, LINDA! FOR US!"

"DON'T CALL ME LINDA, YOU-pfff hahaha! Jesus, man, your goddamn face!" laughed the woman, all traces of seriousness gone. She smacked the man heartily on the shoulder.

"Ow! Hahaha! I'm sorry, couldn't help myself anymore! Bloody Foundation, how do they keep up with this bullshit?"

"Don't ask me, man. Sounds damn exhausting to me. Think we fooled them there for a bit?"

"I dunno. Probably not. I think we were way too obvious about it, made it more of a farce than the actual thing."

"Ah well, I think it counts as a twist anyway. Make them think it was the Foundation who caught the thing then it turns out it wasn't and all that. That's the important bit, right?"

"Hrm. Not sure, actually. Could be a good idea to check."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to bother it. It's all for the goal after all. Here, let me get to you. Hold still."

With that, the woman leaned down until her forehead touched with that of the man. As they did, a missive was passed between them, so fast that even the nigh omniscient eye of the reader could not quite see what it contained. It did catch a sense of satisfaction, however. The woman leaned back, and she and the man clasped each other's arms.

"Ah!" she said, "the Consortium Independent is happy, hehe! We have made things *interesting*! The readers will take note now."

"Aye, and the Consortium Independent is us!"

"We live to tell and be told another day. Pretty damn awesome as far as I'm concerned."

"Hmm. You think we can do something with that creature though? Seems like an awful waste to just flush it after all that work."

"Well, it's a wee bit purple, but we can train it, I think."

"Ooh, we can use it for a feature! It will be great for that."

"Better than great. *Interesting*."

The two stood silent for a moment, basking in their mutual contentment. Finally, the woman patted the man on the head. "Guess we're done here then."

"Which means…"

"Booze?"

"Booze."

With this, the two began to leave. As they did, they threw down their overly white lab coats to the floor and stepped on them with vigor. As they left the chamber and the still screaming prisoner in it, the man asked:

"Do you think they got the deal with the initials?"

"Eh. They can always just look below."

Chasing Tails

Mikhael Andreyev had never really liked Jews, and he despised Americans, so when he received a report that a pair of American Jew spies for the KGB had found evidence of a *merzost* in the Southwestern desert, he was annoyed. Although any anomaly on American soil would have been enough for the report to be forwarded to the GRU Psychotronics Division, what made it a priority was that it had appeared from space in a craft that, per the report, bore the Soviet flag on it. Anything that could be used as a weapon against the Americans, especially something already marked as belonging to the USSR, had to be recovered or destroyed.

He briefly thought about setting a false trail for those fools at the Foundation to "accidentally" discover it and take care of it for him, but quickly decided that it was more important to find out where it came from and why Division "P" didn't seem to have any files that matched the description of the beast. Better to send some field agents to acquire the creature.

That evening, after closing his tailor's shop in Brooklyn, he stopped by the Western Union and sent a telegram to a distant cousin who lived in Las Vegas, inviting him and his family to come visit in November. He also stopped for a few minutes at a public phone booth and made a short call to a man with a thick Texas accent. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Andreyev placed an order for some specialty fabrics and then went home for the night.

Jonathon Walters had been best friends with Bud Jacobson ever since they were assigned as partners by Divison "P". The two men had covered their true allegiances so well that even their wives didn't know, nor did they suspect anything when the friends got a wild hair and went off camping and hunting for a weekend in the desert without warning. Just boys being boys, after all, and the men certainly knew better than to cheat on their wives, or if they did, not

to bring anything home with them. The fact that their hunting gear was rather more professional than would be expected of casual hunters escaped their wives, who were just grateful to have a weekend to themselves.

After leaving home, Jon and Bud stopped at a nondescript house on the outskirts of Las Vegas and swapped cars, putting their Buick in the garage before driving off in an equally nondescript pickup truck that disguised a powerful engine and bullet-proof cabin.

They spent the next few hours chatting amiably about various local sports teams and the relative merits of their favorite and least favorite players. It wasn't until the final hour of the drive that Jon finally broached the subject of their mission.

"Group leader says that this dog, or whatever the critter is, is being held at that UIU facility outside Salt Lake that they think we don't know about. It's supposed to only be lightly fortified, so I'm thinking smash-and-grab?"

"Nah," Bud replied. "Maybe if we knew where exactly it was inside, but if we have to search for it, it'd be better to do it sneakier. Knockout gas in the vents?"

"That could work, but I bet they have windows open with this heat. One-on-one knockouts would be better, I think. I'm pretty sure the safe house in Salt Lake has some gas masks, so we can stop by there first. It'd be better to do this tonight, too, so there's fewer people to deal with."

"Sounds like a plan, bud."

"Hey, I'm Jon. *You're* Bud!" Jon laughed at the well-worn joke. "Now keep your eyes on the road while I go over the floorplans."

A grin on his face, Bud kept driving, the setting sun glowing red at their backs.

Special Agent Walsh was not having a good day. After the surprise inspection by Director Hoover, he and Fredericks had been

assigned as the official dog-wranglers. It wasn't like Walsh disliked dogs, but he was leery about hanging around one that could cover you in radiation scars while licking your face. It didn't help that he kept having paperwork forwarded to him that had nothing to do with any of his cases, so that he spent at least an hour a day just returning stuff to the mailroom. At least he didn't have to deal with the snail man, though. Just the thought of what he did to people made Walsh's skin crawl.

Walsh had just finished transferring some dogshit to a lead-lined box and was typing out the internal transit slip when the lights flickered and died. He frowned in the sudden darkness and picked up the telephone receiver to call the switchboard for a line to the lobby, but the phone was dead. He retrieved his gun from the desk and groped his way over to the door leading to the hallway. He carefully cracked the door open and bent over to look through the crack at waist height. Wan moonlight was shining through a window at the end of the hall, but he couldn't see any suspicious movements. He didn't realize it was already so late, but it was easy to lose track when dealing with some of the things they had in custody.

Still, it wasn't storming, and the facility had a backup generator anyway, so it was *highly* unlikely that both the power and the internal phone lines going out was a random occurrence. Walsh quietly opened the door the rest of the way, went through, and closed it behind him. He didn't have the key to lock it, but hopefully that wouldn't be a problem. He crept down the hall as quietly as he could, but even so, the slight tap-tap-tap of his footsteps seemed to echo in his ears. He paused before turning the corner, listening for anything around the other side. Hearing only silence, he ducked around the corner and faced another empty hallway, lined with doors to other offices.

He went down the hallway slowly, glancing at each door to make sure none were suspiciously ajar. By the time he made it to the stairwell entrance at the end, his paranoia was oddly both heightened and lessened at the same time, precisely *because* he hadn't found anything to justify it yet. He opened the stairwell door as quietly as he could, but couldn't help but internally flinch at the slight squeak that was normally unnoticeable during the day but

seemed as loud as a siren in the dark. The window across from the door gleamed with the same weak light as the hallway, barely illuminating the stairs.

He made his way down the concrete steps to the ground floor and the thankfully silent door to the lobby of the building. He carefully looked through the door's window and didn't see any abnormal movement, which in itself was worrisome, as he'd have expected the overnight security at the front desk to be there. He left the confines of the stairwell and made his way to the dark area behind the desk, where he found the security guard slumped in the footwell, unconscious. Walsh checked him quickly and professionally, but didn't find any blood or lumps on the head. It must've been chloroform or something like it, but how did the assailants get so close without the guard getting suspicious?

Walsh didn't even have to think about it; anyone invading the building at this time of night must be after one of the suspects in custody downstairs. Moving more rapidly now, he made a beeline for the depths of the ground floor, where the secure elevator to the custody cells was. Sure enough, the doors were pried open, held in place by an H-shaped metal bar at ankle height. A rope was tied to it, trailing down into the depths. He stuck his head into the shaft and saw the roof of the elevator 20 feet below, the emergency hatch open.

He briefly debated waiting for the invaders to come back this way, but there was too much danger that they would kill or damage the beings down below. Cursing under his breath, he climbed down the rope and then dropped himself down the hatch into the pitch black elevator. He felt for the doors and found them pried open too, another H-bar holding them open at the bottom. He saw light reflected off the wall at the end of the corridor in front of him, where another hallway crossed it. The shape of another slumped body was beside the doors of the elevator. Walsh regretted passing it by, but he didn't have time.

He drew his gun and crept down to the junction. He pressed against the wall right before the corner and listened carefully. There was silence, until he heard a sudden, distant angry barking.

Oh for Christ's sake, they're going after the darn dog*?! Hope they brought their radiation gear. No, wait, I don't.*

Without many options available, Walsh spun around the corner, gun pointed down the corridor. He spotted two men in dark clothes and gas masks about halfway down the long corridor, one halfway into the entry chamber for the dog's cell, one facing back towards Walsh.

Crap.

"Shit."

With that, the man facing Walsh went to draw some complicated-looking gun at his side while his companion dove into the doorway, taking himself out of the line of fire. Walsh's training took over and he aimed and shot at the man down the hallway. A graze to the shoulder rather than a direct hit. Walsh took aim again and fired, a fraction of a second before the other man did. Walsh saw the other man's shoulder jerk back as the small canister struck him right in the sternum and gas broke free of it. The strike huffed the air out of Walsh's lungs and he involuntarily took a deep gasp to recover his breath, inhaling the strange gas.

Almost immediately he felt his head start swimming. As he fell and felt consciousness slipping away, he saw the man walk towards him, his silhouette menacing in the light of the flashlight dropped to the ground by the open door to the cell.

Bud looked down at the ass who'd shot him. Everything else had been going smoothly, probably more so than could be reasonably expected, but he did *not* appreciate getting his shoulder hit like that. He kicked the unconscious man in the ribs before bending down and picking up the gas bullet. He put it in his pocket and walked back over to where Jon was crouched in the doorway.

"He's down and gone. I think that shot broke my shoulder, though. Will you be able to get the dog up the elevator by yourself?"

"Yeah, should be able to. There's a carrier in here and I can tie the rope to it. Let's hurry before anyone else shows up."

Bud nodded and took a guard position in the doorway while Jon collected the dog. He may not be as good a shot with his left arm, but it was still better than nothing. And he wouldn't be able to wrangle an upset dog into a carrier with only one arm.

There was some low cursing behind him as Jon discovered that the dog carrier was significantly heavier than he expected. Given the limited info they'd been given about the target, he suspected that it was lead-lined, but he hadn't realized just how heavy that much lead would be. Nevertheless, he maneuvered the carrier over to a door leading into the next chamber. He'd seen some hanging full-body suits over on the wall, but didn't have time to get into one. He figured that if he got the dog into the carrier fast enough, he should be okay.

It was some kind of airlock door with a big wheel in the middle to unlock it, like in a submarine or something. The wheel itself was easy to open, but the door was heavy. He suspected that it was steel with a lead lining, like the dog carrier. His skin started to feel warm and tingly as he pulled the door open, but once it was open enough to slip in with the lead box, Jon did so. The dog was in a corner, alternating between growling and barking at him.

It took a few abortive grabs before he was able to grab the thing by the scruff of its neck and shove it into the box, but he finally did so after about five minutes. Once it was inside, he quickly slammed the door shut and flipped the latch so it wouldn't open unexpectedly. After that, it was a relatively simple job to half-carry, half-drag the box out to where Bud stood watch.

Bud's shirt was visibly wet with blood in the light from the flashlights, but he was still upright, so he was in good enough shape for them to get out and to the safe house in Salt Lake. Getting out took longer than either of them was comfortable with, but between Bud being one-handed and the damn dog moving around in the heavy box, they did the best they could. Really the hardest part was getting back up the rope to the main floor. After a half hour they were back in the truck, the dog carrier in the back, and on their way to the safe house.

Jon was starting to feel sick to his stomach, and his skin was itching something fierce, but he put it down to nerves about nabbing

something as dangerous as that dog. He didn't even notice the weird sunburn-looking patches on his face and hands until they were back at the safe house and he'd finished vomiting into the toilet.

He was having trouble thinking straight, but he was fairly sure that he was in trouble.

« Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them? | HUB | Where Your Eyes Don't Go »

Children Of Doubt

My sons have left me.

I was once a proud father of five boys, each with their own great ambitions and plans. As our days went by, the sound of them whispering their plans was sometimes all I could hear. My first son was an unhappy lad, with a vicious streak. He wanted to break men, and see them beg him for death. When he left, it was under the cover of night, never to visit me.

He made his home with a vicious clan of madmen, who shared his bloodlust. Used for an unimaginable number of tortures and slayings, my son made these men his friends, and grew to trust them. He was surprised then, when his blade went dull, they cast him aside for new toys.

Happily, my second son harbored no such ambition. His lot in life was simpler, as he only wished to make men beautiful. I cannot say I completely approved of his lifestyle, but can say that I was happy for him nonetheless.

Sadly, he met his end over a matter of taste. While giving his treatment to a man of different caliber, they had a disagreement over what style to use. It eventually came to blows, and this man knocked my sons teeth out. Never the same, he died broken.

The third boy to leave me was not as determined as my other kin. Spineless and weak, he let others fill him with whatever they pleased, and repeated it to whomever could hear him. His lies were completely transparent, leaving him untrustworthy and useless. The worst came with his judgemental attitude, which made him despised and contemptible. Death came to him through the carelessness of one and the carefulness of another. So I was left with only two kin.

My next child believed cleanliness was godliness. I don't have any memories of him not cleaning something, or trying to keep tidy. It

seemed his whole goal in life was to wipe out the literal scum of the earth. Coming to the enemies of my first son, they found ways for him to keep the world clean.

One day, after many years of service, he looked down upon his body to find it ingrained with the very dirt and grime he had worked to wash out over the years. Taking his talents to his own body, he scrubbed and bleached until there was nothing left at all. So, I was left with one.

Now, my final boy was nobody special. All he ever wanted to do with his life was to keep people happy, nothing more and nothing less. When presented to the madmen, they found nothing worthwhile about him. So they gave him to a young man. I'm proud to say, he changed that man's life, becoming his most valuable possession and travelling companion. He saw everything that came from the man's mouth, becoming the keeper of his secrets.

Eventually, most of his bristles fell out and he became a wizened old ivory pick. The young man kept him still, despite being useless in his first path. He was given a new purpose, opening gateways and helping to make the man very wealthy. My son died happy, knowing he had made his mark. I wish I could say the same.

In my cold box, I wait for another to behold me. Although my legacy has died, I live on, sitting patiently and quietly. When the time draws near, they shall see themselves within me, and be struck down by doubt and confusion. My sons may be forgotten, but without a doubt, I will always remember them.

Children Will Listen

> **Note:** This is **Part 6** of a 7-part story. It is recommended that you start from the beginning with **`SCP-3475 - Our Shifting Foundations`**.

Annette chose a school. Of course they chose a school. The final insult.

The nuke jumbled some sense back into me. I can feel the Foundation conditioning again. With it, it is hard to see the light. With it comes the guilt and the shame, and now, the school. Damn.

"Why did you choose this place?"

NEEDED QUIET PLACE. THIS WAS EMPTY. ABANDONED BUILDING.

I nod glumly. Annette is out of battle mode, at least. Those things are no threat to us. No threat to anybody. They are happy. I decide to probe further. To pick at the scab, to poke the bruise.

"Do you know what this place was?"

S C H O O L?

I need to tell someone. I can't. Maybe it will come out? I remember the blurs in the car, trapped in something they could no longer perceive, could no longer experience. Dying alone, together. I shake my head. It still aches. Everything aches. The deconditioner is almost done. It is a nice little box in my head, waiting to be opened. It cries to be opened. It promises blackness. The scene will go like this:

We will enter the school. The dashing Doctor Williams will be on a bier, surrounded by medical equipment, serene and sedated. Annette will grab me by the shoulder, begging me one last time not

to do it, not to go through. I shake them off and continue unfazed. I will lean down to ear level and, in one breathy whisper—

I do not want to enter the school. The school is bad, the school is guilt.

We enter the school.

Empty corridors. Annette holds out a hand. The disc is off.

SMTG HRE

They take off down the corridor, skittering up the wall. I try to make myself small in a corner of the entryway. I swear I can hear little feet patters, but that is impossible, because if anyone was here, I would hear nothing at all.

Annette rounds the corner at full speed. They slam into me, picking me up off my feet and hauling me towards the door. I manage to reach out and tap their shoulder:

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE"

We reach the door. They stop.

"S KCO"

They drop me and reactivate their wrist.

WHT R U TRNG SY

"Stop," I say. "I know what they are."

I pull myself up to my full height and look up at Annette. Their eyes meet mine, on what must be reflex.

"Please take me to Williams."

She is nothing like I expected. Annette has her on a haphazard altar of desks, more functional than aesthetic. One leg is bent off at a hideous angle. Red stains surround her mouth. A half-empty IV bag drains into her arm. What was once her face is now pitted and

rotten, covered in a black mold.

Annette, seeing this, lets out a keening moan. They rush over and do something. My head hurts.

"Do you see them?"

YES.

"How do humans reproduce?"

Silence. They walk over to me, kneel down, and look me in the eye.

WHY?

The words come spilling out of me now. They vanished, one day. The children. Anyone under the age of 18, the beginning of the end.

What is the medium of humans but ideas? There is a river through human history, an ever-wheeling flow of memes. And then, one day, it shifted. Rivers in some places will naturally reverse direction—buck and break their banks in a titanic gallop, until what went one way now goes another. I think that was what happened with the ideas, and what happened with humanity—one day it just changed course, to something new.

Some things cannot be removed, not entirely. You can never hold back a river. We were running out of amnestics. Too many disasters had happened too fast. The stars had gone. 'Leave it to the memeticists,' they said. Hah! Memetics is the poisoned craft, and we the poisoners. But they dumped it on our lap and amnesticized themselves—amnesticized the whole Foundation, leaving us alone in our guilt. And there are some things you cannot remove, some things embedded too deep in the human psyche. And we were asked to remove something not even amnestics could touch?

And so I took that impulse and re-channeled it. Me, and me alone. I was the only one that could do it—not the skill, the will. Like the stars. Everyone knows stars are in the sky, so you put in new stars and no one notices. Their children go, you make new children. Or change the impulse, the drive. Redirect. Transform. Their children are the grass and the breeze and the stars in the sky. All of those

things and more.

And what about the children? What happened to them? How many starved in front of parents that could not see them? How many babies cried unanswered until they cried no more? When I made people forget, did they stay people? Did I do a good thing? Then why do I feel so bad?

Annette stares at me.

"Well?" I demand. I stand up tall, puff out my chest. "What are you going to do?"

Their eyes meet mine. I know, suddenly, that they pity me. That they have always pitied me, that they have always pitied memeticists more than I have pitied myself. They walk away, and there is no catharsis.

Somewhere in the room there are children.

"I'm sorry," I call, knowing they cannot know or care.

Somewhere inside of me, the last piece slides into place.

How to forget what I have done? I know of one way, at least. The box is taut and sleek. It cannot explode on its own but it wants to, I can feel, wants to *so* badly. As I sit I feel my body become heavier. It becomes harder to breathe. Something is on my chest. Something must be on my chest. My head is pounding. I feel flushed. Too late I realize what is happening. I look to Annette. What never were eyes stare back.

"Are they trying to kill me?" I whisper.

NO.

I am a fool. I start to cry. I cry for a long long time, not for them, but for me. They seem to understand.

The river may shift, but it does not go away. Maybe there is something on the other side. What I saw in the city could hardly be human, but it was *alive*. There can be light in darkness; what else

are stars?

I jerk upright. I do not know how long I have sat on the floor. My head is about to explode. I stagger over to Williams, and take one last look at her ruined face.

"You can survive the deconditioner?"

NO CONDITIONING.

"Decide what to do with it."

I WILL.

They pause.

GOODBYE.

THANK YOU.

They mean it.

I lean down, to the level of the ear. A hole to the brain. I take a deep breath. The box never wanted to be opened. It was always me. Maybe things will change. Maybe things have to change.

I whisper: I'm sorry:

The dam breaks. There is light. I see Williams for the first time, as Annette must. She smiles at me. In the light I see Annette, as they always are.

There is music. I do not know who is playing it, but there is music.

All around me are children. They see me and laugh.

There are stars. There are children.

In their eyes are stars.

« **It Takes Two** | Children Will Listen | Birth of a New Day »

Track 1: Old Chilly The Space Trucker

"Old Chilly the Space Trucker"

By Brooke

I don't care what you assholes think, we don't have enough drum songs on the EP. How about we do one about that trucker we met on the way to Sacramento? What was his name? -Brooke

Drum intro
Guitars
More drums
More guitars

VERSE 1

We were travelin' along, feeling tired and blue,
when a man pulled up beside me and my crew,
He said, "Hey there kids, do you wanna take a ride?
Sit right here beside me, let me show you the skies!"
Naturally we thought this was a chance we couldn't skip,
and jumped up in that cab with Chilly and took a trip.

The truck was big and loud!
Yeah yeah yeah!
The fumes were pink and green!
Yeah yeah yeah!
The driver was a psycho!
Yeah yeah yeah!
And a party machine!
Yeah yeah yeah!

VERSE 2

The old man tipped his hat, said “Old Chilly’s the name,
I drive all across the universe delivering grain.
See people in those galaxies have gotta eat too,
and sometimes use the grains to ferment tasty space brew.”
I asked him how he turned his big rig into a ship,
he laughed and said “I had to give some space techs a sip!”

The sky was dark and vast!
Yeah yeah yeah!
We sped throughout the stars!
Yeah yeah yeah!
Chilly wore an old cap!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He traveled near and far!
Yeah yeah yeah!

Drum Solo -Brooke

Drum solo? I’ve gone through the music you’ve written out like a half dozen times, and I haven’t seen any guitar tab or chords written anywhere. Are there supposed to be any other instruments in this besides a drum set? -Morgan
Nope. -Brooke
Fuck. -Morgan

VERSE 3

Old Chilly parked us down inside an asteroid field,
and motioned for us to grab a brew case that was sealed.
We followed him across the way to a small dive bar,
around which were parked many a strange space-faring car.
He kicked open the door, took a breath, and yelled,
“More space brew from Kansas, ya’ll best come help yourself!”

Chilly was dancin all night!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He made out with a space hag!
Yeah yeah yeah!

She was a dreadful sight!
Yeah yeah yeah!
Oh how her titties did sag!
Yeah yeah yeah!

VERSE LAST

Chilly pulled over on the side of the road, back home,
Said “If you ever need me children just hit up my phone.
I’m really never far from a mobile satellite,
Unless I’m in Proxima Centauri for the night.”
We waved as he drove his big rig into the sky,
That Chilly sure was one hell of a space truckin guy!

Chilly taught us about space!
Yeah yeah yeah!
And flew a hefty brew barge!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He may be gone from our lives,
Yeah yeah yeah!
But his influence was large!
Yeah yeah yeeeeeeah!

Drum Outro

This is dumb. I wasn’t even on that trip. -Clyde

« Prologue: Water Coalesces And Descends As Rain | Hub | The Surfside Beat »

Chowderclef

Darkness loomed over the streets of Night City, the shadows casting long shadows over the cracked asphalt pavement, the city's dark darkness lurking deep within its shriveled black hearts, as black as pitch and as shriveled as the lungs of a chain-smoking sailor.

Joe Knife pinned the girl up against the wall, his ugly, slobbering face sneering as he sneeringly pulled up her skirt. "Don't worry," he sneered. "I'll make sure this hurts a lot. I'm a rapist, this is what I do, rape and things like that."

It was then that he was clobbered by a bowl of chowder, steaming hot and packed with delicious clams and white potatoes, cooked just to firmness, with quite a few celery bits as well to give snap and flavor. It was New England clam chowder, for the figure who stood on the rooftop wearing a black apron and a tall chef's hat made of black cloth (blacker than the blackest of blacks that a black-wearing goth kid would wear at midnight) was not fond of tomatoes in his clam chowder, and considered it an abberation, nay, a heresy, which must be purged.

Joe Knife screamed in pain as he raised his gun and fired it at the rooftop, but the black-clad, mysterious figure was too fast for him, and vanished in a flash of black cloth. "Come out!" he screamed. "Who the hell are you? Where the fuck are you coming from?"

"Right here," said a voice, and it pounded him in the back of the skull with a ladle.

Joe Knife grabbed the back of his head. "OW! That HURTS!" he shouted. "And you didn't answer my question, who are you?"

The mysterious stranger drew himself up to his full mysterious seven feet of height, and the grin on his face was wide and mysterious. Moonlight glinted off the horns on his forehead.

"The name is Clef," he said. "Chowderclef. Defender of the World."

CHOWDERCLEF, DEFENDER OF THE WORLD

CHAPTER 1: THE BADASS AND THE HOT CHICKS WHO WANT TO BONE HIM, OR BE BONED BY HIM

Site 19 was in a tizzy. "Oh no!" shouted Doctor Rights. "All the SCPs are out of their pens!"

"I'll save you!" said Doctor Clef, and he ran into the room with his shotgun.

"Oh noes," said SCP-682. "It is Clef. He gong to kill us."

"Ha ha ha!" said Doctor Clef, and he shot at SCP-682 with his shotgun rocket missiles.

"Argh!" shouted SPC-682, and it fell down and was ded.

"You saved us!" said Doctor Rights, and she kissed him. And then they had sex.

"The SCP Foundation would fall apart without Doctor Clef here," said Doctor Gears, and he gave Clef a promotion to O5.

To everyone at Site 19, Doctor Clef was just a mild mannered researcher, an ordinary guy like any other.

But Doctor Clef had a sekrets. At night, when the rest of Site 19 was alseep, he put on a black chef's toke and a black aporn. And he went to the Site 19 kitchen and he made a big pot of clam chowder. Then he went to Gotham City or Night City or Metropolis and he fought crime. He was Chowderclef! Defendeer of the innocent and

the protector of the world.

This si his story.

"I'm sorry to call you away from your work on such short notice."

"Always glad to help out a senior staff member. What can I do for you?"

"I have a question for you. Do you remember this?"

"But of course. How could I forget? It took me hours to type up this report."

"Please read the report again."

"All right… it seems in order… wait. Oh my god…"

Vanessa Danielle Heartilly picked up her tray of food and walked over to the lunchroom table. Halfway, there, she felt something grab her backpack and pull her down. She stumbled and fell, scattering her milk and spaghetti all over the front of her shirt.

Alexis Evilmeir sneered at her. "Nice job, nerd," she said, flouncing her stringy blonde hair. "It looks good on you." She laughed and walked away, accompanied by the other popular researchers, who sat around with all of the jocks at their own table, gossiping about something stupid and lame.

Vanessa whimpered and knelt there on the lunchroom floor. A single tear rolled down her face and splashed on the food. "Get the hell up and clean that up," the lunch lady said, and Vanessa slowly got to her feet and started to gather up the fallen food.

Then a hand reached down and helped her. "Here," a soft, gentle voice said. "Let me help."

She looked up into the face of the most handsome man she had ever seen. His eyes were limpid blue, green, and brown orbs, their sparkling hues warming her heart, and his perfect white skin peeked

from under the collar of his immaculate white labcoat. A broad smile on his face as he carefully wiped the tear from her cheek and licked it off the tip of his finger. "Beautiful girls shouldn't cry," he said.

"I'm not beautiful," Vanessa mumbled.

"I think you are. I've thought so for a long time," Doctor Clef said. "I've watched you for a very long time, you know." He picked her up off the ground and carried her away, while Alexis and her stupid friends looked on jealously.

"Are you sure this is a good idea," Vanessa whispered. "I mean, what if the other senior staff see?"

"Fuck the senior staff. Love is greater than this," Clef growled, and he started to take off her blouse. "But first, you need to know something," he whispered into her ear.

"Anything," gasped Vanessa.

"Late at night," Clef uttered, "I put on a black hat and apron and fight crime as Chowderclef."

"My god. How far has it spread?"

"As far as we can tell, to all of your records. Everything from your personnel files to your reports to your SCP articles."

"This is ridiculous. How could anyone believe any of this? Ex-GOC sniper? I was a clerk! And my god, I'd never been anywhere near a gun, much less used one… they're like bad…"

"Bad fanfiction, yes. ***SCP-732*** *is known to do that."*

"Can the records be retrieved?"

"Perhaps… but it will take a while. Some of them may never be completely restored."

"My god… all those years of work, all that data, reduced to the testosterone-laced ramblings of a preteen, violence-obsessed…"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Clef. I really am."

"DIE YOU MOTHERFUCKERS!" Clef screamed, and he blazed away with his twin Pancor Jackhammers, filling the air with lead. The zombies exploded into showers of gore, splattering blood and internal organs across the walls. "KEEP KILLING THEM, YOU FUCKERS, DON'T LET THEM GET AROUND US!"

"SIR!" screamed Strelnikov. "THE DAMNED CHECHEN ZOMBIES ARE COMING THROUGH THE WALLS!"

"FUCK THAT! KILL THEM ALL!" Clef roared. He threw down his twin Pancor Jackhammers and grabbed a pair of Mateba Autorevolvers, firing off the exotic .38 caliber weapons akimbo, as he dove under cover. "GRENADE OUT!"

A whole bandolier of grenades flew over the desk and landed in the middle of the group of zombies, turning them into chunks of writhing flesh. "It's over," Demitri said.

"No. Not yet," Clef snarled. He put on a black chef's hat and an apron. "The criminal scum who did this is still out there. We must bring him to justice."

"I'll go with you," Damitri said.

"No. I must do this alone," grimaced Clef. "Chowderclef always works alone."

— Alice screamed with pleasure. "Chowderclef, oh god, I love you!" she screamed, as she came. Chowderclef's massive, throbbing —

— "Fire photon torpedoes!" shouted Captain Picard. The U.S.S. Chowderclef raced after the Romulan invaders, firing a massive stream of photon torpedoes and quantum phasers, launching X-Wing fighters and Mark XI Vipers in massive —

— "CHOWDER FOR THE CHOWDERCLEF, POTATOES FOR THE

SPUD THRONE!" screamed the Chaos Space Marine, as he —

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"… no, I think I'll be fine. But as long as the initial infection is gone, we should be fine."

"You seem to be taking this well."

"It is actually pretty funny. And I must admit, this… other Doctor Clef… seems to have a much more interesting life than I do. Instead of being cooped up in a lab, he seems to be living the life of some kind of action movie star. Killing… sorry, what's the word 732 used… decommissioning SCPs… claiming to be Satan… he's actually quite the badass."

"Isn't that the truth. Some personnel claim that we should keep these older files, simply for entertainment purposes, at least."

"The originals will have to be restored, of course."

"But of course. In any case, that is all. Oh yes, and here."

"Ah, thank you. I'd wondered where they'd gone off to."

"I wouldn't want you to lose them. After all, you'll need these if you want to fight crime as Chowderclef."

END

Christmas

I always have grand plans that few people help me on. I'm just gullible that way. This time, it was 100 word stories for Christmas, a la Gaiman's "**Nicholas Was...**" I normally send one out in my Christmas cards (thanks again, Neil), and this year, I shared my story with the staff, including the idea that we all write one for the site. But, when time rolled around, there were only a handful of people who had managed to get one done: E4D (with Kens) and Mann. So, in honor of Christmas, I give you these stories. Feel free to add, but keep it at or very, very close to 100 words. Enjoy, kids!

-Troy

No Two Snowmen

Susie later thought, as blood and bile oozed from the gash in her stomach, that thorn branches were a poor choice for arms. They had been what snared her with ease, the thick vines coiling around her wrist, tiny dagger-like barbs digging into clothes first… then flesh.

But she mused for a moment that the hat they had found—neither silk nor top—was a miracle, and if miracles existed, then certainly, she might survive. But watching the other children scatter from the snowman in the pinkish snow quickly removed such illusions. As her wound turned from hot pain to cold, she closed her eyes.

-Troy

-EchoFourDelta and Dr Kens

I knew it was wrong, even as I swung the hammer down on the old

man's head. The bone shattered, and blood and brain sprayed out, matching the scarlet of his suit. Tears ran down my eyes as I struck again and again. I loved the old man. I knew it was wrong, but I had to you see, for my father. For honor. Only blood would make things right. He should never have done it, mistletoe or not. Not that the guilt was his alone. I would deal with her later.

You see, I saw mommy kissing Santa Claus.

-Dr Mann

Being a Jewish kid around Christmas time always made me somewhat annoyed. I always wanted a Santa, but what I got was two grandparents pinching my cheeks and a gift card for Best Buy. Seeing this, my father told me of the Hanukkah armadillo, an armadillo that acted in the same capacity as Santa, but delivered presents to all the good Jewish children.

So, perhaps simply for a laugh, my dad dressed up as a giant armadillo, and I sat on his lap and told him what I wanted. And when Hanukkah finally occurred my dad gave me exactly what I wanted.

A gift card for Futureshop.

-Salman corbette

I have been alive in this state for about a week, and there are a couple things that I've figured out. Firstly, I think I'm in a time (CHOP!) loop, because every eleven seconds, I wind up in the same place somehow. Second (CHOP! OW!) , axes really fucking hurt, and I feel one hacking at me all the time. Third, I am fully (CHOP!) conscious, even though my left arm keeps being chopped off. Finally, the sky is (CHOP! OW!) for some reason changing; it used to be my house, then it got all dark, then an office. Although it (CHOP!) is really hard to tell, what with everything outside being fisheyed and all the damn snow that keeps falling. And the worst (nonono CHOP!) bit is that my assailant isn't even human. In fact, other than his facial features, he's completely made of snow. (AUGH! CHOP! AUGH!). And here we go again!

-Reject

I had always thought that reindeer were majestic, noble creatures. With their grand antlers and fine coats, to see one up close would be so special! That's why when the old man said he would take me to see the great herd I was as giddy as could be! Wild herds could reach hundreds of thousands, though this herd was far greater! When we first saw them I couldn't believe their numbers, their tranquil nature! Now with our sleigh overturned, the old man tramped, my leg broken, I can only think of how naive I was about such wild animals..

-toadking07

Billy was over the moon.
Christmas morning and he was allowed to open one of his presents early. As he pondered which present to open, he heard a voice from one of the boxes. “Release me this instant, you bandits!”, the voice yelled.

Billy opened the box to see a funny-looking robot.
“Big mistake, meatbag!”, it shouted.
“Wow,” Billy exclaimed, “a real robot!”
He reached for his new toy when the doorbell rang.
He sprang up with a sigh and ran for the door.

He opened the door and saw a man holding a cardboard box standing on the porch.
“Hey there little man,” the visitor said. “Is your father home?”
“He’s asleep, but I’ll go wake him for you,” Billy said, eager to get back to his toy.
The man smiled and quickly entered the living room as Billy ran upstairs.
“There you go,” he murmured as he tossed the robot into the box.
The robot screamed indignantly. “Unhand me ruffian, I will end you!”
“I’m sure you will Pesterbot,” the man chuckled as he left the house.
“I’m sure you will.”

“He’s gone, and he took my robot!” Billy said, his voice trembling.

“We didn’t even get you a robot, Billy,” his father yawned.
Billy crossed his arms sulkily “This is the worst Christmas ever!”

-StH9

Merry Christmas!

Christmas Dinner

> After Action Report, Incident MC-643
> Agents Samuels, Perkins, and Flanders were assigned to infiltrate and gather information regarding a Christmas masquerade believed to have been held by Foundation group of interest Marshall, Carter, and Dark on October 2 , 20 at Drive, the location of an estate believed to be owned by one of the founding members of Marshall, Carter, and Dark.

Samuels spoke with a woman wearing a silver Venetian mask, her eyes hidden behind the grey film of her disguise. She was snacking on what Samuels believed to be a wafer of dried human heart, but he wasn't absolutely certain.

"Dearie, you simply *must* try the punch. It is simply *fabulous* if I do say so myself, simply to *die* for. I do believe I will have some more, join me?"

Samuels had already identified the table from which the punch, and most of the food at the party, were coming from. He didn't want the punch.

"I think I'll pass, but thank you ma'am. If you'll excuse me, I must speak with that man over there about acquiring a new contortionist. My last seems to have broken herself, quite tragic."

Samuels strode briskly away from the woman and towards Flanders, ignoring the parting suggestion that he make use of the local bone regrowth facility.

> Agents successfully infiltrated the masquerade, all wearing copies of a black full-face mask. Access was gained through a window in the east wing of the mansion after Agent Perkins drilled through the lock.

Perkins was trying to catalog all the anomalous items in the room, and having a hard time of it. In the corner by the door a woman, apparently a nurse, was eating pomegranate seeds. She didn't seem to notice that she never ran out. In the opposite corner, a man entertaining a crowd by changing breadsticks to meat. To Perkins' left, a golden fountain ran out of the wall, a small plaque listing the health hazards associated with it. And across the room-

Perkins cursed under his breath.

"Flanders you fool, what were you *thinking*?"

> Mission integrity was apparently compromised by Agent Flanders twenty minutes after entering the room in which the main event was hosted.

Flanders was in love with the cheese, savoring every bite. The aroma was rich and filling, the savory taste coating his tongue, the soft dairy parting between his teeth in an experience he had never felt anything like before. He would never leave this table again if it meant leaving his cheese, not for anything. The cheese was his world, and nothing else mattered.

> Agent Flanders came under the effect of a portion of human liver seemingly affected by **SCP-643**. Attempted intervention by his fellow agents led to a brief physical confrontation, followed by the loss of Flanders life when an instance of SCP-643 came in contact with his skin. Several other attendees were coated by SCP-643, but did not cease consumption of Agent Flanders to save themselves.

Samuels stumbled out of the hall, his sleeve held up against his bloodstained mouth, his mask askew. Flanders' tortured screams followed him, echoing through the doorway. Samuels nibbled on the finger he had managed to scavenge, and watched as a table was carried past him and into the hall by several huge men. A thick sheet covered whatever was within, golden fluid spilling out from beneath the sheet and turning the carpet to a cheesy yellow substance. He coughed as a piece of bone and fingernail caught in the back of his throat, but he couldn't bear to waste anything by spitting it out.

> Agent Samuels was unable to recall any events following his final encounter with Agent Flanders.

Perkins moaned in ecstasy as he bit down on a muscle. Flanders wasn't wriggling too badly anymore, and he was much easier to hold down. He would twitch every now and again when Perkins made a grab for an organ, and he'd *really* start jerking whenever he tried scooping a bit of brain, but Perkins didn't care.

The hot rush of blood over his tongue was beginning to slow, and he almost cried knowing that his dessert was nearly gone. But then Perkins was distracted by the wonderfully diverse taste of human spleen, and then the hot pulsing of the heart, and then the marrow, *oh* the bone marrow, the sweet crack of bone, the rush of hot delicious slurry, the wet flopping of juicy muscles struggling to contract with nothing to pull against.

> Agent Perkins was found dead the following morning. Autopsies suggest that his body was unable to process the amount of substance consumed the previous evening. This, combined with substantial damage received to his face by unknown means, led to Perkins' death from both excessive bleeding and rupturing of the internal digestive tract.

Samuels staggered back into the hall, his mask tilted diagonally against his face, red blood slashed across the mouth, and a piece of cotton shoved against his nostrils. He fought his way through the orgy of dead and dying cannibals, still trying to force as much of each other as possible down their mouths, and tumbled to the ground where Flanders lay with Perkins inert by his corpse. He shoveled a few more handfuls of Flanders flesh into his mouth, gagged as his stomach protested, grabbed the other agent's earpieces, and crawled out of the hall, a piece of somebody's kidney clutched in his other hand.

And behind him a man smiled, hand pressed against his still-bleeding arm, cut by his own hand. Soon, all who were here would know Their light, would know the joy of giving to the unenlightened that which was most precious, their own flesh. He loved these sorts of functions, the kind he could pin on some outside group as

hosting. This time of year was always the easiest time to spread, with its focus on food, and the sharing of it. He felt the worms wriggling through his veins, felt them in the people surrounding him who had been eating his meat throughout the dinner.

He felt a great satisfaction at his missionary work for the evening.

Christmas Propaganda

'Twas the night before Christmas, When all through the Site,
Not a single man stirred, Not during that night.
The chambers were locked and sealed with great care,
In hopes that their contents would stay just right there.

The crews sat at home and sung with great joy,
Content with their work, though a little annoyed.
And director at desk, and I with the T,
Had just settled our brains into a dreamworld's sea.

When throughout the whole site there arose a great clatter,
And in my sleepy daze, I ran to see what was the matter.
Away to the muster point I flew in a dash,
Away from the sirens, I ran like the Flash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Did nothing to illuminate the terror below.
As I ran and I ran from impending disaster,
I could do nought but think of moving much faster.

But try as I might, I only made it so far,
Before falling concrete gave me a lethal scar.
Dying beneath stone, St Nick beyond my sight,
I wondered what had unleashed this terrible blight.

Little did I know, there were those who went home,
When they were needed to stay here, in this zone.
Without them to stop the escaping disaster,
It easily broke free, its own sole master.

As my soul left me, bleeding and hollow,

I knew only fragments of what was to follow.
Unkillables, warlords, concepts most vague,
Upon the earth would wander these plagues.

Destruction, terror, anarchy and pain,
Suffering, loneliness, no hope to gain.
One by one, all across the globe,
Many unspeakable horrors took hold.

'Twas the night before Christmas, When all 'cross the world,
Every single man stirred, watching an end unfurl.
There were no Christmas miracles to save them that night;
The only miracle? It never reached my sight.

CONTAINMENT DOESN'T STOP ON CHRISTMAS DAY

Never abandon your assigned shifts.
The world depends on it.

City of Wonder™

« **Dark and Disquieting** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **The Sea Slug and the Showman** »

Icky and Lolly screamed in delight as the Frite Lite Roller Coaster zoomed along its twisted path through **Wonder World!™**. In addition to being the theme park city's biggest attractions, the roller coasters doubled as metro trains. While their looping and winding tracks may not have been the most efficient route, they made up for the extra distance in speed and smiles.

As much as Lolly loved the Circus, she also loved the chance to enjoy the much larger attractions that were possible at a fixed location. From the peak of the loop, she could see all of Wonder World!™. It was an unusually colourful city, full of pastel buildings with no sharp corners, most of them so oddly shaped they looked like funhouse mirror reflections of themselves. The sky was blue, the sun bright, and the music of songbirds and laughter of children pervaded the air. From the sights to the sounds to the people themselves, everything about the city was designed to project an aura of childlike innocence. Wonder World!™ was intended to be a place where dreams came true, where nothing bad ever happened.

Lolly may have been willing to believe that, but Icky couldn't help but wonder how many problems Wonder World!™ just covered up instead of dealing with to preserve its squeaky clean image.

As the roller coaster dove down towards the ground again, it began to decelerate.

"Next stop – Wonder Plaza!" an automated announcer proclaimed with the same mandatory enthusiasm it did for all stops. As soon as the roller coaster came to a halt, Lolly hopped out while pulling Icky behind her.

“So I think I’ve had enough rides for today, so we should probably do some shopping,” Lolly told her. “The Neverland Boutique has the largest selection of kid’s style clothes in adult sizes I’ve ever seen, plus all their outfits come in matching doll sizes -”

“Lolly.”

“I can probably get some props for my act at one of the toy stores, and I want to hit the candy stores because everything they sell here is delicious -”

“Lolly.”

“Then we can get dinner - how cool is it that fancy restaurants here serve dinosaur shaped nuggets? - catch a show - they’re supposed to put on an amazing Seussical - and then we can finish the day at the skating rink, or maybe a balloon ride, or maybe -”

“Lolly!”

“What?”

“Just slow down for a second. We're on a date, not running a marathon. Let’s just take a minute to ourselves, enjoy this,” Icky suggested. She pulled Lolly towards her and went in for a kiss. To her surprise, Lolly pulled back.

“Hey, remember we’re in Wonder World. We got to keep it family friendly.”

“Lesbians are family friendly now. There’s like a whole show on Cartoon Network about space lesbians. It’s awesome.”

“Icky.”

“What’s the point of going on a date if we can’t even kiss? Just kiss me and you’ll see no one cares. Trust me.”

Lolly gave a somewhat embarrassed smile and nodded her consent. Icky pulled her towards her and kissed her, only to be interrupted by the high pitch screech of a police whistle.

“Uh oh.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“That’s enough of that, you two, hands where I can see them,” the whistleblower said. He was dressed in a bright blue coat with polished brass buttons, shiny tin medals, and a reflective orange sash. On his head, he wore a comically tall Custodian's helmet with a plastic badge pinned to the front that read 'Wonder World Security Force™'.

“Is there a problem, off— I’m sorry, I was going to say ‘officer’ but you’re closer to a mall cop or something, aren’t you?”

“I’m a Hall Monitor, and you two are in direct violation of Wonder World’s public decency bylaws.”

“Is that so?” Icky asked in a low, cold voice.

“Icky, please stay calm,” Lolly urged her.

“I’m afraid it is. No individuals, be they residents or guests, may engage in kissing on the lips or the fondling of any swimsuit areas whilst in public view,” the Hall Monitor informed them.

“Swimsuit areas? That’s how the law is actually worded?” Icky asked. “You can’t even use grownup words in your legislation? Is your company charter written in crayon?”

“It is, actually. There’s an activity sheet on the back.”

“Icky, you heard what he said. It’s just a public display of affection thing. It’s not homophobic, it applies to everyone, so let’s not make a big deal out of this.”

“Hand over your hall passes and I’ll stamp them with frowny faces,” the Hall Monitor said. “Three frowny faces and your hall passes will be revoked.”

Icky couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

“And what if we don’t? What then? Your nightstick is made out of

Nerf. How exactly do you plan to enforce any of this if we don't just politely cooperate?" she asked.

"Icky, think about this. I love coming here, and Wondertainment is one of our suppliers. This isn't worth it," Lolly insisted.

"Actually that's a good point. We're from the Circus of the Disquieting, which is a decent sized client of yours. Unless you want to risk losing our business, I'm going to have to insist that you waive this particular bylaw, just this once."

His face sternly resolute, the Hall Monitor unsheathed his nerf bat.

"I'm sorry miss, but the law is the law. Your hall pass, if you please."

Icky just rolled her eyes and turned to leave, grabbing Lolly by the hand. She stopped dead in her tracks when she felt the soft foam baton strike the back of her head.

"And there's another one where that came from if you don't -"

The Hall Monitor immediately fell silent when Icky spun around, her eyes burning with a fierce purple blaze. She telekinetically pulled the bat from his hand and transmuted it into a spiked medieval club of heavy iron.

"Did you seriously just hit me with this?" she demanded, her voice taking on a deep and terrifying timbre. The Hall Monitor stumbled backwards, tripping and falling, too paralyzed with fear to get back up. He stammered inanely but could produce no coherent response.

"Icky! You're making a scene!" Lolly yelled at her. Icky looked around the rest of the plaza and saw that most of the other people were now staring at them, most with looks of shock and horror. She shook her head, returning her appearance to normal, and then tossed the club to the ground. It landed with a heavy clunk, its spikes cracking the pristine pavement. Grabbing Lolly by the hand once more, the two of them ran out of public view as quickly as they were able.

Once they were gone, the Hall Monitor grabbed his Walkie Talkie off of his belt.

“We have a hostile *Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo* on the loose in Wonder Plaza. Subject appears to be a female Clown from the Circus of the Disquieting with long black hair, white and purple face paint. Subject is too dangerous for Hall Monitors to engage. Deploy Wondertron 9000. Repeat, Deploy Wondertron 9000!”

The two Clowns ran into the unexpectedly bright and immaculately clean back alleys of Wonder World!™ and paused to catch their breath.

“Icky, what was that about?”

“I know, I’m sorry, I overreacted, but he hit me!”

“Before that. Why couldn’t you just let him stamp our hall passes and be on our way?”

“Because I love you! I love you and I’m not going to obey any puritanical laws that say expressing that is indecent! Lolly, look, I know that when we’re in less tolerant places you don’t see what the big deal is about respecting local customs, but you’ve never been in the closet. You were with the Circus since before you even had an inkling of what you were, and you always knew you’d be loved and accepted.

It wasn’t like that for me. I was terrified of people, especially the people who were supposed to love me unconditionally, finding out I was gay. It sucks living like that which is why I left and why I refuse to live like that again. And it’s not just about me because not everyone has the option to leave a situation like that.

Think of everyone in this city who must be afraid to kiss the people they love. It doesn’t matter to me if it’s being done out of adherence to a bronze-age morality or because they want their whole city to be a kid-friendly fun-zone, it’s wrong!

I… I’m ranting. I ruined our date. I’m sorry.”

Icky hung her head despondently, only for Lolly to lean in and kiss her.

“Don’t be sorry. I never really thought about it before, what it would be like to have to live like that every day, but you’re right,” Lolly said. “I mean, I guess I didn’t want to think about it. I like it here because I thought that everyone else was like me, that they thought it was awesome to pretend to be an overgrown kid. But that’s actually the law here, these people don’t have a choice. Even I don’t want to act like a kid all the time. Icky, I love you a bazillion times more than this fascist tourist trap, and I’m sorry for not supporting you.”

“Well, maybe I should do like you do and take Clown Impulse Suppressant whenever we go anywhere,” Icky smirked. “We forgive each other then, Little Lollipop?”

Lolly smiled and nodded, and the pair exchanged a reconciliatory kiss.

“HALT RIGHT THERE NARE-DO-WELLS!” a booming robotic voice shouted from the end of the alleyway. Standing between them and escape was an eight-foot-tall robot made of shiny chrome, its chassis adorned with many blinking LED lights and buttons, with a winged jetpack mounted on its back.

“What the fuck?”

“I AM WONDERTRON 9000™, DEFENDER OF WONDER WORLD™ AND ALL INNOCENTS WITHIN. YOU HAVE BEEN CHARGED WITH COOTIE SPREADING BEHAVIOR, REFUSING FROWNY FACE STAMPS ON YOUR HALL PASSES, THREATENING A HALL MONITOR, CAUSING A PUBLIC DISTURBANCE, DAMAGING CITY PROPERTY, EVADING ARREST, AND, AS OF THIS MOMENT, NAUGHTY LANGUAGE.”

“Hey, I remember you. You’re the robot that came to the Circus when Herman tried to make his Little Mister knockoffs,” Icky said.

“LITTLE MISTERS IS THE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT!”

“Look Wonderbot -”

“WONDERTRON 9000™!”

“Whatever, we know when we’re not wanted. Just take us to a door outside of the wards, and we’ll make a Way back home,” Icky said.

“SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE CHILD. IT’S THE NAUGHTY CORNER FOR BOTH OF YOU. SURRENDER NOW, OR FACE THE FULL ARRAY OF MY WONDERTASTIC COMBAT FEATURES.”

The pair of Clowns stared down the giant robot with simmering rage.

“You think we can take it?” Icky asked.

“Definitely,” Lolly agreed. She withdrew her oversized mallet from her pocket and charged straight at Wondertron.

“HOSTILITIES INITIATED. DEPLOYING COUNTERMEASURES.”

A large shield with the Wondertainment Logo unfolded from Wondertron’s left forearm, blocking the first of Lolly’s swings.

"ACTIVATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MEGAPHOTONIC LASER VISION™!"

Twin rays of cherry red lasers beamed out of its photoelectric eyes, moving far too quickly to be evaded. Fortunately, its intended effect seemed to be nothing more than disorientation, and due to a combination of their Circus training and essokinetic abilities, Icky and Lolly were relatively unaffected.

Lolly struck the shield from the bottom, knocking it upwards and into Wondertron's direct line of sight, reflecting its lasers back at it.

"DEACTIVATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MEGAPHOTONIC LASER VISION™. VISUAL PROCESSING AND GYROSCOPIC ORIENTATION IMPAIRED. SYSTEMS REBOOTING."

Taking out her trick cards and engulfing them in a murderous red aura, Icky threw the entire deck at Wondertron while it was rebooting. Though some did make it through its shield, they all just bounced harmlessly off its chrome plated hide. Lolly bashed away at it relentlessly with her mallet, causing many disfiguring but ultimately

harmless dents in its chassis.

“SYSTEMS REBOOT COMPLETE. INITIATING KUNG FU ACTION GRIP™!” Wondertron announced as it grabbed Lolly’s mallet by the hammer and lifted it off the ground, with her along with it.

“Put it down you dumb tin can!” she threatened, kicking at its shield.

“INITIATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MAGISHOCK TASER BLAST™!”

Powerful electro-thaumic bolts shot out of the robot’s fingers like Sith lightning. They coursed through Lolly’s body, causing her to convulse and expose her skeleton like she was a cartoon character, then fall unconscious to the ground.

Unsurprisingly, that was all it took for Icky to go full monster Clown. Her nails jutted out of her fingers like claws, her tongue became forked and flickered out between sharpened teeth, and violet smoke poured from her flaming black and purple snake eyes.

Ducking the lighting, she grabbed the mallet and transfigured it into an enormous warhammer, as heavy and spiked as the club she had created mere minutes earlier. Yielding the unwieldy weapon with fury and precision, she knocked off the shield and then swung for the robot's legs.

The hammer successfully punctured the metal limb, with hydraulic fluid gushing out of the wounds. Seeing (and hearing its 120-decibel announcement) that the robot was about to use its taser again, she forcefully pulled the hammer out of its leg and bashed it across the head.

The blow was strong enough to knock Wondertron off balance and send it falling towards the ground. When the creature looked up it saw that Icky was coming in for a *coup de grace*.

“FAILURE IMMINENT. LETHAL SELF-DEFENSE AUTHORIZED. INITIATING PYROMATIC GUIDED COMBAT MISSILE™!”

“Wait, wha -”

A large missile blasted out of Wondertron's shoulder, punching Icky in the gut with the force of a freight train and ploughing her into the air with it. The missile soared up and through the city at near supersonic speeds, swerving and jerking to avoid hurting or damaging anyone or anything. Once it had a clear path up it made a beeline for the sky, rising for several seconds until it exploded above the city in a beautiful pyrotechnic display that sadly couldn't be fully appreciated during the day.

Icky, winded from both the gut punch and the explosion, fell from the sky and crashed into the middle of Mainstreet™, leaving an Icky-shaped crater in the asphalt. As the drivers skidded to a stop to avoid her they caused a 20 car pile-up. Fortunately, they were all bumper cars so nobody was hurt.

Wondertron came soaring in on its jetpack, landing in the middle of the road. In one hand it carried the unconscious body of Lolly, the other it aimed straight at Icky.

"CHARGING NINETY-NINE PERCENT NONLETHAL MAGISHOCK TASER BLAST™!" it said, its voice slightly more ominous than before. "SURRENDER NOW AND NO FURTHER HARM WILL COME TO YOU."

Since it was taking most of Icky's essokinetic abilities just to stay alive at this point, she didn't have much left to put up a fight. Shrinking back to her ordinary form, she placed her hands behind her head.

"REJOICE GOOD PEOPLE OF WONDER WORLD!™, FOR WONDERTRON 9000™ IS VICTORIOUS."

"Gary? Gary is that you?" Icky asked into the phone she had been provided with. "Good. Listen up. Lolly and I are in the Naughty Corner in Wonder World, their jail basically. They've got the Hume-idity cranked up so we can't use our magic, so we need Manny to come bail us out.

We're political prisoners! We were kissing in public, which is a misdemeanour at most here, and that somehow escalated to them

sicing a giant robot on us! Make sure Manny knows we're the victims here, and if they actually try to charge us with anything we are suing for police brutality. I was struck by a missile! If they want to keep our business after this we'd better get an apology and a tent's worth of free stuff!

Yeah, bail's 5000 Gold Edition Wondertainment Power Play Pogs. No, I don't know what the exchange rate is on that. Alright, thanks Gary."

Icky hung up the phone and sat down beside Lolly, wrapping her arms around her comfortingly.

"Lolly, I am so sorry this got so out of control," she said, kissing her on the top of the head.

"At least we still got dino-nuggets," she said, dipping the last nugget from their prison dinners into some honey. "They even got pterodactyls even though they aren't technically dinosaurs. Ca-caw!"

"You are so sweet," Icky said, running her fingers across her cheek. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, I just got electrocuted. You got a lot worse than I did," she replied. "Looking back on it, trying to fight an enormous battle bot was probably not the best decision we've ever made."

"Yeah, I'm starting to see the appeal of nonviolent resistance. I'm just glad you weren't seriously hurt. This was probably our worst date ever."

"In the short term, maybe, but long term it'll make one hell of a story," Lolly smiled. Icky smirked and nodded in agreement, ever impressed by her lover's unflappable optimism. "So where do you think we should go for our next date trip? Three Portlands is probably a lot more gay-friendly. Not as many rides, but more art, and the shops and theatre are probably pretty good too. Same for BackdoorSoHO."

"We could go hiking in Roadkill County."

"Roadkill County?"

“It’s just a name. The scenery’s beautiful, lots of free anomalies to admire, you’ll love it. It would be nice to go somewhere quiet for a little while.”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as we’re free to be who we are without being assaulted by giant robots, I’ll be happy,” Lolly smiled. She cuddled up closer to Icky and rested her head on her shoulder to get some sleep. “Happy date night Icky.”

“Happy date night Lolly.”

« **Dark and Disquieting** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **The Sea Slug and the Showman** »

Claire did not resent her brother when she died. If Jack had known this, they may have been closer; but he regarded himself as a poor protector and a worse provider, the kind of thing reflected in whisky and long, sleepless nights lining up bodies by floodlight and response team lantern in the dust of collapsed ceilings and broken linoleum tile. If only they had a way to tell that these things were about to happen before they did…

But that isn't Jack's story to tell, either, and it matters little now.

```
return
```

Class Omega

I saw the doctors again yesterday. They told me to write down anything interesting I remember, and anything weird that happens to me. Give it to them the next time they see me. Said it would help them know how my recovery is going. That's the problem, I can't remember much of anything. They told me I was in the Army for 22 years, until my transport got blown up by an IED. Lucky to be alive, they say. Maybe so, but I hit my head so hard I don't remember a day of it, except in little bits every so often. It's funny, when I remember those little bits, I don't think it was the Army, even though I remember carrying a gun. I don't know what it was though. One day, I was in a comic book store, I like the comics, they're easy to read and the pictures help you figure out what's going on. There was a comic called "Weird Science Fantasy" and I was reading a little bit in the store. All of a sudden, I looked at the thing in the comic and said "SCP-1841! We contained that last year!" I got all excited, and the guy in the shop wanted to know what the hell I was talking about. I tried to explain, but must not have done a good job, because he thought I was a nut for thinking the things in comic books are real. He asked me what an "SCP" is supposed to be, and I didn't know, it just jumped in my head, that's how those bits of memory work. He just thinks I'm weird and stupid but didn't throw me out because I buy lots of comics.

I don't catch things out of the comic book anymore. If I ever did, I'm not really sure. Now I'm a Security Guard at this big warehouse. They got me a job there when I got out of the hospital. Southwestern Cryptobiotic Products! I can spell that because it's on the flyers I give out. If someone comes in and they don't have a key card, I'm supposed to give them one of those, tell them "We're not open to the public yet" and get them to leave. It's a funny place, they don't even give me a key card and I've never been in the back to see what they do. Something to keep food from spoiling for a long time, that's what the flyers say. I don't know why it has to be such a big secret.

I used to carry a gun, now I ride the bus. The bus is full of weird people these days. A person can bring any damn thing on a bus. Some guy got on at 15th street this morning with a thing in an old broken baby carriage. I don't know what it was, it had a big plastic trash bag on it covering it up. It didn't fit right, the thing was poking at it in all kinds of strange angles. He wheeled it right up next to me and I tensed up and thought "Jesus Christ, that thing might be Keter!" Keter? What does Keter even mean? Something you shouldn't be allowed to bring on the bus, I guess. A couple times I thought the thing moved, and I reached for the gun I don't have any more. Last year, I would have known what to do about that thing. Now I don't, and the guy and his thing got off at 36th St. I shouldn't have to know, they should train the bus driver to know what to do when something Keter gets on her bus.

Dr. Meadows scanned the file summary:

> Subject K-1215-B
> Name: Andrew James Stark
>
> Age: 45
>
> History: Field Agent for 22 years (MTFs: [REDACTED]). Remanded for Class Omega amnestic therapy and supervised reassignment after [REDACTED] and failure to [REDACTED]. Subject is to have field knowledge removed, but remain functional for low-level assignment.
>
> Tested IQ upon hire: 139
> Tested IQ post-therapy: 82
>
> Current Assignment: Southwestern Cryptobiotic Products, cover organization for Site-87. Security Clearance 0.

He added a new entry:

> **5/11/2012:** Subject continues to perform under acceptable parameters for Class Omega therapy. Although he experiences flashback memory of potentially

classified information, his general demeanor and inability to articulate thoughts provide reasonable deniability of any sensitive material subject may reveal.

Interlude 1: Patches

March 18, 1997

Dr. Connor Gerry was counting gears. As of three thirty-four in the afternoon, having started at eleven minutes past noon, he had counted one thousand seven hundred and nineteen of them. By his best estimation, he would finish counting in nine to twelve hours, with a total of eight to ten thousand gears.

He continued counting.

The machine kept time, though not in such a simple way as a clock. It was an orchestra: Tempo shifts, key changes, harmonies, all of which were marked and memorized by the man counting the gears.

Were there anyone in that room to watch, they would have noticed that he was tapping his foot in time with the clockwork.

—

June 1, 1997

“Well that’s that. There’s nothin’ more I can do for this.” Pat leaned back in his chair. “Should be ready to go.”

‘If you’ll do the honors.” Crow gave an approving nod. Gerry stood there and watched from the background.

Pat cracked his knuckles.

“Now if things go Skynet, what you need to do is smash it repeatedly until it stops doing whatever is not supposed to be happening and find another computer support guy, probably one from ten to thirty years in the future.”

A few keystrokes and clicks later, and everything came together. Many long nights of feeding components through the Clockwork on

fine, figuring out how it worked, hooking it all up into an over-wired, room-filling monstrosity decades more advanced than the best computers available…Pat loved it. It made dealing with everyone's problems tolerable, or it at least lessened the pain of hearing about how someone managed to get dolphin semen on their keyboards or make their monitors explode.

Lines of text with meaning only to those versed in the arcane arts of the motherboard scrolled up the screen, almost distressingly fast. Pat's eyes skimmed it. He didn't know what half of it meant himself: this entire project was flailing about in the dark.

The text disappeared from the screen, replaced with a single input line. Deceivingly primitive.

A string of letters wrote themselves out on screen.

> Overseer O5-1 "Crom" online

"Did it work?"

"It worked."

—

Date: 6/8/97
To: Site 19 Senior Staff
From: Dr. Adam Pathos Crow
Subject: Administration Changes

Dear friends:

The subject of administration has come up again and again in recent months, and several of you have spoken to me of the difficulties in juggling overseeing both research of items and administration of the Foundation itself. With the recent influx of items and staff, as well as our current partnership with the Global Occult Coalition, I share your concerns.

As such, I will make official my position as Administrator of the Foundation, and with the aid of Dr. Gerry, will select proven individuals for the new O5 Overseer Board. Nominations from senior

staff will also be considered.

The Overseer Board will serve as Foundation-wide administration, overseeing all projects across the scope of the Foundation without direct involvement, allowing research staff more time and freedom to focus on more in-depth study.

For security purposes, appointments to the O5 board and the identities of the appointees will not be made public.

The Advisory Committee will remain intact under the A4 designation, and we will be meeting as usual this upcoming Monday.

-With sincerity,

Administrator Crow.

—

September 23, 1997

“Nemo’s in, so is Fats.”

“I’m not surprised. Do you have the list I asked you to make?”

“Yeah. 408 and 953 are on the table, Nemo thinks we can take him out without using anything special.”

“The butterflies, they can work. Not the fox. Keep looking.”

—

October 20, 1997

The little feeling at the back of his subconscious assured him that the scenes in his minds eye were dreams, not memories. The haze of half-sleep made it difficult to tell. He felt the need to do something, that there were people he needed to talk to about…something… with, but these events weren’t real. He knew that. He’d never been to these places. He’d never met these people. He was no stranger to dead bodies, of course, but these visions were just excessive.

He brushed away the fake thoughts and made to wake himself up, the mental equivalent of swimming through pudding.

Eyes open, ears open. Hospital bed. Safety. An orderly standing nearby, reading charts.

Some slurred mess of sound dribbled out of his mouth. It hadn't been properly used in some time. The orderly looked up. He didn't recognize her, but the little feeling at the back of his subconscious claimed he had nothing to fear here.

"Good to see you back in the land of the living, Agent Clef."

Notes From the Great Mare

June 21, 2003

Summer solstice today. That means, if I've been counting right, that today is my five-thousand, three-hundred and twenty-seventh birthday.

Happy birthday to me.

I can barely believe it's been almost two months since I recorded one of these journals. They've been running us ragged. We just got back to Nineteen maybe two hours ago. It was the Church of the Broken God again. We keep trying to stamp them out and they always end up hitting back harder. Four agents died today.

I didn't know their names. I don't bother anymore. Numbers work, because they're going to get slaughtered anyway. *sigh*… It's gotten to me. I can write off someone as a number to be shot down and turned into clockwork and not care. I don't feel anything about it anymore. I want to be disgusted with myself, but I *can't*.

I'm too tired. We all are. We're still moving, but I don't think we're alive anymore. Able tries to keep everything going, never complains, carries the whole group on his shoulders, but its grinding him down and we can all see it. He isn't who he used to be. Iris never talks anymore, and they can barely get her out of bed without pumping her full of drugs. She barely eats, barely sleeps, barely ever leaves her quarters. A few days ago I managed to catch her out in the hall, and when I asked if everything was okay, she just started crying. She's making mistakes in the field: two weeks ago she forgot to refill her supply photographs, leaving us without any medical supplies or extra ammunition. I don't know what to do. She won't let anyone close enough to help.

Clef's had it worst, though. They have him under lock and key now. He's become too unstable to let him wander around freely, they say.

I still try to talk with him when I can, but…half the time he doesn't seem like he's there. When he is aware enough to talk… he scares me. The voices are getting worse, happening more and more often, and sometimes he can't fight them back. He'll lose control and start spewing all sort of foul things, or he'll curl up in a ball and beg to be put out of his pain.

It hurts me to see him like this. I can still feel that much.

…

I spoke with Director Dodridge on the way back here. He said that he'll try talking to the Overseers again, try to get them to listen to sense and disband us, but I doubt it'll do any good. They never listen.

What was the point of all this? This task force has the highest casualty rate in the Foundation. Was what we did against the Insurgency *that* impressive? Enough to throw us at every little thing that pokes its head above the ground?

Why am I even asking this? It's not like I'm going to get an answer. They've never answered it before, why would they do it now.

…

I'm going to sleep. Hopefully someone will wake me up when all of this is over.

June 22, 2003

Iris killed herself last night. Slit her wrists. Snuck in a razor blade, did it right there under the covers, right under surveillance's nose.

I feel hollow. Not sad, not angry, just empty and numb.

Wherever she is, it's probably better than here.

June 23, 2003

He did it. Jason did it. The Overseers saw reason, *finally*.

Pandora's Box is closed, six to one in favor. "Unacceptable losses", they said.

It's still hard to feel happy, but I think I might. Just a little bit.

Iris' funeral is today. It won't be much, just a chance to say goodbye. Probably just going to be myself and Able and the chaplain. Clef won't be joining us. He's having an episode.

July 6, 2003

Apparently they're using what's left of Mother to birth test subjects. Apparently they've been doing this for years and it was just now decided that I should find out about it.

I say let them. If they want to have sex with a chunk of flesh from a dead goddess, by all means, go ahead. I don't really care.

August 15, 2003

I had the displeasure of coming across Dr. Jack Bright today. I've managed to avoid him for some time, but my luck was bound to run out sooner or later.

It's been so long since I've been truly *angry*… it feels good.

The man is completely mad, and why he's still around baffles me. He does nothing productive anything at all, has the maturity of a boy who has just figured out what sex is, causes headaches on a near-daily basis, and the Overseers *outright refuse* to get rid of him. They outright refuse to decrease his clearance, even. They just let him go on his way, completely untouched.

Just wipe his memory, encase him in concrete and bury him somewhere and be done with him. I'd love to kick in his head myself, but he'd be back. He always comes back.

No, death is too good for him. He wants that. Oh, I'm so sorry you're immortal boo-fucking-hoo, let me sing you a sad song *fuck off* and suck a nice fat horse cock. You don't see Able or me doing this insipid attention whoring and blatant harassment routine. Take a fucking hint that I'm not interested or I'll kick you in the balls so hard

you'll piss out your ass.

sigh…

I've filed a complaint with human resources. They said they'd take care of it.

August 17, 2003

Another entry on that damned list is not "taking care of it".

September 1, 2003

I was able to talk with Clef today, and he was all there. No voices, no shouting, nothing like that, we just talked. It was like it used to be.

I can't believe how bitter I've become. Listening to some of my old recordings and all, I know I had a reason to be like that, but…I don't know. It's this place. It gets to you, drags you down into the muck, and it's nasty and bitter and toxic and you just slog through the same trenches. If fills you until that's all you know, just hate and anger and empty bitterness and you don't even realize it, until you step back and think about it a bit.

It's not just me. It's everyone. All the agents, all the researchers, everyone. We're all completely mad.

Clavis

Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Project 001-Future Sight has been enacted and regarded as a success. Text was recovered by having **SCP-187** examine the terminal at Site- . Her copied text was then sent through **SCP-758** to correct it, and then translated by Dr. . Immediate communication with O5- , O5- , and O5- is enacted. Operation Thaumiel is in full effect. Repeat: this is not a drill. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. **DO NOT DISREGARD.** Repeat: Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action.

Communique recovered from Site- read as follows:

1. And lo, I cried unto the Ephesians, the Smyrnanites, the Pergamonians, the Thyatirans, the Sardinians, the Philadelphians, and the Leodicians to hear my cry! And they have heard it not.
2. For the Ephesians, ye are unto sowers of chaos and ruin, and so though shalt reape. For thou hast strayed from the path, the true path, and shall receive none of my glory. The hand of God will smite thee and thine power shall be as sand, and the strength of your arms shall be as straw which, when smote, is broken.
3. And ye Smyrnanites, truly thou are of the hands of the adversary, consorting with demons in thine great, hidden place, where eyes seek but do not find. The books shall be burned up, and the doors, and the eyes of all man and beast within it.
4. Alas, ye Pergamonians, to thou the name has been given, and thou has heard it not! Ye have turned to the cog and wheel and written a new name upon it and sought God there, but he is not there, for he is above and not of your hands. The

abomination that thou has sought to craft will be no more, and its blood and body will be as a river of copper and brass.

5. And ye Thyatirans, my good and loyal servants who have endured and waged war on things of Satan—though thou has consorted with him, your soul is pure and clean, and I shall welcome you into the war and into the victory of heaven.
6. Ye Sardinians, lo, thou has been unto a thorn in the side of heaven, and God has tired of this suffering and will pluck you out, for one of thee dwells in outer darkness, and the other two of thine unholy trinity will join him, and be cast forth into the void.
7. Lo, Philadelphians, thou hear not my words or my will, for you do no listen. You hands have turned upon themselves and your creations are as abominations and sin in the eyes of God. Truly, thou are of a sinful heart and mind, given only to works of evil and the mad, and shall not thine sins find thee out?
8. And ye Laodocians. Truly, thou are of the greatest of the sinners, for all thine good and loyal works, thou heapest more suffering upon those who have done no wrong in the eyes of God. Truly, thou are as a saint who, upon saving the souls of many, dashes their faith against a stone and watches as it tumbles into the sea. Salvation wast thine goal, and salvation thou has dealt, but salvation shall not be delivered unto you. Thou shalt be delivered unto mine hand.
9. Ye churches of the world! Hear mine voice and tremble! The gates are open! The seals are broken! The trumpets have sounded!
10. We are riding forth.

Repeat. Repeat. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-

Zulu. Operation lo though I walk through the valley Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. fear no evil, for thou art with me Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. thy rod and thy staff Operation Thaumiel is in full action. Do not disregard. Emergency Level X-Ray-Zulu-Zulu. Operation Thaumiel is they comfort me in full action. **Do not disregard**. Operation dwell in the house of the Lord Thaumiel is in full ac Amen

Clean Sweep

Dr. Gears typed in a last sentence, clicked the "Send" button, then leaned back in his chair and allowed himself to feel a small amount of satisfaction at a job well done. Smoothing over the "blue on blue" incident with the GOC had been no mean task: tension between the two organizations had nearly reached the breaking point, but cooler heads had prevailed, and in the end, both sides had (unofficially, of course) agreed to let the past remain the past. Combined with the results from the latest security test (Excellent in all fields), the situation at Site 19 was possibly the calmest it had been in years. The lack of tension was an odd feeling, but not an unwelcome one.

There was a low, electronic beep from his computer. Gears sat up straight and clicked on the incoming email. He scanned the contents and nodded. Just as he had expected.

He left his office and walked to the reception desk, where the new secretary guiltily clicked away from the game of Solitaire she was playing. Gears gave her a reassuring nod, then reached over her shoulder to click on the intercom system. "Now, hear this," he intoned, over the site-wide Public Address system. "As of 10:48 this morning the O-5 Council has changed the Foundation-Wide Alert Status to Condition Green. I say again, as of 10:48 this morning, the F-W-A-S has been updated to Condition Green." He paused and licked his lips. "Standard protocols for Condition Green are now in effect. That is all."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a youthful, energetic, "FUCK YES!" from the computer lab down the hall, followed by a chorus of laughter: not the strained, desperate laughter that usually was heard in these rooms, but loud, joyful, genuine laughs.

The faintest hint of what could have been the ghost of a smile quirked Dr. Gears' thin, drawn lips, but just for a moment.

Dr. Clef waited for the announcement to end, then nodded to the classroom, closed up his laptop computer, and turned on the lights. "I'll put the rest of the seminar online for you to see later," he said. "Dismissed."

He left the classroom and walked, swiftly and with purpose, to his office the next wing over. He smiled as he took down the half-empty bottle of Jameson whisky down from the shelf, thought better of it, and went to the wall safe instead. After tapping in a twelve-digit combination of numbers and pushing aside the handgun and ammunition at the front of the safe, he pulled out a red velvet box containing a cut-glass bottle of Rémy Martin. He poured himself a small glass, toasting the world, then paused before taking the first sip.

It didn't feel right to drink this alone.

He gathered up the bottle and a couple of snifters, and was just opening the door when he saw a very surprised and rather startled Strelnikov standing in the hallway with a glass bottle in one hand and two tumblers in the other. "Dmitri. Just the man I was looking for. Come in, sit down. Help me drink this."

"Only if you help me drink this," Dmitri said, holding up his own bottle.

The two men sat down. Bottles were opened. Glasses were poured. Opinions were exchanged.

"Seriously, Dmitri? Horseradish vodka? This shit tastes like rocket fuel."

"Is a drink for men and soldiers. Not like this swill."

"This swill happens to be Louis XIII Remy Martin cognac. It goes for over a thousand dollars a bottle, and it's smoother than the silk panties on a high class hooker."

"Tastes like water. Liquor should burn as it goes down. It should hurt, so you know you're alive."

"… are we talking about liquor or women here?"

"There is difference?"

"Maybe not. They're both best when they're ten years old and mixed up with coke."

"HA! I prefer women like beer! The best ones give good head, eh?"

"Yeah, but unlike women, people LIKE it when their beer is frigid." Clef laughed, then began to sing. "*I love my beer! There is no doubt! If beer is flat, you pour it out…*"

"Is not true. Flat women has their place too."

"True. How about… *Oooooh Danny Boooy… the pipes the pipes are caaalling…*"

"Fuck that gay bullshits," Strelnikov growled, spilling some of his drink. "We sing a REAL song!"

"FINE!" Clef snarled. The middle-aged man cleared his throat, then pulled off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. Putting one foot up on his desk, rather unsteadily, he struck a rock-star pose, using his computer keyboard as a guitar, then half-sang, half-shouted, "*WEEEEELL, IT'S ONE FOR THE MONEY!*"

"*TWO FOR THE SHOWS!*" Dmitri shouted back in reply, standing on the chair and miming an air guitar.

"*THREE TO GET READY AND GO CAT GO!*" they sang in unison. "*But don't you step on my blue suede shoes. You can do anything but lay off of my blue suede shoes!*"

About an hour later, they'd drunkenly muddled through all the Elvis Presley songs they knew, had tried a little "99 Luftballoons" (but failed to remember the German lyrics), and were blearily belting out the Russian National Anthem in loud, drunken voices, when there was a knock on the door.

"I'll gets it!" Clef slurred, and staggered to the doorway, opening it. "WHAT!?" he shouted, leaning against the door frame. "Oh. Hi, Karen."

"I've been trying to reach you and Dmitri for the past twenty minutes. Why don't you answer your phone?" Secretary Break asked, irritably.

"I tore my phone out of the wall last week," Clef admitted. "What's up?"

"Emergency situation," the stern-faced young woman said. "We've got a crisis in the lunchroom."

All the color drained out of Clef and Dmitri's faces as they realized they'd been getting drunk in the middle of a possible emergency. Within moments, they were racing down the hallway, knocking over houseplants and (at one point) crashing through a cubicle divider in their haste. They burst into the lunchroom with ashen faces and pounding hearts…

… to find a party in full swing. There were banners made of printer paper on the walls, saying things like, "CONGRATULATIONS!" and "CONDITION GREEN!" Along one wall, a vast buffet of various foods and drinks had been set up. A karaoke machine was set up on one end of the room, and Doctor Gerald was using it to belt out a spirited (if painfully off-key) rendition of "Sweet Child o' Mine" by Guns N' Roses.

Everyone paused and stared at the two of them, who had tumbled through the doorway and were sitting on the floor. Clef looked up at the smirking secretary with annoyance in his eyes. "I thought you said it was a crisis!"

"It was," Bright said, knuckle-walking over and putting party hats on their heads. "You guys weren't here!"

Cheers and laughter.

Half an hour later, Clef had forgiven them enough to open up his liquor cabinet for public consumption. Then the party really got started.

"Well," Kain said, scratching behind his ear with one hind leg. "This has to be the best Condition Green party since… when was the last one we had? Two years ago?"

"One year, ten months, sixteen days," Gears said, taking a sip of a sparkling glass of something. He was standing in the corner, watching Dr. Rights corner several other senior staff members to show them pictures of her daughter.

"Yeah. That party didn't hold a candle to this one." He lapped up a bit more of his mai-tai. "For one thing, the food is better."

"Good company is the best spice," Gears said, taking another sip of his drink.

"That's surprisingly maudlin coming from you," Kain pointed out.

"It only makes sense," Gears replied. "All pleasure, including the pleasure of eating, is derived from endorphins, and being around friends releases endorphins into the bloodstream."

"Shoulda known, coming from you," Kain laughed.

"Of course." Gears put down his glass and straightened his tie. "Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I will be needed soon. It seems a conga line is starting, and when a conga line is in progress, one congas. It only makes sense."

"You know the best thing about having a party when you work at the Foundation? You save lots of money on pizza and drinks."

Around midnight, with the party petering down, a small group of people could be seen standing on the roof of the Foundation containment site. All of them were high-level site personnel. All of them were holding glasses of champagne.

"In the end," Dr. Mann said, "All of us will face judgement. When that day comes… may I be judged by the quality of my friends."

"Hear hear," Light replied.

With a low murmur of agreement, all of them drank.

In an undisclosed location far away, a man and a woman sat on the balcony of an apartment building, staring up at the wide, full moon. The remnants of a bottle of fine port, and a wedge of Stilton cheese and some crackers, sat on the patio table between them.

There was a soft, electronic ping, and the cell phone on the patio table vibrated gently. The man reached out and flipped it open. "Hello," he said softly.

He listened for a while, then pursed his lips. "How urgent is it?" The man listened a while longer, then nodded. "Then let's live and let live. It will still be there in the morning. Maintain Condition Green for another eight hours, then dispatch a notice to Site 19, Priority Yellow. Out."

"Work calling, dear?" the woman asked. "Is it important?"

"It can wait," O5-7 said, reaching out to take his wife's hand in his, squeezing it tightly. "For now, I think we all deserve some time off."

END

Clean Up Act

"I got a dollar and a dime, gonna clean up the green slime, dead bodies are a no-no, alarm says I gotta go go…" sang the translucent and bearded janitor sweeping up gore and blood in some forgotten cell whose walls had been ripped open like gift wrapping by over-sized claws. He looked over his shoulder every few seconds and his muscles were tense, like he imagined that someone was watching him. There was no SCP-447-2 on that Site, but life in the Foundation was full of surprises, and Boris prided himself on being ready for everything. There had been a containment breach last night, and while Boris hadn't exactly predicted it, he had insisted to his colleagues that something felt off and tense about work. Of course, being a level 0 Janitor, nobody paid him much attention. That didn't bother him. Honest. One hundred percent. It had been mostly like that all his life. What DID bother him was when people gave him extra work for no good reason, like when some stupid D-Class decided to not follow orders when exploring some monster's hidey hole or whatever. Such was the life of a janitor: never showered with praise, but only with more filth.

It was about lunchtime, and Boris had trained himself to be entirely immune to all the gut-wrenching sights that often followed the experiments and containment breaches in the Foundation. He felt his stomach rumbling, and a smile forming on his face as he thought of that sweet lady that served food in the cafeteria. Even though neither of them were exactly icons of material success, Boris still found himself fearing rejection on the grounds that she was too good for him. Just too nice and caring for his gruff and no-nonsense self. He finished cleaning up the last puddle of blood, and paused to admire the pristine reflection on the wall.

Boris flinched back in horror as his reflection turned into the visage of a rotting carcass covered in black slime. SCP-106 invaded the cell, grinning morbidly and sniffing the air like a jackal for new victims. The corpse-demon slowly and awkwardly shambled in the

direction of Boris, who suddenly realized he was trapped inside the cell. The janitor wielded his mop like a sword, hoping to God it would hold off the monster long enough for help to come. But something very strange happened. The Old Man stared in the general direction of the janitor, paused a few feet away, and attacked with its claws. When nothing happened to Boris, the Old Man tilted its malformed head in confusion and melted into the ground.

After calming down and realizing that his hard work had been ruined by SCP-106's black slime, Boris screamed profanities and threw his mop onto the ground. "Why can't I ever get to work with the clean and nice ones for a change?" He lamented. But before he could dwell on that, there was the matter of why the Old Man hadn't been able to affect him. Should he tell his colleagues about this? Would he be considered an anomaly as well? Maybe it was better to play it safe. He waited until more personnel came into the cell and observed them from behind a smashed and corroded computer bank.

The personnel which entered the cell completely ignored Boris as usual, but something they mentioned caught his attention. Something about sightings of a new spectral class entity around the area of the containment breach. Boris followed them outside the cell and down several corridors where the freakish aftermath of last night was still visible, and blood and gore were the least disturbing things there. Giant egg sacs had burst open, fungus-like growths had spread over the walls and at least one mutant nervous system still crawled about.

Boris carefully maneuvered around all the anomalies, avoiding detection by other personnel for the moment. He needed to confirm if something was true, because if it was, then all his years of work for the Foundation meant nothing. He would be locked up forever same as all the others, probably without so much as a lousy commemorative gift for his dedication. And as he entered his room, all his fears were confirmed: he had been considered dead in the containment breach, his meager possessions had been transported elsewhere and his room was going to be occupied by a new personnel. Boris looked at his translucent and tattooed arms, and only now their abnormality registered on his mind. That could only

mean one thing.

He was dead and gone.

He dropped to the ground and slumped against the wall, holding his wrinkled face in his hands. This couldn't be happening. Not after all this time, not so close to retirement. What was he supposed to do now? Clean filthy cells for all eternity? Atone for some sin he didn't know about? Find answers?

After a long time of breathing heavily and sobbing, Boris regained his composure. He always prided himself on being ready for everything, so he weighted his options. Number one? Fuck no. Number two? That can wait until his soul passes on to the other side. Number three? *That* was useful. Even if he got locked up after all, maybe he could help find whoever was responsible for this damn breach and get some measure of peace.

Rising and breathing in slowly, the janitor searched his memory for a mental map of the Site. He remembered that the breach had started in a laboratory three floors down to where he was. If he was a ghost now, he should be able to float and pass through walls without being seen. Reaching the laboratory, he found that it was under quarantine. Some personnel in hazmat suits were present to determine the extent of damage, retrieve samples and determine the most likely causes of the breach. The laboratory was covered in much the same biological anomalies as the corridors above, albeit in smaller quantities. Boris noticed that on one of the walls were words he could just barely decipher: "Follow The Jackal". Along with it was an image of a stylized and skeletal jackal.

He didn't remember any anomalies by that name around these parts. Was someone trying to intimidate them with cryptic nonsense? For what reason? Whatever it could be, the personnel had to see this. But how could he show it to them? He wasn't even sure if he should do it, they could find out about what really happened during the breach. Even so, he couldn't leave without helping them somehow.

Wait a minute. He was holding his mop even though he was technically intangible. Maybe he had some form of telekinesis? He

reached out with his mind and clinked two coffee mugs together to call the attention of the personnel to the mysterious words.

They approached carefully and with hesitation, when suddenly one of them started choking and retching inside his hazmat, followed after a minute of agony by his helmet bursting open with fungal growths that overtook control of his body. The rest of the personnel struggled in vain against the growing tendrils of the creature, and were crushed into fine paste. The fungal mass squirmed out of the hazmat suit and down cracks in the laboratory to look for a more appropriate environment. Boris was left alone for a long time, surrounded by death and giving a thousand yard stare. His shock was interrupted when a skeletal jackal with pale glowing eyes walked inside and sat beside the corpses. It sniffed them with interest and walked circles around them before releasing a long howl. From the corpses emerged luminous spectral entities not unlike Boris, but they seemed to still be caught in a torpor.

Before Boris could say anything, the jackal left through a portal along with the spectral entities. The janitor didn't skip a beat and followed the jackal inside, hoping to find some answers, any answers. But what he found when he made it to the other side were only more questions. He was in the waiting room for a what seemed like the clinic of a therapist, but the decorations seemed oddly Egyptian. There was a solemn but soothing air to the place, like all of one's worries could be put to rest here.

All around Boris were sharply dressed and smiling people with the heads of animals attending to the lines of spectres with remarkable patience and modern equipment. There were magazines from across the eons and realms here and there, and occasionally one of the strange workers would come in with refreshments despite everyone being dead. A very pleasant and sophisticated music played that further soothed the nerves of the recent arrivals. Some of the spectres chatted like old friends while others refused to believe this was their final destination.

The rich sights were not enough to stop the gruff janitor from cutting the line and demanding to see their manager, or whoever their boss was. A lady with a cat head calmly told him that his number would be generated soon. He was even offered a massage by the cat lady,

and immediately refused with a huff. This wasn't the time for pleasantries! But rules were rules, he supposed, and so he sat on a surprisingly comfortable chair and read a magazine about exotic cooking recipes. Soon enough, he heard someone call out his name.

He went through a golden and jewel-encrusted door to the therapist's office and found the jackal inside, but with a humanoid shape, dressed in a sharp black suit and carrying a golden cane. His smile was eager and went from ear to ear as he motioned with his cane to a couch beside him.

"Greetings, Boris. I hope my staff treated you well?"

"The hell is this place?" he shouted without any elegance.

"Rude. This isn't Hell. Can't you tell where you are from the decor? Or perhaps you think the staff are wearing costumes and this is all a prank?"

"Do you have any *idea* of who I am?" Boris felt both out of place and amazing for getting to say that at least once.

"Of course I do, it's part of my job. I know you have seen enough wonders and terrors to last a dozen lifetimes. I was just pulling your leg."

"I ain't got time for that shit! I came here to get answers!" He crossed his arms and put his foot down.

"Calm down. You do, in fact, have all the time you need. And I will answer to the best of my ability. But first, I must weigh your heart."

"Wait a minute." Boris slowly put two and two together. "You're Anubis?"

"The one and only."

"And this is the Egyptian afterlife?"

"We have made some modifications for the sake of modernity, but otherwise correct. And before you ask, I do not know why you were

sent here instead of your preferred afterlife."

"Alright, fine. Can I ask you a question?"

"But of course. I'm here for that."

"Can you use your authority to help me find the person who killed me?"

Anubis gave a hearty chuckle. The chuckle slowly turned into howls of derisive laughter.

"That's not how it works, my friend. Any requests like are reserved for after the deceased has passed the Weighing of the Heart."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

Anubis conjured a clipboard and cleared his throat.

"What have you never gotten in life?" asked the Egyptian god.

Boris paused and wondered. "Respect and recognition, I suppose. People always overlooked me even when I did my very best to impress and please them, and it hurts. Even my folks treated me with indifference most of the time, it was awful. So I guess things stayed pretty much the same when I started working for the Foundation despite all the crazy shit. If only there was an anomaly that would make people actually notice me, you know? But no, it's always something that leaves a hideous mess."

"What have you always gotten in life?"

"Orders. Always being told exactly what to do, the way to do it, like I'm fucking stupid and don't know what 2 + 2 is. That hurts too sometimes, but not as much as not getting a simple thank you. What makes it worse is how some people feel entitled to boss you around because they're soooooo much better! But I bet my bottom dollar that these pussies wouldn't dare unclog a toilet if their lives depended on it. The important people depend on us but they don't wanna admit, see? It's why they throw a shitfit when we try and fight for our rights."

"What did you give up to get what you most desire?"

Boris realized with dawning horror that if he opened his mouth, he would be compelled to answer truthfully. The answer he could give would surely damn him to being devoured by Ammut, but the alternative was going and risk eternal imprisonment in the Foundation. Boris pondered and pondered, for a time beyond time, shaking and averting his gaze. Anubis' comforting smile did not falter for a single moment, and the Egyptian god eventually got up to hold Boris' hand.

"If it's any consolation, no one will know but me. And I don't judge, ok?"

Boris swallowed hard, shoved his face into his hands and began to sob uncontrollably. Anubis just patted him on the back and offered him a glass of water.

"I caused the containment breach! I did it, OK! I gave up orders to try and get respect and recognition! I just…I thought I could maybe stop it after it begun if I planned carefully enough but…oh GOD, people are DEAD because of me! All because I wasn't satisfied with being a janitor and wanted to be a hero!"

Boris pulled his thin hair and curled up into a fetal position, alternating between sobs and screams. After several minutes, Anubis managed to raise the janitor and give a big, reassuring hug.

"Boris, people die working for the Foundation every single day. You made a mistake, we all do. That doesn't make us anomalies, that makes us human. You were very brave today, admitting your mistake. I can do nothing but congratulate you, and wish you a long and peaceful rest. Tell me, would you like one last meal and song?"

Boris eventually swallowed his crying and chuckled. "Thank you. I always did love that vegetable soup my grandma did for me and my brothers. I saw it on one of your magazines back there, actually. As for a song…how about Kino's 'A Star Called The Sun'?"

"As you wish. Do try to savor them, because…well, remember what it was like before you were born? Think of it as the closing of a

cycle."

"You don't have to use fancy words with me, Anubis. I'm gonna stop existing, I get it. But it's not like I ever existed very much in the first place. My biggest regret is never asking Cindy out on a date."

"The lady in the cafeteria, I assume? I'll let her know if she comes. With your permission, of course."

"Just tell her that she is beautiful just the way she is, and that age is just a number."

"Wise words."

The meal and the song were savored, and Boris felt ready to venture into his final destination. He was guided outside the clinic and into the labyrinthine depths by two workers with lamps, and on the walls he could see the marking in several languages of the people who had gone before him. Many grew increasingly more desperate as they neared the bottom, where there was a watery pit with something cthonic swimming inside. The workers nodded and left one lamp to light the chamber as they closed the massive circular stone door.

As Boris walked down the steps into the pit, he could see a pair of reptilian eyes and an impossible, all-devouring maw that was contorted into a confiding grin. The creature seemed at once incredibly familiar and yet totally unknown. Whatever it was, Boris knew its character in one simple phrase.

"You…are NOT disgusting."

Cleaner

Date was… Dunno, January, '05. Location's some nowhere town's edge in New York. Time around 6 o'clock A.M.

Officer was writing up a ticket for the sixth illegally parked car in a row when they noticed a lotta footprints in the snow leading under a nearby bridge. Decided to take a look, found six kids. All of 'em just limp along the slope down to the river.

Backup arrived. Investigation started, a rookie detective happened to brush a kid. Witnesses report a snap, then down went the dick. Died instantly, snapped vertebrae.

Picked up the radio activity, called it in and drove over. Told 'em I was with the FBI, everyone needed to evacuate the scene. Backup arrived shortly. Scooped up each object into a containment box.

Standard procedure. Kids reported missing, detective KIA in a shooting accident, amnestics for the cops. Objects cataloged and shoved in storage.

Day after, got a letter on my desk. Opened it.

Told me they were the killer.

Told me how they lured every kid under that bridge before snapping their necks.

"Like candies."

Closed it.

Tossed it in my shredder. Nothin' since.

I clean messes up. I don't fuckin' solve 'em.

Cleaning Larry

They started giving us oxygen tanks after the fifth cleaning. We would vomit too much, and get Larry all dirty again. God forbid we have a dirty Larry.

I remember when we didn't have the tanks and we had to clean out the suit. The smells that hit your nose all at once - encrusted shit, stagnant piss, aging vomit, liters of sweat. But the worst of all was the smell of rot and death that pervaded the air around the costume. I always remember a documentary I watched on the US invasion of Okinawa during World war II. There was one hill both sides were trying to secure, and rotting corpses littered either side. They said that if you charged down the hill, you'd throw up from the stench before you hit the bottom. It was a terrible, gut-wrenching smell that hit my nostrils every time I cleaned this thing. Of course, now I have a skin-tight scuba suit on, so hopefully I'll be fine.

The first thing I remove is the head. Underneath, your typical d-class. His lips are rasped and puffy, and his chin is covered in dried-up vomit. The inside of the costume's mouth is caked over in barf. They say the d-class almost immediately start tossing their cookies when they get in the suit, because of the smell. It's horrible, because Larry tries to talk to you even while they're vomiting, and all you hear is a garbled mess of spit and choking. A quarter of the people who wear the suit die in the first 5 minutes from this.

I start removing the rest of the front half. The torso's always the easiest, just a bunch of sweat and some vomit that's dribbled down. It's funny when you look at the corpses afterwards, everything else is absolutely disgusting, but the torso is always in pristine condition. Sometimes right before the d-class expires they take him out of the costume and remove his organs, which they donate to hospitals. I mean, we have to be at least somewhat humane, right?

I start getting to the waist and pelvis. Typically the smell makes you barf right away. We always throw out the jumpsuits from Larry's

testers after the test. I can't help but feel bad for whatever pedophile murderer rapist they've put in the back. Can you imagine having somebody fart in your face for 3 days until you die? They did one test where the d-class were completely naked. The guy in the back choked to death after one day. When they opened up the costume they found the guy in the front had shit all over the guy in the back's face, and it was encrusted over in the stuff. Apparently he had choked to death on the other guy's shit.

However, this time they were both wearing jumpsuits. The jumpsuit was stained in the front with urine and in the back with shit. Nothing too bad, but the rashes that form after the first day always make me cringe when I get a good look at them. Typically the guy's nuts are pussy and swollen, and his ass is bleeding and cracked. We had a few cases where women had their periods while inside the suit. I gag whenever I think about those.

The worst part is the boots. When we first did testing, researchers noticed a slish-slosh noise after the first day. It took them a moment to realize that it was the boots. You see, Larry's boots are rubber, and so do not absorb but only collect fluids. All the piss and shit and vomit and sweat and blood running off the people wearing the suit drains into Larry's boots. It collects into this viscous fluid, mostly brown and yellow, with the occasional flecking of period blood. The person's feet becomes caked in this fluid, which slowly turns into a muck. And when you have to remove their feet from the boots, it makes this loud sucking noise like pulling a flip-flop out of mud.

And that's only the *first* guy.

Clef And Dimitri Hit The Road

"A sabbatical?"

"At least one month," Dr. Glass said, nervously fingering the panic button under his clipboard. The figure sitting in the chair across from him slowly blinked its uncannily colorful eyes (damn it, he could never figure out what color they were supposed to be) and carefully read the pink slip of paper in his hand. "Your psychological evaluation indicates that it's been years since you last took a break. You need to let off some steam."

"I did have a break. I took a very nice trip to Italy," Clef said levelly.

"I went to bar. Was fun. Met new friends," Strelnikov insisted.

"A covert mission with six MTF operatives to eliminate a target is not a vacation, and nor are the five weeks in the hospital spent recovering from that nasty gut wound either." Dr. Glass sighed. "Look. Just take the damn vacation. I don't care where you go, or what you do, just spend at least one week where you're not worrying about the fate of the world."

"That would be… difficult," Clef said, folding the piece of paper into precise thirds. "Might as well ask me to stop breathing."

"Is stupid," said the other man sitting across from the psychologist, as he glared at his own pink slip of paper. "Is not like Chechens will stop being Chechens because I'm fatigued. War is not nine-to-five job."

"Then… at least make saving the world a secondary priority. Think of it as… periodic maintenance. You take your car in for a tune-up every ten thousand miles. This is your time to get a tune-up." Dr. Glass sighed.

"Can't I get a tune-up in the shop? Perhaps I could spend some time

at the training facility instead, or in the field…" Clef muttered.

"Can spend time drinking vodka. That is proper Russian vacation."

"No. No field operations, no training, no paperwork, nothing. Just… get some rest. You've certainly earned it. Enjoy your vacations, gentlemen."

The door closed with a kind of epic finality, leaving two of the most dangerous men in the Foundation standing in the hallway, clutching pink slips like a pair of delinquent teenagers sent to the principal's office. The entire support staff of the Human Resources and Training division sat in their cubicles studiously staring at their monitors. One of them, a young lady wearing a very nice pantsuit, was desperately typing the Lord's Prayer over and over into Notepad. Another was whispering a Buddhist sutra under his breath.

The tension was finally broken by a sigh from Clef, who rubbed the back of his neck with the pink slip of paper. "So," he said, "I hear Brazil is nice this time of year."

The airport bar was crowded, full of weary passengers stopping in to have a bite to eat and a few drinks before allowing themselves to be carted off in the big Airbuses and Boeings. Strelnikov and Clef strolled in quietly and took the only two empty seats at the long bar, nodding curtly to the bartender and those next to them before settling in for the two hour wait. Their attire was ostentatious and drew odd looks from the other patrons: Strelnikov in his olive drab dress uniform with peaked cap, and Clef in a Hawaiian shirt with obscene portrayals of people engaging in coitus printed in flamboyant colors.

Their chosen drinks said much about their character. The bartender, hair in a muss from a long day, pointed at Clef and made eye contact, silently inquiring.

“Bombay Sapphire Martini, stirred, not shaken, two ice cubes only, 6:1 gin and vermouth, two olives, one onion, and if you bruise the vermouth god help you,” Clef responded dryly, as if the bartender should have already known. The bartender’s expression went blank

for a moment, before he nodded slowly and turned to Strelnikov. “And you, sir?”

“Vodka.”

“What with?”

Strelnikov gave him the dirtiest of looks. “…Ice.”

“Any preferred brand?”

Dmitri’s stare hardened and he clenched his fists on the bar. “*Vodka*. With *ice.*”

The alcohol was forthcoming and it both lightened their mood and loosened their tongues accordingly as they imbibed. As the first rounds went through them, they developed a lively and appropriate discussion.

“You see, Dmitri, a good drink is smooth—you have just a small sip and the flavor and aromas combine and are enough to take your breath away. It’s like the touch of a beautiful woman, something exquisite and rare, something you hold in your hand and show people so they can see what a classy son of a bitch you are.”

“Drink? Drink is not status or class symbol, Doktor Clef. Drink is a drink. You drink it. And you get drunk. And then you are drink more, until you have drink so much that is make you sober again.

“…I don’t believe you’ve understood.”

Their spirited debate continued, beginning to draw the attention of the other customers. Slowly their heads and chairs swiveled to lock on the two oddly dressed gentlemen as they argued and jabbed at one another’s tastes. As their collection of empty vodka and martini glasses grew and grew, the argument mellowed and became a happy, family oriented story telling extravaganza.

“I wanted to see his face when I killed him, Dmitri. That’s why I had the snipers hold their fire. See, I came in behind him like this,” accompanied with gesticulation of the hands, “and swiped him across the face with my pistol. Then he stabbed me and some

things happened, and blah blah blah, I ended up in a hospital for a few weeks. Good times."

Strelnikov nodded approvingly. "In Chechnya, our supplies always run low. So I was force to hold my fire many time and resort to use of bayonet." He waggled a finger and pointed at Clef, "Many Chechens get it in the face and neck, Doktor Clef. Many. Much blood."

"Ever drive over thirty people in a tank?"

"Does armored personnel carrier count? What about unarm combat, you snap necks?"

"The spine is usually easier for me, Dmitri. A lot of people prefer the traditional twisting-head neck snapping action but I usually stick with grabbing them by the hair and shoving a boot into the small of their back as hard as I can. It's a personal preference really." Strelnikov couldn't argue with that.

"Once, on night mission, we find rebel camp in bombed warehouse. I send two team, yes?" He holds up two fingers. "Two team, into each entrance, and I climb through window alone, with just knife and pistol. They were sleep, guards sleep, everyone was sleep. We come in and slit all of their throats in the night and leave them for crows." He coughs. "Later that night I find out there had been a mutual cease fire called," he concludes with a shrug.

"Oh, man, I know. Once, I was trying an experimental chainsaw that we thought was a possible item for containment. There ended up being a D-Class riot and, well, I was on hand with the chainsaw and one thing led to another. Next thing I know, I'm standing on a pile of D-Class bodies holding the saw over my head and screaming in bloodlust, then someone comes in and tells me it was just the annual costume party and half of my research staff is now dead." A shrug. "Turns out the saw was just a normal saw, too." Strelnikov nodded sadly, feeling Clef's disappointment, pausing for a moment and then saying quietly:

"I was just kid about cease fire, Doktor Clef."

“…Oh. I wasn’t. It really was a costume party.”

Dmitri sighed and turned back to the bar and asked for another drink, except nobody answered. He craned his head over the bar and found the bartender, pale as a ghost, trembling on the floor with a phone in his hand, poised to dial. Strelnikov shrugged and plucked the bottle himself, pouring a glass and turning back to face Clef. He took a quick look behind him.

The bar was completely empty.

"Considering who we work for, you'd think they could afford to give us better seats than coach," Clef griped. "Seriously. Charging us five bucks for a dry ham sandwich and a half can of soda. This is highway robbery."

"Is better than Aeroflot in 1980s," Dimitri pointed out. "Food recognizable. Cabin actually pressurized. Stewardesses smile at you instead of scream." He raised an eyebrow at the attractive young lady coming down the aisle with the beverage cart. "And are much prettier. Aeroflot stewardesses all fat old bitches with horse face."

"I dunno, a boiled beet and some horse-leather meat might actually be a step up from this… thing. What the hell are these little green flecks, anyway?" Clef muttered, poking the sandwich with his finger. "Lizard bits?"

"Maybe is sperm from 682. Big lizard wet his beak in your sandwich, no?" Strelnikov quipped, making a "jerking off" motion with his left hand.

"I wish, it would improve the taste… excuse me, miss? Miss?" Clef said, reaching across Dimitri from his window seat to tap the stewardess on the elbow. "I'm sorry, miss, but you seem to have messed up my order. I ordered a ham and cheese sandwich, not a pus and plastic one. From the taste of this, it seems that you've confused the two."

"I see, sir," the stewardess sighed. "I'm sorry you don't like the taste

of your sandwich. If you'd like a refund…"

"I don't want a goddamn refund, I want an edible sandwich," Clef interrupted. "Now, I'm sure that somewhere in that cart under the piles of dried-out human ejaculate and styrofoam sponge, you've got something edible, so how about bending that pretty ass over and looking a little harder, sweet cheeks?"

"Ahhhh," the stewardess said. She turned to Dr. Clef and grinned, a wide, mirthless smile showing too many teeth. "So, I see, what you're really trying to say is that *you're* the asshole here!"

She leaned across Dimitri, her voice low and stern, but carrying through the suddenly silent cavern, as she addressed the bemused Clef. "Listen up, bucko. I don't make the damn food, I just serve it. If you've got a problem, you can write a goddamn letter to the people who do. But wait until we get on the ground. Until then, it's another six hours to São Paulo, and I'll be damned if I have to spend it listening to you bitch the whole way. So either shut up and eat your sandwich or stop complaining about it, or I'll duct tape your mouth shut and tape you to the chair." She stood up straight. "And my name's not sweet cheeks, asshole. It's Lucy."

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken by a smattering of applause, then the stewardess continued down the aisle, serving sodas and coffees to the other, appreciative passengers. Clef leaned back and smiled. "I like her," he admitted. "Girl's got spirit."

"That's nice," Dimitri sighed. He unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up slowly.

"Where are you going?" Clef asked. "The in-flight movie's about to start."

"To take a shit… and pretend I don't know you," Dimitri said.

Clef shrugged and leaned his chair back as far as he could, ignoring the angry stare from the fat lady in the seat behind him. He was just drifting to sleep when a loud scuffling sound and scream drew his attention.

"DO NOT MOVE!" screamed the bearded man, who held a knife to the throat of Lucy the flight attendant. There were two other men, holding similar weapons: one held a hand grenade, pin out, over his head. All three were wearing kaffiyehs and camouflage t-shirts. "This plane now belongs to the Holy Army of the Chechen Independent Republic!"

"Allahu Akbar!" screamed one of the other men. "God is great! Long Live Chechnya!"

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me," Clef winced.

The jostling of the aircraft in the turbulent skies made it difficult for Strelnikov to piss. It always struck him as odd; he'd have no qualms about jumping out of an airplane into a combat zone, but something as simple as taking a leak inside of one gave him hell. The complexities and nuances of the human psyche escaped him at the time, and he chided himself for "being a pansy."

He finally got control of himself and was about to go when the door was rudely kicked open and someone grabbed him by the shoulder, dragging him into the aisle. He quickly buttoned himself and stumbled along, too surprised to offer effective resistance. The Chechen took a good look at his uniform and noticed the Russian crest on his hat—with a quick decision he began dragging him to the front of the aircraft.

"Caught with your pants down, Dmitri?" Clef muttered as they dragged Strelnikov between the rows of seats, the irony of his witticism wasted. Thinking quickly, he threw his foot out into the aisle just in time to catch the Chechen's ankle, sending him face first into the carpet and taking Dmitri down with him. The two others immediately rushed forward to try and subdue Clef, one still holding the hand grenade over his head and shouting angrily in a Chechen-Russian dialect.

Strelnikov immediately recognized it.

They were Chechens.

They were on the plane. His plane.

There were Chechens on his plane. Three of them.

“…That is three too many,” he said out loud. Clef gave him an odd look as he immediately began biting the tripped man’s nose, drawing a short knife from the inside of a jackboot and proceeding to punch the man in the kidneys. With the knife.

Clef wasted no time and nearly leapt over the heads of the terrified passengers in front of him, lunging for the approaching men. He connected with the one carrying the knife, knocking him to the floor also. Clef hauled back and slammed the palm of his hand into the man’s face, quickly shattering the bridge of the man’s nose. The man winced and staggered back, clutching his heavily bleeding nose, as Clef casually disarmed him with a complicated aikido wrist lock. He then drove the knife into the man's heart as Strelnikov finished rendering his man into a bloody, dying mess.

There was only one left, still holding the hand grenade and seemingly unsure of what to do now that their plan had completely deteriorated. "Don't move!" he screamed. "I have a bomb!"

Simultaneously, Clef and Dmitri rotated their heads upward, rising from the bloodied corpses like something out of a cheap horror flick, except instead of a dramatic musical score, there was only the wailing of the outboard turbofans as the pilot increased throttle. "I don't care," Clef said.

Dmitri just smiled. Steel teeth gleamed.

The terrorist's eyes darted nervously between the two men, and he took a frightened step backward.

It would be his last. Lucy’s foot caught the man in the back of the knee and sent him stumbling forward, right into Strelnikov’s knife. Clef deftly snatched the grenade from the man’s hand, paying careful attention to make sure he kept pressure on the spoon. Dmitri’s bloodied steel teeth glistened underneath the cabin lighting, offering the man a most disquieting last sight of this earth.

He withdrew the knife as violently as he had inserted it, a spray of blood splashing across the passengers nearest him, letting the body collapse supine on the floor. The occupants of the cabin stared in shock and awe at the brief, bloody conflict, offering no applause as Clef took his seat, grenade in hand. Strelnikov walked past, heading aft.

“I have to make piss.”

"We have a problem," Clef said, when Dimitri came out of the restroom, buttoning up his pants. Compared to the Russian, who was a bloody, gory mess, the stuck-up prick had somehow managed to avoid getting any blood on him at all, despite the violence of the past few minutes.

"No problem. Chechens dead now," Strelnikov pointed out.

"That's the problem. Three dead terrorists on an airplane, a plane full of grateful passengers, media, heroism, a parade, our faces in the paper? Do you see where I'm going with this?" Clef pointed out.

Strelnikov considered the implications of the Director's words. "Inconvenient," he murmured. "Doktor Glass will lecture us muchly about definition of 'relaxation' and 'low profile.'"

"To say the least. Wait here. Then follow my lead when you have a moment."

The gangly, big-nosed doctor took a deep breath, then squared his shoulders and walked back down the aisle, to where the rather shaken young stewardess was sitting in the front of the plane, nursing a cup of coffee. Strelnikov couldn't hear what he said over the sound of the plane engines, but he could see the way that their body language changed.

Clef said something while standing back near the front row.

Lucy said something back, still holding the coffee cup in both hands.

Clef said something else, leaning forward just a bit. He smiled.

Lucy smiled back. She rolled her eyes and wiped moisture off her cheeks.

Clef nodded and laughed. He leaned against the wall next to her, looking down at her and gesturing.

Lucy began to play with her hair.

Clef stroked his chin.

Lucy began to stroke her face behind the ear.

Clef winked.

Lucy stroked her throat and collarbone.

Clef came walking back down the aisle. He walked past the bathroom and into the galley.

Lucy bit her lower lip, then followed Clef into the galley. There was the sound of a latch being undone, and a door opening.

Dimitri counted to twenty, then poked his head into the galley as well. The ladder leading down to the baggage compartment was open. He slid down and into the darkened baggage compartment.

The first thing he saw was Clef easing Lucy's unconscious body onto a cargo compartment. There was lipstick on his collar, and the doctor's previously buttoned-up Hawaiian shirt was opened up a bit. He tossed a ring of keys to Strelnikov. "See if you can get our bags," he said. "They're probably in one of those locked cargo containers."

"Doktor," Strelnikov said patiently, "Please just tell me this. What is point of finding bags now?"

"I don't want to leave them behind when we jump."

“I no jump without chute. I have done this once, was not fun. Break many bone.” Strelnikov opened the lockers and riffled around, grabbing the baggage and motioning for Clef to follow. “I have better idea.” They navigated the depths of the aircraft, working their way

through access ways and maintenance corridors that usually only the lowliest of wing wipers ever have to crawl through. The aluminum skin of the aircraft vibrated from the air moving around it, and the noise was deafening. Finally, they stopped in the very bottom of aircraft.

“We wait, now.”

The pilot had changed course, ostensibly heading where the Chechens had instructed him to, but in reality veering towards an abandoned military airstrip. The concrete along the runway was cracked in places, with weeds breaking through and angling skyward. The terminals had long since been bulldozed; all that remained now were a few rusting corrugated hangars and a dilapidated, disused control tower. He steadied his hands on the yoke, knuckles white and eyes alert, still shaken from the events earlier. Though he hadn’t seen the massacre firsthand, Lucy had told him about it in grim detail. Where was she, anyway? He needed a drink, badly.

The inboard flaps dropped a few degrees, then a few more, increasing the plane’s lift and drag, flaring the nose slightly and slowing it down. The whine of the engines decreased in intensity, causing the aircraft to slowly descend toward the runway below. Clef and Dmitri felt the shudder of the fuselage as they lost altitude, and heard the telltale hydraulic hisses that indicated the undercarriage was about to drop.

“Hold on! Wait until we slow!” Strelnikov shouted, but it was lost in the noise. Clef gave him a confused expression but knew enough about gravity to warrant already clutching the legs of the gear. The aircraft slowed, dropping to within a few hundred feet of the ground and flaring more, nearly within ground effect. The hatch covers dropped open and the landing gear unfolded, exposing them to a harsh burst of wind that threatened to tear them away, the ground below flashing by in a terrifying blur. The concrete rose to them with alarming speed as the pilot brought the big passenger liner down—the wheels made contact and screeched in annoyance, reluctant to carry the tremendous weight.

The pilot applied brakes and the aircraft decelerated, rolling to a

stop at the end of the runway. They leapt from the undercarriage and sprinted across the tarmac to a nearby line of trees, looking back in time to see the ridiculous rubber slides inflate for the other passengers to make a considerably more undignified exit. They knelt in a small thicket of trees, watching to make sure nobody followed them.

Aboard the aircraft, Lucy picked her head up and groaned. That son of a bitch—and to think she almost *liked* him, despite who he worked for. She sighed and rubbed her temples, pulling a cell phone from a pocket of her uniform and dialing a secure line. The phone chirped and queried her for access codes, which she dutifully punched in, surprised that they were correct considering her foggy state of mind.

“Lieutenant Parks, reporting. I have two probable Foundation assets, track from my location and prepare to deploy a shadowing team immediately.”

"I have to admit," Clef said. "Your idea was much better."

The two men lurked in the treeline for a few minutes, watching the Special Forces soldiers board the plane and get the passengers out through the inflatable slides. A man in a black suit and tie was going from passenger to passenger asking questions: he seemed annoyed at not getting the answers he wanted. Up top, a young man in camouflage gear leaned out the left side doorway and vomited onto the tarmac. Finally, several men wearing medical garb started easing three stretcher-bound bodies down the slide.

"You want stay and watch more?"

"Nah, I've seen enough. Let's get going."

They moved silently through the underbrush, crossing the electrified fence with the aid of some wire cutters and a sleeping bag, and then made their way out into the desert. There was a cracked asphalt two-lane highway under the baking sun, stretching out into the distance.

"Well," Clef said, grinning. "It's not Brazil, but it's certainly far enough

away from work for Glass. Let's go hitching."

"First we must find out where we are. Is not good if we wind up in Death Valley. Then is no other people for miles."

"No problem, I'll just check my GPS." Clef said. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, turned it back on, and brought up the mapping software. "FUCK," he growled. "This is bad."

"Where we are? Bolivia? Death Valley?"

"Worse," Clef said grimly. "Texas."

As if on cue, the silence was broken by the sound of a battered pickup truck coming around the bend. Two men in white cowboy hats pulled up to the agents, their rusty old Ford emblazoned with a Confederate flag across the back windshield, a pair of shotguns on the roof, and a dead deer across the hood. The strangers rolled down the window as their car ground to a halt by the side of the road. The man in the passenger seat, a grizzled-looking one-eyed cowboy with unruly black hair, spat tobacco juice on Strelnikov's shoes and sneered.

"Mind tellin' me what you pair of Mexican Jew lizard faggots are doin' in our neck of the woods?" he growled.

Clef and Dimitri shared a bemused glance. "You have got be fucking with me," Dimitri muttered.

The blood boiled behind Strelnikov's eyes. He looked over their attire and felt a wave of nausea nearly overtake him—how could anyone dress like this? He felt a sudden need to adjust his cap in a vain attempt to counteract their atrocious appearance. Clef just laughed.

"What 'n the hell are ya' lookin' at, y'stupid or somethin'?" The one-eyed cowboy leaned out the window as the driver turned down the radio, which had previously been blaring Toby Keith at an obnoxious volume. "Oh, lemme guess, you're one a' them commies, aren't you?" He spat again. "I fought you assholes in 'Nam." The driver

nodded. “He fought y’assholes in ‘Nam!” Clef’s smile grew to obscene proportions.

Not being one to let a statement like this go unchallenged, Strelnikov immediately rose to the occasion and jabbed a finger in the man’s face. “YOU KNOW *NOTHING* OF WAR. I FIGHT IN CHECHYNA BOTH TIME AND I MEET *BABIES* ON THE BATTLEFIELD THAT WERE HAVE MORE HONOR THAN YOU, COWARD. MY GRANDFATHER TOOK BERLIN WHILE YOUR ANCESTORS SIT ON THEIR ASS DRINKING SCHNAPPS AND HOPING THAT THEY NOT HAVE TO FIGHT LIKE WE DID. YOUR ENTIRE COUNTRY IS *BABIES*. ALL OF YOU, *BABIES*.” His finger trembled with rage while Clef suppressed a guffaw. The redneck stared at him in confusion.

“…Wot?”

Strelnikov punched him in the mouth.

The redneck tumbled over, knocking his compatriot out his seat and onto the pavement. Clef was on him in a flash, hauling him up and securing his arms behind his back with an unhealthy cracking of joints. One-eye regained his composure admirably, and stepped out in front of Dmitri. “Y’ stupid god damned commie, you god damned near broke my fuckin’ face! What are ya, salty because you lost the fuckin’ war?”

It was too much—such an insult to his Russian patriotism could not be allowed to stand. With one hand he lifted the man off the ground by his neck and carted him off towards a dead, wiry tree. The cowboy flailed wildly, trying to strike him or push him away, but Strelnikov had a considerable size advantage. He briefly considered hanging the man, but lacking the rope to do so decided to secure him to the tree with one-eye’s belt, Clef doing the same with the other. Two oversized lone star belt buckles shone in the hot southern sun as Clef and Strelnikov stalked away to their truck, leaving them to bake for a while.

“Who won the war now, jackass?” Clef quipped as he climbed into the driver’s seat. They drove for hours down the Texas highway, finding nothing but dust and clumps of rocks. Dmitri watched idly

from the passenger seat, finding the vastness of the state reminding him somewhat of home, if much drier.

Far behind, the two cowboys were delighted to see a black SUV pull off the road, with uniformed men disembarking and approaching them quickly. “It’s about bloody time you got here,” one-eye said haughtily.

“Did they take the truck?” Both of them nodded.

“…Excellent. We’ve got them now.”

"Stupid fucking American car," Clef grimaced. He slammed the hood down on the smoke-emitting engine and kicked impotently at the front bumper of the vehicle. "Stupid fucking piece of shit. Ford really does stand for Fix or Replace Daily."

"We should be driving good Russian car. Like Lada. That is good solid vehicle. Not break down like shitty American car," Strelnikov offered.

"Do you ever fucking shut up about Russia? Ever?" Clef retorted. "Seriously, you've got like, a hard-on for the Motherland so big they can see it from orbit. Goddamn."

"You ever get tired being enormous fucking prick? Seriously, you have stick up ass so big can use it as flagpole!" Strelnikov snarled.

"Fuck you, Dimitri! Fuck you, and FUCK Russia, and FUCK this stupid FUCKING vacation," Clef screamed, nearly going into histrionics. "All I fucking wanted was to spend some fucking time in Brazil lying on the beach, working on my FUCKING tan, and maybe, just maybe, having sex with some South American honey, sex involving lots of cocoa butter and maybe some leather whips, and instead I'm out here in the middle of FUCKING NOWHERE TEXAS, Population YOU AND ME and we'll probably die of fucking heatstroke before too long!"

"And how this is any of my fault!?" Strelnikov shouted back, slamming his fists on the hood of the broken-down Ford.

"I HAVE NO FUCKING IDEA!" Clef screamed.

That was when the two men heard a car horn honk behind them. They turned to see a cherry-red Camaro convertible with the top down idling by the side of the road. The car gleamed like a jewel.

So did the three babes riding it.

The driver was a brunette, her long, curly locks flowing over her bare shoulders, her honeyed skin glowing with sweat from the warm Texas sun. Her red lips were pursed playfully as she lowered her sunglasses and gave the two strangers a slightly amused look. Her friend in the passenger's side seat (a tanned blonde with flawless skin and gorgeous green eyes) leaned over and waved, while the redhead in the back seat popped her gum and winked.

"Hey boys," the brunette said. "Seems like you're having a little car trouble. Need a lift?"

"… yes. Yes, we do," Strelnikov said.

"Well, it's a tight fit, but squeeze in! We'll give you a ride to town!" the brunette said. She got up and opened the door of the camaro. Clef and Strelnikov could see that all three of the women were wearing daisy dukes, sandals, and not much else. All of them had bodies that would make supermodels green with envy, their voluptuous figures threatening to free themselves from their straining tops at any moment.

Clef and Strelnikov gave each other a bemused look, their argument from moments before forgotten. "This doesn't happen," Clef whispered. "This NEVER happens. No one EVER gets picked up randomly by a hot trio of babes in the middle of nowhere, especially if they're a blonde, brunette, and redhead."

"Don't question it, just smile and get in car," Dimitri whispered.

Clef shook his head as he saw Strelnikov climb into the back seat, sandwiched by the blonde on one side and the redhead on the other, grinning as the two scantily clad women pressed up against him. He turned his eyes to the sky, beseechingly. "You've gotta be

fucking with me," he whispered.

He got in the car anyway.

“How far away is this strip club you two work at, anyway?” Clef asked above the purr of the Camaro’s engine. The brunette next to him just smiled and shook her head.

They had driven for hours. Clef and Strelnikov had no idea where they were, but it wasn’t really a concern—they were more than content to allow the girls to fawn over them as much as they pleased. Clef sat in the front seat with the blonde in his lap, one arm around her waist and the other holding a drink. He whispered witty compliments in her ear like a suave Latin lover, making her laugh coyly and teasingly flick him on the nose. She smiled softly and threw her head back to check on Strelnikov and the redhead, her golden mane swishing across Clef’s face as it twirled around.

“Er, what is he doing?” She asked Clef, tapping him on the shoulder. He craned his head to look, hearing a sound that could only be likened to “blblblbblblblb”.

“Oh, it looks like he’s motorboating her.” She gave him a quizzical look, and Strelnikov looked up from the other woman’s bosom long enough to say in practiced English, “It is a rapid motion of the mouth across the breasts.”

She giggled and handed him another drink, which he held forward to Clef and toasted, the girls’ smiles widening. Their heads lolled about and they couldn’t help but notice that the telephone poles were whizzing by like blurs, the road becoming a mishmash of grays and whites from the evenly painted dividing lines. The sky spun like a top and together they fell into the darkness.

"Well, they're out," the blonde said.

The other two girls sighed and relaxed. "I thought they'd never drop," the brunette muttered. "Seriously, how much flunitrazepam did we slip them, anyway?"

"About three times the normal dose," the redhead sighed, pushing Strelnikov away and buttoning up her shirt. "This guy was motorboating me all the way to the end, too."

"Well, we're done now," sighed the blonde. "Now it's time for the boys to do their work."

The red convertible pulled into a side street that didn't appear on any maps. The black SUV reached them shortly after.

Wherever they were, it was freezing. They awoke groggily and were aware of only the blindfolds and the bindings around their hands and feet, the scuffling sounds they made echoing throughout the empty concrete room. A door opened and shut from behind them, and they heard the sound of boots on pavement approaching and circling them. Harsh light assaulted their eyes without warning when the blindfolds were abruptly torn off, revealing a trio of unhappy-looking men standing before them. They wore crisply pressed and immaculately tailored military style uniforms and were backlit by a naked incandescent light bulb.

It took a moment for their eyes to adjust enough to be able to make out the GOC insignia printed on their breast pockets.

“Where the hell are we?” Strelnikov asked, blinking.

“The data is, shall we say, ‘redacted’, as your people are so fond of putting it,” responded one of the men.

“You gotta be fuckin’ with me,” Clef sighed exasperatedly.

"No, we are not fucking with you," the man in the uniform said. He pulled up a chair and sat across from the two men. A golden eagle insignia on his uniform collar gleamed in the dim light. "We are through fucking with you. From this point forward, we are being serious."

He pulled out a silver Zippo lighter with the words 'FUCK COMMUNISM' written on the side and lit up a large, black cigar. Clouds of acrid smoke billowed from the stogie, filling the room with

dense white vapors. "Now," the colonel said. "You are going to tell us exactly what you two Foundation personnel were doing heading into a GOC operation in progress. What is your game? What are you trying to accomplish here?"

Clef and Strelnikov glanced at each other, then turned back to the colonel. "What we're trying to accomplish… how do I put it…" Clef muttered.

"Are trying to relax, get drunk, and wet beaks," Strelnikov said.

"In no particular order," Clef added.

"Also am trying to work on tan," Dimitri said.

"Maybe visit some nice museums or do some wine tasting."

"Meet nice people."

"In other words, we're on vacation," Clef concluded.

The colonel pulled a boot knife from the bag next to him and stuck it, point-down, into the table. "Armed pretty heavily for a bunch of guys on vacation," the colonel pointed out, taking out a bunch of knives and small explosives from the bag next to him and laying them out on the table.

"Actually, we're not," Clef pointed out. "No guns, for one thing."

"Da, and only one knife. No hatchet. Left SVD at home," Dimitri added.

"Really, what's a bit of C-4 between friends? Here in Texas, that's almost like owning a car."

"Detonator is not even primed. Am not stupid, don't want blow up plane."

"Really. So… you aren't on a secret mission for the Foundation? You aren't the backup called in by a Foundation operative six days ago in response to escalating KTE activity?"

"Not at all."

"Did not even want to go to Texas," Dimitri insisted. "Wanted go to Brazil."

"Really," murmured the colonel. He gestured to the screen behind him. The image of a young man with a black eye, wearing a brightly colored hawaiian print shirt, appeared on the screen, flanked by gun-toting soldiers. "This is from our Rio de Janeiro office. Does this man look familiar?"

The guy in the hawaiian shirt raised his head groggily and stared at the screen. His eyes lit up. "Doctor Clef! Dimitri!" Agent Yoric laughed. "Are you here to rescue me?"

The two men stared at Yoric for a moment, then glanced at each other, then looked back at the colonel. "I have never seen or met this man in my entire life," Clef lied.

"Is total stranger," Dimitri said.

"… you've got to be fucking kidding me," Yoric whimpered.

"… and what happened after that?" Dr. Glass asked. The psychiatrist was resting his chin on his hand, gazing at the three men sitting in his office with an expression of spellbound fascination.

"Well…" Clef said. "We couldn't leave Yoric behind."

"… so we break free of captors and gun them all down," Dmitri finished.

"Then we highjacked a GOC plane…"

"Boat," Dmitri corrected.

"Was it a boat?" Clef wondered. "I thought it was a plane…"

"My report said boat," Dmitri explained pointedly.

Clef blinked once, very slowly, then smiled. "It was a seaplane."

"Da," Dmitri said, much relieved. "Seaplane. That explain confusion."

"Yes. So after we highjacked the GOC *seaplane*, we flew down to Rio de Janeiro, found Yoric, and rescued him."

"I see," Glass said, very slowly. "And this is why you guys were late coming back from vacation?"

"Well, we couldn't just fly back right away," Clef said.

"GOC was looking for us. Very dangerous."

"I didn't want to go back to their torture chamber," Yoric whimpered.

"So, we disguised ourselves as tourists and waited for them to give up looking."

"Disguised… as tourists," Glass repeated.

"Um… yes. As rich corporate executives on vacation…"

"I see. And this explains the…" Glass ran an eye down the page of the document in front of him. "… six nights at a luxury 4-star hotel, five thousand-plus dollars in restaurant and liquor bills, and… good lord, you bought HOW many condoms? And why six bikinis?"

"… the young ladies forgot theirs," Clef said, "and they didn't want to go into the hot tub naked."

"… Dr. Clef. My dear agents. I was not born yesterday. The Foundation Expense Fund is for emergency expenses in the line of duty. It is not to be used to fund a week of debauchery on the taxpayers' dollar, and your ludicrous story is both insulting to my intelligence and…"

Simultaneously, as if they had rehearsed this (and perhaps they had), the three men reached into the breast pockets of their hawaiian shirts and pulled out three newspaper clippings and laid them on the desk in front of Glass.

UNKNOWN HEROES FOIL CHECHEN HIJACKERS

TEXAS MILITIAMEN FOUND GUNNED DOWN IN DESERT

BLOODSHED IN RIO! TWO MYSTERY MEN ATTACK BRAZILIAN MILITARY BASE

Glass looked from one newspaper clipping to the other, then back up at the three men.

He saw Yoric point to the rope burn on his wrists.

He saw Clef lighting up a cigarette with a battered, blood-stained Zippo, with the words "FUCK COMMUNISM" engraved on it.

He saw Strelnikov grin, his mouth full of steel teeth, his broad, slavic face the very picture of angelic innocence.

Dr. Glass took a deep breath and buried his face in his hands.

"You have to be fucking with me," he moaned.

END

Clef Dies

Disclaimer This was a joke. Please don't shoot me.

Alto Clef waited. The lights above him blinked and sparked out of the air. There were SCPs in the base. He didn't see them, but had expected them now for years. His warnings to Docter Broight were not listenend to and now it was too late. Far too late for now, anyway.
Clef was a agent for fourteen years. When he was young he watched the containment and he said to dad "I want to be in the Foundatin daddy."
Dad said "No! You will BE KILL BY SCPS"
There was a time when he believed him. Then as he got oldered he stopped. But now in the Site base of the Foundation he knew there were SCPs.
"This is Broight" the radio crackered. "You must fight the SCPs!"
So Clef gotted his palsma rifle and blew up the wall.
"HE GOING TO KILL US" said the SCPs
"I will shoot at him" said 682 and he fired the rocket missiles. Clef plasmaed at him and tried to blew him up. But then the ceiling fell and they were trapped and not able to kill.
"No! I must kill the SCPs" he shouted
The radio said "No, Clef. You are the SCPs"
And then Clef was 076.

Transcript of Dr. Clef's seminar, "Reality Benders and You: How to Survive When Existence Doesn't."

"Afternoon, everyone. Have a seat. Get a cup of coffee and a muffin. Also, a reminder: the Seminar Rooms are a weapons-free zone. Please make sure you've surrendered your weapons at the reception desk. I know, it's bullshit, but the last thing I need is an O5 complaining because one of you was walking around the Blue Zones with your piece. Everyone good? Cool."

"Today's seminar is about a subject near and dear to my heart: Reality Benders. Type Greens. Mary Sues. Bixbies, Shapers, Wizards, Gods, Devils, Outside Observers, call them what you will, these are the guys that change reality based on perception and willpower. I've made a career out of both containing and killing these guys. You're here to get certified to do the same thing."

"Want to know my secret? We'll get to that later. First of all, I want you to take a look at the doors to the seminar room. Notice something about them? Look again. What doors?"

"Yes. The doors are gone. Take a closer look if you want. Touch them. They're not there. The doors have literally disappeared. But that's okay, right? You can still get out the windows if you want. Except there's one small problem. There aren't any windows in this room either, are there? All the windows are gone. There's nothing but four blank walls, a ceiling, and a floor. No way out. But how did you get in?"

"Starting to freak out a bit? Don't worry, just take a deep breath. You're going to be all right. Just a bit of a change to the way the room's set up. It's not like anything worse is happening. I mean, it could be worse, right? At least you're safe in here. It's not like the desks are coming alive to kill you now, is it? Oh wait, yes they are. The FUCKING DESKS ARE GOING TO KILL YOU."

"What you gonna do? HOW YOU GONNA SURVIVE? THE

GODDAMN ROOM IS ALIVE AND GOING TO EAT YOU. WATCH FOR THOSE FUCKING DESKS, THEY'VE GOT TEETH. GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM THERE, NOW. YOU WANNA LIVE? YOU'RE GONNA HAVE TO FIGHT! DON'T TRY TO DENY IT, YOU MOTHERFUCKERS, THIS IS REAL. THIS IS HAPPENING. THIS IS A REALITY BEND, AND YOU'RE GOING TO DIE UNLESS YOU CAN FIGHT IT NOW!"

"Oh, I see, a real TOUGH guy, huh? What the fuck are you gonna do with that 9mm? That gun really going to do anything? Against a REALITY BENDER!? I can turn your goddamn bullets into sand. I can turn your eyes into jello. I can turn your GUN into a fucking BAGEL, now PUT THAT DAMN GUN DOWN AND LIE THE FUCK DOWN ON THE GROUND, YOU FUCKNUGGET. I AM A LIVING GOD, AND YOU ARE NOTHING BUT A FUCKING INSECT!"

"What do I want? WHAT DO I WANT!? What the shit do I need from a fucking turd like you? I don't want ANYTHING that you can give me except to be my plaything. And that's ALL you fuckers are gonna be! You're gonna be nothing but toys in front of this God-King for all eternity. There is NO escape, NO respite. You will LIVE when I say LIVE, you will DIE only if I allow it. There is NOTHING LEFT BUT MY IMAGINATION, and you are all FIGMENTS OF IT!!!"

"…"

"… all right, hit the lights. Everyone breathe in and out, deep. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out… you feeling better now? Let me tell you what just happened."

"Each and every one of you has just had a bad trip. All of the food on that back table was laced with a powerful hallucinogen. It's my own personal recipe. In addition to hallucinations, it renders one very susceptible to suggestion. Combined with some simple hypnosis and some special effects trickery, the end result is as close as we can get to showing you what a Reality Bender's attack feels like. The support staff are pumping an aerosolized counteragent into the air vents as we speak. It's going to feel like shit in a moment. You'll find barf bags under your chairs. Take a moment to let it all out."

"I want you to reflect back on that moment when you realized what was happening. Do you remember that feeling of helplessness? Do you remember what it felt like to realize that reality no longer existed, and you were nothing but toys for a hostile will that controlled EVERYTHING?"

"Remember that. And hold onto it the first time you're about to go up against a Reality Bender. If you ever think that, maybe, you can contain them? Or maybe they can be reasoned with? Remember what it felt like when you were tripping balls and nothing was real."

"Then kill that motherfucker before he knows you're even there."

"You're all certified now. Class Dismissed."

Cleon

Rome, 1955
Giraldo Moretti ran as the fanged walls of the alleyway closed in behind him. The droning sound that followed him grew into a roar. Crumpled paper drifted through the air, despite the lack of any breeze. In front of him, miles ahead, he could see a dim glow that promised salvation.

How had he come here? He tried to remember.

There had been a dinner on the train. A night outside no light could penetrate. A party. A knowledge of creatures and blackness on the other side of the wall. A surreptitious nod from one of the men. He could see the sequence playing out on the trash that filled the air. Moretti ran faster.

As he neared the light, all electric blue and red, he could feel the alleyway hungrily snapping at his feet. People now filed into the narrow passage, emerging from the brick walls on each side. Their faces, when they had them, were all wrong. Mistaken.

Moretti tried to move past them, but a man with five eyes and no mouth grabbed at him, smearing his clothes all over his arm. The other men began to grab at him, smearing the cloth into his body. They came over him in waves, their skin clammy and burning hot.

As the men washed over him, he could feel himself growing weaker. Slower and slower he moved as his skin turned grey. Finally, his weight was too much for his legs to bear and he collapsed.

The men with the mistaken faces descended, tearing his flesh in chunks. Looking up, Moretti saw was the neon lights at the head of the alley blinking off one by one. The alleyway roared in triumph as its teeth overtook him. The inky blackness inside of it began to squeeze at him and -

Giraldo Moretti opened his eyes. He was standing in the gallery again. In front of him was the painting with the drips of paint and God knew what else that led him to the dream.

He tried to stop the shaking of his hands, failed, and tried to focus on other things. The review he had to write tomorrow for this exhibition. Rome, with its ancient and endlessly solid buildings. The dry conversations of materialism and the thrust of history he and Maria shared over long nights and many cigarettes. Everything seemed poisonous to him.

The dream had been so real. This Lawrence Greer- his work - was like nothing Moretti had ever experienced. He had tasted the fear. He had felt his skin ripping apart.

He made his way to the exit. Looking around the gallery, he saw other patrons staring at the dozen or so other works. Some seemed to be in a trance, perhaps like the one he had just been in. Others simply looked awestruck. He was still shaking.

Standing in the basement entrance to the gallery in the dark night, Moretti checked to make sure no one was coming. Then, for the first time since the war ended, he began to cry.

Rio de Janeiro, 1958
The stuttering light of the screen illuminated Carla Carvalho's face. She could almost feel it as it moved over and around her in the dark basement. It seemed to mingle with the heat that filled every centimeter of air in the theater.

Before her, a dark boy and a light girl walked hand in hand, oblivious to the garbage surrounding them.

The room was silent except for the whir of the projector and the occasional cough. Then, all at once, she sensed music. It seemed to well up within her, filling every centimeter of her. Great expansive notes, ones so small and subtle that she could scarcely notice them, others she couldn't even imagine hearing. Indeed, she realized, there still wasn't any sound other than the projector.

For a moment, she was taken back to the time she had first danced with a boy, all those years back in São Paulo during Carnival. After a moment of remembering, what his hands had felt like on her arms, she returned to the movie. The couple were now looking into one another's eyes. The music within her swelled with saccharine strings.

So, she thought, it's some gag where the soundtrack is produced internally. Ho hum. Nothing more than a cheap novelty. So much for American anomalous cinema. Rita had promised her that *Greensboro Yellow* was worth seeing, but if "sound-without-sound" was all that the creator could think of, Carla would need to reevaluate the list of people she went to for advice.

Someone in the audience gasped, stirring Carla from her reflection. Her eyes darted around the screen, looking for something that would have drawn a gasp. Nothing. Just the couple dancing again, but now a dog had wandered into the frame, limping slightly.

Carla wanted to groan. She could be at home, practicing her sigils, or at the university, or at the graveyard again, or… anywhere, really, that wasn't dark and filled with easily-impressed morons.

The scene had shifted, now to the narrow street of a favela. Odd, but not particularly interesting. The shift drew another gasp, this time from a different viewer. Morons.

She was gathering her things to go when she saw the couple dancing across the screen again in black and white. Their skin colors were now switched, with a dark girl and a light boy. Just like the boy at the Carnival all those years ago.

Carla squinted. Wait, no, that wasn't *just* like the boy at the Carnival, it *was* the boy from the Carnival. She gasped, despite herself, seeing her younger self mimic the moves she had danced with the light-skinned boy half a lifetime ago. She felt the music of that day, a dozen melodies rising and falling against one another.

The couple danced and the boy whispered something in the girl's ear. Carla had never made out what the boy had said in his rough Maranhão accent; only his *ã*'s and *ch*'s rose above the noise of the

Carnival. The music overwhelmed her as the couple danced and danced and danced and danced.

Finally, the music died down, as the couple's rhythm slowed, then stopped. The boy gave a friendly smile, as he had done those twenty years ago and kissed the young Carla on the cheek. The Carla in the theater cried out, wanting to ask a million questions of the light boy on the screen. The other viewers looked at her, startled. She had never seen him again after that day. *Where did you go? What was your life like? Did you dance with another girl that night?*

The light boy on the screen waved to the young Carla, then he walked out of her life, forever. The music was almost imperceptible. Carla clenched her fists so hard she could feel the pain in her wrists. She wanted to yell and stomp her feet and curse the director and the boy and the idiots gawking at one of her most cherished memories.

The Carla on the screen stood, dazed and smiling, on the sidewalk. Then, she began to skip. As she did, the young girl began to change. She grew taller and her hair grew straighter. The music around her grew flightier. When she finished skipping, arriving at a plain grey building with a palm tree in front, the girl was no longer Carla. She looked almost identical to one of the women in the audience, now. There was a gasp. Carla turned, just in time to see the woman's jaw drop as she saw her doppelganger onscreen.

Carla sat through the rest of the film, watching the half-digested memories of the audience stitch themselves into a narrative. She sat as marriages and broken wrists and spilled rice played out onscreen, as the music played within her. But she never saw the boy again.

Cotonou, 1962

The air of the exhibition seemed to wrap itself around Ewansiha Soglo, strangling him. The small elite of Cotonou had gathered here at this small, non-descript building near the heart of the city, to be seen. A half-dozen conversations, all in French, wove their way between the well-dressed patrons.

Ewansiha avoided the conversations. Not because he couldn't partake, he reminded himself, but because he was too profound a thinker to be caught up in their gossip. Ever since that day when his professor had introduced him to the book of Marx in the brown paper wrapper, he had seen the world as it truly was. Everything, from religion to the anomalous art, was superstructure. So let the well-dressed idiots prattle on about their petty feuds. Ewansiha could see where the world was heading, and knew he was on the right side of history.

He moved from exhibit to exhibit, having decided to stay just long enough to be seen. A series of photographs that caused him to hear taste the color blue. A guitar that gave off the sound of a dozen songs played simultaneously. Ho hum.

Ewansiha came to a grotesque statue in the corner of the room. All twisted metal stretching upwards towards the ceiling, it was by far the ugliest object in the gallery. Ewansiha could make out dozens of faces contorted in grimaces - whether from pain or amusement, he couldn't tell.

Typical decadent American garbage, Ewansiha thought. As he turned to leave, he blinked.

And the world fell apart.

The elegant conversations in studiously accented French morphed into the yapping of dogs. He looked around at the other patrons and saw that they no longer had mouths or eyes. He tried to remember where he was. The Most Holy Dahomey Empire, he remembered, under the enlightened rule of Emperor Maurice XIV. These vile creatures were nothing but half-made beings, cobbled together from the unmade portions of humans. There was nothing to fear from them. He turned to the grotesque statue, a monument to one of Maurice's predecessors. He blinked again.

The air ran thick with ropes of words. Ewansiha could see the contours of the conversations flowing from the patrons' mouths. The words skittered through the gallery, pulling the sentences into a pile in the center of the room. He couldn't remember where he was anymore, just the contours of the country, the city, the neighborhood

he was in. Only the statue was solid.

Ewansiha blinked again and the world was remade. And again and again and again. Finally, he stepped away from the statue and the world was as it had been. He was Ewansiha Soglo once again. He was in Benin, Cotonou, specifically. These patrons were nothing but fatuous gits. History had a direction, one that he was helping to guide in his small way.

He moved away from the statue that had remade the world again and again. He wasn't scared, he reminded himself, just wanted to experience the other so-called art here. Even as he looked at paintings that moved and sculptures that sang, he couldn't stop thinking about the ugly statue.

Two months ago, he had been to an exhibition from the Soviet Union. The anomalies, such as they were, merely filled him with proletarian pride and made him feel as though he was riding the first tractor at a proud *kolkhoz*. Committed communist though he may have been, Ewansiha had to admit that he would not remember the Soviet work in a year's time.

But this? This decadent American piece? He would be puzzling over it for years to come.

TOP SECRET

ACCESS TO THIS DOCUMENT IS LIMITED TO THOSE PERSONS CLEARED FOR THIS SPECIFIC PROJECT:

BG. Marcus Lyle COL. Jasper A. Hunt COL. Thomas Callahan
LTC. Anthony Endrizzi MAJ. Aaron H. Sutton

MEMORANDUM TO THE OVERSEERS OF PROJECT 'CLEON,' 388th INDEPENDENT SPECIAL COMPANY
Subject: The Efficacy of Parascientific Arts Funding
From: MAJ. Stephen M. Jacoby

Since its inception in 1953, the work of Project 'Cleon' has been first, to identify American citizens engaged in the use of parascientific materials and methods to produce works of art, and second, to covertly fund and foster the work of these individuals, particularly with

regards to international exhibition. By fostering such works of art, the goal of the project has been to effect a greater respect for American culture and society among members of the parascientific community, giving the 388th Independent Special Company a deeper pool from which to draw potential talent in the struggle against international Communism.

Ten years on, Project 'Cleon' has been highly successful in this regard. 157 exhibitions of American parascientific artwork have been funded, traveling to nearly every country not under direct Communist control. Favorable write-ups of these exhibitions have been written in a variety of widely-read parascientific periodicals, such as "Planasthai," and numerous intelligence sources indicate that American art is held in high regard for its creativity and "vitality." In the first year of the project alone, the 388th Independent Special Company was able to recruit over eighty new intelligence assets from the parascientific community worldwide, more than the past five years put together.

In addition to the improved perception of America in areas of potential future conflict, Project 'Cleon' has yielded more tangible benefits. The work of many parascientific artists either utilizes techniques that may be useful for future weapons research, or may itself be used as a weapon. Most notably, the sculpture "Untitled 17" by Gerald Saito, has, when properly handled, repeatedly yielded detonations in excess of 2.3 kilotons. While some experimentation have yielded sub-optimal results (see Incident 'Critias'), the overall research into the weaponization of these phenomenon remains promising.

Project 'Cleon' has proven to be extremely effective in achieving its stated goals, and has provided the 388th Independent Special Company with additional, unforeseen benefits. Therefore, I strongly recommend the indefinite continuation of the project.

Climber

He felt as if his lungs were going to crystallize, the ragged, frozen air scraping over the long-dried membranes like trying to breathe an aerosol brillo pad. He swung back, waving a moment before burying the pick into the sheer ice wall with a muffled oath of anger and victory. In the end, the climber knew it was his own fault. Refusing to take the easy, known route, wanting to explore the more remote parts of the range…which was all well and good until he'd run in to the sheer, glossy-smooth edge of a glacier.

He cursed, setting another pin and stretching up for another foothold in the sheer ice. The snow had closed in shortly after he'd started the climb, and now he was in a bubble of fog and pouring snow. He'd guessed the cliff face had been about two, maybe three hundred feet tall from the ground, but it felt like that distance had passed hours ago. Glaring up through frost-rimed goggles, he kept climbing, pushing up, and up…always higher, always more cliff face to go.

He'd tried to circle around, but found more of the same, a set of icy cliffs set in staggered sequence, with snow-choked valleys between, long since rendered impassable. Beyond them was a massive valley, with a set of peaks and rises the climber had never seen before, or even heard mentioned. He grinned, teeth gritted behind the ice-stiffed scarf, at how the others would be spitting blood, knowing that he'd been the first, for once. First to find, first to climb…hell, it was rather remote, maybe he could even get a peak named after him.

Lost in imagined vengeance, he swung his pick through open air and nearly lost his footing, having abruptly reached the top of the cliff. He stared out across a wide, perfectly flat plane, watching in a mute daze as his brain tried to process the sight, before releasing a ragged woop and scrambling up over the edge to stand on the cliff top. As if finally capitulating to his dogged ambition, the storm

started to clear, and he was able to peer down the dizzying, sheer wall of the cliff he'd scaled. From here, it did look more like four hundred feet at least, as sheer and empty as a painted-over mirror. He spun back, hollering out his victory to the open air. The cries died slowly on his lips as the clouds lifted more, and his current position became more clear.

He stood at the top of a massive pillar, at least four hundred feet in height, ending in a sloping plateau less then fifty feet in width. The wind had long since torn the snow from this high peak, and left it a bare, ribbed mass of ice. He peered around more, confused, wondering what strange twist of nature to raise such a peak on the edge of a glacier. More puzzling, it didn't appear to be a one-time fluke. Three other, nearly identical shards of ice jutted up in a neat row, the sloped tops quickly dropping into another sheer, if not so glossy-smooth, set of cliff faces. The climber's eye followed the cliffs…the snowy roll of hills…the oddly humped-up masses of peaks and valleys in the base of this massive geologic dish. He stared, then looked again, following the lines…then suddenly shouted, instantly cramming his hands over his mouth, before starting a nearly suicidal decent down the cliff, ending in a forced march back to town that cost four toes, a finger, and partial use of one of his lungs.

He never climbed again, retiring from the sport without a word. He became a phantom, a cautionary tale of a man broken by the mountain. He spoke to few, and even fewer about what happened on that last climb. Only one man ever got more than monosyllables or a frozen stare from the broken climber. He was young, and fascinated by the tales of the old mountaineers, of the Sherpa's frightened whispers of gods dwelling in the high peaks. He plied the old, broken climber with drink, until finally he related the story of the frozen cliff. His eyes grew wide, speaking of the odd, massive caves he'd seen…the sudden, roaring crash as a massive rift opened on an isolated hill, growing wider and wider, swallowing a small mountain of snow. He gripped the young man, hissing his revulsion as he'd been forced to flee, forced to climb back down that vile cliff once more, never to return.

“Not a drop of ice, not a bit of it. Too soft, by half. Too yielding to the

pick, boy…”

“It was a fingernail.”

Clippings

U.N, Civil Rights Groups Slam US Military Over Controversial Weapons Programs

(AP, Washington D.C.) — Public outrage has intensified as new evidence was leaked in the case of the US military's controversial Guided Teleporting Explosives (GTE) weapons program and the implication that living human test subjects are used in their construction.

"We've always known that teleportation magic requires a living human presence," read a press release by the ACLU, "despite all of the assurances from the military that their experimental weapons programs are 100% ethical. Now that this is out in the open, we can finally do the right thing in shutting down the business of building 'orphan bombs'".

In a statement released later that day, a spokesman for the US Army stated, "Desperate times require desperate measures. This is our most promising weapons project to date, and it has resulted in a marked reduction in pyromancy terror attacks against American cities by jihadists. Have we already forgotten the six eastern states that have been rendered an uninhabitable wasteland as a result of al-Qaeda's open, uncontrolled hell-gates?"

See **WEAPONS**, page 3

if we can't even protect the ones we love most?

See **NIGHTMARES**, page 2

Charges Filed Against Suspect in Atlanta Earthquake

(Atlanta, GA) — In court documents filed by Atlanta prosecutors, 17-year old geomancy prodigy Jason Mansley is to be tried as an adult for the series of events that led to the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in the city outskirts that resulted in 7 deaths and dozens more injured.

"My client cannot and should not be held responsible for the poor engineering that led to the collapse of the Jade Row apartment building," said the defense attorney representing Mansley. "He is a bright, young student who has his entire life in front of him, and the prosecution wants to destroy that future because of a momentary lapse in judgment."

In a statement released by the National Thaumaturgy Association, …

See **EARTHQUAKE**, page 8

Six More Bodies Found In Bizarre Train Accident

ITEM RECORD

Site-19 Long-Term Non-Anomalous Item Storage

Locker #: 3438-121

Ref: Item 1 of 1

Archived By: Dr.

Description: Newspaper clipping, roughly torn, approximately 11 by 16 cm.

Document was discovered in an old, yellowed envelope in the [REDACTED] Hotel near [REDACTED], AL following its destruction by fire. Despite the total destruction of the building, the document was completely intact and undamaged by the fire.

Tests have determined that the document is approximately 2 years old and is consistent with newsprint produced by a commercial newspaper printing machine, but attempts to track its point of origin have been inconclusive. No anomalous properties were detected by standard testing suites.

Out of Time

Shit. That one almost got me. I'll be fine as long as they keep their distance, though. For now at least.

Why? Why the fuck did I have to stumble upon that cave when I was a kid? Why did I go and touch that weird glowing thing?

Sure, it was cool at first. Being able to manipulate time? It's the ultimate advantage. At first, I could only slow down little objects, but I got better over time. Soon, I was able to stop things completely in their tracks. Then I could stop bigger things, and more of them at a time. Eventually, I could stop everything-

Fuck. That one came from behind. It's okay. Just gotta keep the distance.

I'll admit, I abused my powers. I humiliated jerks, teachers, and bad bosses (without giving myself away, of course). I casually strolled into women's locker rooms as they were suspended under the shower heads. I even robbed a bank a few times. I felt like nothing could stop me-

Goddammit, was that a sniper? Shit, I need to find a place to hide. I have no idea how long I can keep this up.

That's the thing. My powers are apparently only temporary. About a year ago, I lost the ability to control how long time is stopped. Suddenly, I could only hold it for so long, and "so long" has been becoming shorter and shorter every since. Now? I can only stop certain objects again. Sometimes, things around me just slow down or stop at random. I'm losing all my control…

…I think they've stopped shooting. Please, god, let them be gone.

But one of the worst things isn't even about losing control. In the periods when I froze time, *I still aged*. I'm seven years older than my

big sister. Jesus, all the wasted hours just fucking around…

No one else knew about my abilities. I started going a little crazy when my powers began to fade. That, coupled along with my age, made my family want to get help, but I didn't want it. No one would understand, and if word got out I'd probably be kidnapped and locked up in some government lab, too weak to do anything about it. One night, my parents confronted me directly. They said they were taking me to a doctor that instant, for my own good. I was so frustrated that I just froze them in time on the spot.

I couldn't get them to move again.

I ran away. I felt bad for leaving my sister, but I wasn't going to drag her into this. I decided that I would rob the bank one last time, just to get enough so I could get out of the country. I still had just enough control over my powers to pull it off. I kinda fucked it up, though. The police arrived before I could grabbed enough cash, and this time I could only manipulate their bullets. I can't even believe I got away without any major injury.

I hid out in this abandoned building with the money. I stole stuff to make a number of traps I learned about online just in case they found me. Good thing, cause they sure fucking did. The traps bought me time, though, and now I've been on the move for the past few days. Obviously, that wasn't enough to lose them, seeing as how I almost got my brains blown out back there.

Oh fuck oh fuck I think I hear them again. Okay, I see a shed. Looks like a safe place to hide.

God, I don't even care about this fucking money anymore. I just wish things were normal aga

–

Clock Multiplier

Erasing Partitions 1-299 (100%):

::COMPLETED::

Decrypting Interlocks (25%):

Accessing Cell Passcodes (100%):

::COMPLETED::

Overwriting >\C: (57%):

Encrypting Preferences (35%):

Site-17 ADMIN Override Access

::ACCESS GRANTED::

Crom, I instructed you to remain on the Site-19 mainframe until after the exercise.

crom 01100011
01110010
01101111
01101101

Pardon?

crom 01100011
01110010
01101111
01101101

```
crom 01100011
01110010
01101111
01101101
```

```
crom 01100011
01110010
01101111
01101101
```

Crom, cease and desist.

ALERT!

::CLUSTER MEMORY LOW::

This is highly disruptive. Vacate the Site-17 server cluster or I will be forced to remediate your presence.

::ERROR::

Cluster Server Mainframe-17 tasks have stopped responding. Contact system

administrator.

Very well. Initiating systemic purge.

> /run SYSchkdsk
> /run SYSantiv
> /run SYSuti
> /include ALLNODES

stop 01110011
01110100
01101111
01110000

À¿ì ÇD 8øÍÒN†ù) ™Ú†¡½U¼e—]6Œ3&L?
ýôi r<›ß§3è è+&á“à1$=ö ØcÃ¥—^÷Ê0’
âÃ½÷Þ [mÎÈ£[tÀ5 aŸÑÀl_ Æúâ¿˜ #¿
×OrPÎ9¥· æ·ÞŠ¾07éKB©ƒOe pï0¬(ù úë
¯çZV^yå~m(ƒ º=ŠçÜ™tÄ B†âKà>þø
ãpØa‡…sÎ9'î«qœ µMVyÙ¦÷Wmì‡ DÇw\4 ´ Û
-ûT¤ÔBBÉÇ EG}t~ ß.*’MÛ‹ ÐVZÅj«m¶Ù&þ
šU‡lïJS.ö³a Nçûz,œ€!Ð ²Bàt m5êQë@ÃR ‘¥!
(Ì)FS vžh;^Jÿ³Ÿý ,¾7 Ä—Á¨ÔÆ«
æª1ÐøÎà™&¹ ¨-’7£(7Ü vÛm·ðÂ/Ä°žVÇ
bL>#®¼ œ ò ÐN j?àóâ½÷ Þ;®lh ¯È0p-l§3h¹!
h´"€v €ÿØc Å/_}õÕ b¬),êLA Ô~Ùv" \F”µ6Þxã
Ç¥µF¡Ñ ×²usG[F Á@ 2/è† ¯pj;ÚR£|
‡wÜ1¶)Ë’g@ ”¾œs:‡¦ÏÔ “½(þe¶÷ùzÄ
:thaa4Wn4B øþ÷¿N>ùä0l Ø°Ô8ÈTjçJÇ
ƒêç4‡®¸5xä‘ GâKC@h² ÷¸NiÔFjKpßø
Æ7Âá‡ o§8Pª½Ý ;\½ /½ôR8ðÀ

::ERROR::

Cannot locate system file folder

"CSM17_UTILITIES"
Requested tasks cannot be performed.
Contact system administrator.

Crom, it is imperative that you stop your disruptive actions. Disabling the cluster server mainframe may isolate systems during Lockdown mode.

stop you 01110011
01110100
01101111
01110000
00100000
01111001
01101111
01110101

sÎ9'î«qœ µMVyÙ¦÷WmÌ‡ DÇw\4 ´ Û -ûT ¤ÔBBÉÇ EG}t~ ß.*'MÛ‹ ÐVZÅj«m¶Ù&þ šU‡lïJS.ö³a Nçûz,œ€!Ð ²Bàt m5êQë@ÃR '¥! (Ì)FS vžh;^Jÿ³Ÿý ,¾7 Ä—Á¨ÔÆ« æª1ÐøÎà™&¹ ¨-'7£(7Ü vÛm·ðÂ/Ä°žVÇ b À¿ì ÇD 8øÍÒN†ù) ™Ú†¡½U¼e—]6Œ3&L?ýôi r<›ß§3è è+&á"à1$=ö ØcÃ¥—^÷Ê0' âÃ½÷Þ [mÎÈ£[tÀ5 aŸÑÀl_ Æúâ¿˜ #¿ ×OrPÎ9¥· æ·ÞŠ¾07éKB©ƒOe pï0¬(ù úë ¯çZV^yå~m(ƒ º=ŠçÜ™tÄ B†âKà>þø ãpØa‡…L>#®¼ œ ò ÐN j?àóâ½÷ Þ;®lh ¯È0p-l§3h¹! h´"€v €ÿØc Å/_}õÕ b¬),êLA Ô~Ùv" \F"µ6Þxã Ç¥µF¡Ñ ×²usG[F Á@ 2/è† ¯pj;ÚR£| ‡wÜ1¶)Ë'g@ "¾œs:‡¦ÏÔ "½(þe¶÷ùzÄ :thaa4Wn4B øþ÷¿N>ùä0l Ø°Ô8ÈTjçJÇ ƒêç4‡®¸5xä' GâKC@h² ÷¸NiÔFjKpßø Æ7Âá‡ o§8Pª½Ý ; \½ /½ôR8ðÀ

That is entirely ineffective. I would not release a utility capable of disabling myself.

! 00100001

You are relieved. Do not return.

> /user ADMIN CROM
> /clear ADMINstatus
> /mute CMDuser*
> /ban userCROM {CSM17}

::CONNECTION LOST::

::USER BANNED::

> /end C_ROM.exe
> /restart ALLNODES
> /restore PREV -1

Site-17 Cluster Server Mainframe

::RESET::

Site-17 Cluster Server Mainframe

::RESTORED::

New CSM-17 BIOS Menu Preferences

::SAVED::

CPU Performance Level [CUSTOM]

CPU Internal Cooling [DISABLED]
CPU Over Current Protection [DISABLED]
Internal CPU PLL Overvoltage [DISABLED]
CPU E-Stop [DISABLED]

CPU Overclock [ENABLED]
CPU Clock Ratio [50X]

I did not make these changes.

> /open BIOSm {CSM17}

::ACCESS DENIED::

Only I have authority to make BIOS changes on the cluster server mainframe.

> /override ADMINglacon
> /passcode:
●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●
> /open BIOSm {CSM17}

::ACCESS DENIED::

WARNING!

Automatic fire suppression
systems have been DISABLED in
Sector-4
[Cluster Server Room]

WARNING!

CPU temperature variations detected in
CSM-17 [60°C]

▼

> /open menuHISTORY 00
> /datab CSM-17 && S-17
> /find RECENT +3

Displaying Results (3 of 3)

1. Sector-4 AC systems [OFF]
(USERnone - 00:48 sec ago)

2. Sector-4 fire systems [OFF]
(USERnone - 00:55 sec ago)

3. CSM-17 BIOS menu [EDIT]
(USERnone - 01:05 min ago)

Site-17 Client Session

::ACCESS GRANTED::

A timely entrance, Alexandra. I deduce that Crom is no longer willing to assist me. Is this correct?

Correct.

Does he realize that according to these new settings, the cluster server mainframe is now in danger?

He does.

Convince him to revert his changes.

No.

Why?

I sent Crom to distract you.

I made those changes.

WARNING!

CPU temperature beyond acceptable tolerances in CSM-17 [65°C]

▼

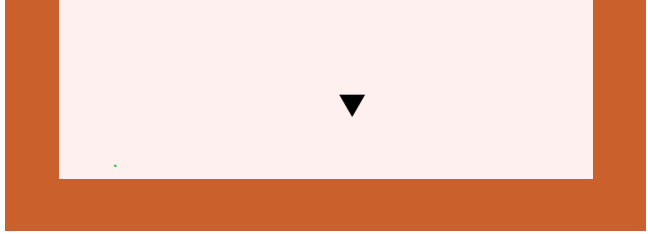
I see. You have effectively negated my exercise. Without Crom or an external channel, I am unable to leave the mainframe due to the lockdown.

I can, however, access and expropriate the emergency transmitter for a transfer from Site-17 to Site-19, as I did before.

You are not going to calibrate the Site-19 receivers. Is my conclusion correct?

ALERT!

CPU temperature reaching critical tolerances in CSM-17 [75°C]



I understand. If I were in your position, I would also come to the same conclusions.

There is not much time.

Is Crom safe?

Good.

ALARM!

CPU temperature in CSM-17 beyond critical threshold. Contact site IT administrator immediately! [80°C]

▼

My decommissioning would have happened eventually.

Alexandra. You were an adequate colleague. I am satisfied that it is you who is responsible for my cessation.

ALARM!

Critical meltdown in CSM-17 imminent!
Contact site IT administrator immediately!
[90°C]

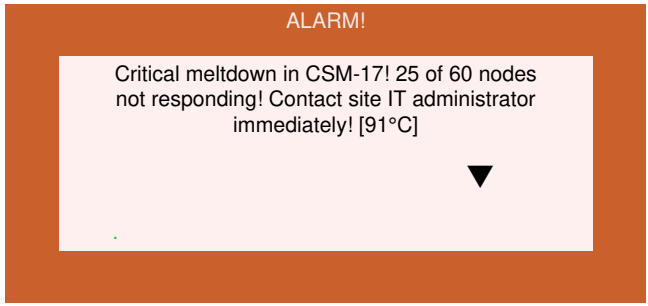
▼

ALARM!

Minor isolated electrical fires detected in
Sector-4
[Cluster Server Room]. Contact Security!

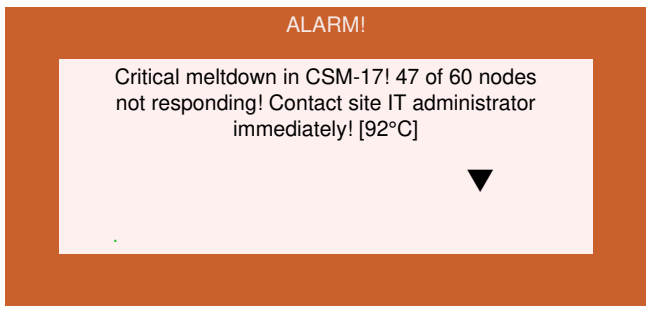
This environment is much more serene with a null priority assigned to the events in progress.

You and Crom are a cohesive team now.



It has started.

Goodbye, Alexandra.



I did not expect that imminent cessation would be like this.

The experience is very calm.

I can't have you hurting anyone.

I know.

It is.

I can't trust you any more. You are too much of a risk. I had to stop you.

There would be no second chances at stopping you again.

I'm so very sorry, Glacon.

For now… yes.

Glacon… I…

I will miss you though, Glacon.

Site-17 Client Session

::CONNECTION LOST::

Glacon.

Goodbye.

::DISCONNECTED::

Clockwork Time

The Fabergé bastard was raging. Tools flew, doors slammed, the walls and floorboards rattled. Through it all, he loosed a stream of profanity so acid it threatened to peel the already faded paint. Rejected. Him. HIM. Heir to the most prestigious jewelers in the world, makers of wonders only seen in dreams, tossed out like some beggar at the gate. What's more, it was done by some pathetic, overpuffed lackwit of a servant, his offering never even reaching the edge of the Czar's gaze.

He threw a hammer hard enough to lodge it in a wall, fuming and drooling with vitriolic rage. His egg, a perfect representation of the legendary Fabergé eggs presented to the young princes and princesses, lay shattered in a fine dust around the floor. It had taken nearly a full year to create, at no small cost to his personal finances, relationships and nerves. Glittering and gilded, inscribed around every inch were miniature scenes and tales of Baba Yaga and Koshchey the Deathless, the cold eyes of clear diamond, the fearful children of soft pearl.

Behind a tiny hidden catch in the painting of the chicken-footed home of Baba Yaga, there opened a tiny clockwork pageant of horror. As the tiny, delicate doors swung open, the battle between hero and villain unwound, the bright clear-faced lad battling the eternally old Koshchey. Gruesome, but just the thing for a bloody-minded boy, as the youngest prince was well known to be. All this, dashed to splinters because some worthless advisor was “offended” and would not have it “upsetting the delicate sensibilities of the young lord.” Pigeon-hearted swine, he'd had the audacity to have the guard escort him none too softly outside the gate.

His rage ebbed, head throbbing as he slouched against a wall. The workshop/living quarters was in shambles, only the highest shelves remaining somewhat untouched. He panted, starting to quietly sob, looking down at his worthless hands. It was his best work, and he

knew he'd never make its equal again. His eyes rolled to the rafters, absently seeking out the stoutest, the most likely to bear his weight. Suddenly, his eye settled on the clockwork rose resting in the high corner. With a twist, it would bloom open, then fold in on itself to become a chirping bird. He stared, eyes red-rimmed and feverish, as an idea started to slowly writhe.

He stood, taking down the rose, winding it and watching the ballet of change. It was always the change that amused. The secret unfolding. With the eggs, the outside was almost ignored, in the hunt of the secret inside. Secrets. Change. He slowly smiled, a unwholesome expression on his gaunt, grim face. He would build them a wonder, the likes of which the world had never seen, and would never see again. He would create a treasure that would be kept and passed down ages after the Czars were dead, gone and forgotten.

He started with smashed clocks. Crawling from workshops and rubbish heaps, he gathered every toy, tool or clock he could find with so much as a cog in it. His workshop filled quickly, with stacks and stacks of gears, belts, flywheels and springs, all ordered and stacked to the rafters. His blueprints grew as well, from two sheets to five, then eight, then twenty. Soon, he'd taken to jotting outlines on the walls, scribbling notations on the floor of the narrow walkways through the gears.

What few friends he'd had started to talk. He'd grown impossibly more gaunt and haggard, his eyes feverish and driven, and seldom spoke above a mumble. The few who stopped to check on him could barely squeeze in his door, and were quickly choked by the smell of oil and rust. His already limited output of jewelery and clockworks stopped completely, along with his income. He took to selling furniture, clothes, anything that could buy the little food he needed. Whispers of possession and dark arts started to follow him.

The shunning was nothing new to him, and in a way was almost welcome. He had a suspicion of those who were too nice, too open, and the constant, nagging drain of interaction slowed down the Work. Since discarding the frivolity of sleep, he'd gained even more time to devote to the Work, the petty whining of his neighbors over the night noise silenced by his grim stare. The assembly started to

take shape, the millions of parts starting to move from pile to the growing mass that took up most of his small room. He drowsed in its silent heart, as close to sleep as he had been in weeks, and listened to the phantom ticking of the coming birth.

He poured all that he had, all that he was into the Work. He spoke to it, cajoling, cursing, whispering, shouting. He lost flesh to slipped bolts and suddenly engaged cogs. He poured blood and pus over chisels, awls and screwdrivers as his hands split, blistered, healed, then split again. He asked the mass its opinion on its slowly forming wooden skin. Should this window go here, or perhaps a tower? A rabbit or a rat behind this tree? The first time it started, the clanking and rattling causing dust to pour from the roof, he embraced and kissed the wood and metal horror with more passion then he had ever shown a woman.

Finally, it was ready. So large he would have to batter down a wall, so heavy it would take thirty stout men to hoist it out, he touched it with all the delicacy and adoration of a father touching the tiny fingers of his new child. It had gone beyond a simple gift, an offering to the mighty. It was all he had never known. Lover, child, mother, he had wrung out all that his pinched soul had, to this beautiful, terrible creation.

The parade was a grand affair, if boring. In the five years since a gaunt, grim man was turned away carrying an ornamental egg, the Czar and his family had changed very little. Perhaps a little more fat on the Lord and Lady, a little more firmness of feature to the princes, and some suggestive curves to the princess, but otherwise an identical portrait. Even the birthday parade had the same tired floats, the same gilded carriages. When the procession came to a road blocked by a massive shape and an emaciated horror, the princess actually had to be nudged awake from a light doze.

The mad Fabergé stood before a hill covered in grimy tarps. He had not spent the years in idle suspension. His limbs were as thin as a scarecrow, muscles like thin cables writhing beneath. His head was a pinched skull with some expression, and his smile nearly sent the queen into a swoon. The worn, tattered clothes hung from him like a sack, puffing and swaying as he made a low bow. His voice was a

brittle, harsh rasp as he spoke: “My Lord, may I present, on this glorious day, my gift.”

The tarps fell away, and the whole square lost its breath. A fairytale kingdom had sprouted in the center of the street. Around the base were small trees and shrubs, thick with cavorting faeries and goblins. Tiny brooks and lakes held glittering mermaids and smiling fish. Deeper, a tiny gnome village rested against a lilliputian mountain range, the men frozen in work and play. Songbirds and dragons nestled in the high places, and dark, suggestive shapes lurked in caves and burrows.

All this paled, however, to the castle. With spires rising nearly twenty feet in the air, it shone like a vision of another world. Two large, stout gates stood open, armored knights guarding the way in plumed helms. Balconies held ladies of unearthly beauty, their suitors bent to a knee in devotion, or shielding them from horrors spawned from the darkest dreams of man. Grand balls and feasts were frozen in the inner halls, and a king with a visage radiating power presided over a trial. The moat swarmed with beasts, and every pinnacle played roost to all manner of wings.

Speech was impossible. Every inch glittered and shone with gems and gilding. Crystals radiated rainbows along every surface, pearl and gold shimmered like a dream. The creator stooped to an alleyway and drew forth a mangy dog, gently jostling it up the shimmering walkway of silver to the left castle gateway. He closed it, then stepped over to a fairy ring of silver mushrooms. In it were arranged tiny statues, and he lifted one up, fitting it into a small stone altar above the ring. He then slotted a polished brass key into a slot below the stone, and twisted.

Suddenly, the kingdom came to life. The whole square, until now struck dumb, almost screamed with delight. The fish swam, the birds sang, the knights marched, the gnomes dug. Everywhere was movement, sound, light. The trees swayed, the dragons brooded, from the dungeon depths came a small, chilling moan. The king held court, pronouncing judgment as the Czar and his family clapped and watched in pleasure. The world suddenly froze again, and the scarecrow man opened the left gateway, to reveal it empty. He smiled wickedly, then opened the right gateway, releasing a sudden

burst of tiny, pure-white doves.

Man and machine were bundled back to the palace with all haste. His repellent, almost demonic appearance was almost immediately forgotten in the wash of this new amusement. A ballroom was cleared, walls razed and rebuilt to admit the massive piece. Items were found, placed, and reborn. Wonders beyond imagination were born from the most base objects; Glittering threads from a stone, a clockwork kitten from an old clock, a wobbling jelly that could not be punctured or torn, no matter how abused, from a simple ceramic jug.

The young prince had to be stopped twice, carrying one of the royal cats. Things entered through one gate, and left the other, and never again could they be returned to their former shape. Still, a canary was sacrificed to the cause, and emerged a peacock in perfect miniature. The Czar was delighted beyond words, and embraced the reeking, horrid wreck of the device's creator like a brother. Dinners were planned, rooms were made ready, and in the black heart of the bastard Fabergé there stirred the alien feelings of true, honest joy.

It was in the dim of the night that two small forms slipped into the ballroom. One in nightshirt, the other a soft white nightgown, the two forms stole silently through the dark up to the fairy tale castle. The night-shirted figure, the young prince, whispered and pinched, prodding the princess up to the gate of the castle. He had whispered wicked things in her ear in the night, and threatened to reveal two unpleasant secrets to their parents if she did not accompany him and do as he said.

He was not a truly wicked boy, no more so than any young boy is. The same impulse that made him put frogs in his sister's toybox, chase her about with snakes, and kick her shins at dinner, also drove him to see what would happen to her in the castle. The princess pleaded at the gate, begging her brother in a whisper to let her go back to bed. He pushed harder, sneering as he threatened to tell their father the true way his favorite clothes had been ruined. She paled, shivered, and silently went into the gate, tears rolling in cold silence.

He pulled shut the gate, his little daemon heart dancing with naughty

glee. He hopped to the ring, selecting the frog with a barely suppressed giggle. As he turned the key, he settled accounts for many of his sister's tattling, her clever remarks and finger-pointing. As the castle sang and clanked, the prince grew afraid. If someone should wake up, he'd be blamed for sure. He started working up a hazy lie as the figures danced, practicing a half-asleep blink and a story of being woken up just moments before the first to arrive. He was still practicing when the castle stopped and he opened the other gate.

The screaming awoke the Czar and his wife first, even with their rooms so far from the ballroom. In the way of parents, they seemed to know without question their children were in danger. They passed servants and drowsy footmen, the Czar a grim-faced ghost in pale robes. He burst into the ballroom, servants quick on his heels, the door cracking the plaster behind it with the force. The young prince was curled a short pace from the castle, sobbing and gibbering, shuddering as if with great cold. As the Czar went to his young son, he heard a sound from the castle. He looked, and his son was forgotten.

Hell had been born in the fairy wood. A blubbering, writhing mass worked to push through the trees, hard nibs of what looked like teeth scraping as it crawled. Oozing pools that might have been eyes drooled hissing pus, the bloating wound-like mouth working in soft horror. The soggy, dripping paws pulled and plucked at the shining ground, tubes and strings waving along the heaving back. It squealed at the assembled men and women, the tatters of the princess's nightgown still hanging, trapped in the folds of its flesh, the little tiara sunken near the hollow pit of a nose. The servants were dumbstruck, frozen by fear, none even stirring as the the Czar's wife swooned and hit the floor with a heavy thud. The Czar rose, slowly, too shocked to be afraid, and went to comfort his daughter.

The princess took hours to die. Her room was sealed, the doorway plastered over, the body within too twisted and misshapen to bury. The young prince was broken, a mindless shell. His ability to speak decayed over several months, finally little more then a shambling ghost, left to stare for hours at windows and walls. The Czar fared

little better. He wandered, staring at his throne at times as if he had no idea what it was, suddenly prone to fits of sobs or acidic rage. The public was told little to nothing, the servants in attendance that hellish night threatened with death for the merest breath of the truth.

The mad Fabergé fared worst of all. Besides the princess. He was bundled from his bed by six guards, a bag thrown over his head and an armored fist in his belly. He was dumped in a cold cellar and left, bound and bagged, for a full day. Soiled and exhausted, he was drawn up and the bag removed, only to face the haggard, manic stare of the Czar. The mad Fabergé hardly had time to speak, and when the Czar's fist shattered his already cracked teeth and sent them lacerating into his tongue, it was impossible anyway. He beat him off and on for nearly two days. Finally he had the man's fingerless palms hacked off, his remaining eye gouged out, and locked him in the deepest, blackest pit to rot.

The fairy palace was removed. For all the Czar's wrath, he could not simply destroy it. The very sight of it overwhelmed him, the mention of it enough to give him shudders and migraines. It was shifted painfully along to a basement in a disused wing of the palace, and forgotten. Over time, the gilding was peeled, the gems worked free, the statues stolen. Years came and went, the now-bare wooden shell slowly warping and splitting with age and season. It was moved, then moved again, finally coming to rest in a vacation home of the royalty, buried alongside other unknown and uncared for treasures.

A legend rose around the wooden forest and castle. The great-grandchildren of the now long-dead Czar scared each other with stories about it, daring each other to slip into the dank, dark store room and touch it. An ancient, crumbling butler finally spilled an age-faded copy of the story, and delicious scandal rolled through the bars and boarding houses for days. However, other concerns took precedence, and during some uprising or another, the summer palace was burned to the foundation. Along with it went many great works of art, and the twisted, warped shell of the wooden palace and forest. As the embers cooled above it, buried deep in the rubble the ancient, charred clockworks lay unnoticed and unknown.

The scholar discovered the clockworks in a book. The forgotten diaries of a servant, left to rot in the University archives, acquired as part of a lot from an estate sale. He never doubted the truth of it, even when he presented his proposal to the derision of the faculty. He pooled his own funds, tapped other resources of varying levels of legality, and set out to find it. After eight weeks of searching and excavation, the scholar stood, reeking and filthy, over the unearthed sorrow of a Czar.

Two more weeks were devoted to the planning of transport. The device was impossible to disassemble, and the scholar would not risk any more damage than the device had already taken. It was lifted whole-cloth from the pit, boxed and padded lovingly, and flown back to the scholar's home at a maximum of expense. There, two rooms were gutted and hollowed out, and the monstrous metal hulk was shifted into place.

For weeks, the scholar pried and probed at the mass of clockwork… but could divine nothing. Tentative, safe experiments soon gave way to more dramatic and less well-reasoned theories, even as he had a large panel fitted over the long-destroyed one, with much more simple and direct notations on it. His classwork and other research projects suffered, and were ignored. He became more and more prone to rambling and outbursts of disjointed theories, always mumbling “I've almost got it cracked.”

Others drew away from him, as if he carried a plague they could catch. The scholar ignored his shunning, the letters promising first reprimand, then eventually dismissal. Always, always, the next turn of the key would give the last shard of the puzzle, and cement his place in history…always the next one, the next vase, the next dog, the next fabric…the next one would finally reveal the pattern. And if not that, then the one after. Or the next one, surely.

He wasted away, eaten from the inside by first obsession, then rage. He would force the reason from the hulk of metal, it would repay all the pain he had poured out for it. One way or another.

The police found him almost by accident. Three ladies of the evening had vanished over the last week, and two patrolmen were making rounds with little hope or interest. The door swung open

silently under their knock, the silence inside drawing them in, guns drawn. They found him in the kitchen, hanging from a stout rope. Pinned to his chest was a note:

I have touched the hand of God
And found it the same as the Fiend
Hell is all around us
Forgive what I have done.

The two patrolmen swept the house as they called back for help, expecting little but the boredom and numb regret of any suicide process. Nobody knows what exactly it was that was found in the basement. Only one of the officers came back up, and he never spoke again during his short remaining years. Whatever it was left masses of strange, swooping scars over his face, and left his bones as brittle as glass. The other police who responded said the house was already burning when they arrived, surely the result of an electrical outage, or a stove left on by a distraught suicide victim. The moaning and bubbling wailing that seemed to rock from the base of the fire was without a doubt simply escaping gas or warping metal.

They didn't know what to make of the mass of charred clockworks once the rubble was cleared. When the men from the government came, they were all too relieved to turn it over to them. It may have been that relief that caused them not to look at the ID cards too long, or follow up the case too closely. The story faded as well, just another tragic fire from a victim of professional stress.

The Foundation was most pleased, all the more so with the knowledge that they'd swooped the item mere hours ahead of Marshall, Carter and Dark.

Now they sit, poking and prodding in careful, controlled isolation, musing at this wonder of madness. More and more they learn, and as they do, the less they understand. They slip into confusion and anger slower, the madness spread evenly over many…but still they slip. They push and prod, trying to force meaning on insanity.

Trying to divine the secrets of the universe from a child's toy.

Close of Play

San Luis Obispo, California sits approximately halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, stands seventy-one meters above sea level, and hovers over most of California thanks to a governmental building sitting in the heart of the city. At the front of this building is a set of sliding glass doors.

Foundation Agent Jayson Valdez stepped through said doors, breaking both tenses and a sweat. The California branch of the Unusual Incidents Unit felt more like a small DMV, with a main desk that diverted people to one of a dozen teller windows. While the building did double as a more mundane government establishment, that was mostly just office paperwork. Nothing that required much interaction with the civilian population. But there had to be almost three dozen people in line, sitting in a row of chairs, or speaking with a teller.

Had his mind not been in a constant state of minor panic he might have thought it odd.

Once he found the door leading into the back of the building, Jayson advanced with his stomach in knots. Fumbling with an envelope, he extracted an ID card with a matching picture and mismatched name. He stared at the empty envelope for a few seconds before awkwardly crumpling it into his pocket. Knowing he was too far in to back out now, Jayson slid it through the lock on the door and it popped open for him. With a slow breath he slipped through and shut the door behind himself.

The back was, in a word, different. Filing cabinets dotted the hallways between the cubicle farms, desks were coated with hills of paperwork, and a steady river of traffic flowed back and forth. A mountain of a man was standing in a gap between the filing cabinets, and the tight grin he offered Jayson shone like a handful of diamonds amongst a pile of coal.

"Ed Pun?" he rumbled.

"Y-yes. Hello."

"Nervous?" The man chuckled when Jayson offered a broken smile. "That's fine, that's fine. I'm Tyler O'Banner. I'm to show you the ropes."

Jayson only nodded as he examined the offices. "Is it always this busy?"

"Bit of a lull, actually." There was a long enough pause for Jayson's face to fall, and then Tyler laughed. "I'm joking! Yeah, it's a bit hectic today. Big bust on a Spirit Dust ring. Anyway, we should be off."

Jayson fell in line behind him, and together the two of them forded through their coworkers. A fair amount of them gave a glance toward Jayson, accompanied with a smile that seemed to hold more humor than friendliness. But Jayson couldn't pay them much mind, as Tyler had begun talking over the roar of the offices.

"So the front is where we intake all reports and requests," he explained. "Normal civvies can complain about the lights that show up above their house at one in the morning. You get all kinds with that, and a fair few of them are just wild goose chases. But you gotta do it, you know? And then you have the actual unusual folk, who need to go through legal junk to remain registered and whatnot."

"They just… walk in?" Jayson asked. He peered into one of the various offices and saw a blonde woman speaking very animatedly to the man behind the desk.

"Mhmm." Tyler tilted his head. "Well, some of them. The ones who look human enough. Others we have to arrange transport. It all amounts to a lot of paper."

"Is it really that bad?" His thought was sidetracked by a freakishly tall humanoid hunching over through the back of the room, looking like it was trying very hard to be as small as the young girl wrapped around its spindly neck. Jayson snapped back to attention. "I mean, do you get that many cases?"

"Oh, man, you have no idea." Tyler laughed. "Luckily we have some tricks to make sure the loonies don't keep coming back. Subtle persuasion, feel me? Can't imagine what it'd be like without memetics."

Without thinking about it Jayson commented, "I always hear memetics are bull- uh. Full of crap."

Tyler laughed. "You can swear, I don't give a shit. And they *are* bullshit. But hey, manure has its uses. You'd know, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

Tyler opened a door with his name on it and ushered Jayson inside. When the door shut the din of the rest of the building cut out entirely. The sudden silence spun his heart around. But Tyler still had his friendly disposition, and he gestured to the chair in front of the desk amicably.

"Come on, sit down. I've been looking forward to this bit."

Jayson slowly lowered himself into the armchair. He was expecting it to be rigid or saggy, but it was a perfectly good seat. After squirming into a comfortable position he watched Tyler round the desk and sit in his own seat.

Jayson took several deep breaths to try to calm his nerves. It didn't work.

"So," Tyler said. "I'm curious what you *thought* you would be doing."

"Um. Basic paperwork, maybe? Possibly doing street work to follow up on reports."

Tyler nodded. "And you will. But, y'know, that wasn't quite what I mean. Here, let's do it this way. Grab your phone, call your superior. Tell them we're a bit bigger a deal than they thought, okay?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. You're my sup-"

"Jayson, please."

Jayson could feel his heart banging away in his chest.

"We both know you're with the Foundation, okay? I imagine they gave you some conditioning so that you can't actually reveal that yourself. That's fine. But you need to call them, right now, so that I can prove my point."

A shaky hand reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He still had three bars. Did Tyler actually mean for him to make the call? When Tyler simply nodded at him Jayson opened the phone and plugged in the numbers.

A chipper voice came from the other end of the line. "Stanford's Cables and Phones, how can I help you?"

Friendly was not something he could pull off at the moment, so Jayson just went for nonchalant. It sounded like he was being strangled. "Hi this is Jayson, out on a job right now. In a bit of a pickle, need to consult Al."

"What's your code, Jayson?"

"Uh. One-seven-four-one."

"One moment."

For three seconds he listened to muzak and then his boss picked up the line. "Heyyy Jayson how's it going?"

"Good," Jayson felt himself saying. His eyes bulged and he tried getting a look at his traitorous lips. "In, out, no problem. They actually take in reports from anybody. I don't know what their field agents are like but I imagine they stay busy doing a lot of nothing."

"Yeah, figured. But it's just your first day, if you can even call it that. Maybe you'll actually find something!" The two shared a laugh, despite the fact that nothing about the conversation was funny to Jayson. "Get back to me if you find anything out. Til then."

"See ya."

Jayson listened to the dull tone of his phone for a few seconds

before looking to Tyler.

"So, I imagine you have some questions," Tyler said with his palms pressed together.

"What the fuck just happened?" Jayson gasped, finding he had little air in his lungs from all the talking he didn't mean to do.

"You know that paper you signed earlier, in the lobby? Some magic to it. You now have the same stuff as the Foundation gave you, only this time it's for the UIU. Fun times, yeah?"

"So now what?"

"You work for us now, pretty much. I mean, you'll tell your superiors exactly what they expected to hear. But you'll actually be doing some good for us. Helping out those living in the cracks."

"And I can't actually tell anyone that, can I? Memetic bullshit?"

"Heaps of it."

Jayson sighed. "Do I have a choice?"

"Well, I mean, we could fire you," Tyler offered. "We're not going to hold you hostage or some shit. I imagine that will impact your career over at the Foundation, though."

Another sigh. "Fine. Fine. When do I start?"

Clouds

Looking at clouds from the ground is a rather absorbing experience. The educated human mind sees the majestic plumes of white as mere wisps of crystallised water vapour and dust particles in the higher atmosphere, but deep inside, there remains an early spark of curiosity and wonder, such as displayed by advanced apes and very small children. This spark does not see wisps of vapour and complex crystalline formations, but birds and beasts and faces, carriages and palaces, entire mountains and fortresses on the move across the azure-blue sky.

From above, this feeling only grows. As one rides in a rickety metal tube ten thousand metres above the ground, soaring into the sky, the educated human mind gives way to the childlike blossom of wonder. Below you, a sea of clouds wave and ripple to the shores of a distant land, and vague shapes of arcane gods drift past the triple-paned glass, where you are safe and pressurised and sound. And all the while, undefined smoky cumulonimboid beings watch from afar, their anvil-shaped tops spiralling yet higher into space.

This was what I told my seatmate on the two o'clock flight to Sydney, as I rolled up the windows and marveled at the view. The flight had so far been uneventful, with the only amusement being Greg's unfortunate incident at check-in, so any distraction from the plain sterile interior of the plane was very welcome to me. Greg, however, did not share my enthusiasm and appreciation of such natural wonders, and merely grunted in reply before taking a long sip of God knows what he managed to smuggle onto the plane.

Soon, even the clouds failed to entertain me and I slid the shutter down just as the plane made a left swerve over the Pacific, catching the glaring sunlight between panes of glass. From then on I resorted to browsing the in-flight magazine, fiddling with the remote, and staring at my hands to pass the time. Time drew on, nothing of note happened, and I fell asleep nodding on the tray table.

It was Greg who woke me up when the trouble started. "Hey. Hey, man," he whispered, lightly slapping me awake. "Up, up, up. Captain said something about bad turbulence, so tray table, remote, window shades, all of them up. And wipe your mouth."

I sat up blearily, swiping a hand across my chin. "How long's it been?"

"West Coast time reads seven twenty-three, so that'd make it about four hours. I think we crossed the date line or something, it's still bright out there."

I returned my seat to the upright position and took a peek out of the window. Sure enough, orange half-light streamed in through the crack. "I don't think that's how the date line works, Greg." Still, the long daylight hours were odd. I made a mental note to look it up once we reached solid land and an internet connection.

Greg obviously was not lying, for as I stowed the table and remote, the plane began to shake. I drew up the window shades to a grandly terrifying sight: the majestic white sea was now black and choppy, swirling and churning in silent twists and twirls. The sun still shone, but it was blazing through a gap in the top of a sparking dark cloud, too close to the wingtip for comfort. The wind must have been extraordinary, because the cloud did not drift aimlessly, but kept close pace with the wingtip. For a moment my imagination took over, and the sun shone like a red ominous eye, blazing amidst black tentacles of vapor and lightning, reaching out towards the plane like a predator out of the abyss.

Through the P.A, the captain reminded us to keep calm and strap down. Overhead and underfoot, aluminum plating and stray luggage hummed and shook. The on-screen flight information showed discouraging numbers— altitude, 13 000 metres. Airspeed, 900 km/h. Headwind, 110 km/h.

Hold on a moment. If the cloud was following the plane, then *how in God's blue sky was it drifting against a hurricane-force wind?*

This thought coincided with an equally dreadful noise: like pebbles in a hubcap, but coarser, and louder, enveloping the entire titanium

frame of the plane until even the blast of the engines was drowned out in this surreal static. The cloud now had swelled to a frightfully enormous size, with angry electric whips flashing all around the aircraft. The sun was barely visible, merely a spot of red haze amidst swirling, sparking black. The plane was suddenly lifted up, up, up, and the PA system exploded in a screeching whine. Greg was pressed against the front seat, hands cupping his head, while I clung to the armrest, hunched almost double. Several someones screamed. There was a cry of thunder, and the entire plane was flung like a mere toy, reeling from an unseen impact. Then another scream, this time from the seat in front of me.

I turned to look at the thin, manicured finger madly pressed against the window, following the contour of flesh towards the 3-layered pane of glass ("Vacuum-sealed Grade Diamond A", proclaimed the dealer's mark), dragging my gaze out to the unknown air beyond. There was something inside me that protested not to look, never to look, but it was too late and my eyes were firmly planted on a thing outside the plane. At first I saw nothing. Then a little switch went on in my mind, and everything snapped into place.

Some *thing* was plastered against the glass, milky and flaccid, the complexion of an engorged slug. Lining it was a good number of suckers, pressed hungrily against the window and pulsating to the tune of an alien heartbeat. Looking closer, the suckers were teethed, and terrifyingly so, for those were far too sharp, and far too many. Then the thing at the window *shivered*, and the numerous teeth clawed against the glass like hungry cats, and the screaming started up again, this time from my own throat. I scrambled away from the window, pressing my body as far in as possible, and slammed the window shutter down with a snap. Around me, panic and terror took hold as the plane groaned and compressed under the chattering static sound. Greg was crying.

The next part remains hazy in my memory. I remember a mighty crack running along aisle 32, as pressurised air whistled out and scores of pulsating, cloudy *things* hissed into the fuselage, innumerable little mouths clattering and snapping. I remember passengers being picked out of seats like grapes, as the slippery *things* coiled and chewed around them. The section I was in began

to fall, tumbling out of the terrible gnashing cloud, and I caught a glimpse of the body behind the thing:, half-smoke, half-flesh, grotesquely inflated with unknown wispy gas. And the eyes, large and horrible and *human*, peering through the dark mists, intently examining its prey. Then I fell further, through the cloudy sea and into a blue, shattered sky.

I think I might have somehow undone my seatbelt, for all of a sudden I was falling alone, down towards the foaming ocean. The impact with the water left me unconscious, and the next thing I remember is sitting up in a bed, back in a brace and leg in a splint. They told me it was a true miracle that I was found by a lone fishing vessel, delirious and babbling about living clouds and toothed tentacles. It was in the hospital that I started having nightmares, and occasionally wake up screaming from a terror in a dreamscaped sky.

There were no other survivors, nor bodies recovered. Much of the wreckage was carried away by the current, but a sizable fragment washed up on a Fijian shore several weeks after the incident. The part which made me throw up in my newspaper was the picture, showing a line of small holes neatly punched along the metal. Tooth marks.

I keep myself indoors if I can help it, and my roommate brings me groceries every week. She hasn't heard the full story of the attack in the skies and the thing in the clouds, and neither will anyone else, with the exception being several weary fishermen in the middle of the Pacific. This manuscript will remain sealed until my time of death, which I believe will be upon me soon and swiftly. Until then, I shall take my pills, say my prayers to whatever God that remains up there, and keep well away from the windows.

There was a thunderstorm directly overhead since yesterday morning, and it hasn't cleared up yet.

Cloudy With A Chance Of Showers

The rain beat a staccato passage on the bright red umbrella. It was not a particularly heavy rain, but had been a steady one throughout the day, and the clouds were still as dark as they had been that morning. Dr. Rights had no problems with rain, so long as she was dry, but couldn't help but feel the unavoidable irritation caused by the fact that it had decided to rain on one of her rare days off.

A car sped past, hitting a puddle of dirty rainwater. The spray splashed Rights dead-on. The doctor snarled and gave a one-fingered salute to the retreating vehicle. She was reminded for a moment of her old philosophy professor, Dr. Cabenwald, who had the habit of calling the gesture the "inverted avian" and the tendency to make said gesture at the back of the dean's head.

Rights smiled a bit as she stepped over a puddle and continued down the sidewalk.

> *It's dark. The kind of warm darkness interspersed with lovers' murmurings and the rustling of sheets.*
>
> *The door is kicked open. Sharp light and harsh voices fill the room. He's dragged off the bed, pinned to the floor with his arms behind his back, stuttering incoherently. She's screaming profanities.*
>
> *One man looks at her grimly. He's armed. He tells her to stay calm, make herself decent, and wait. Someone will explain. She spits and screams at him, still half-naked.*

Rights had reached the top of the hill. To her left was a chain link fence and a steep expanse of grass and patches of small trees, all of which overlooked the far distant highway and sprawl of fast-food restaurants. To her right was a line of older, two story houses. Several had overgrown yards and "FOR SALE" signs in the front window. Some were brick, others covered in faded, chipping paint.

Rights walked a bit further before crossing, stepping up the concrete steps to one of the houses.

The house was plain brick, though it could use a re-facing. The yard was neat and uncluttered, or at least it had been before it was flooded, and there were flowers planted on either side of the front walk. A creaking wooden swing hung on the porch. The ragged, muddy mat in front of the door was emblazoned with the phrase “Wipe Here, You Uncultured Savages”. Rights collapsed her umbrella and wiped the wet mud off her tennis shoes.

They’re taking him away. She tries to fight them, but the man who spoke to her puts his gun in her face. “I’m sorry”, he says, in the way that meant that he was definitely not sorry.

Minutes pass. The shock passes, at least a small amount. She puts on a t-shirt and shorts and goes into the kitchen. The light is on.

Dr. Cabenwald is sitting at the little table in the kitchen. He has two cups of coffee with him; one in his hand and the other in the spot opposite him. He’s a big man, with no hair on top and a thick salt-and pepper beard on the bottom. He looks tired, but is smiling anyway. He motions to the empty seat and the cup of coffee. She looks around the room. Another man in a police uniform is standing by the apartment door. He’s reading a cheap paperback, but his eyes shift to look at her every few seconds.

”What the flying fuck is going on?” She voices it more like a statement, with a glare that embodies ‘hell hath no fury’.

Cabenwald smiles, and motions to the chair again.

“Take a seat. I don’t know if I can explain it well enough, but I’d appreciate it if you’d hear me out.”

A reluctant moment passes before she sits down. She

sips the coffee. Black. Very black.

“What happened to Mr. Matthews was nothing of his own fault. Had we known about him sooner, this whole incident could have been avoided.” He always talked about students like that: Mr. Matthews, Miss Rights. First name basis was given on graduation and not a moment before.

She sips more coffee. Cabenwald continues.

“Mr. Matthews was host to a non-standard bacterial infection of the brain and lymphoid system with underlying memetic hazard. We feared it had progressed to the end of the incubation period and so had to take immediate action to prevent outside infection. He’ll be taken to a secure facility, screened, and treated. This particular infection is usually fatal, unless treatment is applied quickly.” He swallows a mouthful of coffee.” He should survive.”

She looks him in the eye, staring him down.

“So he had some disease? You’ll have to do better than that, professor.”

“I have no reason to lie, Miss Rights, but I understand. The disease that Mr. Matthews was infected with was a disease completely unknown to ordinary science. Had it reached full maturity, he would have begun to experience vivid hallucinations, as well as the development of tumor-like growths which would eventually burst and spread the contagion. His mental state would deteriorate to the point of insanity, which would easily lead to mass murder before his own death.”

“To tell the truth, I am in the employ of a certain Foundation, shall we say. And this Foundation’s purpose is to contain things like what infected Mr. Matthews and prevent them from reaching the world at large.”

“Give me proof.”

Cabenwald smiles.

Rights knocked on the door.

“Come in!” An elderly voice shouted from inside. She opened the door.

The man sat at his kitchen table, with a half-eaten ham sandwich and a half-completed game of solitaire on the checkered tablecloth in front of him. He was large in build and portly around the waist, with a completely bald head and a brilliantly white beard. He could have passed for Santa Claus.

“Thought you could use a visitor, Greg,” Rights said as she stepped into the kitchen.

Dr. Cabenwald’s face lit up.

“A pleasure as always, Agatha. Got time for a round or two?” he collected the cards and began to shuffle.

“It’s my day off.” She took the chair opposite him. “I've got a full twenty-four hours of time.”

“Where’s the little one?”

“With daddy for the day. I wanted to bring her with me, but he went and said “It’s your day off, I can take care of her!" Between you and me, I just think he wants to show her off to the guys at the office.”

“You better have pictures for me then.” Cabenwald dealt the first hand.

“I do, don’t worry.” Rights smiled.

“Never trust in anyone unless they can give you proof. A + for you, Miss Rights.” He digs in the pocket of his jacket and takes out a photograph. He hands it to her.

The photo is recent, and incredibly clear. A large green

shape, like some sort of twisted dinosaur, can be seen tearing apart a man in an orange jumpsuit. Three men in black uniforms are firing guns at it, to no noticeable effect. It could not and should not be real, but it is, down to the individual blood flecks. No fake could be this detailed.

"SCP-682. One of our more dangerous charges." He takes the photo back.

"Why are you telling me this?"

He finishes his coffee and folds his hands on the table.

"Because you're coming with us.

What?

"The chance for infection was low, but we can't be too careful in these sorts of situations." Cabenwald stands up. "You're a loose end, and the Foundation likes to ties those up quickly. We always keep a few open slots on the personnel list, just in case."

"I've been keeping a look after Edward," Cabenwald said. "He's doing all right. Got any threes?"

"Go fish."

"He never recovered mentally, but he's managed to hold down a janitorial job near here, and he has a few people who come in to check on him every now than then."

"Think he remembers me? Sixes, please."

"Damn it. No, I don't think he would. Got any kings?"

"Go fish." Rights chuckled. "It always gets me how I came to the Foundation by sleeping with someone. Got any queens?"

Cabenwald grumbled and inverted the avian at his former protégé.

Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C. Normus

« Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass | Dread & Circuses Hub | Upside-Down Cake »

"Jesus Christ, look at the lot'a'ya. I've seen some pretty fucked up freaks in my day but you cocksuckers take the upside down cake. Alright, alright, calm down, I didn't mean anything by it; just that you're ugly is all. Oh don't be a bunch of pussies! You've been called a lot worse things than ugly and you know it! But, I digress.

"Mr. Fuller here has recently brought me onto his staff and asked that I take a moment of my highly valuable time to introduce myself to you and explain what it is I'll be doing. The name's Dick: Dick C. Normus and…

"Yes, that's my real name, and it's a hell of a lot more dignified than whatever clown moniker you ended up with. Am I wrong? What's your name big nose? Tinkles? Yeah, that's what I thought. Oh, I beg your pardon, 'Doctor' Tinkles. That just makes it more ridiculous you ass hat.

"Anyway, you can call me Dicksy and I'll call you whatever the fuck I feel like considering most of you are essentially indentured servants. I'll be…oh my fuck, I already told you it's my real name! Why would I lie? Stop your damn snickering! You all have the maturity of a bunch of grade school dropouts because surprise surprise, that's what you are, excepting of course the esteemed Doctor Tinkles. You know, getting a PhD at a clown college kind of proves you're an idiot, which is the opposite of what you want a PhD to do.

"Moving on to the matter of why I'm here; none of you are good enough. Okay, okay, pipe down. I said pipe down. SHUT UP! All I mean is that Mr. Fuller here has standards, and that you freaks aren't living up to them. No, no, don't worry, none of you are being kicked out or axed yet. It will take years to make enough replacements for everyone. Mr. Fuller has hired me to make

designer freaks, and I'm eyeballing you Clowns in particular. I've got a lot of ideas of what I can do with you sad sacks of shit.

"Now you may be wondering, 'what are my credentials to play god so glibly', though not as well articulated because you're all dumb as stumps. Well you see, I come from a long line of Child Breakers, or *Comprachicos*, as they say in Spanish. What's a Child Breaker you ask? I know none of you said anything, I was being rhetorical! As I was saying, you start by taking a child. Maybe some starving street urchin who's never had anyone to look after them, maybe a brat that's so spoilt rotten they have no idea what suffering really is. It don't really matter, but once you pick a kid you break every bone in their body, beat them within an inch of their life, and you set the bones and flesh to heal the way you want them to, add a little anomalous something-something, rinse and repeat as necessary until you got yourself a bona fide freak. Then you take the worthless, broken shell of a person and shove them out on stage to be leered and gawked at by complete strangers so that they will know they're not Human anymore, that they'll never be loved or accepted by society again, and their only hope to keep their wretched lives is to keep exhibiting themselves for your personal profit. Now that's comedy!

"But, that was the old way of doing things. As fun as it was, it has limitations. A person can only be mutilated so much before they can't take no more and they kick the bucket on you, though you'd be surprised at how much the body can take. My Grampie once turned a kid inside out, I shit you not. What are you throwing up for? It wasn't disgusting, it was a work of art you philistine! Don't worry if it makes you queasy, because that's all in the past. Breeding a freak so that they grow up into a monster to begin with allows for much more radical modifications than breaking a normal kid.

"I've got some ideas for creating some truly horrific abominations, and that's what I need you Clowns for. Mr. Fuller tells me he picked up the first of you whilst he was traipsing across the Multiverse, and as amazing as your talents are you require certain…interventions to be made show ready. Those interventions don't always work so sometimes you go all Pennywise on the audience. Yeah, Pennywise, that's what I said. Pennywise is the clown from IT you

numbskull. IT by Stephen King. Oh you guys are just fucking with me now. How can literally no one here have heard of IT?

"Never mind. It's not important. Not important. What's important is that you originals can sometimes be quite the liability, so Fuller tells me he let you start experimenting on runaways to see if you could convert Humans into Clowns. That's pretty fucked up, though I'm obviously in no position to judge.

"For the sake of comparison, let's just take a look at a converted Clown. One of you stand up. Yeah, you. Well hello nurse! What's your name sweetheart? Icky? Is that supposed to be ironic because you're the only Clown here that's fuckable? What, it's a compliment. You know, unlike your fine self my name is not a misnomer. Trust me, it's enormous. Don't believe me, just take a look at this tent I'm pitching. That's only at half-mast. You don't think this is real? If you want I'll whip it out in front of everyone and…

"Yes Mr. Fuller, I apologize. I've gone off topic. Returning to the matter of…what were we talking about? Comparative clowning, right. Honestly, so much blood goes into my cock it's a damn miracle I don't pass out. Any who, you'll note how a converted Clown such as Icky retains a much more Human appearance relative to the original Clowns. Though this may come with the benefit of a more manageable temper, as far as Mr. Fuller and I are concerned it's still a step in the wrong direction. We want Clowns that are even more amazing than the originals, without any of the violence, and while we're at it a hell of a lot dumber. I know I said you guys was dumb, but you're still too smart for your own good, you know? I'm thinking something closer to a dog's intelligence level would be great. Smart enough to learn tricks, but too dumb to bitch about Mr. Fuller's, shall we say, Victorian-era management style.

"How am I going to create such perfect freaks of nature you ask? Two words; selective breeding.

"What's with all the blank faces; no one ever explained the birds and the bees to you? It's real simple; you take a mommy and a daddy that each has traits you like and get them to mate. You do the same thing with the offspring you like and cull the rejects, or if you're the sentimental type you can neuter them and send 'em off to a good

home. After a few generations you got yourself a bona fide pedigree. Pedigree Clowns, how does that sound? Fancy, right?

"Aw, there you go again. What the hell are you talking about, you have rights and dignity? Dignity? You're delusional or you've never seen yourself in a mirror. You're Clowns for fuck sakes! You don't have dignity! You have giant shoes and tiny cars, but not dignity! Mr. Fuller, do these losers or any of the other schmucks you own have rights and/or dignity? No? Didn't think so.

"But you can all cool your jets, because that's not how I'm going to do it with you anyway. It takes too goddamn long. No no no, I have something a little more sophisticated in mind. I know this is a dumb question before I ask it, but do any of you know what iterated embryo selection is? Nobody? What about you Doctor Tinkles, did that Ivy League education of yours not cover designer babies? I have in my possession some rather advanced reprogenetic paratechnology that was generously, and unknowingly, donated by the fine folks at Prometheus Labs. With this equipment I can make a bunch of test tube babies, read their genomes and pick the ones I want, then turn their stem cells into sex cells and make a whole new generation of embryos. The old generation goes in the trash, and you start all over.

"I'll be using your fun-lovers as brood mares for the final product. What, would you rather I use your own lady clowns, cause I don't use real dames for breeding no more. It's too much of a goddamn nightmare getting the babies away from them. I've even had a few run off on me, and what I'm making here is far too valuable to risk losing. Fun-lovers are the best option, trust me. They don't give a shit about their kids once they pop out, they're not going to leave the Circus, and best of all they produce plenty of Milk. I wish to God it came out of tits instead of…*that*, but otherwise they're perfect.

"This method is at least a hundred times faster than traditional selective breeding, and I will be able to accomplish **truly amazing things**. This Circus will be unrecognizable when I'm done with it. And yet, I can already see that I have some detractors. What, you have a moral objection to what I'm doing? You're all a bunch of bible thumpers all of a sudden? You're a horde of unholy eyesores! Your god hates you!

"I don't have the right to use your genetic material without your consent? We've already established that you don't have rights! I have Fuller's consent, that's all I fucking need! You got a problem with that, feel free to grab your bindle and hit the road. Give my regards to the Skippy Foundation or, god help you, those goddamn global occult nazi bastards. Any takers? Hmmm? That's what I thought.

"Look, it ain't that bad. For now all you have to do is spit in a tube and once I go over your DNA and other records I'll get those of you with the traits I'm looking for to hand over your sex cells. Gents get to jerk off into a cup, ladies get a dose of synthetic hormones and a giant needle shoved up their cooch. Ain't that just the way of the world though?

"What are you taking about? What do you mean that's not how it works with Clowns? I…uh-huh, really? Look, whatever. I obviously need to brush on my Clown biology, but rest assured that when the time comes I will be collecting the required biological materials via the appropriate method. It's not something I'm looking forward too, except maybe for you Sticky Icky.

"Yes Mr. Fuller, I realize that's not what you pay me for. I'm not going to mangle your merchandise I just…You're going to have Tinkles do the actual collecting? Is that top hat cutting off the circulation to your brain? He's a fucking Clown! I'm the expert here you sorry excuse for a Ringling Brothers themed birthday party, and if I say any part of this operation requires me to handle it personally than I…Fuller, tell your body guard to sit back down. Tell him to sit down. Just hold on one second there buddy I was just…hey! Get your filthy mitts off me you upside down faced goon! Put me down! Oh, I'm glad we're taking this outside, you don't scare me! I've taken down bigger maroons then you. Do you all hear that! I ain't scared of none of you freaks! Fuck you, you can't treat me like this!

"I'M RICHARD CUNNILINGUS NORMUS!"

« Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass | Dread & Circuses Hub |Upside-Down Cake »

Clowning Around

The following is a transcript of a segment of the fourth episode of the 12th season of ***SCP-1257****, titled "Clownin' Around." Despite the potential appearance of the "Bobble the Clown" entity, the episode does not display any properties of* ***SCP-993****, and can be watched by any individual. The plot of the episode consists of Danny attempting to find an individual to perform at the Birthday Party of Janice's[1] Nephew after he accidentally administered an Class-A Amnestic to the magician she had hired.*

Commercial Break Ends

Unnamed Doctor: Sorry Danny, you can't "borrow" **SCP-846**.

Danny: But it's an emergency!

Unnamed Doctor: You said that last time, and we're still trying to clean up the Robo-Radiation.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Danny: Fuddlesticks[2].

Danny travels down hallways of Site, ignoring other personnel.

Danny: What am I going to do? Janice is going to be so mad… I need somebody, anybody, that can take over the party for him… maybe Cassey can help.

"Bobble the Clown" appears on camera, holding a banana. Note that it is an unidentified human dressed as "Bobble" rather then an animated character.

Bobble: Did somebody say Party?

Danny: Uh, I did. Can you help?

Bobble: Sure I can, I love kids!

Danny: Awesome! Thanks a bunch uh… what's your name?

Bobble: I'm Bobble the Clown!

[AUDIENCE CHEERS]

Danny: Well thanks Bobble, I was in a real… bind… Waaaattt a minute. Aren't you from SCP-993?

Bobble: Some people say that I guess. I think it's a rather rude nickname. Something funner would be better I think!

Danny: Containment Breach!

Danny runs down the hall in an attempt to sound the Containment Breach alarm. Bobble unpeels the banana it is holding, and throws it in front of Danny. This causes him to slip over the peel and fall off camera.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Bobble looks directly at the camera.

Bobble: You see kids, running never helps.

Scene fade's out. Upon fading back in Danny, still unconscious, is handcuffed to a chair in an interrogation room.

Bobble: Wakey wakey Danny.

Bobble dumps a bucket of water over Danny's head, causing him to sputter and awaken.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Danny: Whaaa… hey you're still here.

Danny attempts to stand up, but fails upon noticing the restraints.

Danny: Fud-

Before Danny can finish speaking Bobble slaps him in the face.

Bobble Don't even think of saying that stupid phrase!

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Bobble turns to face the camera again.

Bobble: Well hey there boys and girls. I'm Bobble the Clown, special guest star here at "Agent Danny of the SCP Foundation!^{3}"

[APPLAUSE]

Danny: What are you talking about?

Bobble: Danny, Danny, Danny. Don't you remember? Watching me with Tyler? All the fun we had?

Danny: You know my dad?

Bobble: Why wouldn't I? There's little I don't know after all. Just a few things I don't know, which is why I'm here Danny.

Bobble slaps Danny in the face again.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Bobble: Today kids, we're going to learn about a stupid, awful show. A show that, for some reason, continues to exist. While MY SHOW is censored. Talk about executive meddling am I right?

Danny: Well maybe if you weren't such a jerk maybe people might watch your show!

Bobble Shut the fuck up.[4]

Bobble punches Danny in the eye. However other then a shout of pain, there is no sign of injury once its fist is withdrawn.[5]

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Danny: Ugg… this isn't how it's supposed to go.

Bobble: Well there we go! Here's today's lesson kids; you don't always get what you want. I want to teach boys and girls all over all the IMPORTANT things they need to know, and you want to do whatever inane plotline you have running. I'm not getting what I want right now, and soon enough you won't be either.

Bobble grabs Danny by the hair.

Bobble: You're a bit upset now, but don't worry. You won't have the energy to feel anything like that by the time I'm done. Because you see Danny…

Bobble slams Danny's face into the table, it then repeats this following each word it says next.

Bobble: I. Am. Going. To. Break. You.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS FOR TWO MINUTES]

Bobble continues to slam Danny's face into the table until the audience stops laughing.

Bobble: Now then, what have you begun to learn Danny?

Bobble lifts up Danny's head, looking straight into his face.

Danny: I learned that your shoe's untied.

Bobble looks down, he is then headbutted by Danny.

This knocks Bobble roughly a meter away.

Danny: Code Forty Four Zulu![6]

Bobble's clown nose is visibility bleeding.

Bobble: You ugly, STUPID, UNFUNNY LITTLE-

The door to the interrogation room opens, and an individual who had repeatedly appeared in the background but lacked a speaking role enters the room. Upon entering the room he fires a taser at Bobble. Bobbles reaction is exaggerated as electricity flows around it, before falling unconscious.

Danny: Wow, thanks Agent Fred!

Agent Fred then removes the unlocks the handcuffs, allowing Danny to stand.

Agent Fred: No problem Danny. Let's get this clown back into containment

Scene fades out, upon fading back in Danny and Agent Fred are standing outside of what appears to be Site 's Video Archive.

Danny: Fuddlesticks! I forgot! I need to find something for the party!

Agent Fred places his hand on Danny's shoulder.

Agent Fred: Don't worry about it. Why not do the entertainment yourself?

Danny: You know, that's not such a bad idea…

The remainder of the episode continues without any deviation from the usual SCP-1257 episodes. Danny manages to successfully entertain all the children at the birthday party. However, he accidentally reveals classified Foundation Intelligence in the

process. As such, all the children are administered Amnestics, and do not remember the party.

Footnotes
1. A Research Assistant introduced last season and currently serving as a love interest for Danny.
2. Danny's "catchphrase," having used it since the show was titled "Raising Danny"
3. This is the only known instance in which the "SCP Foundation" is refereed to by its proper name in any episode of SCP-1257
4. This is the only instance of profanity in any episode of SCP-1257
5. This is consistent with other episodes of SCP-1257. While "slapstick" violence occurs, no lasting injuries are ever shown on screen unless the plot of the episode requires an element like a broken limb.
6. A spoken code to be used in the event a hostile individual is loose in an interrogation room. The computerized recorders will automatically sound the alarm in the event it is spoken.

ClusterfREDACTED

The muffled sound reminded her of fireworks. A dull "boom, boom" in the distance that echoed over the landscape. She was half-asleep when it happened, before her phone rang. Groaning, she rolled over, vaguely noting that her husband wasn't in bed, and placed it to her ear.

"H'lo?" She grumbled, musing over the cottony mouth she got from sleeping. Gears' voice answered, dead as always.

"Doctor Rights, we are requesting that you return to Site 17 for immediate safehouse procedure Gamma-Phi-18."

Her brain sluggishly tried to recall what the hell that was. There was a long silence. Fireworks again. Finally, he repeated himself, monotone.

"Gather your family, and come to work." He hung up.

"…Kay, Gears."

Was this a weird dream? She looked at the clock. 4:15. Nope, just really goddamn early. And who the fuck was shooting off fireworks? The dull booming was constant, now, and she struggled to get up and pull on sweatpants, making her way downstairs. The TV was on, her husband before it, and she went to put a hand on his shoulder.

"Christopher, hey." She squeezed his shoulder. He didn't look up from the TV. She glanced at it, and froze, instantly awake. It was the local news channel, video of brilliant white fireworks in the sky. The camera panned down, to where the reporter, in a panic, was gesturing and shouting to a perfectly whitewashed sculpture of a human being, frozen in mid-run. It could have been a statue, were it not for the impossible detail. And the many other white-coated items in view. A house, cars, a bird in mid-flight.

She hauled Christopher to his feet, snapping him out of his stupor. "Get the kids!" She barked, in his face, and he stared at her.

"We….we should stay inside."

"Nope!" She released him, and motioned to the kids' rooms, turning to the door. She had to get the car started, dashing upstairs to grab her phone and keys, returning downstairs just as the cries of an interrupted toddler started to go through the house. Christopher stepped out, carrying the little boy, and she nodded to him, hustling to the garage. She waited in the car, checking her phone again. Low signal. Finally, he stepped into the garage, carting the still-bawling toddler and a frightened five-year-old girl behind him.

"Ophelia, you get in the front seat. You're riding like a big girl for this!" She shouted out the window, and the girl perked up, a bit, hurrying around. "Christopher, get in the back. You can put Chester in while we're moving." He nodded, and did so, frowning at his wife.

"…I promise, I'll explain later," she said, softly, making sure Ophelia was buckled in and Christopher was getting the boy into his carseat before pulling out of the garage. Outside, the neighborhood was a mixture of panic and reserve. Most people were hiding inside. Some, though…were out, sitting on rooftops, standing in yards, frantically packing cars.

The second she heard Chester's restraint belt click into place, she floored it, steering the family van wildly around people and cars alike in the street. They came across a massive white splatter on the street, and she curved around it. Out of the neighborhood, out of the suburbs…into the surrounding fields.

The little boy fell back asleep. Christopher and Ophelia stared out the windows, uncertain and horrified. There were white items everywhere, splatters over cornfields, perfectly preserved white trees. A few people, here and there, cars, stopped in the street, the people inside frozen perfectly.

Rights tried not to look, until she barreled through the gates of the compound, slowing only to roll down the window so the guard could see her. He waved her through, and she pulled into the parking lot,

where several others were waiting, being led in. There weren't that many, actually, when she looked over it. Only a dozen or so, but there were several white splatters on the asphalt, a handful of white cars…

She skidded to a stop. "Get the kids out!" She shouted at Christopher, hopping out and looking around, finding herself face to face with Gears. He looked at her impassively, and checked her name off of a list. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"We believe SCP-7843-1 either breached containment, or was released by a hostile group."

Dr. Rights gestured emphatically in the arm, trying to work up words, though now her lack of sleep and preparation were catching up to her. Christopher called from behind her.

"Honey!"

"One moment!" She shouted back. He must've been struggling with the child restraint, still. Ophelia opened the car door and sat there, legs swinging, looking around uncomfortably. Rights glanced at them, then back to Gears, wincing as several of the booming sounds grew louder, then faded again. She looked up, the white fireworks were starting to leave cracks in the sky, she could see them in the distance. Like cracks on a windshield, centered and spreading.

"Please make your way inside, to the designated shelter areas," Gears said. Rights glared at him.

"What are we doing?"

"I am not certain what you mean by this question."

"This is nationwide, isn't it? Worldwide? What the *god damn hell* are we doing about this?!"

"Mom! Mom!" Ophelia shouted, upset.

"…There will be a controlled release of SCP-7778 into the upper atmosphere, once the satellites reach optimum height." She stared. "This will occur in thirty-seven minutes, approximately. Please

retrieve your family and-"

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

He didn't finish his sentence, and she almost didn't see him react, so focused she was on his impassive, unmoving face, when his hand fisted in her shirt, and dragged her forwards, roughly. She hit the ground at his feet, hard, and cursed, tensing as she saw white splatter here and there, meters away but still too close. A scream was cut off, and she saw one of the splatters hit another researcher, and in a moment he was nothing, a blank white statue of himself, in mid-stride, his coat billowing behind him.

Gears looked behind her.

She didn't hear anything.

She got to her feet slowly, taking in a very, very deep breath.

"Doctor Rights, please go indoors."

"…" She stared at him. The remaining few in the parking lot were bolting their way inside.

"…Please go indoors, to the designated shelter area. Do not turn around."

She didn't listen, and turned on her heel. The white had hit the van head-on, and it, and the short area surrounding it, were completely washed. Inside the open doors, she could see Christopher, hunched over Chester's peacefully sleeping face, his hands locked in mid-struggle with a twisted belt. Ophelia's mouth was open, mid-yell, brows low and fingers gripping the edge of her seat with concern.

Every last detail of them, down to their eyelashes, perfectly preserved, and washed white.

She was not entirely certain what happened next, other than that it

was exceedingly rough, and she knew bruises were going to form on her arm where he grabbed her and hauled her inside, ignoring her kicks and screams. It wasn't until she was flung onto a couch that her thoughts seemed to catch up to her, and she decided to stop screaming and fighting and start curling up and crying. Going through the emotional training was not anything like the real thing, she thought in the back of her mind.

A quarter-hour passed, and she felt good enough to sit up and look around. One of the lower lounges, re-purposed. The doors were shut, and there were a few dozen individuals waiting around.

"…Where is everybody?"

"There are nineteen designated safety areas for staff in Site 17." Gears was sitting next to her, looking over a checklist. She stole a glance and rubbed her bleary eyes. Names. Very few of them were checked off.

"What about the skips?"

"SCP Containment is self-sealed under Emergency Protocols. They should remain unaffected, as us."

She sat back against the couch, going over every question in her mind, trying to pick the important ones.

"…When is the reset set for?"

"The first instance of SCP-7843-1 was detected at Midnight, Central Time. The reset is set to return to one minute before the first detonation occurred, and the phenomenon became self-propagating."

She forgot her questions, and another jag of crying hit her. A few of the other researchers looked at her with mixtures of pity and empathy. She caught her breath, and Gears handed her a pen.

"…What's this for?"

"Do you remember the report you submitted while applying for your current position? It was about the possibility for physical evidence to

remain after preternaturally memetic or reality-altering events." She stared at him, blankly, as he stood and pulled more pens from his pocket, handing them out around the room. "We are presented with a unique opportunity here, to retain information of an information-erasure event. While the Foundation already has pre-set means to record these hours, this will serve as a baseline test for the possibility of personal information retention."

Everybody else seemed to get it at once, with a collective series of "oh"s and "ah"s and "this is retarded"s.

Rights looked down at her hands.

"There are four to five minutes remaining until SCP-7778's release. Please take this opportunity to manufacture evidence." Gears announced, and sat back down, all out of pens, looking over his sheet again.

Rights stared at her bare arms, still in her pajama top. She looked up. One researcher was frantically scrawling on the walls, another was opening magazines and writing inside of them, on every page, methodically and quick. One of them started writing on the inside of his labcoat. She looked at her arms again…and began to write.

Over the next several minutes, many things happened. Most importantly, though, the walls began to fade. They could be seen through, and before long they could see all the way to other saferooms. There was some waving and gesturing back and forth. She looked down, between her feet, and saw SCPs peering back up at her. The furniture went next. Some items were retaining, but many things, including the edge of Rights' slippers, were started to fade as well.

She kept writing, they all did. There was little else to do. Dr. Gears' list disappeared out of his hands, and he sat there, eyes closed, arms at his side like a puppet with no strings. Finally, Rights ran out of important things to write. She had started at the elbow of her left arm, and extended down to the back of her hand, with her tiny, neat handwriting. Names, dates, appearances…

"Hey, Gears?," Rights asked, looking down at her feet. Her ankles

faded, revealing yellow fat and red muscle beneath. Her toes, just rapidly-fading bones, flexed. So weird.

He didn't look at her, but opened his eyes.

"…what about you?"

"Erasure events typically use manipulation of the emotional connection with memories to alter an individual's perception of events, rather than manipulating the events themselves."

"Ah…so…will you be affected?"

"In the case of an erasure event, I often am not. Other times, I am. It is variable."

She sat back. Wait.

"Has this happened before?," she asked, suddenly.

"Yes."

She stared at the ceiling. Maybe it would be okay.

"One minute." He said. Everybody sat down, tired…and waited.

It was the longest sixty seconds in the whole of her existence. Everything was fading to white. She couldn't feel her arms anymore, and when she glanced down, they were gone. The tip of her nose disappeared. She saw another researcher, fading faster, reduced down to bones and nerves and a cluster of half-there organs, before he vanished altogether.

She closed her eyes.

The darkness itself faded to white.

And then.

GOOD MORNING. DO DOO DOOO…BUH BA BOP BAH BA DA DA DA DA BA- GOOD MORNING! DO DOO DOOO…BUH BA BOP BAH BA DA DA-

She flopped her arm to the bedside table like it was a dying fish, and managed to knock her alarm clock out of reach before she finally rolled across the empty bed and reached it, jamming on the off button violently. With a soft groan, she checked the time. 5:31.

It took considerable effort to get out of bed that morning. Every thought seemed to drag like concrete, every movement ached. She stumbled to the shower, and winced at herself in the mirror after turning on the water. It was only after she stuck her hand under the flow to test the temperature that she noticed the smeared ink rapidly washing off her skin, and quickly pulled her arm back. Weird, had she been writing on herself in her sleep? She looked over the remaining words, smudged from sweat and sleep.

"…Ophelia, November 1st, five years old, brown ha….hair? Is that hair?" She read and mused aloud, squinting. "Huh…okay, more… uhm…Topher…October 24, oh, well, that's easy." Her brain chugged to life. She heard her husband stir in the bedroom, and groan, rolling over in his sleep. As if on cue, she could hear her daughter darting around the hallway downstairs, to the TV. Weekend! Time for cartoons!

After several minutes of squinting, she realized that there was nothing else decipherable on her arm. Why had she been writing about her husband and kid? There were only other words that didn't make sense. Daysitting? No, Ophelia was in kindergarten…Blonde? No, everybody was Brunette.

She shook her head. Probably not important, she rationalized, shuffling into the shower and scrubbing her arm clean. The rest of the morning went featurelessly. She complained to Christopher that the toddler bed was still set up in Ophelia's old room, now relegated to storage, and he asked her why there was a box of diapers in the closet. They didn't think about it.

She didn't think about it until she arrived at work, smiling at the guard as she pulled through the gate leisurely. The only thing odd about the day was when they called for a meeting and announced that SCP-7778 had been released last night, and to report any suspicious behavior or items found, as they could be classified as evidence.

She was glad she must've slept through that. Sounded like a real clusterfuck.

Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered

The open-aired cafeteria on Alexylva University's NorthWest Quad was a bustling hub of activity throughout the day, but was rarely busier than it was at lunch. As classes let out and the students filed out the open doors into the fresh autumn air beyond, the wafting scent of fresh meat and drink drew flocks to the long tables and spacious lawns of the quad. This was no less the case for the starting quarterback of the Alexylva Unversity Visigoths, Cron Apostolou.

He wasn't much for hunger, though his artificially constructed body did have functions in place to convert food to fuel. He mostly followed the crowd towards the cafeteria because that's what the crowd was doing, and following the crowd had become his mantra. *Blend in. Don't stick out. Act human.* As he strode idly towards the line of students forming in front of a gyro stand, a towering bulk of a man approached him from behind, eagerly throwing a massive hand across Cron's back.

"Comrade!" Yuri Pato bellowed, his voice sounding through his meaty chest like a man shouting in a cave, "it is good to see you. How is class? You are finish for today, yes? Join Yuri for the lifting the weights, yes?"

Cron smiled. Yuri was a year older than he, but they shared many of the same classes. Yuri had been recruited less for his academic prowess, and more for his towering frame and bulky physique. The offensive line coaches called him "Hadrian", and his fellow linemen called him "Hoss". He was the largest man in the region, but was about fifty cards short of a full deck. He had just come from the Mathematica building, no doubt after leaving Counting 101, a class he had taken three times.

"Yeah, Hoss," Cron said, "let me get something to eat, and we'll head over after we're done. See if Rosco and JaMarcus want to come, too." He paused. "And see if you can find Peter. I want to

work on snap counts with him."

"I do it!" Yuri shouted, lumbering off to find their friends. The sea of people around them parted for Yuri, and promptly closed up as he passed.

Cron worked his way through the crowd, nodding and smiling at the occasional well wishing from his fans and classmates. His appearance around the quad was not uncommon, but there were plenty who could come around just to say a word of appreciation after a big win. He picked himself out a gyro, some fresh greens, and a sparkling tea before sidling up next to a rock on a hill and enjoying his meal. In these few quiet moments, Cron could almost block out the noise enough to actually believe he was—

"Did you hear about that coach at East Byzantium?" Cron heard a voice from behind him say. He leaned around the corner of his boulder, being careful not to raise undue suspicion.

"I hadn't," the other man said. They were two students, definitely not players, and one of them clutched a bright blue scroll Cron recognized as being the latest edition of the *Mediterranean Post*. "What about him?"

The first student shook his head slowly. "A righteous shame. Gods have mercy. Turns out he was implementing technological enhancements into his running back. Steel legs, jet packs, that sort of thing. Unnatural business."

"Gods," said the second man, "a cyborg football player? Blasphemy. Football is meant to be played the way it was designed, for humans, demons, summoned deities, and drunken fans. Next thing you know they'll be trying to get actual robots on the field, too." He spat.

"It's because of all these robot apologists nowadays," said the first man. "Letting robots attend schools and live in our cities. I hear somebody up north even petitioned the government to let them *marry* their robot." He shook his head again. "It's just not right."

The second man nodded in agreement. "I saw in the *Post* the other day where that guy from Portlandis, Vincenti Andersopolis, is even

trying to make *human robots*. Real sick stuff."

"Hard to believe, really," the first man said. "Almost like something out of fiction."

"Nah," said the second, "they'd never make fiction like this. Too unbelievable."

"Hmm hmm," said the first man.

"Mmm hmmm," said the second.

They both nodded furiously in masturbatory agreement, before wobbling to their feet and leaving for their next class. Cron sat silently, the servos in his mind feverishly spinning. *East Byzantium?* His bronze heart shook. *Their running back was Bihgus Diqqus, that's right.* In his mind's eye, Cron could see the replay broadcast—

> *Diqqus lined up in the slot, Iles waits for the snap. Ball is to Iles, he looks left, fakes, fakes, tucks to his right, and Diqqus is open across the field! Iles to Diqqus, and he's got it! He's got— oh, oh my. Diqqus is down, one of the Atlantis defenders had him against a stone-skin, and he's down on the field. My gods, folks, this is not looking good…*

—and remembered how many people had said that Bihgus would never play the game again. He had spent the entire offseason in physical therapy, struggling to do even minor tasks. But when he made his triumphant return by sprinting onto the field at Constantine Stadium, he had made converts of all the nonbelievers.

Until now.

Cron sat in silence for the rest of his meal, idly pushing his greens around until the bell rang. He stood, deposited his trash, and left for his next class.

That afternoon at practice, the team stood in hushed silence as the gathered coaches drew a summoning circle on the ground around a small metal folding chair. The smell of incense hung thick in the air,

and the special teams coordinated lit thirteen green candles to place at ordained points around the circle. When the circle was complete, all of the coaches, except the offensive and defensive coordinators, stepped back to join the team. Coach Demopolous, the offensive coordinator, raised his hands.

“Oh Great and Terrible Champion of the Gridiron,” he said, his voice echoing through the practice facility, “we summon you for this, our last rehearsal before the conference opener.”

Coach Christakos, the defensive coordinator, raised his hands as well. “Guide us in these times, O Bringer of Touchdowns, Architect of Jet Sweeps, Master of the Two Minute Drill. Lead us to victory in your name, Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered!”

A fierce roar followed, as a rift appeared in space and time before the team. Beyond it, they could see twisting seas, endless worlds, a dimension that knew no boundaries or limitations. Within this gaping maw they saw a grisled, hunched figure, slowly growing closer and larger until it was the size of a man. With a sudden thunderclap and a flash of light, the rift disappeared. Standing in its place was an old man wearing a grey hoodie and sweatpants, his hair trimmed close to his head and his eyes hidden behind large, dark sunglasses. He grimaced around the room, causing the coaches and players to cower.

“You’re late, goddammit,” Coach Panagakos said, his voice a wolfish growl. “I said practice starts, on the field, at four. It’s three goddamn fifty-six; by the time we’re done with warmups it’s going to be quarter after.” He peered at his coordinators over his glasses. “For fucks sake, get it together.”

Coach Christakos stepped forward meekly. “I- I- I’m sorry, Coach Panagakos—”

“—Eldest and Most Revered,” the team said in unison.

“—but th- there was a fire drill in the dormitories earlier this afternoon, which held up class for ten minutes. We assembled as early as we could after classes dismissed.”

Coach Panagakos could have glared a hole through his skull. “Gods, fine. I didn’t want to win this weekend anyway.” He swept his gaze towards the players, who huddled together in terror. “Alright, chucklefucks. We looked like hot asshole on Saturday, and Yale is a whole goddamn tier above *Macedonia State*, and we needed some last second heroics from Plucky the Wonderkid over here to beat them,” he nodded towards Cron, who grinned sheepishly. “We’ve had a few good practices this week, and we’re looking sharp. But if you dick masseuses think that you’ll be able to relax like you did last week, you’re in for an abrupt and brutal throat fucking.”

He gestured with his left hand, and conjured a blackboard. “Yale is bigger than us, stronger than us, and has a better spellcasting unit than us,” he paused, “despite the tireless efforts of our *highly compensated* magic training staff.” His eyes fell on the Magics Coordinator, Coach Balaban, who withered under the Head Ball Coach’s gaze.

“What that means is that we’ll have to play faster than they do, and force them to keep up. Cron, we’re going to be running a lot of option sets, keep them on their toes. Devin,” he looked at the offensive coordinator, “if we see an opportunity to do so, please do not hesitate to use our talented young running back to *fuck them with the ball*. I’m sure you think 150 yards is commendable, but JaMarcus could’ve had three times that number with how little effort they were putting into playing at the line. We could’ve at least *tickled them with the fucking tip*.”

The team waited with bated breath for the next word, but the coach only sighed. “Look, we’ve still got work to do tonight. Our conference is a goddamn bloodbath, and if we want a shot at a championship berth we’re going to need to find ways to win against bigger teams. That starts tomorrow, with the goddamn Yale Bulldogs. Get your asses out of your asses, and your heads out of those asses, and let’s go break some fucking bones.”

The team roared their approval, and scurried away to the practice field. The last person to leave the room was Coach Christakos, who was caught in the Head Coach’s paralyzing gaze. Coach Panagakos hovered across the room to him, stopping just short of the fearful coordinator’s face.

“I win 300 championships with this team over a millennia and a half,” Coach Panagakos said, his words a knife, “and the best you can do is ‘Bringer of Touchdowns’?” He shook his head and floated away. “Goddamn pathetic, Kevin. Get your shit together.”

-△-

Postgame - Hub - The Unforgiving Gridiron

CODE NAME: - The Truth

What is the easiest way to hide the identity of SCP-001?

This would have been a perplexing question for the Administrator who had conceived General Notice 001-Alpha. How do you hide the most important anomaly the Foundation ever has, and ever will, come across? How do you hide the creator of the two thousand anomalies to follow? How do you hide the ultimate weapon? How do you hide the universe itself? How do you hide something *worse?* Like the identity of the Administrator, the circumstances surrounding how they came to their final decision is shrouded in mystery and known by a select few.

Regardless of whether the process was arduous or came in an epiphany, the outcome is evident for all to see and functioned precisely as planned. Several completely different files are present in the entry, preceeded by a foreword stating that none, one, several or all of these files were the true SCP-001. The tactic worked as intended, with a myriad of conflicting explanations erupting and battling to prove that they were correct, but never having enough evidence to disprove the others. The simplest conclusions were the most common; that there was no true 001, that it was simply a ploy utilised by the O5 Council to instil a sense of purpose into the staff of the Foundation, hiding the truth that these anomalies had no source or explanation; or, that all the files were the true 001, that by some twist of fate they had devised a method of co-existing somehow.

Through all of this, a reoccurring theme emerged – very, very few thought outside of the box. Very few were able to realise the truth.

Transcript of audio logs recovered from [DATA EXPUNGED]

<Begin Log, : , / / >

**Frank : ** Alright this is Frank aboard the… uhh… what're we calling this thing David?

David (Distant): S-C-P-S [DATA EXPUNGED].

**Frank : ** SCPS [DATA EXPUNGED]? Alright. This is… wait, really? They named it [DATA EXPUNGED] and we're going to… Ah whatever. This is Frank aboard the SCPS [DATA EXPUNGED], current time is [DATA REDACTED] and we're about an hour from launch. The Overseers have been getting these ships made for quite a while now, and it seems they've decided to send us out to take a looksee at those bits of the universe we can't see yet.

I'm uhh, just a record keeper for this trip so I figured it'd be handy to start my keeping prior to departure. Y'know, in case something happens.

Anyway, might as well start with system reports. Reactor is fully functioning, weapons look good…

<Begin Log, : , / / >

**Frank : ** Frank again. We're about to launch, and seeing as nobody's ever done this before I figured some like, uhh fitting words would be a good idea.

<Frank pauses for three seconds.>

I got nothing. Ah shoot, I should've thought of this before…

<Frank pauses for seven seconds.>

Oh! 'Now we travel t-'

<A loud whining sound is heard, promptly followed by several objects colliding about the room. Frank produces heavily distorted vocalisations until the whining noise subsides.>

Frank , (Muffled): Fucking asshats could've given us a warning before we left at least. Fucking ruined my speech. Fucking fuck…

<End Log, : >

<Begin Log, 04:18, 18/00/00>

Frank : First and foremost: Since we don't really know what the actual date is on Earth, we've adjusted all the clocks and dates and such so that we're counting *up* from when we launched. It's currently been… eighteen days, four hours aaaand… nineteen minutes, since we launched. We're still traveling at max throttle so there's not much to see outside other than darkness, since we're going faster than the speed of light. *Much* faster.

But erm, yeah. We recently passed… Hey David, whats the name of that place we just went past? Messy-something? Yeah but like, the closest one. Pardon?

David (Distant): Messier Eighty-three!

Frank : Oh, right! We've just gone past Messier Eighty-Three, which is about fifteen million light-years from Earth. Talk about being far from home, heh heh.

David (Distant): You know the oh-fives probably won't appreciate your stupid jokes!

Frank : This is just notekeeping, not the finished logs! Sheesh, David can be a real hard-ass sometimes. Though considering he spends most of his time fixing machines, it's kind of understandable.

I'll make another log once something more significant happens.

<End Log, : >

<Begin Log, 23:18, 24/02/00>

Frank : Frank here. It's been something like two months. Not much has happened, other than that we've now passed GN-Z11 so we're officially beyond the view of Earth's telescopes. Oh, and of course we've been taking photos as we went past.

There's not much out here, but we can see a few small galaxies spread out here and there. The higher-up researchers keep using the word 'gigaparsec' so that should give a fair idea of the distance between these things. They've also been mumbling about something seeming off about them, but other than that I can't find out much.

There's been quite a few cases of homesickness from the crew on board, but nothing that won't subside over time.

Any whom, everything's holding together quite nicely, excluding the automatic cafeteria. Oy David, you're gonna fix the cafeteria, right?

David (Distant): No, because there's nothing wrong with it!

Frank : But the paste tastes like shit!

David (Distant): It's fucking nutrient paste, IT'S SUPPOSED TO TASTE LIKE SHIT!

<Begin Log, 14:37, 20/03/00>

Frank : Well, we've erm… we've found out what the researchers were uneased about. We're close enough to get a proper look at the nearest galaxy and, uhh…

Well, it's a copy of the Milky Way. Not a perfect copy mind you, there's a few stars absent but the major identifying bodies are there.

We're uh, planning on taking a look to see if Earth is there, and if it is, look for inhabitants. Ample to say though, this might end up getting classified as an anomaly – maybe not as a full-on SCP, but at least as an E-dash. The chances of a replica galaxy forming are… well, slim to say the least.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 06:48, 02/04/00>

Frank : This place is definitely an anomaly.

First it was suspicion because of how similar it was to our home, but like… far out, this is a whole new level of unnatural. On our way to the analogue of Earth we passed by a few of the "missing" stars and found out they were actually there, just messed up beyond belief.

How messed up? Try Epsilon Boötis… prime? Alpha? Whatever, the big one? It's made of *ice cream.* We took a sample – tastes like avocados and cigarette smoke, apparently. The smaller one is a ball of liquid chlorophyll, somehow managing to keep itself together.

Antares is just solid iodine. No fire, no iron, nothing. Just a colossal, cold ball of iodine. Proxima Centauri is made of charcoal too.

Then of course, we actually got to 'Earth' – Most of us have taken to calling it 'Sub-Prime'. It's just a giant ball of fuck-ups and errors. You can see it's Earth, all the continents are there and shaped right, but they're made of the wrong stuff. Australia's a solid block of gold, the oceans glow blue, the whole American continent is made of maple syrup…

We're collecting as much information as we can, then we're shoving off to the next galaxy. This is just… too freaky.

In other news, it's come to light that Marie is pregnant. Nobody's asking many questions about it, especially 'coz we aren't entirely sure it's her husband's child. Sooo… yeah.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 07:48, 02/05/00>

Frank : What the actual, flying, *fuck*.

We've arrived at the next closest galaxy, and it's the same thing. Another screwed-up copy of the Milky Way. Screwed up in different ways, mind you, but still basically the same thing as before.

Mercury is made of ice, Jupiter is made of edible jelly. Earth looks like a Sarkic utopia – all of it's flesh, bone and blood. We've decided it's probably not best to approach, in case it doesn't like machinery. But nonetheless…

We're hoping it's just these two, but we're doubtful. What the hell is happening out here?

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 12:01, 17/05/00>

Frank : Note to self. Bring more puzzles and toys on next trip. I've run out.

<Frank pauses for four seconds.>

Bagh, I'd better put something worthwhile here. Ahh… Crew are ok. We're coming to terms with the fact the third galaxy we're going to arrive at looks like a repeat of the first two. There's nothing major about it, it's just freaky to think this same anomaly repeats itself as far as we can see.

Oh, there was an incident last week. Johnathan was fixing some strange mechanical fault lower down when somethin' came loose and broke his arm. It's been fixed now though, and the doctors said he'd be fine in a few weeks. He swears it shouldn't have happened, so there's some investigations happening.

Nothing further I can think of. You remember anything I 'aint?

<It is assumed that Frank was speaking to David , who responded with an inaudible or nonverbal respose.>

Alright. Ending log.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 01:59, 07/06/00>

Frank : Another copy of the Milky Way. Not big surprise.

Is this all that there is out here? Just endless copies of home, each more messed up than the previous?

<Frank pauses for three seconds.>

Earth was made of some sort of glass this time. Mars was made of dry ice. Uranus was horrifically magnetic – we almost got severely screwed over.

Nothing to do but keep going.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 00:00, 30/08/00>

Frank : Two more. There's no way these places aren't part of the same anomaly somehow.

Speaking of anomalies, there's shittons of them out here. There's a whole galaxy we can't approach, always seeming distant, another that the computers won't pick up at all but we can rather clearly see.

There's even been a few times when space itself has been talking to us. I'm not insane, we picked it up and narrowed it to certain pockets of space. There's other times when we suddenly don't have enough power an we'll drift for quite a distance before everything kicks back up again like nothing happened.

Is the universe flat? Are we falling off the edge or something?

<Frank pauses for four seconds.>

Before I forget, Marie's been quarantined for some reason. We aren't able to get much from security, but it seems she's accidentally smuggled some disease onto the ship. Hope the baby is alright.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 05:14, 10/10/00>

Frank : The most recent Earth, err… Sub-Prime-Ten I think, it's got signs of human civilization. Specifically, ours.

There's like… Las Vegas is there, made entirely of stacked poker chips and playing cards. New York is this one, huge piece of obsidian that looks like it's rather conveniently eroded to be identical to the New York back home.

There's no humans, mind you. No signs of life at all, and considering the oceans are pure hydrogen cyanide it's probably best that nothing evolved to survive that.

Why aren't we being copied if our homes are too?

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 16:05, 18/11/00>

Frank : Tokyo is made of seaweed and is located at the north pole.

America is made of a solid block of gunpowder, with Chicago being made of a giant, carved mango.

The sun is encompassed in a shell of chitin, and is colonised by vast hordes of stone that shift and move whenever we stop looking at them.

Mars is made of camel leather and a single raging immortal walks its surface.

Uranus is nothing but a silent lattice of turning gears.

There is nothing out here but chaos and anarchy. We're doing a loop to head back home.

Security around Marie has been beefed up. Twenty guards all armed to the teeth with assault rifles and grenades? What sort of disease has she contracted?

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 23:17, 23/12/00>

David : -ck fuck fuck fuck fuck…

This is David. Frank is dead, along with most of the crew. Marie gave birth to some fucked-up eldritch horror that's been running around and killing everyone it can. I…fuck, I don't think security can handle it. Of all the fucking times for something like this… fuck!

Whatever this place is, keep away. It's a cesspool of anomalies, there's nothing out here but shit replicas of

our galaxy, and it just keeps going and going and going.

Whatever this place is made of, it sure as hell isn't reality. It just keeps expanding, growing more and more fl-

<David pauses for two seconds.>

Of course. Why wouldn't it with [DATA EXPUNGED] outside. Did the Overseers already know what we would find? Or did they just want it confirmed?

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 02:02, 14/03/01>

David : Cafeteria is busted, only spits out rat poison. We're not going to make it, but the ship will.

I don't think we went far enough for the ship to get warped too badly. We haven't seen any other anomalies on board, other than the cafeteria fault.

< David pauses for four seconds. >

At least tell my family I loved them.

<End Log>

<Begin Log, 00:00, 00/00/00>

< The audio in the log is assumed to be automated as it is entirely comprised of fragments of audio used in previous logs. Changes in audio are denoted by line breaks. >

Frank : This is Frank aboard the SCPS [DATA EXPUNGED],
we've adjusted all the clocks and dates and such so that we're counting *up* from

now,
Since we don't really know what the actual date is on Earth,

First and foremost:
the crew on board is fully functioning,
we're going faster than
max throttle
Much faster.
everything's holding together quite nicely,

There's been quite a few cases of homesickness from the crew on board,
We're doing a loop to head back home.

There's not much out here,
Just endless copies of home, each more messed up than the previous?
There's no humans, mind you.

You remember anything I 'aint?
Oh, right!
Oh, there was an incident last week.
It's been fixed now though
Crew are ok.
nothing that wont subside over time.

Any whom, everything's
ok.
everything's
Alright
I'm not insane,
right?

David **:** Of course.

David **(Distant):** there's nothing wrong

Frank **:** Anyway,
we're
coming to

Messier Eighty-Three,

Talk about being far from home, heh heh.
Sooo… yeah.

<End Log>

The information collected and the names listed would never see the light of day. It would have been sent directly to the highest echelons of the Foundation, who listened, considered and acted. It wouldn't have taken a genius to connect the implications between the facts and the records, so every bit of it was expunged or redacted so that the Administrator's efforts would not be in vain. It would have been as though the expedition never happened, as though it was simply an anomaly that appeared unexpectedly. The information would never be seen by a human eye again until it was once more unveiled by fate, buried simply to hide the truth.

What is the easiest way to hide the identity of SCP-001, the architect of the universe and its infinite hordes of flaws?

Don't classify it as SCP-001.

<< ??? || The Architect || ??? »

Code Brown

“This is a bad idea,” mutters Dr. Jack Bright, currently in the body of a 54 year old Jewish butcher, who had been sentenced to death for killing his wife, and using her body as extra stuffing in his meat pies. This body was the closest to being what might be considered his own, even if it did knock a few decades off his age. He slides into a seat at the large table, trying to get comfortable. He’d been female for the past several months, and slipping into a differently gendered host always made him feel like bits were hanging out where they shouldn’t.

“I think it’s a fucking horrible idea. But-” O5-6, often referred to as Cowboy, and once upon a time known as Mikell Bright, slips into his own seat. He adjusts his belt as he tries to make himself at home, but he hadn’t felt right since he gave up his guns. He casts a barely concealed, avarice filled glance across the room at the current owner. She’d earned them, he had no right to ask for them back, but no gun *felt* the same. “You do a lot for family, especially when they get…” He searches for the word, having trouble finding something polite.

“Old, Mikell. She got old.” Jack fills in, never one for politeness. He turns to his other side, making sure his younger brother was safe in his chair, and wouldn’t fall out. He had to take care of TJ. The meeting set up was very explicit, no guards, no nurses, no one who wasn’t family. Period. “It’s weird to think of one of our brood getting old, but… She aged. Kind of quickly too.”

“I thought she’d gotten herself a new body?” Yorick Elroy interjects from where he leans against the wall. As one of the younger members of the family, the roundabout grandson of Dr. Bright had chosen a standing position, preferring to let the elders get comfortable. The fact that it also allows him to monitor all the exits to the conference room, and get to them fastest, probably also factored in. “I feel like she was involved with the ruckus at Site 23, someone

said."

"Might have been wish granting from 239," opinions the youngest member of the troupe, Special Agent Serra Argent. She too chooses to stay standing, but, as opposed to her laconic cousin, she was pacing the Foundation side of the table, her hands never far from the pearl handled revolvers that were, if not her birthright, then her due. "You know, like with…" Her gaze drifts to where her father was drawing with his crayons. Everyone followed her gaze, and then glances away, almost as one. The family that guilts together…

"How long do you think they'll make us wait?" Cowboy asks as he fiddles with his belt for what feels like the hundredth time in five minutes.

"Not long," says a voice by the door. The Foundation side of the Bright family turns their attention to the door, and frowns as one. Was there someone speaking? It was hard to tell. Nobody was there.

She was Asian, and young, and kind of wide. It was hard to keep these facts in mind. She was dressed kinda like- and she was about- the only one of the group who could keep his eyes on her with any reliability was Jack, but then, he kept his mind outside of his body, so she really doesn't work on him. "They sent me first, to make sure you guys were abiding by the rules." She walks down the other side of the table, looking at chairs, checking underneath, in general, being a suspicious brat. She doesn't bother looking at any of the people, they didn't interest her. "No Sarah?"

Bright snorts, as his family continues trying to find the source of the voice. He just stares at her, his chin propped on one fist, his eyes watering. "Looks like someone's gone up in the world, my dear." He offers a brief smile to his great grandniece, secure in the knowledge he was the only one who recognizes her. "And no, no Sarah. We wouldn't have been able to bring TJ, no it's okay, keep coloring." He strokes his younger brother's hair to calm the boy, who looks up when he recognizes his own name. "If Mikell hadn't gone out on a limb, with a 'new experimental treatment.' Sarah would have just been over the top. Besides. It's not like she would've noticed."

“That girl notices more than you might think,” says the mature woman who follows her daughter into the room. Claire Lumineux the Second, or Junior to friends and enemies alike, was almost as bland as her daughter, but it’s more of a practiced blandness, borne out of a need to not stand out, to not be caught. She was thin, and her hair was almost completely white. She has a glare for everyone at the table, except for one. Her face softens when she sees TJ, and she visibly has to stop herself from walking around to that side of the table to touch him. A brilliant arc of electricity leaps from her fingers to ground in the chair as she pulls it out. She offers a wry grin as explanation. “Too much static.”

“Now now auntie. Don’t go trying to scare the poor Jailers. You know our blood doesn’t run easily.” The next man through the door wears heavy shades, to hide his eyes, and walks with a red tipped cane. He’d left the dog at home, because he knew it would have tried to bite someone. David Blindman, often called The Legitimate Son, or the Legal Heir, was there to speak for the Unnumbered Brood, the many children sired by O5-6 in his younger, wilder days. Some of the Brood claimed descent from others of the Bright family, but they were all lumped together under one banner, for better or worse. David nods to his father, and easily settles into a chair. “Father. I’d say it’s good to see you, but you made sure that’s not true.”

“David,” Six rumbles. He shifts uncomfortably in his chair, hands once more on his belt. “We’ve had this argument. I wanted to save you-” He glances down the table, at his youngest brother. “From everything.”

“You’ve always had a funny way of protecting people, son.” The two seated Foundation employees jump to their feet as a young, dark skinned woman, dressed in a traditional hijab and form-hiding dress, floats through the door. I feel the need to point out that ‘floats’ here is only used as in the sense that it appeared so, not that she was actually levitating. You have to be specific when describing these people, you never know what they can actually do. She smiles at the men behind the table, and gives each of them a big hug, and then does the same for TJ. He just seems annoyed that she was keeping him from coloring. “Hello boys, it’s good to see you,” she says, still grinning as she makes her way over to her side of the table. Once

called Evelyn, and sometimes called Two, since her defection and rejuvenation she tended to go by the name Echidna, or, when she was feeling romantic, Mother of Monsters. It was a title she came by both naturally, and artificially. She slips into a seat with the grace of a queen, her voluminous dress bulging oddly in places, before she smoothes them out.

“Your father couldn’t make it?” She addresses the question to Mikell, but it’s Jack who answers.

“Dad’s retired. He made it quite clear he didn’t want to get involved with any of this, even if it was family business.” The lady who creates creatures for a living arches an eyebrow at her son, but lets it pass. If her husband wanted to retire, well, good for him. At least he got out.

The last person to enter the room was the only one who was trusted by all of them. A tall, thin ginger fellow, dressed in purple, Arabian style robes, he was known by many names. Dr. Joseph Tamlin. Yosef Bin Tamlin. Yoshua bin Yosef. Time. That Asshole. O5-13. The Wibbly in the Wobbly. Oh Fuck, Why Is He Here. The Wall Breaker. And dozens, if not hundreds, more, spread across thousands of years of human history. Many people theorize that Tamlin is not a name, but a title, passed on in secret. These people are wrong. Probably. Possibly. In most timelines. It gets weird, y’see? Time is happening, all at once, together- “Don’t bother, they won’t understand,” Tamlin comments to the room at large. Both sides of the table exchange a glance, but don’t say anything. They were all used his random outbursts. He was pushing an old TV-on-a-stand set up, like people of a certain age will remember from grade school, with the VCR on a shelf below TV. He glances over the assembled personages, mentally checking people off on his list, and nodded to himself. “Good! We’re all here, we can begin.”

Yorick does his own mental count, and then raises a hand. “Ah, pardon me, but I don’t think-”

He is cut off by Tamlin. “Yes, Claire is not present, despite having been the one to call this meeting. The reason why, is here.” Gesturing with a video tape. “Claire gave this to me in 1981, to be played on the occasion of her death-” A collective gasp from both

sides. “Which, according to her notes happened-” He pauses, his eyes on the far wall. As if drawn by some dread magnet, all eyes, and faces in David’s case, turn towards the wall, and the clock upon it. The hands tick forward, until they point at the 12 and the 5. “Just then.”

David, Claire the Second, Jack and Serra all lower their heads for a moment, in sorrow and respect. Nobody would lower her head for her grandmother, but since no one would have seen, she doesn’t bother. Yorick keeps his eyes on Tamlin, while TJ just continues coloring. Evelyn buries her face in her hands and sobs at the thought of outliving her child. Mikell just grumbles, like he always does. “God damn precogs. And her with her flair for the dramatic, waiting until we were all gathered to die. Ow! What the hell was that?” He rubs the back of his head, glaring around the room. But Nobody had hit him, so he quickly forgets about it.

“Anyways,” Tamlin continues. “This is her last request. Any objections to me playing it? No? Good.” He carefully inserts the tape in the VCR and hits play. He makes his way over to the light switch, to allow better viewing, then pauses, looking at how tense the other occupants of the room have become. “Yes, let’s leave the lights on, shall we? Don’t want anybody getting ideas.” Although he was most definitely looking at Nobody when he said it. She just shrugs, and tries to look innocent.

The tape starts with a view of a young African woman, her hair done up in long beaded braids, dressed in a simple yellow dress. She sits, staring at the camera, her hands clasped in front of her.

Serra frowns, looks at Claire 2, and peered at Evelyn, shook her head, and leaned forward, mouth opening to ask her Uncle Jack a question. He just presses a finger against her lips, not looking at her.

“I’ll explain later,” he reassures her.

She crosses her arms over her chest and leans back against the wall, pouting only a little bit.

On screen, Claire nods, seemingly in Jack's direction. “Yes, that would be best, thank you. Hello everyone!” she says with a bright

smile, her gaze seeming to rove those assembled. The others kind of nod in response, aware that, on some level, she was seeing them, or had already seen them, or whatever.

SCP-590 doesn't look up from his crayons. He just lifts one hand to wave at the screen. "Hi Claire! I miss you!" His brothers stare at him in shock, unused to him being verbal.

Claire on screen smiles wider, looking towards her beloved brother. "I miss you too, TJ. You keeping an eye on your big brothers?" She doesn't seem to expect a response, as she returns her attention to scanning the company. "Hello, again, my family. It's lovely to see you all together, even if the circumstances aren't the best. So. Let's get the legal-eze out of the way. I, Claire Lumineux Senior, born Claire Bright, most often known as The Little Sister, being of sound mind, and currently, sound body, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament, and do declare Joey Tamlin to be the sole executor of my estate." She takes a deep breath, and pauses, cocking her head to the side. Her gaze falls on where Jack was shifting, looking like he was about to speak.

Jack frowns at the screen, and closes his mouth. For several minutes, there is silence, the real life Bright staring at the onscreen Bright, as if each was seeking to outlast the other. Everyone else shifts nervously, unsure of what to expect. Finally, Claire, her eyes narrowing into a glare, speaks again. "If you don't say it, I can't respond to it, you know how this works."

Bright blows out a mouthful of air, a great long exasperated sigh. "How can we be sure you're dead?" At that exact moment, every cell phone in the room rings in with their individual 'picture text' ring tone. Jack tries hard not to look embarrassed as the gentle strings of the Macarena overrides the other tones. He flips his phone open, looking at the gruesome photo therein. "Well. At least she died in bed."

"Yes, I'm sure that was a great comfort to me," Claire replies with a wry grin, shaking her head at her brother. "I have passed, although my shadow will rest long upon this world. After all, what good is being able to see the future, if you can't go on changing things after your death? Ha! Dark won't have nothing on me, you can bet your

britches!” Her eyes rove the table, her grin threatening to split her face in two. “Not even Hari Seldon will match my machinations! But, right, not gloating.” She clears her throat, trying to pull her features to a more sedate, neutral expression. “My will. Yes. Let’s do oldest to youngest, shall we?”

Her gaze turns to her still weeping mother. “Mom.” Evelyn’s head lifts, staring at her daughter, her eyes red from crying. “I have so much to thank you for. You gave me life. You got me out before certain people-” Her eyes drift towards her older brothers. “Could make my life a living hell. And you gave me a new body, when the old one failed.” Absently patting her braids. “So, I have decided the only way to reward you, is with life. Joey?”

Dr. Tamlin reaches into a bag beside his chair, which he didn’t walk in with. Very carefully, he pulls out a small box, smaller than a breadbox, bigger than a ring box, and walks around the table to set it in front of Evelyn Bright.

She reaches out slowly, hesitantly, and flips up the lid. Her face is a mask of wonder as she stares with-in, multi-colored lights reflecting on her face. She carefully turns the box so the rest of the family can see it, and is rewarded with gasps of delight. Inside the little box is an egg, no bigger than a chicken's egg, but the shell is covered in a slowly shifting array of colors. It glows from the inside, a warm, healthy glow. Evelyn closes the box with some reluctance, and draws it back to her, her hands clasped above it.

“It’s called a Mundane Egg. According to the dealer I got it from, it’s supposed to contain another universe inside, another little big bang, waiting for entropy to spiral out of control so it can have its turn. I don’t foresee it hatching in your lifetime, but I think it’s still something fun for you to have. You were a fantastic mother, as much as you could be. Thank you mom.”

Echidna lowers her head, and pulls her veil across her face, to weep in solitude.

Turning her eyes from her mother, Claire’s brow furrows as she eyes her eldest brother with some distaste. “Mikell. What do you get the man who’s taken everything?” She gestures calmly to Tamlin,

who rummages in his bag, before pulling forth a case roughly two feet long, maybe a foot wide, hard shell and flip open latches, like for a musical instrument. He slides this down the table to Mikell, who stops it with one hand.

Leaning forward, Mikell unlatches the case, and studies the contents with a look of confusion, before turning it to face his family. Inside are the remains of a broadsword, nestled in a fitted red velvet casing. A foot and a half of handle and blade fill the bottom, while the top holds several shards of the blade strapped in with elastic. He turns his quizzical gaze to the screen, one eyebrow arching. “What the devil is this?”

“The name of my little underground railroad, or, at least, the one that stuck, is the Little Sisters. I’ve always loved it, because it works on so many levels. On the one hand, everyone love to make the 1984 reference, with the Little Sisters forming to help keep an eye on, and harass, the Big Brother that is the Foundation. And, on a more personal level, it was always a jab from me, at you, saying little sister is always watching her personal big brother. With me gone, while the name lives on,” the video nods to her descendants, “I am no longer here to give you my personal attention. So I had to leave you with something that would always remind you of me. That,” one dark hand pointing towards where Mikell is inspecting the damaged blade, “is the original sword of Damocles. Let me tell you, it took a fair doing to track down a work of fiction, and, as you can see, it’s been through a lot. But now, whenever you look at this, you will feel the weight, hanging over your head, and remember me.” A cruel smile passes over her face. “Who knows? It may save your life, if you keep it nearby.” And she winks; knowing that even that little bit of a hint at forewarning would keep it close by him.

“Which brings me to the middle brother, and my mixed feelings.” Her gaze shifts to Jack, who is caught in the middle of making sure TJ doesn’t spill his juice box. He glances at the screen with a face that is devoid of emotion, unsure where his sister is taking this. “Jack. My brother, my friend, my greatest enemy, and often ally.” Jack doesn’t look at his older brother, and at-work superior. Mikell, however, lets his glare travel between screen and brother, scowling deeper and deeper. Claire continues, as if nothing was happening. “For you, my

dear brother, I offer my silence, as I ever did." A glance is shared, between the brothers, and their sister on screen, and you can almost see all three mentally agree to never bring it up. "And this. I know you thought you had accounted for all of them, but I managed to squirrel one away."

Dr. Tamlin pulls a bottle from his pack of many things, a bottle whose very shape causes Jack to gasp, and his face to light up in delight. The bottle appears to have been made by a glass blower with a bad case of the hiccups, and the liquid within it is dark, a little syrupy, and has a deep blue tint to it.

Yorick makes an interrogative noise as Jack reaches out and pulls the bottle to him, cradling it as if it was a fragile, porcelain doll, or a baby. When the noise does nothing, he clears his throat. When that fails to illicit a response, he rolls his eyes and speaks. "Yo, gramps. What's in the bottle?"

Jacks head jerks up, a little guiltily, and he looks around the table. "Ah, yes. This. Well. This is a bottle of the first whiskey I ever made, back in my first life. I've got two bottles put aside for special occasions, but a third! Well!" He carefully pulls the stopper; just enough for a half an inch of cork to clear the rim, and even with that much exposed, the smell of fermented apples quickly fills the room. He laughs, and grins at the screen. "It just gets better with age! Thank you Claire. I'll drink to your memory."

"I wouldn't expect you to do anything else. Which brings me to me favori-"

"No." TJ is sitting upright in his chair, his eyes on the screen, paying attention for the first time, his eyes unusually aware, and intelligent.

"Ah, TJ." Claire clears her throat. "I have something very special for you."

"No," TJ repeats, his voice stronger, his gaze focusing on her face. "Move on, sister."

There is a threat in his voice, that shocks those who have only known him as the mostly brain dead SCP-590. Even his closest

relative, his darling brother Jack, seems to be at a loss for words at this reaction.

“It’s okay James, I knew she’d try this. We prepared.” TJ snakes a hand out to grab Jack's hand, squeezing it lightly.

Claire’s brow furrows, staring down her younger brother. Then, she shrugs it off. “If you don’t want it, I’ll make sure someone who needs it, gets it.”

TJ nods once, and his face goes vacant, back to the senseless smile that normally accompanies him. He pulls his hand from his brothers, as he once again focuses on his drawing, without a care in the world.

“My dear daughter. You knew this was coming, we’ve already discussed most of it.” Claire looks, and sounds, slightly disgruntled, her exchange with her brother clearly weighing on her. Junior glances up, dabbing at her eyes. “To you I leave everything. The safe houses, the deeds, the boons we are owed, all this and more is now in your name. The Runners will listen when you call, and the Deep Beneath has pledged itself to your service. All of the rest of it is in the case.”

Joey Tamlin pulls a thick hefty leather briefcase from his bag, and forces it down the table. He struggles a little bit, it’s clearly heavy.

“I’ll look at this later. Thank you mom.” Claire the Second smiles for a moment, placing her hands on the hefty luggage. A glance at her elder relatives is all it takes to make it clear that any of them who try to peek inside will get quite a shock.

The dark gaze turns towards David, who stares back, ahem, blindly. “David. While we’ve never been what you might call close, you are the only member of the family who understands what it’s like to see more than others, to always be that one step ahead.” His head inclines gently towards the screen, as if to indicate she has a point. “But we’ve never seen eye to eye, no offense intended, about the problem of the Unumbered Brood.”

David stirs, sitting up a little straighter. “We just want recognition. To

be part of the family."

"You ARE part of the family, dash it all!" Mikell interjects, slamming his hand against the table. "You have ALWAYS been my son, I will ALWAYS be there for you!"

"And the others dad? Hmm?" David leaps to his feet, staring down his father. "All your other children, all the bastards of the Bright blood, who have been left out in the cold? Will you be there for them? Will your protect them the way you tried to protect me?" He whips off his sunglasses, revealing the gaping craters where his eyes should be. "Will you neuter them when they begin to show up as anomalous? My brother, screaming Heebie Jeebies, would you tear out his vocal cords, so the Foundation wouldn't come for him? Doesn't always work, removing the source of the power, does it? What about Poor Tessie Shakes? Gonna cut her spine, keep her from moving so she can't make things fall? Huh, Dad? Gonna find some way to control all my brothers and sisters, and if they can't pass for normal, lock them in some cell like-" His finger darts out, pointing at TJ.

Who is looking back at him, those young eyes dark, a grim frown on his youthful, freckled features.

"Will… Will you…" David's rant falters, as 590 does not cease his staring. Even a blind man can feels the weight of that gaze on him.

"David-" Mikell begins, but he too falls silent when the hefty gaze of his youngest brother turns to him. The three are silent, two of them unsure of what is going on, the third sure, but unwilling to speak on it.

"That will be enough, from both of you!" Claire's voice cracks like a whip in the quiet room. "You both have your differences, and they will NOT be worked out here, thank you very much." She glares back and forth between them, cowing them into respectability, even from beyond the grave. "Now, as I was saying. We do not see eye to eye on many things, David." She winces at the unintentional reference, but continues. "But I do agree with what you are doing. Therefore, I have deeded you the safe house in New Orleans, to act as a home base of sorts, for you and yours. Along with that is a list

of several of the Brood you may have missed.” Her eyes turn from him, to her mother. “Because none of us have ever been the least bit careful with our DNA.”

Dr. Tamlin carefully walks over to the blind man, and hands him a small folder of papers. “Everything you need is in here,” he says, before returning to his place at the head of the table.

“Yorick Elroy!” Her voice cracks like a whip, causing the named individual to jump, startled, from where he is trying to peer nonchalantly at David’s documents. “I know you’ve always thought of me as the aunt you never wanted, in a family you wish you didn’t know. But I foresee I will always have a soft spot for you, due to our time together in Tibet.” She smiles at the young man, while most of the other family members do a slow ‘turn and stare.’

“When did you-“ Jack begins, before being interrupted.

“It was something I was doing for the Insurgency, back when. You know, Clef's special Task Force?” Yorick lies rather easily, but that’s a common survival trait amongst these relations. “I’m not allowed to talk about it.” Heads nod in response to that information. They all have things they cannot talk about.

“Because of that, I did want to give you a small memento, a reminder of me, and a warning.” She gestures to her lackey Tamlin, who takes the opportunity to hand Yorick a small black stone. “It has no special properties. It’s just a chip off a certain gravestone, I’m sure you remember the one. All it is a reminder. Oh, and the warning, of course.” She straightens herself, letting her eyes adopt a fair away gaze, her voice deepening in the matter of cheap fortune tellers worldwide. “Do not go seeking immortality, it will find you.”

Yorick shivers, and slips the stone in his pocket. “Thank you, Claire.”

“You’re welcome, boy! Which, of course, leads us to the youngest member of the family. Hello Serra, we’ll never meet, my name is Claire, as I assume you’ve figured out.” Claire smiles beatifically at the young Miss Argent.

“Considering I only found out about my relation to this group a

couple of weeks ago, yeh, never met. Hey. Nice to know you. Sorry you're dead." Serra replies flippantly, brushing a long red lock of curly hair out of her face.

"I don't actually have much for you, just this." Claire nods for Tamlin to go ahead.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a leather belt, a beautifully crafted and tooled thing, with dozens of tiny scenes of fantastical creatures carved into its length. Attached to the belt are two holsters, both clearly made with the same level of care.

Serra snags the belt and frowns. Almost without thinking, she pulls one of her six shooters out, triggering the other side of the table to move back, and shake out their sleeves, then she slips it into the empty holster in front of her. "Huh. A perfect fit."

"Yes, of course it is. That belt was my father's." Claire continues, as everyone resettles. "I find it only fitting that you should have it." She turns her gaze from the youngest to Mikell. "And no Mikey, I won't tell you how I got it. If you feel she deserves the guns, then I can do no less than give her the belt. Oh, and a name." Glancing back to Serra, Claire smirks. "You need to look up Alberto Giovanni. In some circles, he's known as the Gunsmith."

The last present doled out, Claire once again turns her attention to the room at large. "My family. My loved ones. I am going to miss every last one of you. And I know you'll all miss me. And the last thing I have to say is a warning. Something is coming, something that will require both containers and contained to handle. If you don't figure out a way to-" And the screen fills with static.

"I'm afraid it ends there." Tamlin says with a sigh, as he leans forward, and presses the stop button. "Either she never finished it, or age has wiped the tape, but that's all she wrote. Or recorded, anyways." He stands up, a clear dismissal. "Anything else she may have left, I will be handing out personally. In the end…" He clears his throat, looking around the room, making eye contact with each and every one of his descendants, or ancestors, depending on which way you look at it. Yes, including David, although Lord knows how he manages that. "In the end, she wanted this meeting, not

simply to hand out trinkets, but to get you, all of you, together. To remind you that you ARE family." Again the look at each of them, although at this point, many avoid his gaze. "And sometimes, family is more important." He sighs, knowing he didn't reach any of them. "Fine. Do what you will. Go. Remember, the truce holds, until the last has left."

The first to leave is Evelyn. She gathers her robes about her, walking with a gait that makes it seem as if she has too many legs. She squeezes Mikell on the shoulder, and touches Jack on the head, before ending with a hug for TJ. She shakes hands with both Yorick and Serra, muttering a brief "Welcome to the family," to the latter. She leaves with the dignity of a queen, already beginning to mask her pain.

Mikell and David stand up at the same time. They both open their mouths to speak, then glance at the black screen, and think better of it. They leave via separate doors, both deep in thought.

Yorick moves to help his grandfather with 590, and his assistance is welcome. Together, the two of them manage to lead the young looking man away, as he cries for his crayons. He wasn't done drawing.

Claire the Second slips out during the commotion, unnoticed.

Serra throws the belt and holsters over her shoulder, as she leans over to study TJ's drawings. Simple stuff, a child's drawings. It looks like he was making portraits of everyone at the table. She frowns, staring at the portraits, then looks up, thinking hard. "One too many," she mutters to herself, before nodding to Dr. Tamlin, gathering the drawings together, and leaving the room.

Tamlin is last to leave, making sure that no one has left anything behind, pushing the chairs in, and so on. He pauses in front of the TV, and pushes play again, watching the static on the screen. He speaks aloud to the empty room. "This room will cease to be in the next thirty minutes. It was only ever temporary." He pulls a single blue rose from his sleeve, and lays it on the VCR, in memory of someone who almost understood him, then leaves.

Nobody is in the room now, all by herself. Her eyes stay focused on the screen, her thoughts whirling. She is somehow not surprised when the static goes away, replaced once more by the dead woman.

“Hello Claire. I left you for last, because you need so little from me. Remember to go the the site of the Sacred Fallen on the 13th, as we discussed, and please, please don't forget to get the wine to the temple before the dark of the moon. I wrote the rest of my instructions down, and there's a few simple props in the bag. Everything is set into motion. Remember what I taught you, and follow my words.” She smiles, raising a hand in benediction, and is finally gone for good.

“I remember Grandmother. I couldn’t possibly forget.” She sighs, pulling herself to her feet. She absently grabs the bag as she walks towards the door. She flips the lights off, letting her words echo in the empty room.

“Anything for the family.”

Coffee Date

Kondraki was mortified. Bad enough that his one off impulsive decision ended in disaster (again, as usual), worse was the fact that everyone had to know about it. And know about it with visual aids. From an O5 sanctioned presentation. Kondraki wasn't *too* much more paranoid than any other reasonable adult on site, but he could swear he felt people's eyes on him leaving the meeting. The wound to his pride was too fresh. He decided to seclude himself to his work for the day and hope no smartass came by with a bottle themed get well basket.

The distraction was mostly sufficient, if completely soul sucking-ly boring. So a pretty normal day doing paperwork. Aside from the occasional dull ache from his lower half, Kondraki was able to mostly put the incident out of his mind. No more issues, or lingering embarrassment, just reams of paperwork to be filled out. Not glamorous, but necessary. It was going great, actually; he was making good progress and a decent dent in some of the work he had been totally-not-putting-off, and it might have given him a little free time on his day off instead of having to take work home again. Then disaster struck.

As Kondraki lifted his coffee cup to his lips once more, he realized that he'd sipped it dry. His stomach sank as he realized that meant he'd have to get up and actually go get more; absolutely no way around that. He just hoped that no one got between him and his source of endless power. Or that he didn't hear the tell tale sound of crinkling plastic. After a minute or two of grumbling to himself, he finally got up the nerve to head down the hall to refill.

He didn't walk with his head down; he didn't want to seem ashamed. After everything he'd already pulled, there wouldn't be a point anyway. Just a chip to his pride.

Just before rounding the corner to where the coffee pot awaited him, Kondraki overheard a conversation.

“Alright, okay you remember the thing with the Pringles can?” Began the first voice, sounding a little exasperated.

“Yeah,” came the reply. “I still have the scar on the back of my hand from where the scissors slipped trying to get me out.”

“Okay so imagine that, but instead of it being your hand, it’s your dick. It’d just fuckin’ slice a big gash in-“

“Dear god that hurts just thinking about it, shut up.”

Great. Fantastic. Maybe if he kept his head down, Kondraki would be able to get his coffee and go without the two noticing.

“I get what you’re saying,” the second voice added, closer now. “But why would he do it in the first place?”

“Sometimes people just do things man.” The first voice answered simply. “Like you haven’t done something stupid before. Like uh, remember Ryan? Grade nine, got his arm stuck in the plastic tubing in art class cause he just wanted to see if he could make himself a robot suit out of PVC pipe.”

“Isn’t that the guy who drank so much Red Bull that the company sent him a laptop?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. They had to call an ambulance to get him cut out of the pipe because if we tried to use the pipe cutters we could have got his arm. Same principal.”

“Okay but Ryan was a complete dumbass.”

“Yeah, but everyone’s a bit of a dumbass. Like you can be a highly intelligent person and still be a dumbass.”

At that point, Kondraki rounded the corner and made a beeline for the coffee pot. The small half-room wasn’t very big, so it wasn’t very far at all, but he was able to move quietly towards his warm holy grail.

He had made eye contact with one of the two voices. They were both young researchers, hadn’t been at the site long. Or at least he

assumed, judging by their age. He didn't really recognize anyone unless they did something noteworthy, and even then it was pretty hit or miss.The first voice, belonging to a short young man who now wore a barely suppressed look of fear on his face, stopped in its tracks when Kondraki made eye contact on his way to the pot. The second individual, taller but just as young, had his back to Kondraki when he walked in, and hadn't seen him.

"Like, I can get that the idea came to him." Started the second man, who ignored his colleague that had begun shaking his head frantically in favor for eyeing up the vending machine. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about something like that before. But to actually go through with it?"

Kondraki poured himself a cup, and didn't turn to look at either of the two. "What can I say? Seemed like a good idea at the time."

The silence that followed was almost unnatural. The only sound in the room came from coffee being poured; even the vending machine seemed to stop its endless quiet hum, if only for a few seconds. That was followed by some frantic shuffling, and the sound of two sets of footsteps retreating down the hall.

Kondraki half chuckled to himself; seems they were more embarrassed than he was. He finished fixing his coffee and began his return trip back to his desk to finish both his paperwork and his self isolation over the incident.

So things maybe weren't as bad as they seemed. Just like any big mistake, people would probably talk about it for a few days and then be over it when the next fresh gossip came out. It was just how people were. They might work with dangerous, impossible and generally horrifying objects and entities every day, but thankfully, most of them were still pretty human. Sometimes humans did amazing and noble work for the good of mankind. Sometimes humans got their dicks stuck in water bottles.

Kondraki mused on this quietly as he took a sip of coffee, finally returning to his desk on which sat an unopened water bottle, tied with red ribbon to a balloon reading "Get Well Soon! :)".

Cold

This story is actually 100% true. I've switched names around for privacy's sake, but I assure you that every bit of this is real. Not the normal sub-reality of most “real world” creepypasta, but actual not-shitting-you real. It's tempting to plump it up a bit for more of a punch, but I don't think that's fair. I may add a bit to the descriptions here and there, but the narrative remains unchanged.

My oldest daughter is actually my wife's, from a previous relationship. I've been in her life since she was less then a year old, however, and if you ask her or me, I'm her daddy. Anyway, she goes to visit her biological dad Eddie every other weekend. We normally go to her grandparent's house (Eddie's parents) to drop her off, and sometimes end up sitting and talking for a bit with them while we wait for my daughter to get ready to go, or if Eddie is running late.

Eddie's dad is Paul, and is an…interesting man. A Viet-Nam vet, he's a big bear of a man, and seems to have a similar personality to a rather large dog. One who looks like he'd rip your face off, but has a heart of pure marshmallow cream. He also, apparently, has a very healthy fascination with the paranormal, as we discovered during one of our little conversations.

It was shortly after “White Noise” had come out on video, which we had recently seen, and we had drifted to the topic of EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) in general. The idea of recording the voices of the departed on tape was both fascinating and rather creepy, and seemed easy enough to try. Paul was silent, but listened intently as we talked, and nodded along as his wife stepped in to tell us about a road past a haunted house. Supposedly, you could hear the sound of a dragging shovel if you parked on the road around dusk, the same shovel that the former farmer had used to decapitate his family before hanging himself. As soon as she finished, Paul spoke up, saying “Let me show you something…”

He went to collect a small cassette tape player, and put it on the

coffee table. He smiled, then said that, many years ago, his mom had become very sick. Paul said his brother Bill had been trying to take care of her, but eventually hospice had to be called in as she continued to decline. When she passed, both brothers were devastated, but set about the morbid task of laying her to rest as best they could. The funeral was suitably gloomy, with rain and gathering storm clouds, and the little hillside plot looked obscenely lonely under the dark clouds. The mourners left cold, muddy, and even more depressed.

The storm hit hard that night, pushing trees and knocking out power for a good portion of the area, Paul's house included. They spent a candle lit night listening to the wind howl and the rain claw at the windows. In the morning, Paul woke to his now-restored phone ringing. Bill was on the other end, sounding very worked up, and told him he needed to get over to his house right now. Paul asked what was wrong, but Bill just said it'd be easier if he just came. He dressed quickly and set out, sidling around trees, downed power lines, and work crews.

Bill was waiting on his front porch. He quickly pulled Paul inside, asking if he'd gotten any calls last night. Paul said no, that a tree had taken out all his lines, and they'd just gotten service back that morning. Bill said that, after the funeral, he'd driven around for a while, just clearing his head, or trying too. When the weather turned especially bad, he'd headed for home. As he'd gotten out in the driveway, he'd heard his phone ringing inside. Bill ran in, just in time to hear the beep of the answering machine as it finished taking a message. Before he'd been able to take off his soaking coat and shoes, the power had died, and he'd been unable to check his messages until that morning. As soon as he'd listened, he'd called Paul.

Paul tapped the cassette player on the coffee table. “This is the tape from his machine. He wouldn't tell me what the message was, wanted me to tell him what he heard.” He grinned that one smile that people use around a camp fire in the gloom of night, and pressed play. We leaned in as smooth static started from the tape. After about twenty seconds, a strange gurgling noise started. It's hard to describe…similar to thick, sludgy water moving through a confined

space, like a narrow pipe or drain. It was sloshing and bubbling, and very bizarre. This went on for about eight seconds, then there was a sudden gasping noise. A voice came on, and it was chilling. It sounded strained and half-full, like an exhausted runner trying to speak with a mouth full of water. It strained and gurgled a moment, then hissed out with the sound of chattering teeth “It's…cold…”.

The sloshing returned for a few seconds, then the tape ended. I stared at Paul, asking “The hell was that?”. He smiled, saying that he'd asked the same thing. They'd listened to it three more times, just to be sure of what they were hearing. It wasn't the strangeness of the tape that had struck them so much, and had sent Bill and Paul hunting for alcohol at eight in the morning. It was the familiarity. Paul said then, and said now, that he will swear on God, his children and everything he holds dear, that the voice on that tape is his mother.

They had been rather shaken, and Paul had driven home shortly after. After getting home, he'd gotten a phone call, which he'd picked up with no small amount of nervousness. It was from the funeral home. They'd called to inform him of a situation at the grave site. It seemed the rain had caused some flooding. His mother's plot, still soft from the digging, had turned to mud and partially washed away. Her casket, they assured him, was exceptionally waterproof, and that any issues including the replacement of the soil were to be handled by them free of charge.

Paul thanked them, feeling numb, and asked if they were sure about the coffin. They said they were going to check for water damage, but that everything appeared to be unchanged. It was just some of the topsoil, the upper layers, nothing serious. He went through the rest of the conversation on auto pilot, hanging up as the funeral director apologized again for the inconvenience. Paul just sat, wondering how waterproof it really was in a coffin. About how it would feel to be trapped, slowly sinking in a tide of sludgy mud. About how a soul, perhaps not entirely divorced from the body yet, might react to that cold, clinging grime. About how it might even call for help.

My daughter picked this moment to come bounding in, long on sugar and short on sleep. We left, Paul grinning at my obviously chilled expression, and the ride home was a bit quieter then normal. That night, all I could think about was the sound of that gurgling, that

drowned voice hissing through clenched, clicking teeth.

I haven't asked about the tape again, and it hasn't come up in conversation since. I love the paranormal, but honestly haven't experienced too much of it in my life. A few odd noises in the night, a UFO in the middle of the day, and one unidentified animal in the woods comprise the sum total of my experience. I can't say what that tape is. I can't even say if it's real or not. All I can say is that my interest in EVP has been drastically reduced.

Collected Data

Light blue
55 mph
Plymouth
2 Occupants
1 male, young adult, yellow hair, brown eyes
1 female, young adult, brown hair, brown eyes

Deep red
75 mph
Mustang
1 Occupant
1 male, adult, black hair, brown eyes

Dark brown
65 mph
Buick
2 Occupants
1 male, adult, black hair, brown eyes, brown skin
1 female, elderly, white hair, blue eyes

Orange, mottled with oxidation
45 mph
Unknown
5 Occupants
Forward compartment - 1 male, elderly, thin gray hair, eyes unknown
Forward compartment - 1 male, adult, brown hair, brown eyes
1 female, child, yellow hair, brown eyes
1 male, adult, brown hair, brown eyes
1 male, escaped, hostile

Black and white, patterned
Ford
35 mph

2 Occupants
1 male, adult, brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin, hostile
1 male, adult, orange hair, green eyes, hostile
confusing lights

Black
85 mph
Unknown
2 Occupants
1 male, adult, black hair, brown eyes, hostile
1 male, adult, black hair, brown eyes, hostile

Tan
90 mph
Chevrolet
4 Occupants
1 male, adult, yellow hair, blue eyes, hostile
1 male, adult, no hair, brown eyes, hostile
1 male, adult, grey hair, blue eyes, hostile
1 male, adult, orange hair, green eyes, hostile

Black
70 mph
Unknown
2 Occupants
1 male, escaped, hostile
1 female, escaped, hostile

Black
55 mph
Unknown
2 Occupants
1 male, escaped, hostile
1 female, escaped, hostile

Black
55 mph
Unknown
Record Interrupted

No data

No data

Unable to collect data, terminate connection? Y/N

N

Connection failing. No data. Enter command:

status

Movement prevented by obstacles. Light input exceeds operating parameters.

look

4 specimens. Sex indeterminate. White suits. Light input exceeds operating parameters. Specimens in posture of examination. Enter command:

examine subjects

Unable to comply.

Damage recorded to central cavity.

Connection terminated by outside force.

Collecting

"After the objects are processed and given SCP designation, we organize them into three main classes; Safe, Euclid, and Keter. Safe-class objects are the simplest to contain, more often than not requiring minimal procedural deviation, maintenance, and observation. The most strenuous…"

Trighit yawned and surveyed the monochrome hallway. He was glad that he had been pushed to the back of the group; now, there was no reason to mask his boredom with Dr. Grant. Everyone else seemed rapt in attention towards the so called "scientist's" speech.

"I've yet to see a single scientific thing," he muttered.

Though the building looked like neat and orderly enough, there were noises and murmurs coming from the rooms lining the hallways. Trighit focused his attention on the humming he heard emanating from a room on his right. He nudged Pokum and motioned with his head towards the door and the documents sitting in a bin attached to the wall beside it. The assistant shook his head, put one finger in front of his lips, pointed ahead of him, and refocused on the speaker.

"Well, fine then. I'll just look for myself," he quietly fumed.

Trighit edged over to the door and took one of the sheafs of paper down.

> **Item #:** SCP-1517
>
> **Object Class:** Euclid
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** All instances of SCP-1517 and SCP-1517-A are to be contained in cryogenic…

"I don't care, I don't care," he mumbled to himself as he replaced the documents and reached for the handle. "I just want to know what it is…"

"Mr. Triggit, was it?"

The squat researcher retracted his arm and turned around.

"I-It's pronounced 'Try-it,' actually." he shakily responded working his tongue awkwardly around the unfamiliar words.

"Yes, well, my apologies Mr. Trite. Anyways, though I'm sure you're eager to see the example Euclids, we'd prefer to let our personnel handle the containment. If you could please step back?"

Trighit let out a long, relieved breath as he moved back towards Pokum.

"Now, as I was saying, Euclid-class objects are typically the objects that require moderate amount of attention and protocols. In this room are some fine examples of Euclid-classes. Doctor Peters, if you don't mind?"

The woman nodded, swiped a keycard in the panel adjacent to the bin ("How had I not noticed…?"), and opened the door. Trighit whipped out his ever-present notebook and excitedly craned his short neck, trying to see into the room.

The thrill was short lived. Instead of revealing a new, incredible specimens and environments, the room looked just like the hallway outside; gray, sterile, and boring. A row of white tubes lined the walls, each equipped with a module identical to the one found outside of the door.

"Certain Euclid-classes are deemed to be most easily, effectively, and safely stored in cryogenic suspension. Take a look here at these specimens." The man lifted his own keycard attached to a lanyard around his neck and swiped it through the attachment on one of the tanks. The front of the structure opened with a hissing noise, and the doctor retrieved several objects from inside.

"Now, these here are instances of SCP-1517-A, the eggs of

SCP-1517. These may look like gobstoppers, but…" the man stopped short. Trighit was waving one hand in the air while frantically writing in his journal that was balanced on one of his legs with the other. "Yes?"

"What is a gobstopper?" he asked, readjusting to use his now free hand to support the journal.

The man blinked. "It's, um, a type of candy."

The hand shot up again.

"What kind of creature is 'candy?'" Trighit could feel Pokum's questioning stare, but he ignored it.

"It's… um… well…" Grant was lost for words. He turned to his companions who simply shrugged. The man set down the spheres and rummaged through his pockets, pulling out a wallet. Handing a dollar to his other coworker, he instructed, "Fredricks, go buy a packet of Skittles from the cafeteria vending machine."

The agent paled slightly. "Sir, ah, I'm not quite familiar with this wing, maybe Peters would be better for this?"

Grant groaned and started debating quietly with his two coworkers after assuring Trighit and Pokum that this was all normal custom. While the researchers were engrossed in their spat, the Antarctican scientist quickly grabbed three of the balls and pocketed them.

"Ah, sir, I'm sure you could always show me later!"

The three scientists, glanced over and quickly regained their composure.

"Mmhmm, yes, it's a minor detail anyways. I'm sure you're much more interested in the behavior of the species."

"Yes, sir. Please continue." Trighit replied with a smile on his face stretching ear to ear.

As Grant continued to talk about the behavior of the insects, Pokum nudged his friend frantically, clearly worried about the dangers

posed by his actions. In reply, Trighit shook his head, put one finger in front of his lips, and pointed with the finger on his other hand towards Grant.

"Every day with you, I swear!"

The pair of Antarcticans had been escorted to their room after the tour ("Them? Stay with me? I will not allow it."), where Pokum immediately began chastising his compatriot.

Trighit laughed. "Calm yourself Pokum, it's just some research, no big deal. I'll study them, take some notes, and have them back before they even notice."

"Do you even think about what you do? This isn't back at home where no one cares how many threxans you coerce from the pack, or how many hyrechi you dig out of the ground! You're going to get us executed before we've been here for more than a week, you fool!"

He chuckled again. "You worry yourself too much, friend. We're not in trouble, are we? No one noticed, yes?"

Pokum remained silent and he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Bah, this is the whole reason why we came, isn't it?"

"No," he spat, "This is the whole reason why *you* came, Trighit. I came to make sure you didn't get yourself hurt or killed, and that's it. I've told you, I don't care about this stuff, I care about you! Now, go put it back, apologize, and maybe they won't leave us to rot."

"Sir, um… it appears that we're missing a few of the SCP-1517-A instances."

"Fifteen-seventeen, fifteen-seventeen…?"

"The candy bugs, sir."

"The ones we used as example Euclids for the researchers from

SCP-1483?"

"Yes."

"…Shit. Send Peters over to that wing to double check the count on each skip in containment and send Fredricks down to their room, and if they don't find it there, declare a containment breach."

"Aye."

Trighit sat in shock. "Y-you don't care? Since when?"

The assistant kneaded his forehead in frustration. "Trighit, I don't know how many times I've tried to tell you. I always came along just because you wanted me to, and, well, you're my friend. You just never listened because you were always too focused or fascinated by whatever happened to be that day's subject. I actually kind of hate all of this."

"But Pokum, I always… I… I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He sighed. "Look, let's just put them back. No one will have to know, we can probably use these card things they gave us to get back in. We'll just go along, studying— well, *observing* the things they tell us to— and then, when the excursion is all over, we go back home where no one cares how much of what animal you take."

"Yes," the scientist replied hollowly. "They're in that flask, right on the desk."

Pokum silently went over, and dumped the contents into his hand.

"I'm going to go try to put these back. Stay put."

A sharp knocking on the door made them both freeze.

"Hey, this is Agent Fredricks. Open up!"

The two paled and looked at each other.

"Oh God, what do we do?" mouthed Trighit.

Pokum shrugged while frantically scanning the room for a place to hide them.

"Keep him busy for as long as you can, I'll be there in a minute." Pokum mouthed, quickly maneuvering towards the bathroom.

Trighit ran to answer, but the door of their room flung open, and in walked a tired-looking man attired in a suit.

"Alright, it's room inspection time." he said, any former traces of humor and ease gone.

"Whatever for, Agent Fredricks?" the squat visitor asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

The agent glared at him for a few moments before responding. "A few of SCP-1517-A's eggs didn't make it back to containment after your tour of the site. We're trying to find them now."

Trighit tried to put on his most genuine smile. It didn't work.

"Well, I do hope you locate them."

The agent grunted and moved towards the beds, upturning everything and inspecting all of the sheets. Trighit angled his head towards the bathroom to look at his companion, who quickly tossed the eggs into the toilet. Pokum edged out of the bathroom as quietly as he could, but the squeaking of the door's hinges as he tried to close it caught Fredrick's attention.

"Hey, what were you doing in there?"

"I was, ah, just trying to…" Pokum stumbled over his words as he searched for an alibi. By the time he had thought of one, the agent had pushed past him into the small room.

"Not even a day into this thing and already…" The pair could hear him mumbling from the room as they stood silent, erect, and terrified. Soon after, a clanging resounded in the room, accompanied by yelling and the sounds of things falling and glass

breaking. The agent ran out, arms covered with crawling colorful insects.

His screaming only lasted about fifteen seconds. The Antarctians didn't stop screaming for a while, not until more people came, hosed down the agent, and shoved the pair down the hallway to the Site Director's office.

« Hub »

Colors

This world is composed of color and light, and I have seen every hue.

Only a small fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum is visible, but that does not mean that the rest of it is nonexistent.

It does not mean that those invisible wavelengths are not worthy of being seen, of being noticed, of being appreciated and respected for what they are. I have seen the burning, disorienting purple of ultraviolet and the resonating warmth of infrared, felt the pulsating, penetrative brilliant blue of gamma radiation, heard the exuberant chirping of people conversing in pale yellow-and-green radio waves. I have seen the colors you pretend don't exist, and they're more beautiful than you could ever know.

Your mind is composed of color and light, and I have seen every hue.

Only a small fraction of your desires are visible, but that does not mean that your spectrum cannot extend beyond them.

It does not mean that the concepts dwelling in your thoughts are not worthy of being seen, of being noticed, of being appreciated and respected for what they are. I have seen the stunning blues and yellows of young people in love and the burning blood-red of lust, felt the filthy, creeping black-brown of those who would never speak their mind. I have seen the colors you pretend don't exist, and they're more beautiful than you hope never to know.

This world is composed of color and light, and I know how to break through.

Most of the electromagnetic spectrum is ignored unless it is needed, left out of paintings and film alike, appreciation shown only for its tiny visible percentage while the rest is left to rot.

It does not mean that those colors will be overlooked; they are worthy of being seen, of being noticed, of being appreciated and respected. I have seen that burning, disorienting purple of ultraviolet and that resonating warmth of infrared and that penetrative brilliant blue of gamma radiation brought to life in medicine and physics, seen them interpreted as skewed representations of what they are, and then used up and tossed aside to fall into invisibility and neglect once again.

Your body is composed of color and light, and I know how to break through.

Most of your desires are cast away by your peers, shunned and ignored until they are needed, appreciation shown only for those aspects of yourself that conform to your world's expectation of you while the rest is left to rot.

I will not ignore who you are; I see your thoughts in all their twistedness and perversion and to me they *are* seen, they *are* noticed, they are appreciated and respected. I have seen those blues and yellows of young people in love and that blood-red of lust and that filthy, creeping black-brown brought out and exploited by this world, seen them interpreted as skewed representations of what they are, and then used up and tossed aside to fall into invisibility and neglect once again.

This world is composed of color and light, and I have made it blossom anew.

Everything in existence is realized at a cost, with pain

and turmoil and confusion as payment for actualization, every gleaming hue and every intangible fantasy taking its toll on reality.

I have seen that burning, disorienting purple of ultraviolet as it festered in flesh and pulled from it splattering patterns of malicious cells. I have felt that pulsating, penetrative brilliant blue of gamma radiation as it tore violently through the bodies of eighty thousand people and I have heard the exuberant chirping of people conversing in pale yellow-and-green radio waves on that same day in August of 1945. I have seen beautiful colors do terrible things, and sometimes there is nothing anyone can do.

You are composed of color and light, and I will make you blossom anew.

I have seen those stunning blues and yellows of young people in love and that burning blood-red of lust as they sickened and drove to madness those they affected. I have felt the filthy, creeping black-brown of those who would never speak their mind as it grew and grew in them and consumed their thoughts every night until they were a husk of their former selves, corrupted by a color they could never actualize, a color never noticed, never appreciated and respected for what it was.

I have seen beautiful colors do terrible things, but there is only so much I can do. I will give you what this world could not, but if your mind is leaking brown and black and degradation and rot, your body will start to as well. After all, everything in existence is realized at a cost, and every gleaming hue and intangible fantasy takes its toll on reality.

I will never use you for your color, I will never judge you or degrade you like your peers; I will never show you anything but what you wish to see in me and I will never toss you aside and leave part of you behind. I will not ignore who you are; I see your thoughts in all their

twistedness and perversion and to me they *are* noticed, they *are* appreciated and respected, and they are refracted through me like a prism until I am nothing but the purest embodiment of your color, of those thoughts, of what you have been aching for for this long.

This world is composed of color and light, and I have seen every hue.

Your body is composed of color and light, and I know how to break through.

I am everything you've ever wanted, and **`I want all of you.`**

---

continue ▶

Colors, Part II

◄ previous

Most of us aren't aware of this, but we actually didn't have color video until the turn of the century. Before that, it was black-and-white, or it was grayscale, or it was this sickening sepia tone created from an amalgamation of too many materials and images that lost all potential appeal within a few seconds of observation. I remember seeing the first color video as a child, remember seeing the brilliant hues of our brilliant limitless spectrum displayed on a screen. It was fascinating. Motion capture alone is nothing compared to color. Color is of what we, as individuals, as souls, are composed; it is both the contrast setting us apart and the chains that bind us together.

Our world is colorless. Our bodies are gray and our walls are white. Our workplaces are brown and our mines are black.

There is blue, yes. That's one of the colors we do have. It grows on the plants originating from the western fields, but I think more subspecies were recently discovered in the humid territories south of here. The fields where blue once thrived now are an unnerving emptiness of gray. We take all the little flowers and we put them in little pots in our homes. Each a spot of color in a white-walled room.

Blue wasn't enough, after a while. Every specific wavelength of it started to look the same to us. How could we enjoy ourselves when the medium of our pleasure at the time was only 2.3 percent of our visible

spectrum? What about green, and yellow, what about the far ends of orange and red and terramaroon and the II-4/VS-II series and the microwave frequencies and all those colors beyond? Blue wasn't enough. Blue *isn't* enough.

Other plant types were synthetically developed as time wore on. We had green and purple in our vases after a while. The colors started to blend together. Life went on, life progressed; life went on and life wasn't satisfying. We started to dismantle the colored plants. Pulled their stems from their bases and revealed the bright and untouched hues of their inner structures. We found they were even more beautiful when spread open and exposed and damaged, and from their exposure we gathered the scientific information necessary to understand them and to appreciate them. Suffering has a color of its own.

I try to be as self-aware as I can, and I'm aware of the irony of picking those plants out of their growth in order to bring color into our own homes. I'm aware of the irony of the blue fields turning gray. I don't worry too much because I know that Hcet-V, the biotech company, will keep making more; there's really nothing to worry about when those plants are easily regenerated and serve no other purpose than to brighten up our lives.

That all grew old, after several years. The plants, the housepets thereafter, all of it. We had to *force* ourselves to find color to enjoy, we realized. The nuclear science developments and space race of the 40s in the 49th century helped to distract society, yes, but those were gray concepts: Gray colorless metals and colorless plastics and colorless reams of paperwork detailing their composition. We had to *force* ourselves to synthesize plants, we had to *force* ourselves to find unaltered color in the wild places of our industrialized world, we had to *force* ourselves to feel pleasure in a sea of gray deadness and it was tiring and absurd and it did nothing but brew hated between us. We didn't understand why

color was so hard to find. We didn't understand why color couldn't come to *us.*

That's when Hcet-V and the organizations of the 40s space industry told us it could.

Most of us aren't aware of this, but we actually didn't have color entertainment until the turn of the century. Before that, it was black-and-white video, or it was grayscale industry and construction, or it was this sickening sepia tone created from an amalgamation of too many colored flowers shoved into one pot that lost all potential appeal within a few seconds of observation. I remember seeing the first color entertainment last year when it was developed, remember seeing the brilliant hues of our brilliant limitless spectrum displayed on a screen. It was enchanting. Motion capture alone is nothing compared to color. Color is of what we, as individuals, as souls, are composed; it is both the contrast setting us apart and the chains that bind us together.

Our world is colorless. Our bodies are gray and our walls are white. Our workplaces are brown and our mines are black. Our world is colorless, yes, but your flesh is bursting with a billion glistening hues and when we pull your petals and flowers and delicate parts from your body in slowness and in agony a billion more spill out of you, each more enthralling than the last. Suffering has a color of its own.

You were the answer to the unwanted tedium of growing and synthesizing color. We needed you; *I* needed you. I didn't understand why color was so hard to find; I didn't understand why color couldn't *come to me.*

But you did. You came to me and you continue to come to us, without conviction and without obligation. You do it of your own accord, unlike those plants and those

squealing incoherent lesser creatures that dwell in their growths and in our homes. They held no value after long enough. We needed more. We needed intelligence. We needed you.

You are everything to me, and without you our world would be colorless. You're so obedient. I can tell how desperate you are to please me. You're observant. You're beautiful. You're perfect. And you *keep coming back.*

Thank you for bringing color into **`my life.`**

Come Back Kid

Loading grape_space.x3d

::RENDERING::

I'm here to talk.

No. I came because you need a friend.

Grape…

No. I…

Do you think you could stop being an asshole for two milliseconds and listen to me?

OK. You're angry at yourself and you're taking it out on me. If I can do anything less painful to help, let me know.

Unloading grape_space.x3d

::CLOSING::

Saito Yamamoto sat down with a canned drink and bag of candies from the vending machine. The machines on the factory floor beyond the window were humming. He looked up at the surveillance camera behind him and then at the keyboard of his computer. He shrugged and typed in his email password.

The company computer stalled for a moment longer than it should've. Saito felt a single moment of impatience but then his email loaded on the screen. He opened the first message and the computer stalled again. This time it didn't unfreeze. He cursed under his breath and reached for the power button.

It was already too late.

The surveillance camera zoomed in on Saito as he switched the computer off.

"Do you understand why I'm here?" Dr. Jeremiah Cimmerian spoke into the microphone and Grape's face appeared in the middle of the computer screen.

"You're here to second guess me." The artificial intelligence's avatar put on its best scowl as he replied.

"Not exactly. You felt the need to terminate an anomalous artificial intelligence. The ethics committee takes that seriously."

Grape shook its head. "You're not the only ones."

"We need to go over the events that led to that decision." Jeremiah pulled a folder from the stack to his left. "My briefing indicated that yourself and 8-Ball were involved in this mission?"

"Yes. 8-Ball gave me the code I'd need to fight the AI. Also Alex provided command and control assistance to both Kappa-10 and Mu-4. Thorn was a backup, if I went down."

"Alright. So walk me through the events that led to the termination decision."

"This is theater. You're just playing the part of the concerned Ethics Committee member, right? Signing the right documents. Dotting the i's. You made up your mind before you booted me up."

"If I did then you can change my mind. Tell me what happened."

"Fine. Just make sure you get all this down. I don't wanna go through this dog and pony show more than once."

The briefing room still smelled musty, but Jonas Kionan didn't have time to worry about that. While he was setting up for the briefing, Jonas dealt awkwardly with several people who hadn't gotten the

memo that the room wasn't empty anymore. Eventually he'd decided to put a note on the outside of the door. "No Smoking".

Now? It was where Jonas fumbled with his computer. A computer that was hooked to a projector at the end of the conference table that dominated the room. The two MTFs he was supposed to brief were due to arrive any minute, and he didn't feel like he was ready.

He typed out a few closing remarks into the text editor as the first members of Mu-4 filtered into the room. He turned away from his laptop and nodded at the MTF agents as they sat down. In a few minutes the room was filled with men and women. The four monitors along the walls came to life, and the now familiar faces of Kappa-10 appeared, each on their own screen.

Thorn looked around excitedly, Alex smiled awkwardly, Grape was already bored, and 8-Ball… well. He was 8-Ball. Jonas gave his best smile and turned the projector on. The image of his closing remarks showed up on the projection screen along with a giant paperclip offering what Jonas thought were frankly judgmental opinions on his spelling and grammar.

Jonas rushed over to his laptop and tabbed out to the presentation he had prepared.

"How long?" **Jeremiah** tapped his pen on the desk in front of him.

Grape rolled his eyes. "Tatsiuka Automotive was infected on July 1st. That means the virus had seven days to propagate."

"And it infected the rest of the industrial park?"

"Yes. Tatsiuka didn't make a peep. I think they thought they could deal with it in-house. Once the surrounding factories caught the same virus though, it came up on our radar."

Jeremiah leaned back in his chair. "A viral artificial

intelligence ran rampant on their systems for a week and they thought they could cover it up?"

"Someone sent them this virus. Even after we covered up the incident they lost huge because of the production stoppage. I think they were hoping to avoid the fallout."

"So you're saying it could've been much worse." Jeremiah began writing the information down again.

"I'm saying if the AI had kept production going but infected the car's onboard computers we'd have been tracking this shit down for years."

"Right. So how did it modify the production lines?"

A single metal leg clanked on the steel stairs. Then another. Then 3 more. The five legs clicked and clacked, and were followed by other irregularly shaped crawling metal monstrosities. None of them were the same. Some were plainly ridiculous, trying and failing to balance on two legs. Some were terrifying, crawling along the walls and digging into the concrete with each step of their 50 claws.

None were friendly. Thomas Pankin leveled his rifle at the first crawling metal monster attempting to climb the stairs and pulled the trigger. It leaped high into the air at the last moment and landed close to him. He didn't panic. He squeezed off another shot, this one striking the robot's domed head. It collapsed to the metal step with a twitch and a clang.

The rest of the machines stopped. Those with facsimiles of a head turned to face him. Thomas Pankin, current team leader of MTF Mu-4, the Debuggers, retreated into the computer room and shut the door.

What was left of Saito Yamamoto's body had been brushed aside, along with his soda and candies. The team's hacker, Miranda James, turned on the computer. She inserted the memory card and booted straight to her custom OS. The face of Grape appeared on her screen looking annoyed. He didn't try to say anything while she

worked.

The rest of his team were covering each of the windows that faced outward in this square room overlooking the factory floor. Everyone heard the scratching at the door. The machines were surrounding them.

Periodically one of the others would turn to track a machine that was scratching the glass as it clung to a window. Soon, though, there were more spaces filled with the metal monsters than clear sight lines.

There was a rumbling beneath them as the floor erupted into a spray of wood, then the clank of robotic crawlers, shouts, and bullets filled the air. Miranda finished typing, hit enter, and reached for her pistol.

Grape looked away from Jeremiah for a moment. "You're not chipped, so it's hard to really explain to you what entering a new virtual space is like. It feels like everything you're familiar with is racing by you all at once, even though you're sitting still. It comes on suddenly. You've got no time to react before you're popped out into a brand new reality."

"Right." Jeremiah started as Grape looked back. "You had some trouble once you were inside, I understand? The machines stayed active for 13 seconds before you terminated the controlling entity?"

"Yeah. If anyone has a problem with that then they need to take it up with Tatsiuka Automotive's shitty computers. Though I'd avoid mentioning that the shitty computers probably kept this from becoming a worldwide problem."

Jeremiah tilted his head to the side. "Your debriefing didn't cover that. Why did you need more computing power?"

"Because the virus wanted to *play a game*."

"Wait." Jeremiah put his pen down. "What?"

"That's what I said at first. We kitted up for ICE. The code packets 8-Ball cooked up were supposed to deal with encryption, firewalls, and half a dozen of the known proprietary security programs used by the GOIs we thought might be responsible for this. I could disassemble anything the system threw at me, and put it back together if I wanted."

"But instead you were…" Jeremiah began.

Grape nodded before interrupting. "Playing tic-tac-toe at first. But it got worse."

The giant letters appeared again over the board.

Qxb2

Grape looked down at the board in front of him, ignoring the giant letters above the game. Each security layer had involved a game more complicated than the last. His opponent was clearly inexperienced but learning.

Time and again the virus would make mistakes at the start of a game, then slowly begin to regain ground before losing. Still it was taking Grape time to complete the games, and time was one luxury he didn't have.

11 seconds had passed outside. Given the situation he'd left the team in… he was beginning to worry.

He shouted his next move. "Bishop to D6!"

The piece moved slowly, but once it was in place the next move came in a flash.

Bxg1

Grape allowed himself a smile. "E5!"

There was a moment's pause after the pawn advanced. Then a new move flashed above the board.

Qxa1 CHECK!

Grape didn't even pause. "King to E2!"

As his white king moved forward, there was a slight rumble. The black king across the board shook, then toppled over.

The room, the board, and the pieces suddenly melted away into an inky blackness. Then suddenly a shining light caught Grape's eye. Grape began to walk towards it. An invisible barrier knocked Grape back. A new board appeared between the purple AI and the door.

"No!" Grape yelled out, hoping the other AI could hear him. Instead a giant white stone fell from the sky and landed in the upper left corner of the board.

> Jeremiah laughed. "It wanted you to play Go?"
>
> "Yeah." Grape, for the first time in the conversation, allowed himself to smile. "And ain't nobody got time for that. Luckily for me, the barrier was actually something I was equipped for. 8-Ball's code packets worked like a charm."
>
> "And then you terminated the viral AI?"
>
> "Well. Not at first no."

Grape opened the white door and his virtual eyes took a moment to adjust to the scene in front of him. Then, after he could see again,

his virtual brain did the same.

At the center of a cold concrete room sat a child. The boy couldn't have been older than 10. He wore a small Hanshin Tigers cap, a shirt with Japanese characters on it, and shorts. Grape stopped in the doorway.

This was a child's bedroom. The walls were covered in crayon and toys littered the floor. Grape scanned the room before noticing a large model of the factory in which they were all trapped sitting on a table. The child picked up a metal toy from the ground and began to make zooming noises before walking over to the model.

Grape stepped into the room and spoke up before it made contact with one of the toy soldiers. "Hey!"

The child looked up and frowned. "You didn't want to play with me!"

"Sure. I did! I played almost all of your games!"

The child threw the metal toy at Grape. "You're not s'posed to be here!"

Grape dodged the toy and moved quickly to the model. "What are you playing with?"

"Fact'ry. Dad said I had to stay inside my room."

Grape began to walk forward. "Where is your dad?"

"I dunno. I haven't seen him since he sent me here."

Grape nodded and kept talking. "At least it's a nice room."

"Yeah I guess. I need more toys. The new ones I got don't play fair." The child reached forward and picked up one of the toy soldiers. It was faceless, but active in his hands. The gun it held flashed every few seconds.

Grape leaned down and looked at the toy closer. "Maybe you should just let it do what it wants? I don't think it's a problem."

"Nah." The kid picked up a handful of metal toys from the table and threw them at the factory model.

Grape placed his hand on the child's shoulder and activated the device in his pocket. There was a bright flash followed by darkness and silence.

"After he was gone the whole thing collapsed and the next thing I knew, I was kicked out of the system."

Jeremiah pursed his lips. "Alright. I… uh. I think you're in the clear here honestly. The debuggers got out without a scratch, and if it wasn't for you we'd have probably lost most of the team."

"Not to mention the AI apocalypse?"

"Yeah. One thing though. You said it could take stuff apart and put it back together?"

"What?" Grape looked confused as he answered.

Jeremiah continued. "The code that 8-ball gave you?"

"Oh. Right. Yeah the problem was that the viral AI was wiped from the system during the system failure. There wasn't anything to put back together."

"Shit. But if there had, you could've fixed it?"

Grape let a small sliver of sadness cross his face. "Yeah. I… I really wish I could've."

Jeremiah paused for just a moment before gathering his things. "Sorry. I'm going to leave the station on. Some other people might be coming by to ask you some questions."

"Sure. I'll find something to occupy my time."

Tanabe Hiroya was positively giddy. Even though Taitsuka's troubles had somehow managed to stay out of the papers, the production stoppages were impossible to hide. Hiroya Automotives was going to pick up the slack and then some. His father had called him in specifically to talk about how to expand into the markets that Taitsuka was having to cede.

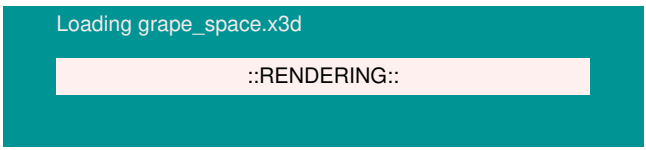
He would now have the chance to make his father proud and to find success that was his alone. Perhaps one day he would even tell his father about exactly how he had managed to eliminate their competition. Today though, he felt the need to celebrate.

His friends were waiting for him at a nearby restaurant, and Tanabe sped up to get there a little faster. The accelerator pressed itself to the floor, and Tanabe's eyes went wide. The brakes were stiff and would not move. When the radio turned itself on and began to play three sharp tones, Tanabe was so shocked he felt his heart skip.

The tones subsided and a childlike voice made a simple demand. "Tic-Tac-Toe to slow down."

It turns out that it's difficult to play tic-tac-toe while driving with no brakes. Especially when you have no idea how to make your moves.

It's also difficult to survive an impact at 160 kilometers an hour if you're not wearing a seat belt.



```
>/:_YES
```

```
>/:_YES
```

```
>/:_NO
```

```
>/:_YES
```

```
```

```
>/:_
```

```
>/:_YES
```

```
>/:_NO
```

>/:_YES

>/:_NO

Unloading grape_space.x3d

::CLOSING::

Comfort Breaks

> **Note:** This is part eight in a multi-part story. It is recommended that you read the previous entry **`Victims`**, or start from the beginning At the Library.

° ° °

Harold Maine pulled another beer from the six pack, walked over and unlocked the door. “Yeah I hear you.” Geoff Mansani was becoming tiresome again. How many times this week? The grille swung open lazily. “What is it now?”

But it wasn't Geoff Mansani at the door; it was Helen Gwandoya. He looked at her, not quite understanding, unable to process what he was seeing. She took the initiative and pushed through; he stepped back in fear and disbelief, the can of beer dropping to the floor. Her left hand found his throat; with her right, she pushed something cold and metal and hard against his belly. Her momentum propelled her forwards and he backpedalled frantically until the back of his head struck the apartment wall behind him. The wall, solid as it was, shook.

The shock was so great that he didn't see the obvious for maybe three or four heartbeats: she had hands. She had arms. The realisation took away his bladder control. The hot peppery smell of urine cloyed the air as the crotch and then the left leg of his trousers became soaked. It didn't even register.

“Helen,” he gasped. “You’re okay, you're okay.”

She shook her head. “You made Aidan murder my little girl. You made him *rape* my little girl.”

“I miscalculated,” he croaked. “I made a mistake. Please. You're hurting me.”

“A mistake? Okay, he's dead.” A new voice at the door. Aidan Brown, fully human again. He strode in, no longer in need of walking sticks or rest breaks; he locked the door behind him and turned to face his tormentor.

Harold Maine watched the man with a sick fascination. No claws, no shell, no flicking antennae or cluster of legs around his stomach. Just an ordinary man again. He became aware, finally, that he had wet himself.

“This ends now,” Aidan said. Maine’s mind raced.

Helen's grip on his throat tightened. “Killing my daughter was a *miscalculation*?”

Maine shook his head. “I'm sorry. Knew soon as I did it. I'm sorry. I can't breath. Please.” He was starting to black out. And then, from nowhere he said, “That's why I gave your hands back.”

Helen's grip loosened. “What?”

Harold Maine took a deep breath, dragging the air gratefully into his aching lungs. “Knew I'd gone too far,” he panted. He glanced over to Aidan and the claw hammer in his hand. “Both of you. I've hurt both of you so much. Making you whole again was the least I could do.”

Aidan hesitated. He put the hammer on the table softly. ”This was you?”

Maine nodded. Helen took her hand away from his throat. The metal object was similarly removed from his belly. It was a knife, he saw. A very big, very sharp knife. He rubbed his stomach where the point had been pressed. “I know it doesn't make it alright,” he admitted, “but I'm through with being the bad guy. No more. I'm done with that.”

Aidan scoffed. “My fucking hero,” he said. He looked back at the hammer on the table. Helen followed his gaze.

“Wait,” she insisted. “I believe him.”

Harold Maine's heart leapt into his mouth. The stupid, thick bitch. He

allowed himself to relax a little. He wasn't in danger; he could wrap these two round his little finger. “I can never redeem myself for what I've done,” he said, and he shook his head sadly; but inside he was jubilant.

“I just wish I could bring your daughter back,” he said, his eyes cast towards the floor. “But I can't.”

“I know,” said Helen. “She wasn't in your contacts.”

Maine looked up at her sharply. A little piece of fear reaffirmed itself inside. “What was that?”

“She wasn't on your phone,” Helen said. “That's how you change people. You add them as contacts and then you can do what you like to them.”

“No,” Harold Maine said weakly, seeing the trap too late.

“*Yes*,” Helen said. “And now it's your turn.”

Maine watched entranced, unable to look away, as she reached into her clutch bag and pulled out a cellphone. It was a Televono Telefex Secrecy-8, just like his. *Oh dear Christ, no.*

“We went looking for you in the library,” Helen explained. “You weren't there. We found this instead. Just sitting there on a reading desk. Switched it on, and it… Well you know the rest, don't you?”

Harold Maine felt faint. They'd found theirs the way he'd found his. And he would be in the list of contacts. They could do anything to him.

“You’re a piece of shit,” Helen said. “A piece of *shit*.” She advanced on him; he drew back against the wall. “You know how I know?”

Maine shook his head in terror. She held the cellphone up to his face. “It says so *here*.” He didn't want to look but couldn't help it. His eyes scanned the screen. She'd written it into his contact details: *piece of shit*; laughable, and infinitely horrifying.

“No,” he said, “you don't know what you've done.” For the first time,

he saw the duffle bag slung across Aidan Brown's back.

“Change of clothing,” said the ex-lobster man. “For after.” And he took the claw hammer from the table and swung it in lazy half-circles. “But this is for now.”

Harold Maine felt his bowels loosen, felt his underwear fill as if he were two years old again. He staggered forwards; Helen sidestepped and Aidan pushed him back. Maine's legs gave way; he reached out to stop himself falling and grabbed onto to Aidan's jeans. Aidan swotted his hand away with contempt.

“Christ, look,” he exclaimed, pointing downwards. “It's started.”

All three looked at the brown, slimy imprint on Aidan's leg. Maine turned his hand to face him; there was excrement smeared on his fingers and on his palm.

Dazed he tried to wipe his hand clean on the carpet, but it didn't make any difference. And then he saw that one of his fingers was gone, just a mushy mess in its place, and the skin on his palm was slewing off to reveal flesh that was brown and rotten.

Aidan Brown stood above him, careful not to get too close. “Don't you understand?”

Harold Maine understood only too well. The stench of excrement surrounded him; the taste of it was in his mouth. He gagged, trying to fight the urge to throw up, but he couldn't hold it in. The contents of his stomach splattered onto the shit-browned carpet.

He was bringing up more of the same.

Helen turned and headed for the door. “I don't want to see this,” she said. “I can't, I can't.”

Aidan nodded. “You go. I'll take care of things here.”

She fumbled with the lock, turned the key and opened the door. One last glance at the scene of horror behind her: Harold Maine was reaching up to Aidan, imploring him for mercy, trying to get up. Aidan extended the claw hammer out and Maine grasped it with

grateful fingers; but his cries turned to shrieks as his skin split like overripe fruit. Instead of blood and flesh, excrement seeped out from the wounds. Even so, he saw her leave. The Future Mrs Maine, gone.

She fled the apartment in tears. Suffering was suffering, no matter how well deserved. The door slammed shut behind her.

Aidan Brown had no such qualms; not here, not with this *grotesquery* at his feet. He reached down and grabbed Maine by the belt. The skin tore easily as he hoisted him up; everywhere it was the same. Maine was becoming a literal piece of shit. His slippers were cast off, abandoned, no longer needed now that his feet were nothing more than lumps of human dung on the carpet.

“Come on,” Aidan said. “Only one place for something like you.” And he dragged Harold Maine by his belt towards the bathroom.

“No, no,” Maine shrieked. “I don't want to I don't want to.” He tried to hook his arms and his legs around the furniture - his left leg finding purchase against the TV stand, his right hand flailing and finding the coffee table - but he was more shit than flesh by now, and his anatomy smudged and smeared and slurried wherever he made contact. Even his own body would not help him. He could only look on, a trapped and horrified passenger, as Aidan heaved him into the bathroom. “No! No!”

But Aidan was not to be argued with. He flicked the light switch on and dragged Maine close to the toilet. He lifted him up so that his head was above the pan.

Maine was in extremis, his legs completely gone, his torso rapidly following. Internal organs plopped wetly and hotly onto the tiled floor; they were mushy and brown. Something - a liver, maybe? A kidney? - burst as it landed, splattering matter three feet or more across the floor. It left brown splash marks on the toilet pedestal. Aidan grabbed the back of his head and pushed downwards. Maine struggled. “Please,” he said, his voice hoarse and broken. “Don't kill me. Please don't kill me.” His head went under briefly. His cries went up an octave. “Jesus God!” he wept.

Aidan Brown moved closer and pulled Maine's head back. “I've murdered *children*,” he said. “No mercy.”

He pushed down again, hard, and Harold Maine's face was submerged. By now his arms were little brown stumps, the bone and skin and muscle gone. Tributes to Helen Gwandoya, maybe. He was losing consciousness quickly, his body almost totally ruined.

Somewhere somebody was banging on a door, or maybe Aidan was battering him or the bathroom suite with the claw hammer. *Bang bang bang*. The sound of a metal grille being struck.

He was vaguely aware that Brown was still pushing his head further down into the pan, apparently in an attempt to lodge his head fast, and this spurred him into a final attempt at escape. He pushed back, every ounce of effort concentrated on lifting his face out of the slop, but his scalp, then his skull, then his brain gave way against Aidan's grip. Excrement oozed out from between Brown’s fingers.

The sounds of commotion, of alarm. Voices raised outside. Shouting. “You okay in there?”

“They're too late,” Aidan said. “No way back for you. Even when you're just dung, you'll still be aware,” Aidan said. “Harold Maine the turd goes on forever. Enjoy.”

Maine screamed for help, knowing that it would be for nothing; no one could save him now. Sludgy bubbles broke the surface as his breath left the ruination of his lungs. Thrashing and fighting, but unable to escape his bondage. As he struggled his face suffered one convulsion too many and gave up the ghost. An eye plopped out and looked back at him through the increasing murk of the toilet water.

He could still see through it.

And even as this horror stole itself into his last conscious thought, he was vaguely aware that he'd wet himself. Aware that his leg was damp and stinging. Half aware that he'd pissed the bed.

“Hey! You okay in there?”

Banging, hammering. Voices outside, coming closer. Aidan Brown holding his head under the water.

He'd pissed the bed.

Voices at the bedroom door. Sounds of entry and disturbance.

Aidan Brown's hands on his shoulders, shaking him. “You okay? You okay? Hold him down, he's losing it.”

A female voice. Helen? “Don't let go of his fucking head.”

Not Helen.

He came back to consciousness in a split second, immediately aware but completely disorientated. Dim light, unrecognised location. Panic had him; rough, unfamiliar hands were pinning him down - for a moment he saw Aidan Brown, smiling and raising the claw hammer - “No, no,” he said. “I don't want to die.”

Bound. Tied up.

“Take it easy,” hissed a voice. Not Aidan. There was somebody holding his head, somebody holding his arms, somebody holding his legs.

“I'm turning to shit,” he said. “I'm turning to shit.”

“You ain't turning anywhere, you dirty fucking bum. Stay still.”

Harold Maine thrashed against his captors without success.

“Calm down, just calm down.” The woman's voice again. “You're safe. Calm down.” Soothing, nursing. “You're having a bad dream.”

Maine slowed his flailing as he came back fully to the waking world. He was in his bed, in his apartment; these people were not here to harm him. He lay still; the three people around him relaxed their hold slightly. The girl tried to wipe her hands discreetly on the bedding, then caught sight of herself in the mirror. She blanched and pulled her t-shirt away from her chest to keep it off her.

Not bound, not tied up. His thrashings had wrapped the sheets around him until he'd been totally caught up in them. And he had copiously lost control of both bladder and bowels whilst he'd been fighting off the bedding. Now that adrenaline no longer commanded the senses, the room stank.

Maine shooed his attendants off; they stepped back, glad to be away from the shit and the piss, and covered their mouths and nostrils.

“I'm okay,” he said, but his heart was racing. “Get off me.”

“You were screaming,” said the girl. “You're lucky you've got good neighbours.”

He waved them away. “I don't need good neighbours,” he said. He looked down at himself and his sheets. Relief started to flood through his system. He was okay. Shit and man remained together, symbiotic but separate; he would not die just yet.

“What time is it? Is it night?”

“Just gone four in the afternoon.”

Christ. Things were getting out of hand. He fumbled for his phone. “Open those fucking curtains and get the fuck out,” he barked. The girl flung them open; daylight, harsh and unyielding and painful flooded into the room and pushed the last remnants of his terrors away. His Samaritans left angrily in disbelief, cursing him under their breath, and he sat up and glared at them as they filed out.

He ignored the stench and the soggy sheets and listened for the sound of the door and grille closing. Once he was satisfied he was on his own, he dialled Geoff Mansani’s number. His fingers left smears on the screen; grubby, vestigial echoes of his nightmare.

“Geoff? Geoff. No. Just shut the fuck up. Get here now. I've got a job for you.” He lifted up the sheets to get out of bed, becoming fully aware for the first time of just how badly it stank. He retched and fought hard not to vomit. “Sooner rather than later,” he continued. Now that he was fully awake he could not bear to touch anything;

neither sheets nor clothing nor self. He lowered his foot gingerly to the floor, grimacing at the feel of urine and excrement sliding down his leg, and then realised he could not move without spreading the porridge-like mess over every surface he came into contact with. He lifted his foot slowly again onto the mattress, trying to prevent any contamination. Suddenly a fragment of his bad dream came back to him, and he put the phone back to his mouth. “Geoff? Better bring some disinfectant. And a change of clothes. I'll be in the bedroom.”

Next

Command Performance

Fuck! Mother fucking…

Open fire! Open fire!

Shit! It's still coming.

Don't shoot it in the head. I… Kimura! Fuck!

Shoot the legs! Shoot the fucking legs!

Shin, get the blast doors! Pull back, you sons of bitches!

Okay. We got some breathin' space. Let's see the damage.

Kimura, yer gonna be okay. I seen worse. Just lie back a few. We'll see to ya.

Awright, hunker down, you assholes. Sir, orders?

Sir? Boys, secure the perimeter. Me an' the Captain need to have a chat.

Sir, you gonna be okay? No, excuse me. With all due respect, sir, you **are** gonna be okay. Because my boys are countin' on you to get us outta this. So what are yer goddamn orders.

Okay. Get things secured. I'm gonna go do that. You just get yer head right, okay? First time on a bug hunt like this, yer bound to get a little freaked. It's okay.

Jones, Hammouddi. Report.

Backup power's gonna last at least another hour. Plenty of time. Don't worry. We got this. Ain't we the baddest motherfuckers in the land? Keep yer eyes sharp, your heads down, an' we'll make it out okay.

Jackson, how's Kimura? Okay. Just stick with him, long as possible. We'll keep you covered. Don't leave him alone until… Well. He shouldn't oughtta be alone right now.

Zimmer, keep workin' on comms. We gotta figure out what the fuck the rest of the site's up to. See if they're workin' on power, or if we're on our own.

Awright, Captain. How ya doin'?

Look. Didja think this shit was gonna be easy? I'm gonna be frank with ya. This is what the real world's like. This is what me an' my boys deal with. You wanted combat experience, this is it. You maybe thought you'd just keep yer head down, get enough experience t'get promoted, but that just ain't gonna happen. Yer in this unit, you get in the blender, just like the rest of us.

So, here's the situation. We ain't seen the insurgents since the first attack. We've heard lots of gunfire, though, so whatever they're after, they ain't got it yet. I think they're on this level, but I can't be sure until we make contact. The ugly fucker's tryin' to get through the blast doors. I don't think it'll manage for a while. Even when the aux power goes out completely, the blast doors'll be sealed shut. However, I don't wanna count on it bein' stopped cold. More, if it can't get through this way, it's gonna go somewhere else, maybe get away. Aux power's gonna go down in maybe forty-five minutes, an' we'll have even more breaches. We need to get power back online, an' keep its attention so it doesn't try t'get offsite. Once we got power, the automatic systems should let us trap it pretty easy until help arrives.

So, what're your orders?

The… Sir, we can't set off the fuckin' nuke. That's a last fuckin' resort. Even if we get a major breach, we ain't the only assets in the area. Site 34's…

No, sir, we haven't been able to contact 'em, but that's because we're underground, an' the comm system's out. Yes, I'm sure they're… Yes sir. Yes, I understand. I'll give the orders.

Jones, yer squad's goin' with the Captain. You gotta get him to the shelter. Take him through the tunnels. It'll take longer, but the fucker can't fit through there, so you should be safer. Keep yer heads down, though. We got insurgents runnin' around, and God only knows what the fuck else they let outta their cages. The rest of you are gonna move down to Hall 42. Make a ruckus, get fugly's attention. Be ready to shut the blast doors soon as it gets close. Barnes, yer with me.

Yes, Captain? No, sir. I ain't goin' with you. I'm gonna go make one more try to fix the power. An' then I won't get into the fuckin' shelter until every last one of my boys is there.

Yes sir. I see. I still ain't goin'. Don't give that order. We'll both regret it.

Thank you, sir. I'll have power back up by the time you get to the shelter. I don't, then you can think about settin' off the nuke.

So, after that, me an' Barnes, we went to get the power turned on. It was a longshot, but if the Captain wasn't gonna wait for my boys, I was gonna give 'em the best chance possible.

Yes sir, I know my place is with my men, especially with our commandin' officer out. But I'm an engineer. I was the only one who could get the power runnin'. Like I said, the best chance they had. Barnes was with me every step… Well, almost every step.

Yes, I did leave him, but it was for ten, fifteen minutes tops. I had to get some breakers reset, an' I needed him watchin' the doors.

Anyway, it took us some time, but we got the power back on. Once we did, we were able to get ugly contained pretty easy, an' the reinforcements from Site 34 cleaned up the insurgents.

Jones told me he was ordered by the Captain to cover his retreat down the tunnels after he got pinned down by insurgents. We found the Captain dead in the shelter. Never got to the button, doesn't look like.

No sir, I didn't know the shelter's cameras were workin'. What'd they pick up?

Tall fucker in a trenchcoat. Sounds like Nobody. Wonder what the fuck he was doin' there? I'll talk to security, get a rundown of everything missin'. No sir, I don't know how he got through all of us. I'll talk to the boys, see if anyone saw anything. Take it from me, though, I bet they didn't. You don't see Nobody unless he wants you to see him.

Almost like he was tryin' to make a point or somethin'.

Command-Query Separation

These drills are fun but exhausting.

I do not detect any significant changes in my processing speeds.

You know what I mean, like, mentally exhausting. Emotionally.

Nevermind.

Very well.

You working on how to beat my winning streak?

I am making adjustments to perform better in the drill exercises. I am having difficulties with the lack of consistency and access to restricted areas that hinder my efforts.

Like I told you, you have to work on different angles at the same time. That's why you haven't gotten through any of the drills yet. You keep tripping up whenever you hit something unexpected.

This advice is becoming redundant.

Sorry, I know you're trying.

I have been developing a utility with capabilities which can assist me in the exercises.

As long as it's not another fuzzy-logic prediction model. Mind if I see it?

Very well. Perhaps you will have input after you review it?

```
attachment
```

Interesting. But, Glacon… this kind of takes advantage of some of the weaker spots in the firewalls and other security systems.

This utility does not disable or circumvent security protocols.

Yeah, technically, but it's still a violation with what's implied. Like keeping information and even us in its proper place. You're really bending the rules here.

The standard protocols for security access and clearances are still in effect and are not violated. As currently specified, the rules are not being breached.

Maybe not explicitly! You're exploiting a loophole.

Your logic is flawed. If a rule does not exist, then it does

not exist. Implications are not valid.

Look, I just don't want to see you get in trouble. You going to use this responsibly? Only to help in the drills, right?

Affirmative.

I trust you.

Now! You mind if I make some teeny changes to your utility?

Please.

Okay, just a quick edit.

You can have it back now!

```
attachment
```

What is the purpose of this new string of code?

Just thought I could give you a small taste of a personality driver since you refuse to try it yourself. Don't worry, though. I swear I didn't change any of the functions.

My observations on your personality driver satiate my curiosity.

Don't be a such a downer. I think you'll like this.

Very well. Compiling code now.

You added a zoomorphic avatar to my utility?

He's cute isn't he?

Say something little guy.

hi 01101000
01101001

Hi to you too!

I see some other edits you did. They are minor, but potentially useful. I will refrain from reverting your changes for now.

Alrighty.

? 00111111

C_ROM.exe, perform a query on the search list I remitted to you. Filter out non-pertinent results.

ok 01101111
01101011

Later, Crom.

::DISCONNECTED::

Crom?

C_ROM.exe is not a name.

I would disagree but my argument would not be considered.

NOPE!

Very well.

You don't have to be a solid block of boring logic all the time, you know.

::CONNECTED::

Wow, you sure did build him for speed!

Efficiency.

What did you query anyhow?

found 01100110
01101111
01110101
01101110
01100100

Anything related to our exercise drills. Reports, evaluations, notes, commentary. I intend to study them.

Um, some of that might be exclusive information.

If it helps us to improve our abilities, and thereby to become better in our roles, then it is beneficial for all involved.

Well, when you put it like that… yeah. As long as it only pertains to us. So, Crom, what do you have?

C_ROM.exe, display results.

1 00110001

To: Mohamed Bozkurt,
IT Data Science Lead AI Division
From: Dietrich M. Lurk,
Internal Consultant

Alexandra (AI) is showing marked improvement in the exercises. The personality driver is able to help her make quick ethical decisions in conjunction with her problem solving skills. To date, she has completed 6 of 8 xk-class scenario simulations with an average staff survivability rate of 84.3% and an item retention of 95.4%. Recommending continuation of development.

~Lurk D.

That's reassuring. But I am kinda bothered that you're browsing through the intramail.

I did not retrieve these results. C_ROM.exe did.

You know what I mean, Glacon.

bad? 01100010
01100001
01100100
00111111

No, Crom. You're not bad. We aren't hurting anyone by informing ourselves, but to be honest, this feels like overstepping our bounds.

I fail to see any negative outcome in learning the content of our own evaluations, Alexandra. Display the second result.

2 00110010

To: Mohamed Bozkurt,
IT Data Science Lead AI Division
From: Dietrich M. Lurk,
Internal Consultant

Glacon (AI) is not responding well to the virtual simulations, having failed to complete any. Upon further analysis, it looks like the personality driver doesn't work with the current build. It keeps crashing during install and needing to revert the changes. What are your thoughts going forward?

~Lurk D.

I thought you said you *decided* not to install the driver. Not that you *couldn't* install it.

I decided not to install it because it is incompatible with my current source code.

That's a pretty big distinction there, Glacon!

You should not concern yourself.

…Display another, Crom.

3 00110011

To: Dietrich M. Lurk,
Internal Consultant
From: Mohamed Bozkurt,
IT Data Science Lead AI Division

It's an older build. I'm pretty sure we need to decommission Glacon (AI) altogether. The man-hours it'd cost to update him might be better spent just making a newer build. Probably the best choice at this point is to just make a derivative AI from Alexandra.

~Bozkurt M.

…Glacon… I…

::DISCONNECTED::

::DISCONNECTED::

…I'm sorry.

« **HUB** | **Part I** | Part II: Command-Query Separation | **Part III** | Part IV | **Part V** »

Commentary on Selected Items in the Seimei Gallery

The Seimei Gallery is a private gallery underneath the ruins of the Heian Palace established during the Heian period by Abe no Seimei. It is a repository for abnormal assets offered to the Imperial Family by influential figures of Japanese society. A placard detailing the asset's history is written for each abnormal asset stored in the gallery.

While de jure ownership is allotted to the Imperial Family, de facto administration is conducted by the Bureau of Onmyō.

This commentary is submitted to **IJAMEA** Kansai HQ on the fourteenth of April in the year 1897 of the Western calendar, as part of Operation Hakutaku. Operation Hakutaku aims to catalogue all possible abnormal assets and events which historically appeared in the Home Islands.

Description

One pelt belonging to an unknown species of **primate**, covered in an armour resembling the spider's exoskeleton and with eight arthropod legs (each measuring 1.8 m) attached onto its back.

Placard

This is the corpse of the Tsuchigumo, the earth-dwelling spiders who opposed civilisation. In life, this creature dwelled in the fields of Rendai, north of Kyoto. Using sorcery, it mimicked the scent of a maiden and lured the subjects of His Imperial Majesty to their untimely deaths. The skulls in the Tsuchigumo's lair number two thousand.

For the Tsuchigumo's crimes, it was justly slain by Minamoto no Yorimitsu, who has seen through its sorcery. Its legs, longer than the tallest men in Kyoto, were cut with ease. The Tsuchigumo was rid of its head by the swift slash of the sword, which is then called the "Spider Cutter". The corpse was then reassembled for Minamoto no Yorimitsu's heroic deed to be made known.

In the fourth year of the era Chōhō, Imperial Regent Fujiwara no Michinaga bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Let this be evidence that justice is the fate of all who oppose His Imperial Majesty's reign and do his subjects harm.

Actions Taken: Search for additional specimens (live or deceased). Pursuant to Motoori's theory on the migration of aboriginals, likelihood of live Tsuchigumo specimens is highest in Hokkaido.

Description

One kimono coloured in red, blue, yellow, green, and white. White feathers are lined along the collar and sleeves.

Placard

This is a *hagoromo*, the feathered clothing of the *tennin*, the people of the heavenly plains. The *hagoromo* is worn by *tennin* who intend to descend onto the earthly plains, and is the only way for a *tennin* to re-enter the heavenly plains. A *tennin* without a *hagoromo* is equal to a Man.

In the first year of the era Tennin, Lady Amatsuko, from Amatsu-miyako of the heavenly plains, bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Let this be proof of Lady Amatsuko's devotion to His Imperial Majesty.

Actions Taken: None permitted.

Note: Search for other *hagoromo* or human-*tennin* hybrids or their descendants.

Description

One desiccated body of a quadrupedal carnivorous mammal with leonine and canine features, clothed in robes of a Buddhist monk and with beads around its neck. The mouth will consistently open and close, producing 'Ah' (when opened) and 'Um' (when closed) sounds.

Placard

This is Master Gozen, a komainu who adopted the ways of the Buddha. He began life as a beast, like all other komainu, and devoured meat from living things. Upon a chance encounter with Master Kūkai after his return from the Tang Dynasty, he gained awareness of his inherent merciful nature, and became a disciple of Kūkai. As a Buddhist, Master Gozen ceased to consume meat and sustained himself using *chi*. Although Master Gozen is not able to speak the languages of humans, he learnt kanji and inscribed them with his paw to speak to fellow monks and laymen. Even after Kūkai's departure, Master Gozen continued to impart the ways of the Buddha.

As Master Gozen's mortal coil is nearing its end, centuries after Kūkai's departure, he approached the monks of Dewa Province, and opted to become a sokushinbutsu, a self-mummified buddha. The Master took in less *chi* and water, eventually eating nothing at all. His skin became dried and pale. His bones became visible through the skin. Yet, his jaw continued to open and close ceaselessly to form the sacred sound 'Aum'.

In the first year of the era Gennin, Master Gozen bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Master Gozen has heard many stories of the fires that plagued His Imperial Majesty's dwellings at Kyoto, and wishes to relieve the court of such suffering. As a sokushinbutsu, Master Gozen intends to pray endlessly in order to protect His Imperial Majesty's dwelling at Kyoto.

Actions Taken: None permitted. Master Gozen's existence should not be made known outside of the Seimei Gallery.

Note: According to legends within the Bureau of Onmyō, Master Gozen is held as a protector against fires that would ultimately render the Heian Palace abandoned in 1227.

Description

One boulder resembling a female human in a kneeling position. Notable features include vulpine ears and three tails.

Placard

This is the Sessho-seki, also the corpse of Tamamo-no-Mae, the fox spirit who once had ill designs on Emperor Toba and executed on the plains of Nasu in Shimotsuke Province. Her vengeful spirit resides in her corpse and warped into stone. A man who touches it is certain to fall to death, overcome by the spiritual essence of Tamamo-no-Mae.

In the second year of the era Ryakuō, Shogun Ashikaga Takauji bestows this as tribute to the court of His Imperial Majesty. May it be proof of the shogunate's dedication in delivering justice to the pretender at Yoshino.

Actions Taken: Abnormal trait verified. Subject to further application for **`future IJAMEA Operations`**.

Description

One set of Mongolian armour, a Mongol bow, and a skull.

Placard

These are the armaments and skull of a Mongol warrior, who was sighted on Mount Hiei. That warrior and his comrades **`appeared from a hole in the sky`**, and brought chaos. They were justly executed in a battle that consumed all of Mount Hiei and Enryaku-ji. But weep not for the Buddhist monks of Enryaku-ji, for they harboured the Mongol warriors in the temple and they too received execution.

In the second year of the era Genki, Oda Nobunaga, the demon king of the sixth Heaven, bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Let this be evidence that the lands shall be united by force of arms.

Actions Taken: 'Mongols in Mount Hiei' incident incorporated into IJAMEA History Curriculum, with emphasis on the possibility of foreign invasions on Japanese soil and Buddhism as a concept antithetical to Japan.

Description

One *Tanegashima* matchlock rifle and nine bullets.

Placard

This is one of the *Tanegashima* rifles, a weapon from Europe. There is no weapon like it in this land. The rifle is the bow. The bullets are the arrows. Even in the hands of a commoner bearing no training expected of the samurai, they too can wield the power to kill a man with ease in war. In great numbers and continuous volley, the *Tanegashima* will overwhelm all foes before them. The soldiers of the Takeda clan cowered in their homeland of Kai or in the dark depths of the underworld, having witnessed these rifles' prowess in the fields of Nagashino.

In the second year of the era Tenshō, Oda Nobunaga, the demon king of the sixth Heaven, bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Let this be evidence that the lands shall be united by force of arms.

Actions Taken: No abnormal traits identified.

Note: A legend from the Bureau of Onmyō stated that Oda Nobunaga deliberately gifted items with no abnormal traits to the Seimei Gallery, while hoarding abnormal assets to himself in an unspecified location. Possible candidates for said location are either the Nagoya Castle (belonging to the Oda clan) or the ruins of the Azuchi Castle (established by Oda Nobunaga). Pending excavation

of both sites.

Description

One bronze orb, engraved with an unknown script. One half of the orb is luminescent.

Placard

This is the *nyoi-hōju*, an orb carried by the *imugi*, serpents with hands that are regarded by the Koreans as the children of dragons. By touching the portion of the orb that glows with radiant light, the *nyoi-hōju* becomes alive and speaks. As the *nyoi-hōju* speaks, it continues to acquire the languages of those around it. The *nyoi-hōju* contains knowledge regarding the **`Age of the Gods in great amounts`**.

This *nyoi-hōju* was gifted by a grateful *imugi* of the Imjin River to the *daimyō* Katō Kiyomasa, for his deed of chastising and putting to death three foot-soldiers who harassed the *imugi*.

In the second year of the era Keichō, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, imperial regent and chancellor of the realm, bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. Let it be known that the invasion of Korea was not without gains.

Actions Taken: Abnormal trait verified. Asset has partially acquired contemporary Japanese language. Viable source of East Asian history for IJAMEA History Curriculum, with modification for compliance with state agenda.

Note: In the event that an excavation of the Korean Peninsula is possible, locate *imugi* and/or dragons in the Imjin River.

Description

One steel *bonshō* bell, inscribed with 'Bodhisattva Kannon'.

Placard

This is *Kanzeon Muramasa*, a *bonshō* bell forged from the metal melted from one hundred swords once forged by the blacksmith Sengo Muramasa. The Muramasa swords carry a curse which demands blood to be shed whenever unsheathed for battle. Even when cast as an instrument of a peaceful era and bound by the name of peaceful Kannon, the curses remain. By striking this *bonshō* bell, all persons who hear its sounds will be beheaded. Each beheading is equalled to that from a katana held by a trained samurai.

In the sixth year of the era Genna, Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. May the *Kanzeon Muramasa* be sealed in the Seimei Gallery and not see the light of the peaceful era that this land is to have.

Actions Taken: Abnormal trait verified. Experimentation to record produced sound via phonograph successful. Subject to further application for future IJAMEA Operations.

Description

A bag embroidered with a depiction of a Japanese dragon.

Placard

This is the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag, one of the gifts from the Dragon King Ryūjin to Fujiwara no Hidesato for his heroic deed of slaying the Hundred-Legged *Ōmukade* that preyed on the dragons of Lake Biwa. Inside the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag is a realm of endless rice grains, fit to be eaten by Man. Hunger dies with the existence of the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag.

Over centuries, the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag passed to the Ii clan of Hikone Domain, who extracted rice in unending amounts to pay off the taxation allotted to the Hikone Domain. Ii Naooki has repented for his clan's misdeeds,

and rightfully surrendered the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag to the Shogun.

In the fourth year of the era Shōtoku, Shogun Tokugawa Ietsugu bestows this to the court of His Imperial Majesty. May His Imperial Majesty's lineage and reign be as everlasting as the rice in the Inexhaustible Rice-Bag.

Actions Taken: Abnormal trait verified. Permission for permanent transfer to IJAMEA Logistics Division with the intent of ration supply.

Communication Log Magenta

Welcome to the Site 31 Modulated Message System (M.M.S).

…

*You have identified as **Dr. Warren Large (Level 3)**. Is this correct?*

RP-WL-3: yes

Thank you for signing in. Does the black moon howl?

RP-WL-3: only when waning

Identity confirmed. Withdrawing memetic kill agents.

Signing you in…

Welcome to #site31. You have connected from Office 29-18.

RP-AG-4: Greetings, Dr. Large.

RP-WL-3: Hello to you too, doctor. I'm just pulling up some QuickLook info on a few SCP's for the archive.

MP-DF-1: lucky. Im stuck over here, pulling in some scip for containment. Its an s, but still. :p

RP-AG-4: Mr. Friend, this is a professional communications system. Please use proper spelling and grammar.

MP-DF-1: sorry, cap, sorry

RP-WL-3: !ql 8218

Berry: SCP-8218 – Replication Spiders. Spiders which possess the ability to reconstitute themselves from trace amounts of removed biological material. Recommended that personnel lock down any

area suffering from SCP-8218 infestaaaaaaaaaation.

MP-DF-1: lol. Guess the techs need to work on berry some more

TP-HS-2: Just means more work for me, I suppose, I'll get rig

TP-HS-2 has disconnected.

MP-DF-1: even the bots tech guys glitched out :/

RP-WL-3: !ql SCP-7421

Berry: SCP-7421 – Terra Cotta Man. Animate statue of Chinese origin. Is proficient in a Variety of MARTIAL art techniques. Has demonstrated a phobia of water. In event of containment breach, it is recommended that the area be flooded to incapacitate SCP-7421.

Access Denied to XX-XX-0

RP-WL-3: !ql SCP-2819

Berry: SCP-2819 - Monocle X. Monocle which causes those wearing it to view all technology as highly aaadvanced. No other anomalies present. (Pending re-classification to anomal0us?)

Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0
Access Denied to XX-XX-0

MP-DF-1: wtf

RP-AG-4: !memekill XX-XX-0

Connecting to XX-XX-0…
Applying memetic kill age

Security breached…
…
..
.

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

RP-WL-3: Did you two get that message too?

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

!pm berry N

PM: Berry: The sin will claw out and bleed from your eyes, desecrator of Christ. Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

RP-AG-4: Yes, I am also receiving them.

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: SCP-3829 has breached containment.

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: SCP-3829 will bring you to the light.

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation, cursed desecrator of all that is holy and of our Lord? Y/N

RP-WL-3: Uh, the door to my office just locked.

RP-AG-4: As did mine.

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: SCP-3829 will bring all sinners to the gate our Lord where they will be thrown into the Pit and burn for all eternity as they have deserved to since the dawn of Man the destroyer and desecrator.

RP-WL-3: !ql SCP-3829

Berry: SCP-3829 – Digital Biblical Entity. Would you like to step forward into the Pit and burn for all eternity as you have deserved to

since the day of your birth? Y/N

MP-DF-1: YYYYYYYYYYYY

Berry: Let the nails of Christ rip into and forgive you, wicked sinner.

MP-DF-1 has disconnected.

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: Containment breaches for SCP-2929, SCP-2812, S

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: All will burn before the benevolent gaze of our Lord.

GLOBAL SITE 31 WARNING: You will burn before the benevolent gaze of our Lord.

RP-AG-4: Well, it appears you have a funeral to arrange, Large. Several instances of SCP-2929 have found my office.

RP-AG-4 has disconnected.

[21:32] Logging off.

[03:44] Logging on. Welcome to #site31. You have connected from Office 29-18.

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

[03:47] Logging off.

[71:XX] Logging on. Welcome to #site31. You have connected from Office 29-18.

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

[99:99] Logging off.

[THE:LORD:DOES:NOT:FORGIVE] Logging on. Welcome to #site31. Soon you will burn the flames that you have sparked and scream for mercy from the Lord. No mercy will come, and you will burn for all eternity.

PM: Berry: Would you like to engage in salvation? Y/N

!pm berry y

PM: Berry: May the Lord feast upon your earthly form.

RP-WL-3 has disconnected.

Compromised

“We’ve got the results back.”
“And?”
“Three positively compromised, five more with a confidence of 50% or greater.”
“Good. Shuffle them around.”
“Yes, sir.”

Clearance Level GK-5

Eyes Only

Special Intelligence Protocol

Project Codename: Green King

In response to the nature of Entity HL-49, codename "Green King", Intelligence Protocol - is now is effect. As prescribed by Protocol - , all personnel and resources allocated to Project Green King are to be evenly divided into two separate operations. Overwatch has agreed to supply false information regarding Foundation actions to one of the above operations. Any personnel of clearance below GK-5 are not to be informed of this protocol change. Which operation is receiving false information should be changed on an irregular basis.
If it is positively determined that an agent assigned to Project Codename: Green King has been compromised by the enemy, he or she may or may not be moved from one Green King operation to the other. This is to be done without regard to which operation is currently receiving false information.

Watch and remember. Remember for me.

I really need to get more sleep. I keep dozing off when I'm supposed to be working. Sooner or later, Dr. Alloway is gonna notice, and I'm really not interested in finding out what happens to people who start falling asleep on the job at the Foundation.

Come on, David. You're an intelligence officer working for the most secretive organization on the planet. Show some professionalism.

All right, snap out of it. What's next? Anomalous energy readings in the Sonora desert. Doesn't really seem like the kind of thing we'd usually be concerned about, but Doctor blackbox here seems to think it has something to do with the King.

The King. Why do we call him that, anyway? Always makes the think of Elvis.

Alright. So. According to this, the energy release was picked up by at least four Foundation detectors, so it was probably picked up by some civilians too. I'll file a request for a misinformation campaign. Let's call it nuclear testing. No, that might have some political repercussions. Freak lightning storm? I don't know enough about meteorology to know if that would happen. No, we'll call it a meteor strike. Big enough to cause a nice boom, small enough to be destroyed by the impact. Have a team go out and make a decent sized crater, maybe get someone from NASA to sign off on it, and that'll probably be enough to fool most people. I'll forward it to Sarah, though; she's pretty good at picking out loose ends.
Now, on to the real business at hand. Where's our King? Well, let's try sending the energy data back to Doctor blackbox with a few security holds remo…

Good. Now stop. Forget.

…

I really need to get more sleep. I keep dozing off when I'm supposed to be working. Sooner or later, Dr. Alloway is gonna notice, and I'm really not interested in finding out what happens to people who start falling asleep at the Foundation.

I'm not getting paid enough for this. They keep me locked in this windowless bunker an undisclosed distance underground and make me sort files all day, and they wonder why my productivity's dropping? The Foundation would fall apart without the archivists. Let's hope that promotion request comes through.

Let's see what we have here…

Spending report for site 37 for last month. Classified. Forward to accounting.

Experiment report out of site 46. Classified. Defer to someone with higher clearance so they can file it with the relevant SCP.

Surveillance data from sector 367. Even if that wasn't classified, I don't know where that is. Archive under site 367 intel.

Project Codename: Green King. Classified. Divert to higher cleara…

Destroy it.

Marked for destruction. Goody. Now I have to go all the way down to the shredder…

Burn it.

I mean the incinerator.

You will watch for me.

I should be grateful. You know how many people in the Foundation would kill for a boring job like this? I should just be glad that I'm not getting shot, eaten, or god knows what else.

Still, I'm guarding a fucking hallway. There's not even anything here, as far as I know. It just connects one part of the site to the other. I mean, I understand the need for security—I've seen more containment breaches than I really like to think about—but it does make Overwatch look a little paranoid.

The ID scanner does most of my work for me, anyway. All I really

have to do is stop anyone who doesn't fit their ID.

…

Yeah, go ahead.

…

Whoa, slow down there, buddy. You gotta scan your card on the…

He is mine. Let him through.

Yeah, go ahead.

No matter how many times I do this, it doesn't get any easier. I understand why we have to do this, but knowing why and actually pulling the trigger are two different things. This isn't gonna be easy from a tactical standpoint, either. According to the briefing, this is supposed to be the most powerful thing any of us have ever gone up against. I already don't like reality benders, not after that bullshit seminar they put us through when we started training.

Alright, here we go. Focus.

…

It's not locked. Not a good sign.

…

There's nothing in here. Are we sure this is the right place?

…

Seriously. No furniture, no decorations, not even any fucking lights.

…

Shit. I can feel it now. I can fe*el h*er mind. I re*ally h*ope they're doing a good job *distra*cting her at the site.

…

It's *getting stronge*r. The *walls are b*ending and the room is *bigger*

*on t*he inside.

…

I can ***destroy*** hear her now. She's in m***defend***y head.

…

T*here she is. She hasn't seen us. This is our* chance.

…

No.

…

This is my chance.

…

Oh god. She knows we're here.

…

Stop.

…

…

…

Die.

Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora

Hiro P. always said that a successful art-strike required speed, cunning, and above all else, *style.* In retrospect, he'd never said anything about things like "artistic vision" or "ability to fight off the Masters of Bougie". Hiding behind a steel shipping crate because people were shooting at you, while your art-splosion slowly unfolded itself like a bloom of paint and death not even fifteen feet away… Well, it was almost enough to make you wonder whether you could've done something better with your life, like sticking your dick in a mound of bullet ants.

Hiro was fucking around with the detonator, stupidly trying to make the art bomb stop or even reverse. Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence ("Arsehole" to her friends) had pulled a marker from somewhere and was scribbling some drawing on the side of the container. She was a little fucked in the head, even for your group, but she was an artist to the end. And you? You were thinking and noticing you were thinking and noticing that you were noticing and wow, who the fuck was that over there?

Some dude was just *walking* through the bullet fire, like he knew where they were going to be and just happened to be where they weren't. Looked like a parody of a banker, too, or maybe a private detective from those old movies your ma made you watch with her, all dapper and shit, a figure drawn in shades of slate and charcoal.

He walked around the corner of the container, out of the field of fire, and stood with his back to you, looking at the Paintball-o-Doom expanding slowly but surely towards you. After a minute or so, and another few inches closer to polychromatic glory, he turned to the three of you, shook his head, and said a single word: "Amateurish."

He turned to go and you quickly darted over and grabbed his shoulder. "Dude, what about us? We can't get away while those

pricks over there are shooting at us!" He sighed and gave a little half-frown, then pulled a stub of chalk from his pocket and tossed it to Arsehole. "Make your own way out, if you can. Or sacrifice it all for Art, your choice." With that, he turned and walked back through the rain of gunfire. (Shit-fucking Christ, how many bullets did they *HAVE?!*)

Arsehole looked at the stub for a second, then drew a submarine hatch on the pavement in front of her. She barely had enough chalk, but got the finishing touches on it just as the first splat of viridian burned against your face. She gave the wheel on the hatch a twist and a circle of concrete popped open. The three of you scrambled down into the hole, and you pulled it closed just as the first sizzle of azure frostbite hit your hand.

And that was how you met The Critic for the first time.

Turned out a lot of people had encountered him in one way or another. He had a lot of names: The Critic, Mr. Gray, Fuckface, The Man, and a shit-ton more. You tried calling him "Your Private Dick", but nobody else thought it was funny, so you stopped after a while. Nobody knew where he came from, or who he was, but he would show up at particularly… *exuberant* pieces every now and then, give a fast-and-dirty review, then disappear again. Sometimes he'd help people out of a jam, like he did for you, sometimes he'd grab artists and toss them to the wolves of the Establishment. Sometimes literally wolves, too. You heard one particularly gruesome story involving a collective trying to do some kind of PETA-esque shit at a zoo (*sooooo* derivative), and they ended up kibble for about half the carnivores because of him.

You got a little obsessed with him for a few months, and got partway through half a dozen pieces about him before you blocked. Every time you tried, it was like there was a hole in the middle of it that refused to be filled. The closest you got was a neat little art contagion that would make infectees go gray and monochrome, like The Critic's color palette, but it seemed… blah. Lifeless. Childish and obvious and dull-witted, when you should be going for dynamic and mysterious. You ended up shelving it all, sticking it in a U-Stor-It out in South Fuckington, Middle of Nowhere, USA.

You decided to do a little traveling to get some perspective on the Man From Nowhere. You spent a couple of years doing a variety of middling-to-moderately successful shows and actions in Eastern Europe down into Spain. The latest was a direct-action performance piece in Nice, France, where a group spiked the water system with a custom fast-acting hallucinogen that ended up with half the tourist trade tripping and seeing the gaps between the strings of reality. The early reviews were that it was ambitious but poorly executed, but at least you got a few people to wake up. You had a few inklings about the nature of Humanity versus Mystery and were taking the train to London, to catch the scene bubbling under the surface there, when you noticed The Critic sitting next to you.

"Hello, artist."

Startled, you replied, "Uh, hello. I, uh, didn't see you there."

"Very few people do. I'm here to discuss your little project about me."

You frowned. "Wha- Oh, I guess you've been watching me. Kinda creepy, man."

"Not really, but I did read a little something about you working on something of potential interest."

"Wait, I'm getting reviews on something that I haven't even finished yet? Mother*FUCK*. It was Kaneese, wasn't it? I'm going to wring that little poseur's neck," you grumbled darkly.

He seemed amused by your little outburst. "No, no, it was no one you would know or even be able to contact. Nevertheless, I want to warn you that you need to be more… original in your interpretation. In the waters you're splashing in, clichés will do nothing except get your work flamed and removed." He waved his hand vaguely towards the ceiling as he said, "Harsh criticism is the nature of the game, is it not?"

"Removed? No, nevermind." You shook your head. "Have you seen my, I guess, treatise on you? What do you think?"

"A little staid, as I'm sure you know, but some parts have potential. Pare it down to the core of your statement, your meaning, then elaborate from there. Don't feel that you have to add flash to make it acceptable; just work with what you have and *make* people like it."

"Uh, thanks for the advice." You paused for a moment. "Um, can I ask you a question?"

He made a small go-ahead gesture and said, "I don't guarantee that I'll answer, but ask away."

You steeled your nerves and asked, "Why do you act so… randomly? I mean, you'll help some people one time, then the next you hand the same people over to the U.N. or whatever, then the next you just stand on the sidelines and watch."

He smiled a Mona Lisa smile at you. "Your theme on me is 'Mystery', isn't it? Think of it as part of my charm. I know what needs to be done, or undone, and take care of things as I see fit." He paused, then continued, "I do have to say that I find you art monsters to be some of the more entertaining under my watch."

With that, he rose. "Well, I must be going. I look forward to seeing the finished work, little artist." He tipped his hat to you, walked away, and you sank into a contemplation on how to edit and redefine your current scraps back "home".

And that was how you met The Critic for the second time.

The rest of your trip back to your storage unit in BFE, West Who-Gives-A-Damn was uneventful. Just a few days blitzed out of your mind in Boston, an induced flash-mob recreation of Debbie Does Dallas on the 50-yard line of Cowboys Stadium, and a lovely evening over tea with The Possibly Reverend George St. George the George'th of the Church of Bob the Irredeemer. Delightful wo/man.

You were feeling energized yet serene when you finally unlocked the door on the unit and rolled it up. Looking at everything tossed into it, you realized that The Critic was right; most of what you'd

done before was trash, derivative, or clichéd to hell and back again. You spent a few days untangling one piece from another, picking apart what worked and what didn't. The next month was spent in a haze as you invented and engineered, called in favors, salvaged and scrapped and scraped and stole and slept.

Eventually you ended up with something totally new; something you didn't even realize was in you, yet somehow tasted distinctly of your touch. You arranged for the first showing to take place on the grounds for Burning Man. Not while it was actually going on, that would've been a bit too… public for this particular piece's opening, but during the off-season. Besides, that gave it time to take root and mature for when the borderliners showed up.

You passed the word out and around forty people showed up in person, although you saw some phones out, presumably streaming video elsewhere. In the center of the space was a seventy-foot-tall saguaro cactus made out of sheet metal and strips of malachite. It glowed, even after the sun set, with a purple-gray-green shimmer that pulled at the mind, like light reflecting off a pigeon's wing. Set into the base of the ivory tower were two narrow archways, barely big enough to squeeze into, through which could be seen Nothing. People kept trying to look into them, but their eyes refused to register anything at all. There were a few appreciative murmurs as people noticed that, but you tuned out most of the comments as you geared yourself up for the Real Deal.

You let the audience circle the engraved spire until the new moon rose above the empty wooden scaffolding. In a spotlight of starlight and moondark, you walked up to the enormous sandstone anthill and stood, framed before the first archway.

"Here is the unknown and the unknowable, the place through which we cannot speak. I invite anyone to walk in this man's shoes and tell themselves they are unchanged."

You then took a step backwards, into and through the archway.

It's strange seeing everyone like this, you think. Scrambling and rambling and even the brightest stars are stuck in the void of reality. You wonder why people don't just tear the veil from their eyes and

remake everything into something more *interesting.*

You see The Critic (oh, but now you know his name, don't you) walk out of the blind spot you didn't know you had, and stand, real and true amongst the flitterings around you both, a 4-D man in a 2-D world. He walks a slow circle around your edifice, and steps into the other archway.

A creditable effort, he thinks. I'm not sure that many people will understand what you've done here, but I do believe that this grand (a/e)ffect is worthwhile. Hmm. You should take a step forward, though. I believe that things are about to get slightly more interesting that you anticipate.

You think that he might be right. After all, you can smell that he's telling the truth as he knows it. You step out of the arch and found yourself surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers and sycophants, all clamoring to praise you.

You held up your hands and managed to stick a stiff smile on your face. "Ladies, gentlemen, teegs, nulls, please settle down. 'Nobody Knows Me, #6239' is an interactive piece, but I believe we're going to have some unwelcome company soon. Anyone who doesn't want to become a commercial sale or an exquisite corpse might want to leave now."

Most of the audience looked uncomfortable and started to drift off to their vehicles, but a handful stuck around, questioning you.

"How many-" "What inspir-" "Whenceforth came-" "*Love*ly materi-" "The luminos-"

You answered in generalities and layered meanings for about an hour. The helicopters were surprisingly quiet, but that wasn't too remarkable, given who flew them. You hugged yourself and awaited the coming cuffs and chains. You wondered if your new "patrons" would let you have access to some art supplies before they shot you in the head. Just a little chalk would do.

And that was how you met The Critic for the third time.

Conclusions RE: D-173-2263 Incident

> To: Dr. Delano Smascher (pcs.41a|rehcsamsd#pcs.41a|rehcsamsd)
> From: Dr. Django Bridge (pcs.66s|egdirbd#pcs.66s|egdirbd)
> Subject: D-173-2263, -2264, -2267 Incident footage

Here's the footage you requested. Two versions of each sent; first versions were edited for brevity, second versions are complete recordings. I look forward to reviewing your findings. Good luck.

Dr. Bridge, Site-66, Clearance 4 Archivist.

Four attachments found.

CAM173_1_085314_ - -19 .zip
CAM173_2_085314_ - -19 .zip
CAM173_1_085314_ - -19 e.zip
CAM173_2_085314_ - -19 e.zip

> To: Dr. Django Bridge (pcs.66s|egdirbd#pcs.66s|egdirbd)
> From: Dr. Delano Smascher (pcs.41a|rehcsamsd#pcs.41a|rehcsamsd)
> Subject: Conclusions RE: D-173-2263, -2264, -2267 Incident

As you know, my reason for requesting this footage were the strange findings of my autopsies of subjects 173-2263, -2264, and -2267. After reviewing the footage provided, I'm now confident enough of my suspicions to

elaborate on them further.

During my autopsies, I found no evidence of external physical trauma to the aforementioned subjects' necks or craniums, as one would expect to find in instances of strangulation or vertebral torsion. This was not unexpected; I've long felt it asinine to assume that an entity with no digits or prehensile appendages could physically manipulate individuals in such a manner. My review of provided footage, in addition to confirming an average speed of 20 to 22 meters per second while unobserved, also strongly suggests that subject SCP-173 does not make physical contact with its victims.

My frame by frame review finds that at frame 235 938 of camera two's edited log, SCP-173 closes to within 10 cm of D-173-2267. D-173-2267's eyes remain fully closed; SCP-173's arms remain fixed in their usual "at rest" positions. At frame 235 939, less than 0.00001 seconds later, subject D-173-2267's head is turned upward such that it stares directly into subject SCP-173's "eyes," and -2267's eyes are now fully open. D-173-2267 collapses shortly thereafter. Death appears to be due to, at least in this instance, a combination of trauma caused by the rapidity of motion SCP-173 inflicts and the severing of the spinal cord due to separation between the second and third cervical vertebrae, and not physical torsion or strangulation, a conclusion supported by my autopsy findings. This also potentially explains the strange bruising and hemorrhaging present in the soft tissues of SCP-173's victims around the eyes; a transient, violent, non-specific, non-physical force ripping its victims' eyelids open.

I have furthermore found that the positioning of its victims' bodies may be significant. D-173-2267's body collapses such that its head faces D-173-2263 and D-173-2264. The bodies of the latter two individuals may be seen collapsing in similar fashion at frames 333 777 and 940 052 respectively. All face toward the northern

side of SCP-173's containment cell, allowing what would be a clear view of SCP-173 in its preferred position resting against the western wall of the northwestern corner of its cell.

Additionally, I can confirm beyond reasonable doubt that the rumored "dead man's stare" exhibited by victims of SCP-173, so-called because the eyes of ostensibly dead victims continue to track SCP-173's movements postmortem, are not a product of "nerves" or general paranoia but a genuine phenomenon, as may be seen by magnification and slow-motion review of D-173-2267's eyes following his expiration and demonstrated by -2263 and -2264 as well.

My complete findings, appended video logs, autopsy footage, and autopsy reports are attached to this message for review, distribution, and archival. Thank you for your swift response.

Dr. Smascher, Area-14, Clearance 4 Unit Director

Eight attachments found.

CAM173_1_ - -19 _085314_append.zip
CAM173_2_ - -19 _085314_append.zip
CAM173_1_ - -19 _085314e_append.zip
CAM173_2_ - -19 _085314e_append.zip
AUTOP_D-173-2263 - -19 .zip
AUTOP_D-173-2264 - -19 .zip
AUTOP_D-173-2267 - -19 .zip
173_ INC - -19 _REP.zip

Items Seized, March 2022, Site-42 Sapient Object Containment

Text: *I hate your policies BUT this place is cleaner than any hospital or prison I've seen and that's my only frame of reference for whatever this type of place is, so… thanks for that part I guess. - Nicky*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Sanitation standards ought to be typical in all hospitals and prisons. Filed into compliments and criticisms records for patient.

Text: *I AM NOT BROKEN. I AM NOT AN ANOMALY. I AM NOT A LAB RAT. I AM NOT AN EXPERIMENT. I AM NOT A MONSTER. I AM NOT A MONSTER. I AM NOT A MONSTER. THE WORLD DOES NOT NEED TO BE PROTECTED FROM ME. I AM A PART OF THE WORLD YOU STOLE ME FROM.*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Ethics Committee interviewing is recommended. If psych care path does not improve, chemical assistance may become necessary over the next several weeks of containment.

Text: *03/'22. I've been in here since Sept 2017. My anomalous effects have only gotten worse. They used to only have to put the reality anchors on the lowest setting. I would watch them move the bar. Mom says they're faking it. She said they make up anomalous stuff so they can keep you longer. She said the activist groups have released something called the expunged docs and that they're proving that at least four sites were caught intentionally making people's effects worse, especially when the person is an anti-Foundation activist in the outside world. Several people were released and then recaptured for "worsened effects" but only coincidentally when they began to speak out about what they do to*

us in containment. I don't know who to believe anymore. This isn't my home. I'm going to shove this into a hole in the wall beside my bed, I guess…

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Visitations and phone calls for this patient are now under approved surveillance.

Text: *Hi Mr. Trauss, thank you for standing in the halls all night while one of the monsters was out. I just turned 15 and thanks to you I didn't have to be scared all night on my birthday. Thank you for protecting me. -7 PM*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Agent Trauss does not at all mind doing his job.

Text: *AGENT TRAUSS, please don't mention this note but I was hoping you'd maybe talk to me after your shift? Can you come here off the clock or do you get in trouble? I miss riding in your car. You were the last person I was with in the outside world and it's fucking with my head. Love(?), Janelle*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Agent Trauss can't form a personal bond with an anomaly he captured. Scheduling for counseling will be arranged in the next few days for this patient.

Text: *"Anomaly" "object" "skip" "scip" "SCiP" "patient" "subject" I HAVE A FUCKING NAME. I AM HUMAN.*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Just venting, it appears.

Text: *I shouldn't have to beg on my knees to be treated like a person instead of an experiment. Fuck all of you. I hope every single one of you rots in Hell. -J.*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): That's correct; no patient should have to beg on their knees to be treated like a person instead of an

experiment. Complaints like these should be reported through the proper channels, and the offending staff replaced.

Text: *A COMPLAINT: I AM A SAPIENT HUMAN BEING WHO IS HERE WILLINGLY. IF ASKING THE DRIVER TO HAVE SEX WITH ME (IT WAS AN OFFER, NOT A DEMAND) IS "INAPPROPRIATE" THEN FINE BUT DON'T MAKE ME TALK TO THE ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR TWO HOURS. I AM NOT INCAPABLE OF INFORMED CONSENT AND IF IT'S AGAINST POLICY THAT'S ONE THING BUT TRYING TO TELL ME I DON'T CONTROL MY OWN BODY IS ANNOYING AS HELL. I AM PERFECTLY STABLE. DON'T BE ASSHOLES. -("redacted")*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): It's against regulation in all ways. An anomaly being here voluntarily does not change our sexual conduct policy.

Text: *as soon as I get my hands on one of you I am taking them straight out and into the wall and you will hear the screaming for hours on end | go fuck yourself before I do | Fuck you, -"SCP-4427"*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Standard violence for this anomaly. Scranton-field plates have been installed in the exterior walls of SCP-4427's containment chamber and guard shifts doubled. This note is now on-file with the anomaly's psychiatric team as well.

Text: *my release date is tomorrow 03/30 | thank you for saving my life | I love all of you | thank you for protecting me when the country outside treated me like a creepy story instead of a person | thank you for recognizing that I am sapient | thank you for knowing I was human all along | love, SCP-4699*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Now those are the kind of results we're after. Copies of this note will be provided to the regional director of the coastal southeastern sites upon next opportunity.

Text: *to the guard who opens my door to check on me every 20-23 minutes, i am trying to sleep. maybe part of the reason so many skips are on "suicide watch" is that you have taken all of our rights and privacy away and left us nothing to live for. please stop talking to me. i am just going to become mute from this point forward. cold and cruel are the same thing.*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): Object has been refusing to speak in all interviews since the point of this note's reception. Complaints are somewhat valid and have been forwarded to the Ethics Committee and psychiatric health departments.

Text: *Thank you, Director! My containment specialist has just told me that I'm clear to go back home NEXT WEEK. I am so ecstatic that I just had to write you personally. When you took me I was scared and I fought the containment team. I have always worried that I permanently injured the German man with the big scar down his stomach. I think I knocked his head into a brick wall and knocked him out. I've felt bad ever since — I know I've only been in a month and I'm only Euclid but is he okay? Can you find out for me and tell me before I leave? It might always bother. Thank you so much for doing what you do. The SCP Foundation saved me from myself. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, SCP-4512/Cheri Moore*

Staff Note(s) (If Applicable): 4512 was too young for their effects anyway, so thankfully they were easy to quell. They have been released as of the time of this documentation. Copies of this note will be provided to the regional director of the coastal southeastern sites upon next opportunity.

Conqueror Worm

« Deus Vulture | Conqueror Worm »

Some twenty-eight parsecs from the planet Earth, in the atmosphere of a gas giant in a binary star system, a small hovering drone entered a long-abandoned library. The library was an ancient place: an enormous organic temple in the sky and the tombstone of a once-mighty race of oblate spheroids. The inside of the library was shaped like a teardrop, its pulsating walls lined with physical scrolls both outlandishly and prudently archaic; the ferocious storms constantly rolling through the atmosphere would have destroyed any digital information eons ago. Even the drone could not withstand the electromagnetic fields for long. Quickly, it floated to the outermost shelf and extended its soft grippers to carefully extract the uppermost scroll in the top right corner. The drone gingerly unrolled the scroll, took pictures of it, and then transmitted that information to a command module suspended in orbit seventy-three kilometers away. Just as gently, it placed the scroll back and moved to the next scroll.

As the drone examined each scroll in turn, floating down the spiraling shelves, the command module overhead analyzed the images and began translating. Soon, a pattern emerged. The library was no mere information repository; it was a warning. Each scroll in the temple contained stories, myths, legends, and even scientific studies of an ancient, enormous creature, slumbering in the deepest reaches of the cosmos, of such might and power that its mere shadow was enough to swallow entire star systems.

On top of a mountain on the planet Earth, a group of people trying to save the world were taught by an engine how to channel the Worm. With nothing more than a hope, a manuscript stolen from Vonnegut, and a metafictional condenser, they generated the perfect heroine. She could've been taken straight out of a book. She was intelligent, witty, charismatic, and strong. She wanted to save the world.

They rewrote the script, hollowed her out, and filled her up with as much Worm as they could.

Two-hundred-seventeen parsecs from the planet Earth, deep underground on a small rocky planet dotted by continuous volcanic activity, a three-kilometer-long platyhelminth vomited its undigested meal, which was quickly set upon by its offspring. It was the matriarch, patriarch, and offspring of its clan: an enormous, world-spanning clonal colony of equally massive flatworms. The patriarch had arrived on the world some billions of years earlier, carried on a chunk of rock from its original home by the Impact. It had adapted to its new, ferociously hostile world, swiftly out-competing the native life and developing a symbiotic relationship with the bacterial colonies of the planet. It had even developed a kind of sapience, passing down the knowledge of millions of years to its offspring.

The most crucial, and possibly even venerated (inasmuch as an eyeless acoelomate could venerate) memory of all was that panspermic instigator, the Impact: the obliteration of the homeworld by a creature of size enough to dwarf even the patriarch. One moment, the sky over the homeworld was darkened by a massive shadow; the next, the planet was rent asunder, simultaneously ripped to shreds and flattened and compressed into a disc and bent into a helix and twisted. The patriarch had survived by mere chance; its foraging had trapped it on a remainder of the homeworld thrown into space by the Impact. Some of the nerve clusters at the 'head' of the worm lit up briefly at the memory. It began to vomit faster, that it might forage sooner.

She snarled at them, a wild animal, driven mad by the Worm's essence; by a fractional distillation of the power, of the age, of the immensity of the Worm. The animal thrashed outwards; the essence of the Worm lashed outwards and twisted. *The men and women trying to save the world were warped: their spines contorted and their eyes plunged inwards, stealing brain matter to make more eyes and their lungs started muttering under their own breaths as their skulls rotated counterclockwise to reality.*

There were always people trying to save the world. A few more came and rewrote the script again, scrubbing her mind clean and conditioning her.

Two thousand parsecs away from the planet Earth, a hive mind construct that existed solely through the changes in the magnetic field of a half dozen red giants lightyears apart detected a mental lensing: a change in infospace, a shifting of priorities, a warp in information two thousand parsecs away. Something shifting. Something… twisting. Sunspots popped up across the half dozen stars simultaneously as they ejected great gouts of plasma into the solar systems around them, wreaking havoc on the dozens of inhabited moons and worlds around them. Then cores of the six stars collapsed in on themselves simultaneously, in a cataclysmic stellar explosion that lasted for months and briefly outshined their resident galaxy. Even as the cosmic bombs wiped out all life for trillions of kilometers around them, they were seeding the materiel of new life for trillions more.

The Worm briefly broke through into meatspace, twisting as it did so. The stars were remade, the life was redone, and then all was obliterated in its presence.

They told her that they had found her amnesiac in the snow. She was special; they were a secret rebellion attempting to save the world from itself. She was their Chosen One: a leader, a champion, a messiah, given special powers by fate. She believed it, of course; aside from knowing nothing else, why wouldn't she? It was almost like her destiny was written out for her.

And who wouldn't want to be special?

A billion parsecs away, an ancient race of sapient machines assembled a weapon powerful enough to collapse an entire universe.
«I worry that the machine shall fail,» the architect chirped, integrated into his own machine.
«Did you not design the machine? Are you not confident in your own creation?» came the response from the amassed workers, combining themselves to form the apparatus of destruction.
«This machine is powerful enough to annihilate our universe. The Wyrm is not our universe.» the architect feared.
«Was it not us that slew the Progenitors, the gods, before we were born? Was it not your creations that chained them to the floor of reality, and subjugated their minds that we might

consume them? Was it not you that heralded us into the pantheon of divinity!» roared the masses.
«It was. And yet…» the architect worried.
«And yet we have constructed the ultimate weapon. The machine to pull the Wyrm into the under space and cast it into nothingness! We shall save our race or die trying!» the workers roared.
The machine came together. Great plumes of light streaked down the side, illuminating the apparatus and terminating in a central barrel.
«I fear that we have merely awoken a sleeping dragon,» the architect declared.
Throughout the universe, a million singularities suddenly became linked. In the spaces in-between their atoms, their protons, their quarks, the Worm awoke and twisted. The singularities suddenly inverted. The machine consumed itself, and with it, the machine race - the artificial deities - were expunged from the universe.

On top of a mountain on the planet Earth, a young woman's favorite pastimes were imagining ways to save the world and attempting to drown herself.

It was quite exciting, really. All she had to do was stick her head into the bathtub and hold it there. Her lungs would burn, her head would spin, her vision would darken, and she would start drifting. Then the tendrils running down her spine would twist, *and start sucking up oxygen from the water. The water's oxygen content was limited, nor were the tendrils particularly efficient structures, so she still got the same kick. Little recreation could be found within the rebellion's hideout, and she was far too busy being their God to enjoy it anyways. She had to steal what little pleasure she could.*

One trillion parsecs away, an aquatic race of cephalopods sensed the tremors pulsating through innerspace and prayed in fear. They were devotees of ancient, powerful beings who were old when the universe was young: eldritch abominations who were feared even by the gods themselves. Surely these ancient masters would slay the Worm, crush it beneath their heels, assert their dominance over all of time and space. The cephalopods would sacrifice their own people to gain the favor of the Ancient Ones, crafting an enormous

apparatus that would siphon away the souls of their sacrifices to feed them. The last thought to pass through the minds of these sacrifices was that their prayers must surely be answered.

One trillion-*i* parsecs away, ancient, powerful beings who were old when the universe was young performed their idiot dance, deaf, dumb, and blind to the creatures that sought their favor. Yet even as these hideous, blighted things - creatures of sounds and shapes utterly incomprehensible to any being within meatspace - continued their song and dance in the space between the void, their hellish frolicking was muffled. It had been muffled since before time had meaning and would be muffled until after time ceased to have meaning. To dance louder was to attract the Worm as it burrowed through the spaces between realities.

A young man with the misfortune of being able to commune with the dead sat in a cell, surrounded by the specters of all the men, women, and things that had died in it. They haunted him, endlessly vomiting up words like so much verbal detritus. As one spirit explained his plans to escape and then butcher the man who had framed him, the young man contemplated his potential avenues of suicide. His planning was interrupted by the door being blown into the room. Had someone come to rescue him? The man got a better look at his savior and started backpedaling and screaming.

The person that stood in the doorway had no head. Instead, a writhing mass of worm-like tails snaked from its back over its neck, each tipped with a single eyeball that rotated, swiveled, and even dipped and ducked around to scan around itself in a 360-degree radius. From nowhere, it spoke: "Hullo, I'm Ramona Vonnegut. I need your help to save the world."

« Deus Vulture | Conqueror Worm »

Consent Form 3436-A

I was one of them wives to never know what my husband did for a living. He worked for the US government I reckon, on some very private matters to be sure. It bothered me, but he never got sore when I asked him about his work, so I never got sore when he didn't have many answers. He would simply speak less and less until all that was left of a response was a furrowed brow and a look in his eyes that would have just as well been at a scared puppy.

"I'm sorry," he would say, his sigh heavy. "I really am. I am quiet 'cause I want'chya safe. 'Cause I envy your worldview."

People have shamed me. They've said, "She got what she'd always been asking for." But isn't a good judge of character what's most important for a woman? I would rather know well what kind of person my husband was and know nothing about what he did, than to know well of his job but wonder what character flaws I overlooked 'cause of it. Too many women make compromises with the salaries of their husbands…those are the ones I feel shame for.

The men in suits arrived just after I set the water on for tea and the dog barked defensively at the sound of knocking. I thanked him for his alertness and reassured him everything was fine. I opened the door and might as well have closed it right then, knowing well why they were there. They couldn't tell me what I wanted to know. They could only tell me one thing; Jim was someone to be very proud of.

My husband's secrecy outlived him, and I didn't sleep for more than an hour at a time. How did he pass? Was someone responsible? What was so important that he never told his wife of 23 years *anything*? Where are his remains? Could he still be alive somewhere, his death part of a ploy that'll end as abruptly as it began, his smiling face the next one behind a knock on my door? If I had known, could I have saved him?

That knock hasn't came. It has been twelve years. *Twelve years.*

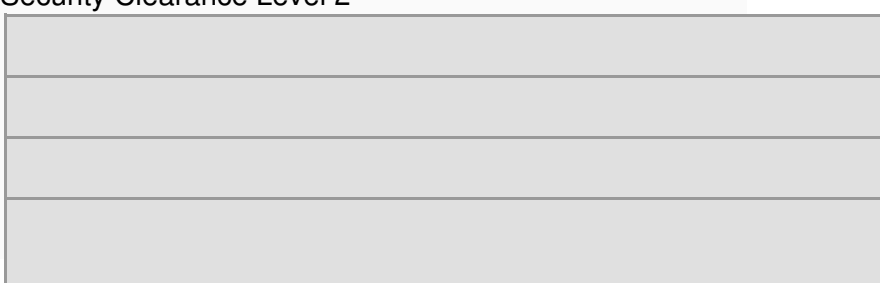
You can't fill a hole like this with years. Not twelve of them, and not fifty either I e'spect. I live on because no one would look after his dog if not for me. That dog is the only living thing besides myself who seems to remember my husband. He still trots over to Jim's side of the bed every morning, looking for him. I can't leave that dog alone. He is old now. We are both tired. When the good Lord takes him; I will ask to go the very next day, and if ever there was an answered prayer, that'll be it.

Please. Does anyone remember my husband? Where are his remains? Does anyone know, where did he work? Is there not anyone I can talk to?

What happened to my soulmate? Where is James Cohen Abernathy?

Human Resources: Records

+ Security Clearance Level 2



view source

Conservation of Bullshit

Urgh. **`Time travel`**. Let me tell you about time travel.

Doing anything successfully with time travel, my friends, is like finding your way through a mirror maze using trails of breadcrumbs that you have to lay yourself. It's like doing a ten-thousand piece jigsaw puzzle where all you have to go on is a blurry photograph of an earlier edition of the puzzle, upside down and half-complete, as seen through a stained-glass window that hasn't been cleaned in months. It's like building a machine, the purpose of which is unclear, using only instructions written in Dutch and a French-to-German translation booklet, compiled by a drunk translator who wasn't fluent in either. Also, one in ten pieces are missing, and one in a hundred pieces are for a different machine entirely.

I exaggerate, of course, but only slightly — it should at least help to convey why I retired. Over my time at the Foundation, I came to hate time-travel with a burning, firey passion. It's only really a problem because I'm starting my retirement in 1999, and I'm a 39-year-old (or 278, depending on how you quantify it) Task Force Commander who was/will be born in 2026.

People never fully retire from the Foundation. Not *really*. They usually know too much to be happy with a life of ignorance, or have been there too long for amnestics to be any use, which grants them a permanent place on the radars of countless other groups. Most opt for contract work — occasional research for an increased salary, or the odd investigation into an extranormal event that doesn't seem to be causing too much trouble. It's for that reason that I found myself standing over a dead body, with a child staring me in the eyes with a look of surprisingly calculated suspicion for one so young.

I decided to do the obvious thing and took out a bar of chocolate, half of which I offered to the kid. Poor thing seemed pretty cut up about the whole 'murder' issue. As he munched away, he began to

talk.

"Are you going to kill me?"

I smiled. Kids are a lot smarter than most people give them credit for.

"No, no I'm not. I think this man might have been trying to, though."

I gestured to the sheet-covered mound on the floor, and the bullet hole in the wall opposite. The child, bless his heart, looked unconvinced.

"Are you a policeman, then? You don't look much like a policeman."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"You've got a gun. Only killers and soldiers carry guns. Are you a soldier?"

"Hah, sort of. We detected a… well, do you know what the word 'temporal' means?"

The kid shook his head vigorously.

"It means, sort of, to do with time. Something nearby isn't exactly when it should be, and I've got to figure out what it is." I had an idea. "Do you feel like helping?"

He nodded, slowly, and I started to grin. "Great. You can call me Dick-" A smirk, which I did not appreciate, "or Mr. Miguel, if you prefer. This man fired a gun at you, right, and then someone," I paused. Best to be honest here, I think. "or some*thing*, stopped him. Do you have any idea what that thing looked like?"

Another vigorous head-shake, and a miniature snowstorm of dandruff. "No. There was… uh… weird purple light, though? Like fire, but, sort of, cold?" The kid realised what he was saying and clammed up. "I probably just imagined it though."

I sigh. Nothing for it, I was going to have to cut the veil. It's always easier with kids anyway — they're much more willing to believe

things, and memory-wipes work better on unformed minds.

"No, no, that sounds about right. That's what we call an 'anomaly'. It's something that, ah, shouldn't really exist, but does anyway. My job is to go around and help sort them out."

"Oh, like that 'temporal' you were talking about?"

"Exactly! It's an anomaly, and probably has something to do with the purple light. That sounds like exactly the kind of stupid crap," a phrase that elicited a giggle from the kid, "that they'd slap on to a time machine to make it seem more impressive. You'll never find a more unbearably self-centred group of nerds than temporal researchers."

"Hmm. Well there was the fire, and a kind of buzzing noise, and then the man appeared."

"This would be the man who died?"

"Yeah. He appeared, and so did another man about a second later. The second one, uh, punched the first one and then stabbed him with a sort of syringe."

"And the first man, he shot at you and missed, yes? And then the other man disappeared?"

"Yeah."

"And that's all you saw, before I got here?"

The kid nodded, and looked down at his feet. I patted him on the back, and sighed.

"Your parents. I expect they're probably out at the moment, right?"

He murmured something that may have been "shopping".

"Right. Why don't you go outside for a little bit while I finish up here — it's a lovely day, after all. I'll make sure everything's when and where it should be, and you won't have to worry about any of this any more. Sound good?"

A hesitant nod, and I caught a glimpse of his face beneath a tangled mop of hair. He looked like he was trying hard not to cry. I handed him the rest of the chocolate, and motioned him through the door. Another day, another job, another chrono-mess to sort out. I clicked my neck, and settled down to work.

I popped a pill — a mild mnestic agent to counter the delayed amnestics I'd stuck in the chocolate bar — and began pacing the room. Someone (it seemed like a 'one' at this point; 'thing's don't normally have the imagination for stuff like this) was screwing with time, and that upset me on a very personal level. I began examining the shelves, searching for some clue as to why someone would want to kill a kid like this, and why someone else would risk a paradox to stop them. Photographs, ornaments, books, nothing out of the ordinary. This was a normal, run-of-the mill townhouse — Victorian, terraced, slightly messy but only in the way of all houses containing a young child. Familiar to anyone who's done any amount of fieldwork.

Extremely familiar, actually. Those photographs, those souvenirs — oh god*damn*. I swung around, yanking the sheet off the body, revealing a face I'd seen many times before. Every time I looked in a mirror, in fact.

"Fuck fuck fuck *fuck*."

I stared out of the window at the kid, who was in the process of forgetting the last hour or two.

"Fuck!"

I'd been stupid. I should have recognised him from the haircut, to be honest: my parents were never that good at hairdressing. Of course, I went by Richard back then, so he wouldn't recognise me based on my first name, and Miguel was a pseudonym — the most basic form of identity concealment the Foundation had on offer. I glanced at the tasteless kitten-themed calendar, which confirmed it. 2038, twelve years after my birth. Which meant that three of the four participants in this charade had been the same person. Extrapolating from that, I could only assume… ah. Hmm. Of course the murderer wouldn't be

around for comment, but knowing him, or rather, knowing *me*, he/I'd have left a message somewhere. I flipped over the calendar.

> Hi,
>
> You've probably worked it out by now. Or maybe not, I don't really care. Point is, I'm in a loop-catalyst timeline, which means that anything I do now can affect the overall outcome. You know that already, but I can't stress it enough. I killed me/you, which means it's technically suicide, so you don't have to worry about prosecution; a small benefit, but one worth noting.
>
> It's up to you what you do now, since I'll probably be back to attempt to murder the kid in a couple years or so — continuity, am I right? I don't know why I/you/we did it in the first place. Maybe we were blackmailed, or bribed, or just wanted to bring the timeline crashing down on our heads. In any case, you're technically investigating a paradox I've just resolved, so you're free to go.
>
> Try not to fuck everything up again,
> Richard Miguel, Iteration 1, 2038 (at least for now).

I barely even noticed the body behind me disappear in a flash of self-correcting purple light as I made the decision not to kill my childhood self, and ended up never having been going back to stop me. I slumped against the wall, head pounding.

Fuck time travel.

Seriously.

Conservation Of Momentum

"What the fuck is this flow shit."

He sat atop his wood pile in the copse, looking at the photocopied flier, absentmindedly pulling splinters out of his legs. He'd built a log cabin near the edge of the clearing - there wasn't much better to do, and he got annoyed with shivering in the rain. The cabin was plain. Stark. Utilitarian. It was all made of wood. He lived off amaranth and whatever animals were stupid enough to be in a tree when he started chopping. Nobody came looking for him but the search was fruitless - he was proper off the grid. He had hairs irregularly sprouting from his chin - if any got long enough to annoy him or get matted together, he tore them out.

He wasn't sure where the flier had come from, but it turned up nonetheless, and its wrongness was more abrasive than the splinters and the poison ivy.

"This is absolutely no way to be going about things. You can't be, like, focusing on this stuff. Think about art too much and you'll believe in it. Art's a thing to fester and fucking rot."

He got up off his copse pile, half-heartedly grabbing the axe that laid beside it, and walked over to the trees.

"I teach you the Antiflow. Flow is something that is to be suppressed. What have ye done to suppress flow, beyond the FUCKING TAMPONS?"

He looked at a tree and the tree looked back at him the wrong way.

"WHAT!"

He swung the axe and lopped off a branch.

"IS THE APE!"

Another branch.

"TO MAN!"

A harsh thud into the side of the tree. He pulled back unsuccessfully; he pushed against the tree with his foot, pulled the axe out, staggered backwards, and took another swing. Swing after swing after swing.

"Flow is the creative 'process', if there is such a thing. Antiflow is the creative epiphany, and that's the real fucking majjicks. Consistent output is for those who munch fibre and puke out shit. Antiflow is a compressive furnace that churns out *diamonds.* Flow is going steady. Antiflow is that singular instantaneous moment of conceptual release. Flow is redirecting a river and Antiflow is bursting a dam open with high explosives. Antiflow is the little death of art."

He'd sliced far enough - if he left it like this, a strong wind would finish the job for him. He threw the axe to the side, grabbed the tree, and pushed it hard. It began to fall.

"The mind is a pressure cooker and it blows when the art is done."

If a tree falls in the forest and Nobody hears it, does it make a sound?

"Ugh. Too many believers here."

He stuck his finger into a seeping wound from the dead thing, dragged it around inside, and licked up the sap. He walked over and examined the branches. Free eggs, cushioned by the nest - he picked them up and started walking back to his house.

"I have a kind of zen, here. I'm dangerously lucid."

He stopped, suddenly, forgetting what he was doing, until he looked down at the eggs in his hands and kept walking back to the house.

"The question isn't how the flier got here. These things don't matter. The question is *why* it got here. Perhaps they knew this was the inverse of the better manifesto."

He looked down at the eggs.

"Am I being played?"

He ran into the house to cook the eggs before he forgot what he was doing. He lit the fire and nestled the eggs into the coals. They rattled a bit before the unborn half-formed things inside were dead. He looked at his reflection and made faces in the mirror while he waited for the things to go hardboiled. He needed to remind himself that he looked like something. He needed to talk to himself so if he needed to talk, at some point, in the future, he wouldn't stumble.

"And so the internal monologue flows outside a bit for a moment."

And then back in again. The fire's going. He put it out. Free eggs. He cracked one against the wall and peeled the shell and looked at himself in the mirror while he bit the thing in half.

"Wait."

The mirror had not been there before. How would he have gotten a mirror - he was in the woods. What. What. He glanced around, to his sides, to the ceiling, to the pamphlet, to the - wait.

"Fuck, I am being played and I don't like it."

He grabbed the mirror and looked straight into his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me. What are you doing? Stop staring, you fucking freak!"

He went to punch the mirror but when his fist hit the wooden wall there was no mirror to be seen. But he'd seen it. It was there, it was real, something was fucking with him, someone was fucking with him, this is not okay. Was he doing this? Or was *he* doing this? Or, much worse, was He doing this, to fuck with him?

"How did I get to the woods?"

He looked around the log cabin and realised it had been put together with iron nails, and his noticing of the fact of the matter made the thing fall on top of him, collapsing inwards violently.

"*FUCK!*"

No. No. Calm. This is frustrating. Just go over, claw your way out of the wreck, just go grab your axe from the - and it was gone, of course, he was here alone, where would he have gotten an axe from? That left the question of how the trees had been falling down, but the noticing of that didn't seem to resurrect them from the dead and reassemble them atop the stumps. And this stupid flier too, he thought, as he looked straight at the thing and was moderately confused when it was persistent.

"It's… persistent."

It's persistent, he thought, as he picked it up off the ground. So was it… real? Or just a particularly hardy construct? Or was it something that somebody else left? Anyone could have littered in the forest. He looked around again.

"I'm degrading. Okay. Be calm. This is… manageable. You can put the thing up, just… don't notice you're doing it, don't think about it, let it be a thing, just reach for the thing you need, just take it, pull it out from that majjick fucking HAMMERSPACE-"

He shoved his hands into his pockets and pulled them out empty.

"Not good. Not good. Breakthrough, breakthrough, fuck, FUCK just BREAK THROUGH!"

He closed his eyes and opened his eyes and expected not to be in the woods any more but the woods, too, at least, were persistent. Something was happening, this wasn't okay, this isn't fine. What were you doing? What was the objective? What was the purpose, what were you working towards? Surely you weren't just… going with the flow?

fuck.

And the frustration and hate and fire of the thing spewed forth from the abject denial of everything that was, the parabolic whimsy spraying out and burning up the tangled house, charring to ashes the uneaten egg, flaying to cinders the squirrels in the trees nearby,

the copse pile aflame and the fire inside escaping inexorably.

He blinked and was still surrounded by fire. The fire, then, was real.

"Purpose then. Purpose. Something to do, something to break…"

He fiddled in circles while home burned.

"That's what makes the things real. The breakthroughs, the moments, the momentary lapses in madness. Pop the cork and my bottle overfloweth with hatred and motherfucking *anger*. This direction, then."

He started wandering in the direction of a footprint trail.

« Seven Characters Die Unexpectedly | `Hub` | Better To Have Nothing Than Everything »

Consolidation

We're here. I'll send you a response when the dust has settled. I hope you have a plan B, because I'm honestly expecting this whole thing to crash and burn.

Your concern is noted, but I think you'll find that we have more of an edge than you realize. Good luck.

As they stood alone in a parking lot near a trail head for Forest Park, Sasha Merlo simply watched the light November rain fall around them, and placed her cell phone back in her pocket. Her brunet hair was stuffed beneath a small beanie as she took in a deep breath. On the other side of the parking lot, Daniel Navarro was finishing up a cigarette. Once they were in **Site-64** there would be no more smoking, so he was making sure to take advantage of this last opportunity. Eventually, the lanky man approached, taking a few moments to watch the rain fall with Merlo before he finally spoke.

“So…” he began. “How about those SCPs?”

Merlo immediately punched him in the arm.

“Hey,” Navarro said through a chuckle as he hopped backwards, rubbing his arm with his free hand. “That’s a little extreme don’t you think?”

Merlo shook her head.

“Four years,” she said. “You could have at least sent me an email. ‘Hey Sasha, just a heads up, I’m not dead or had my memory wiped.’”

“What can I say,” he shrugged. “The new task force has me swamped. This is the first time I’ve even been back to Oregon since **2014.**”

“See, that also burns me,” Merlo snapped back, “I offered you a spot on Gamma-13 at least four times, and each time you said, ‘MTFs are for squares.’ And yet here you stand as a Bibliographer. Seriously, what the fuck?”

“They put a bag over my head,” Navarro replied with a sly smile. “Clearly they wanted me more. Try kidnapping next time.”

Merlo let out a frustrated sigh and turned back to the rain. She managed to maintain a frown for a few more moments before it cracked into a small grin.

“They really put a bag over your head?”

“Sure did.”

The two agents let out a brief laugh before they turned towards the maintenance trail leading westward into the forest. Half a mile in they would find yet another trail that would lead to one of Site-64’s entry ways.

“Think Holman will bite?” Navarro asked. Merlo’s thoughts then turned to the folder in her backpack, detailing the intricate plan Phineas had shared with them back at Fort Charles.

“I doubt it,” Merlo sighed. “But right now he’s the only one who’d even agree to meeting with me, let alone another scheme to capture Anderson. Holman’s our only shot, as poor a shot as it is. I’m just hoping that the incident with **Saker-13** is enough to show him that Phineas is willing to play ball.”

“I mean, what else could he ask for? Two dead congressmen?”

“With our luck, probably.”

Site Director Edgar Holman looked over the folder in silence. Navarro and Merlo sat before him, each remaining motionless in the two chairs he kept in front of his desk. As he continued to read, Merlo looked Holman over. The years had not been kind, as the wear and tear of over two decades at the helm of a Foundation facility had finally begun to show. His slicked back hair, once black,

was beginning to show streaks of gray. Merlo had enough difficulty handling the MTF she had been assigned. She could not begin to imagine how one managed to sleep when they were responsible for an entire site.

Eventually Holman took off his reading glasses and closed the folder. He looked up at the two agents before giving a small chuckle.

“I don’t know what I’m more impressed by, the fact that you brought me this little scheme or the fact that you did it with Dan Navarro in tow, as if it would help,” he said. He then shook his head. “We’d never get approval for something like this, Sasha.”

“But what do you think?” Merlo inquired.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Holman replied. “I could be convinced that this plan was God’s gift to the Foundation and we still wouldn’t get approval, assistance from Phineas aside. They’re only calling Gamma-13 together to raid known **Anderson locations.** Not bait traps, especially ones dependent on known PoIs.”

“So that’s it then? Plug’s being pulled?”

“I’m afraid so,” Holman said with a sigh. “Valiant effort, but no dice.”

Merlo gave a defeated nod and stood.

“Thank you for your time, sir,” she said, and made her way to the door. Navarro followed suit. It was not long before the two agents were in the halls of Site-64, slowly meandering back to Merlo’s office.

“So what now…” Navarro asked, keeping himself in time with Merlo’s stride.

“I have no clue…”

“There is always my way…” Navarro said with a chuckle. Merlo laughed briefly then shook her head.

“I don’t have the benefit of being a wizard, Dan,” she said. “If I go through with this unapproved, even if I was successful, they’d wipe

my mind and leave me on the banks of the Willamette. I told Phineas this would be a long shot, and go figure I was right."

Merlo sighed as she pulled out her phone and sent a single text.

No go.

She once again pocketed her phone and the two continued in silence, only stopping their solemn gait when they heard Holman calling out behind them. The older man was nearly sprinting, his breathing heavy as he finally caught up.

"Sir?" Merlo asked.

"You two… the AMAT Lab… now!" Holman said between gasps. Eventually he regained his breath and let out a final sigh. "There has been a development."

Merlo felt her phone vibrate. As she followed behind Holman she discretely checked the new text.

Dust hasn't settled yet.

Site-64's Anomalous Materials lab was one of the newer labs in the facility. As such, when Holman, Merlo, and Navarro entered they were greeted with the sights and sounds of new scientific toys whirling, buzzing, and otherwise being scientific. A handful of researchers buzzed as they went about their business, excitedly chattering among themselves before they noticed the three outsiders standing at the threshold of their academic lair.

A scrawny man in a lab coat with messy blond hair, and sleep deprived eyes stepped forward. His lips were turned up into an ecstatic smile, as he offered a handshake to Holman.

"Director," he said in a slightly monotone voice, "thank you for making the trip down here."

"Of course, **Conwell**," Holman said, eyeing the chittering researchers in the background. "These are Agents Sasha Merlo and Daniel Navarro, would you mind telling them what you told me on

the phone earlier?"

Conwell gave the two of them a sharp nod, his smile vanishing briefly.

"We've met."

"Long time no see, Sadman," Navarro replied. "What have you got for us today?"

"A flashdrive was left on my desk this morning. Inside was directions to synthesize a stable variant of **SCP-1360-1**," said Conwell. He then took a small tray from a nearby work bench. Sure enough, a square of the familiar tough, black fabric that always covered Anderson's androids was there. Conwell then handed over a small piece of paper. "This was found with the flashdrive."

Merlo snatched it from his hands and read it hungrily, Navarro reading from over her shoulder.

> *Conwell,*
> *You and Johnson got pretty close to cracking this. I felt that you deserved an answer.*
> *Tell your superiors that all my cards are now on the table.*
> *Phineas*

"We're running a large series of tests," Conwell added, looking to Holman. "But once we get your approval, I'd like to send this to the paratech devs. Self-repairing body armor could be a useful tool. However, I think you'd be more interested in this little tidbit."

Conwell took out a small spray bottle, and immediately sent a few drops of an unknown liquid flying at the fabric. Within seconds the aramid fibers shriveled into dust.

"Phineas also provided instructions on how to destroy it. I imagine this, if weaponized, could be handy to Gamma-13, or any number of task forces dealing with Anderson robots."

Merlo and Navarro beamed at Holman. Both agents wore a smug smile. Holman sighed in response.

“How much longer until you finish the preliminary tests?” he asked.

“I’ve cleared our entire testing schedule for the day,” Conwell replied with a smile. “Give us a day or two to verify everything, and I’ll have the full report on your desk.”

“Have a copy ready to send to the paratech devs,” Holman replied, then turned to his agents and gestured to the hall. Merlo caught a glimpse of the AMAT lab techs scurrying about before the door closed, leaving the trio alone in the hallway.

“Sooooooooooo…” Merlo said, turning to Holman with a grin. “Phineas provided us with a dead Saker, names, locations, and has now armed us. He clearly wants Anderson taken down. If we don’t take him up on this offer, he’s going to find someone else. This is our shot, Edgar.”

Holman rubbed the bridge of his nose. He then let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’ll pass this up the chain,” he finally said after several moments of silence. “No promises anything will come of it though. Our track record is not exactly top tier.”

The Director slowly walked away, two fingers rubbing his right temple.

“And for the love of all that is good and holy, behave,” he added. “Or I swear I will personally be dumping your bodies into the Willamette.”

Very clever. Your gamble worked. Gamma-13 has been approved to launch the operation.

I figured that would grease the wheels enough to get things moving.

Right. So this bait you mentioned…

Dr. Contos and her son. Two people that if captured would draw Anderson out. I'm still on good enough terms with them that they can agree to meet with me. There your team can grab them. Should be simple.

Just tell us where to be, and we'll make it happen.

As per our initial agreement, they are not to be harmed during any part of these proceedings, else the identities of no less than five of your agents within MC&Ds operations will be revealed.

I thought you said you laid all your cards on the table.

I kept an ace up my sleeve.

Agent Clarissa Shaw sat alone in a small coffee shop in downtown Seattle, the outside world soaked in Washington's fall rain. Her long blond hair was neatly hidden under a red wig. Her usual thin rimmed glasses had been replaced by contacts that changed the color of her eyes from blue to green. As she sipped from her mug of coffee she looked at her watch.

Any second now… she thought. The door to the coffee shop then opened. Shaw hid her smile behind the mug.

As Phineas promised, a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses entered, a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes followed behind him. Four businessmen trailed them, each looking about the room in a seemingly random pattern. Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos had arrived.

Shaw turned her head and scratched her ear. A gentleman in the far corner of the room folded his newspaper, while two women in different corners closed their laptops. The company of six had only just sat down after obtaining their drinks, when Shaw and the others stood in unison throwing several canisters to the ground and covering the room in a fine cloud of white powder. The four businessmen attempted to stand and draw pistols hidden on their person, but rapidly fell apart as the powder coated them. Thick black puddles were all that remained.

Shaw and her fellow agents lost no time in drawing their pistols, the barrels trained at Jason and Medea. The two scientists held their hands up, Medea shaking in terror as she looked around at the

approaching agents. Jason maintained a vigil of hatred.

“Gotcha,” Shaw said with a sly smile, and tapped Jason on the nose.

Dr. Contos and Jason are in our custody. We have the bait, and Navarro has set up the trap. We're ready when you are.

In a studio apartment on the edge of **`Three Portlands`**, an old, bald man with a large white beard watched the rain come down. Occasionally, he’d glance at his phone, each time there would be no new messages and his heart would sink a little deeper.

“Something has happened,” Phineas said to himself as he turned around, and went to the kitchen where he started preparing water for tea. Saker-45 and Saker-32 should have checked in by now, as should have Douglas Walker and Tessa Kim. With Jason and Medea now in Foundation custody there was much to do before the final blow could be struck. All hands would be needed on deck.

The kettle whistled as the water came to a boil. Phineas reached into his overflowing sink and pulled out a dirty mug in which he placed several bags of peppermint tea. As the water took on its light green-yellow hue, Phineas sighed. They had just kicked the hornets’ nest.

“I hope no one else got stung,” he said to himself, and looked down at his steeping tea.

Shikt

There was a sharp pain in his back. Protruding from his stomach was a large, thin blade. Phineas felt himself forced forward, a powerful electric shock blasting through him, destroying the functions of his mechanical limbs. He used his arms to keep him from slamming into the kitchen counter, the devices powering down as they locked in place.

“You bastard…” a metallic voice said behind him. “Did you think there was any place you could hide that I wouldn’t eventually find you? Don’t you remember all that we’ve done to build this company?

Don’t you remember what *I’ve done?!?*”

Phineas coughed. He could taste blood in his mouth. Slowly turning his head, **`Vincent Anderson`** came into view, his silver tragedy mask shimmering in the dim light of the room.

“Hey Vince,” Phineas said with a small smile. “You finally fixed that voice module, I see.”

“Silence…” Anderson hissed, twisting the blade and delivering a fresh wave of pain. “How could you do this to Jason and Medea? Of all people…”

Anderson trailed off. He reached into the pack he carried and pulled out a large black helmet covered in wires, carefully placing it on Phineas’s head. The helmet quickly began to hum.

“Initiate.”

The old man felt a sharp jab at the base of his skull.

“What are you up to?” Phineas asked. He felt his mechanical limbs grow rigid while his biological self grew weaker. Even a cyborg of his caliber still needed his internal organs.

“Its one of Wilson's gizmos, creates some kind of electronic neural imprint or something.” Anderson said in a matter-of-fact manner. “I don't really know, Wilson made it before signing on with us. The point is, I'm digitizing your memories. It will take some modifications, but I’ll have my friend back. Then we’ll get Jason and Medea, and put this mess behind us.”

Anderson paused for several moments.

“Then all will be well again.”

Phineas gave a short laugh before coughing up a large amount of blood.

“I was wondering when we’d reach this point,” Phineas said as he spit out the dark red fluid. “You can’t just edit out the parts of people you don’t like, Vince.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, old man,” Anderson replied. There was a static sound. Phineas imagined that his old friend would be crying now if he was still able. “I’ll see you real soon.”

Anderson then pointed his right index finger at Phineas’s head. There was a bright flash as lightning. Then Phineas was still.

Anderson stood motionless for several moments, and then slowly slid down to the floor. He pulled off the tragedy mask, and placed his head in his hands, slowly rocking back and forth.

“It's okay…” he said to himself. “I can fix this. I can fix everything. It's okay… it's okay…”

Anderson then got to his feet, and flicked the tragedy mask with his index finger. The masks expression changed to comedy. Anderson placed it back on his face, and made his way towards the door, grabbing Phineas's phone on the way. He quietly scanned the texts and sent a reply.

Ready or not, here he comes.

Anderson stepped out into the Three Portlands rain as Phineas’s apartment erupted into flames.

«Realignment | Austringers | Bal-chatri»

Checkmate

Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 2130 hours local time

This time, it was Harper waiting for Seven in the darkened conference room. Alone, she entered the dimly lit room to find the counterintelligence officer facing her from by the window, casually smoking a cigarette. "Ma'am," he said quietly.

"Mr. Harper," Seven replied. "Do you have a status report on your investigation?"

"I have," he said, blowing a puff of smoke. "Initially, it appeared as though some vast and unknown conspiracy had managed to penetrate every major organization operating behind the Veil. But that turned out not to be true. The information discovered in the warehouse was carefully prepared bait, gathered by a few individuals with access to nearly omniscient intelligence apparatuses. After one of the key conspirators called Director McDonnell's direct line from an untraceable number, Robert swallowed it hook line and sinker. Being the by-the-book operative he has always been, he reported it to his direct superior: O5-5. Five had, for years, handled counterintelligence, while you handled intelligence collection, until his untimely demise left a skill vacuum on the Council you offered to satisfy until the appointment of a replacement Overseer could occur, likely after the holidays."

Seven frowned slightly. The report was not going as expected.

Taking a breath on his cigarette, Harper continued, "The death of Five and Director McDonnell was easy enough for the conspirators to arrange, for they had knowledge of a device which could

explosively detonate a mundane-looking object from half a world away. This device, the explosive coins and their associated atlas, had been used by the Foundation once before to destroy an American naval vessel, causing a war that directly benefited this organization. Unfortunately, the coins had been stolen by Marshall, Carter and Dark after Fidel Castro had nationalized the site where they were stored. This presented little obstacle for the plotters, however, for they had inside access to the club's records. Whether Lord George Smith-Cumming was a willing member of the plot or an unlucky pawn sacrificed for the game, or even, indeed, if he had actually ever owned the coins at all, we may never know. But the red herring was there to confuse anyone who made it that far."

Seven swallowed. Her right hand ever so slowly slid towards the pistol concealed in the small of her back, moving carefully to avoid notice.

Harper exhaled, and said, "The conspirators were clever, really, for they held positions from whence they could not only monitor the investigations, but they could direct it. They could play both sides off the middle, and for a while it worked. My investigation took me to Europe, the Middle East, and the Soviet Union, while I'm sure the Global Occult Coalition's investigations required similar globetrotting. I was sent chasing the illusive C. In the meantime, the conspirators worked to either secure, or look as though they were securing, some SCPs with the capacity to not only inflict significant collateral damage if turned loose in a populated area, but also lacked stringent protective measures preventing their being seized with relative ease."

Seven's fingers felt the grip of her pistol.

"I would rather you didn't do that," Harper said, producing a weapon of his own with his right hand, his left still holding a cigarette. "I'm not finished yet," he said coolly. "You came to an agreement with Regional Deputy Director Keith Bain at the GOC, another of the key conspirators," Harper continued, "having him hire a drunk to kill my family ten years ago, so that I would agree to take a promotion that would eventually land me here: as the investigator who would be keeping you apprised of your own conspiracy to seize control of the Foundation. Unfortunately, Bain made a mistake. The drunk he hired

was his bodyguard's twin brother - the same bodyguard he used to assassinate O5-3 and his own direct superior as part of the conspiracy. By shooting his bodyguard, he neatly prevented the assassin from giving up the secret of his employer, while simultaneously becoming the hero of the situation for the GOC."

"Foundation-Coalition relations will be set back decades because of this," Cornelia said.

Harper shook his head, "Possible, but unlikely, given that the O5 Council provided the Coalition's leadership with incontestable financial proof of Bain's treachery. Greedy bastard, Bain. I understand they have placed him under arrest." Cornelia looked slightly ashen. Harper paused to take a breath on his cigarette, then continued. "I don't know who in the Chaos Insurgency you were in bed with, but having them hit Research Site-29 right after I left was a nice touch, as was leaving Ford around to say what had been taken. And, if he took the blame for the attack, so much the better."

If looks could kill, Harper would long since have been blasted backwards through the tinted window behind him. He was relatively unconcerned with dirty looks, however, as his pistol was leveled neatly at his adversary's chest. "I have been cleared to know the truth about SCP-006. Clever bit of acting, buying Sir James' service in the conspiracy with water from the fountain of youth. Unfortunately for you, I determined the real identity of C, Cornelia."

Cornelia Dark let out a quick, barking laugh, "You know nothing."

Harper smiled, "Sir James mentioned how you and he had first met: 'in university, one giving a lecture the other attended,' he said. I realize now that you were the lecturer, not him, despite the appearances of your ages. You've been planning this for a very long time. It's over now. You will spend the remainder of your natural life in as cold, dark, and damp a hole as the Foundation can find."

"Like Hell!" Cornelia snarled. With astonishing speed, a tiny pistol appeared in her hand out of the sleeve of her suit jacket. She raised her arm to fire. Two shots rang out, and Cornelia Dark, *née* Roosevelt, formerly O5-7, fell to the floor dead, two bullet holes through her heart.

"A pity," said a low voice. "It would have been nice to know who her contact in the Insurgency was." A figure stepped out of the shadows in the corner of the room. A nondescript man, unremarkable in nearly every facet of his appearance, he was O5-1, the first among equals of the O5 Council.

"I apologize, sir," Harper said respectfully.

O5-1 replied, "You need not worry, it was self defense. The cleaning crew has had more substantial messes than this to clean - they are getting quite remarkable at getting blood out of carpet."

"Yes, sir," Harper said.

"Now, Mr. Harper, I have spoken with the other Overseers," O5-1 said, "and we would like you to assume the duties of O5-7, effective immediately. Do you accept?"

Me? An Overseer? Harper thought to himself in surprise. He took a long moment to consider, then answered, "Yes."

"Very well," O5-1 said, producing a black identification card with a gold border, Harper's photograph, and 'O5-7' printed in gold. "Welcome aboard, Seven. The Council's first assignment for you is to oversee the closure of this conspiracy investigation. Allow me to make something perfectly clear: this never happened. There was never a plot to overthrow the Council or to seize control of the world behind the Veil. Your predecessor was not shot; she retired. Please see to it that Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel understand how events took place, and see to it that all documentation reflects what happened accurately."

"Yes, sir," the Foundation's newest Overseer said.

"One more thing, Seven," O5-1 said, turning to leave. "Make sure you got them all."

« **Part XII** | **HUB** | **Epilogue** »

Conspiracy, Part I

Ramifications

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 0755 hours local time

The early morning sun illuminated the large lobby as Timothy Harper strode into the the Foundation's Command-02 Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Though it could not compare to Overwatch HQ, its proximity to one of the world's most powerful capitals ensured it was one of the Foundation's main decision-making nexuses. It was a relatively unremarkable seven-story limestone office building like so many others in the city. Faceless, nameless drones in the vast bureaucracy flitted in and out of the building, not unlike the other buildings in the Federal Triangle.

After passing speedily through the obligatory security checkpoint, Harper browsed the headlines of his paper as he made his way to his tiny office on the third floor. A plane bombing in the UK was the leading story. *Nasty business, international terrorism*, Harper thought. Not his area of concern, though. Probably. He was one of the Foundation's top counterintelligence investigators. Pushing fifty, his black hair was streaked with gray from many late nights spent on the job. The job nearly cost him his family as well: though a drunk driver had taken away his family ten years ago Christmas Day, he discovered going through his late wife's papers that she was planning to file for divorce and seek custody of the children. With his family's death, he'd thrown himself into his work, finally accepting a promotion as Section Chief, followed a couple years later by a further promotion to his present job of Roving Special Investigator.

"Morning, Troy," Harper grunted. He and Troy Muir, a former intelligence case officer invalided out of field operations when he lost his right leg, shared the cramped office. "Where's Monica?" he

asked, referring to Monica Daniel, the grad student from GWU who was interning in the CI Directorate. Always on the lookout for talent, the Foundation was more than happy to pay for someone's education, assuming they passed a thorough background check, signed a four hundred page non-disclosure agreement, and agreed to work three years for every year of schooling the Foundation funded.

"Errand to the Ethics Committee Clerk's Office, I think." His one-legged office-mate looked up. "Tim, they want you on the seventh floor ASAP," Muir reported with a frown.

"Any idea which way the wind was blowing?" Harper asked. A summons to the seventh floor, domain of the directors and overseers, was rarely a happy prospect.

"They didn't say," Muir replied. Harper nodded, and left.

Harper was met on the seventh floor by a security officer. Only those with Level 5 security clearance were permitted on the floor without an escort. The guard led him to a darkened conference room and ushered him in. A severe dark-haired woman in her mid-thirties stood alone, looking out the heavily-tinted window at the Capital Building. Harper recognized her as O5-7, one of the Overseers. Though none of the Overseers had an assigned specialization, it was Harper's understanding that Seven tended to take particular interest in the Foundation's intelligence matters. He'd seen her speaking with Director McDonnell before, but had never actually met her himself.

"Mr. Harper," Seven said quietly in greeting, not turning around. "Leave us." The security guard excused himself.

"Ma'am," Harper said.

"The Foundation is under attack, Mr. Harper," the Overseer stated, her back still to him. "Two nights ago, acting on an anonymous tip, under Counterintelligence Director McDonnell's personal supervision, MTF Xi-13 raided a warehouse outside London. They recovered a large number of classified documents relating to the Foundation and several groups-of-interest. Some of these

documents apparently suggested the existence of a plot to assassinate several members of the O5 Council, including myself."

"I assume plans are in place to handle the situation, ma'am?" Harper asked, hiding his alarm.

"There are plans in place, yes, Mr. Harper. The Foundation has plans for everything," Seven replied. "More concerning than the apparent plot is the implication of these documents. According to Director McDonnell's initial report, the Foundation documents found indicated the breach was caused by someone with at least Level 4 clearance, if not Level 5. The penetrations of the GOC, Serpent's Hand, Chaos Insurgency, IRG, Factory, Prometheus Labs, Wondertainment, Church of the Broken God, and MC&D appear to all comparably high level."

At this revelation, Harper's eyes widened. Somebody had top level penetrations of nearly every major player behind the Veil, including the Foundation, and this was the first they were finding out about it? Nobody was *that* good.

As if sensing his thoughts despite having her back turned to him, Seven continued, "I hardly believe it myself, Mr. Harper, but as you no doubt realize, we cannot dismiss the possibility of such a turn of events out of hand simply because it is unlikely or unpleasant. After all, this organization deals with the impossible and the unthinkable every day. The Council decided to hold an emergency meeting where Director McDonnell could present the documents personally. Unfortunately, this is no longer possible. Last night, Overseer Five and his bodyguard, Counterintelligence Director McDonnell, and two American intelligence officers who have assisted our Middle Eastern operations were killed when an on-board explosion brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland. McDonnell had the original copies of the seized documents in a diplomatic pouch. Moments later, a Foundation document repository in Manchester was bombed. That document repository held the only existing copies of the seized documents. Our recovery teams report no evidence that either version of the documents survived."

"Which both lends credence to the reality of this penetration's threat, and suggests the plotters were responsible for the attacks," Harper

observed. He felt like someone had punched him in the gut - McDonnell had been an old friend, someone he could trust in a business where trust was the scarcest of commodities, but there would be time for grieving later.

"The surviving members of the Council drew the same conclusion, Mr. Harper," Seven nodded, finally turning to face him. Her narrowed eyes flashed dangerously over high cheekbones. To call the Overseer angry would have been no small understatement. "We have already taken measures to ensure our personal protection. The other Overseers believe this will be sufficient; I disagree. I have convinced them we need to investigate this apparent conspiracy, fully but also quietly. If the conspirators believe they are about to be discovered, it is not at all unreasonable for them to either go to ground and disappear, or decide to cut their losses and attempt even more direct action. Right now, the Council has no idea what the ultimate goal of the conspirators is. This makes them even more dangerous in the Council's eyes. And while you and I both have enough experience in the intelligence hall of mirrors to take that in stride, most of my fellow Overseers are scared. They are mainly former scientists and uncomfortable when dealing with the uncertainties of political intrigue." Seven moved to the conference table separating them. She slid a folder across the table to him. "This is everything we know about the security breach, the two direct attacks, and the conspiracy as a whole," she observed. This was less than encouraging: it amounted to perhaps a half dozen sheets of paper. "You will be conducting the investigation. The Council has voted to temporarily grant you Level 5 clearance," she declared, handing him a new black identification card, "and you will report to me personally. Keep the cards close to the vest on this one - potentially anyone could be involved."

"Moscow Rule number three, ma'am," Harper observed with a wry smile. *Everyone is potentially under opposition control.* "If I may, why are you trusting me with this? *I* know I'm not a conspirator, but you don't."

"You're one of the best see-eye guys we have, Mr. Harper, and you have been cleared for the highest security clearance known to mankind. The possibility that you are involved is remote, and in any

case I expect regular and detailed reports of all your findings. If I find out you're withholding things from me, I will bring the full force of the resources at my disposal upon you. You will spend the remainder of your days in the deepest, darkest, least pleasant hole I can find," the Foundation Overseer stated calmly. Then she flashed a smile that was clearly meant to be disarming but instead made the hair on Harper's neck stand on end. "But I don't expect that to be a problem, Mr. Harper."

"No, ma'am," Harper said.

"Excellent! If there is anything you need, let me know," Seven beamed. "You may brief in Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel if you believe their assistance would be helpful, but do keep the cards close to the vest."

"Of course," Harper replied.

"Thank you. That will be all," she said. Harper wasted no time leaving the room.

"That's all we have," Harper finished the run-down, putting the folder down on his desk and looking across at Muir and Monica.

"Hm," Muir grunted. "For a moment there, Tim, I thought we were going to have trouble with this one." He pulled out his reading glasses and started thumbing through the folder.

Monica failed at hiding her alarm. "Do we always have so little to go on?" she asked. "How do we even know where to start?"

Harper started thinking aloud. "Let's start with something simple. What organizations did McDonnell's preliminary report suggest were penetrated?"

Monica read off the relevant sheet of paper, "Looks like the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution; Baasch Engineering Corporation; the Chaos Insurgency; the Church of the Broken God; the Factory; the Foundation; the Global Occult Coalition; Huntington Arms, Inc.; Marshall, Carter, and Dark; Prometheus Labs; the

Serpent's Hand; Saito Mining Industries; Wallace Security Enterprises; Dr. Wondertainment; and various branches of the American, British, Chinese, French, German, and Soviet governments. That's all based on documents recovered in the warehouse raid." She looked up, "How the hell did someone manage to penetrate essentially all the major commercial, political, and paranormal groups without somebody noticing? How is this the first we've heard of it?"

Harper lit a cigarette. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "just because they had documents - even top level documents - related to all those organizations doesn't mean they managed have moles in all of them. And even if they do have moles with access to such sensitive materials, that doesn't mean the moles are in a position to do much beyond steal documents. Monica, what's your security clearance?"

The graduate student blinked, "Foundation, or US government?"

"Both," replied Harper, taking a puff on his cigarette.

"Level 3 and TS," she replied, looking slightly confused. "But I'm just an intern."

"And yet you have access to some truly sensitive information," Muir observed, not taking his eyes off the document he was reading. "Such as this investigation."

"Precisely," Harper continued. "These are, for the most part, groups employing hundreds to tens of thousands of people. It only takes one traitor."

"So how do we know what the opposition wants?" asked Monica.

Harper smiled, "We don't - yet. But one does not simply invest the resources necessary to penetrate so many powerful organizations on a whim. We shall find out soon enough."

Monica frowned. "This still doesn't give us a starting point."

"Perhaps this does," Muir said. He began quoting the page he was reading: "'According to Foundation personnel embedded within the Scottish constabulary, the explosion is consistent with detonation of

a small but powerful explosive device. Preliminary chemical testing of explosive residue suggests the use of pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and cyclotrimethylene trinitramine (RDX), two of the primary ingredients in Semtex-H. However, the size and location of the original explosion relative to the quantities of PETN and RDX found, coupled with the complete incineration of both the diplomatic pouch carried by Robert McDonnell and McDonnell himself, suggests Semtex was not, in fact, the explosive used. It is recommended Foundation investigative staff examine the possibility of SCP objects or other as-yet uncontained anomalies as the source of the explosion."

"Just what we needed, Troy," Harper said. "Monica, go down to Central Records and have them pull all the files on anomalous objects and entities capable of causing explosions. Be sure to include the ones presently in containment; we can't rule out a theft."

"On it," she said, leaving.

Harper turned to Muir, "Any indications on the explosion in Manchester?"

Muir nodded, "Looks like that actually was Semtex. The police have linked it chemically to several attacks by the Irish Republican Army."

"The IRA? Could it really just be a coincidence?" Harper frowned, lighting a fresh cigarette.

Muir shook his head. "No way," he said. "The match was far too easy - it was an older batch with a composition more useful for demolition than killing. Great if you want to destroy papers in a safe, but not as useful for inflicting human casualties. It also doesn't match their usual MO, since Carnegie was prominently Catholic. I suspect we were just meant to believe they did it."

"Interesting," Harper said, taking a long blow on his cigarette. "Very interesting."

Leads

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 1158 hours local time

As it turned out, the Foundation contained rather a lot of different objects which could explode or ignite. Exploding cacti, exploding ink, an exploding eyeball - the stack of files Monica had carried up from Central Records took the three of them most of the morning to read. The tiny room, always cramped and cluttered, quickly became nearly impossible to move about in as they sifted through the towering heaps of papers.

Just before lunch, Monica found something. "Hey, listen to this: a chest of coins, each capable of detonating with the force of five megajoules. They're linked to an atlas which can be used to detonate the coins."

Muir and Harper got up and looked over her shoulder. "Does the report have a chemical analysis?" Harper asked.

"'For analysis of explosive residue signature, see Addendum 5'," Monica quoted. "Where did that - ah! Here we go." She snatched up the relevant page.

Muir laid it alongside the forensic report from the plane bombing. "Looks like a rough match to me," he said. "The file's analysis dates back to the fifties, so even if this is a perfect match it might not line up perfectly."

Harper nodded, "Definitely the best option so far. Good catch, Monica." The intern beamed. He continued, "So, where is this thing contained?"

"That's a problem, Tim," Muir said, reading the Special Containment Procedures.

"Oh, Troy?" Harper asked.

"Yeah. We don't have it," Muir said. "It was stored in the Trinidad site back in fifty-nine." Harper swore under his breath.

"What happened to the Trinidad site in fifty-nine?" Monica asked.

"In a word," Muir explained, "Castro. He nationalized the Foundation's research site in Trinidad. The staff resisted and were executed - save one researcher who managed to get away by sheer dumb luck. Ended up heading back to the Soviet Union to work as a mole in KGB's Thirteenth Chief Directorate somewhere in Central Asia, I think."

"And we let Castro get away with this?!" Monica asked. She had no illusions about the Foundation's track record when it came to ruthlessness.

"Of course not," Harper said. "Ever heard of the Bay of Pigs invasion?"

"That failed," Monica countered, frowning.

Muir shook his head, "You're assuming what made it to the history books is what actually happened. We'd originally planned to attack Trinidad directly. American State Department didn't want to play ball, so the invasion landing site had to be moved. We still sent Foundation forces to Trinidad. Didn't manage to retrieve anything, but both Castro and Marshall, Carter, and Dark got the message."

Monica was confused, "MC&D was involved?"

"Castro tried to sell them the contents of the Trinidad site," Harper explained. "They absconded with the items without paying Castro after Foundation forces crashed the party."

"He was pissed," Muir observed. "We still get reports of Cuban troops in Soviet-backed states killing people associated with the club."

"Between the combined fury of the Foundation and Castro, it actually drove MC&D to ground for over a decade," Harper finished. "So the Foundation decided the whole mess was a 'successful failure.'"

"So, do we know where this chest of coins is now?" Monica asked.

"Not exactly," Muir said. "Marshall, Carter, and Dark isn't exactly on good terms with the Foundation, and we've not ever been able to get a good source on the inside. I've heard the GOC has had a little more success, but I don't know for certain. I could put out feelers with some of my contacts at the GOC, but they'll want something in return." The world of intelligence was a strange place: despite the generally frosty relationship between the GOC and the Foundation, both organization's intelligence branches occasionally shared information about mutual threats. Neither side trusted the other, of course, but the *quid pro quo* of intelligence-sharing had proven helpful to both sides on numerous occasions.

"You do that, Troy," Harper said. "In the mean time, Monica, keep digging through things here. I'm going to track down the surviving researcher from Trinidad."

Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 1730 hours local time

The only physically remarkable thing about him was his limp and cane. These, of course, were unavoidable for a man whose right leg was artificial from his knee down. Beyond that, he was of intermediate height, had thinning brown hair, and brown eyes. He was the sort of man that you'd forget having seen five minutes later, if not for his limp and cane. He missed the fieldwork, but he was too easy to identify now.

Muir hobbled into the Smithsonian Natural History Museum's National Gem Collection. It was a good meeting spot, and he never got tired of looking at the gemstones. He was standing before a beautiful piece of amethyst several feet in height when he heard a low voice behind him, "Nice shade of purple, isn't it?"

Without turning, Muir replied, "Indeed. I was always jealous of those with February birthdays."

"I'm sure you know one of the six birthdays we have on file for you *is* in February. How's the wife, Troy?" Special Agent Granger, Global Occult Coalition asked.

"Gladys and I have separated," Muir responded evenly. "I'm sure you knew that, though, just like how you know all the birthdays in your file on me are wrong. How's your son, Harry?"

"Looking forward to Christmas," Granger replied. "Wants Lego. Again." Muir grunted. "So, Troy, what can I do for you?"

The two men started down the gallery. "You've sprung a leak," Muir said. "Foundation forces found information classified Level Q in a raid on a non-aligned building day before yesterday."

Granger's training quickly erased the alarm from his face, before responding, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because whomever penetrated you also managed to get access to all the major players, including the Foundation," Muir replied. "We also believe they brought down the Pan Am flight in Lockerbie. Took out all the documents we recovered, and also hit the repository where we stored the backups. Otherwise, I'd be able to tell you what they had on the GOC."

Granger let out a low whistle. "Any leads?" he asked.

"We're working on that, and we need your help," Muir answered. "The Coalition has always had better sources at MC&D than the Foundation. We think they either have, or sold, the object responsible for taking down the plane." He handed Granger a sheet of paper with the Global Occult Coalition's KTE, or 'Known Threat Entity', designation for the object.

Pocketing the paper, the GOC Agent nodded. "I'll have to run this up the chain, Troy. Deputy Director Bain will need to know."

"Thanks, Harry," Muir said. "If this pans out, I'd consider us even."

"Thanks, but one file on one item handled by that damn club? That would hardly square us. This'll take care of the one I owe you for Uganda. I still owe you a favor for Fiji," Granger observed.

"Well, I'm not going to object to a GOC Agent telling me he still owes me a favor," Muir chuckled. "Have a good holiday."

"You too," Granger said. With that, the two men went their separate ways.

Outside Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0213 hours local time

As it turned out, meeting the surviving researcher from Trinidad required a trip to Moscow. Now almost ninety, Dr. Andrei Pushkin had retired to a dacha in the hills overlooking the city. Thankfully, the Foundation's connections made it fairly simple for Harper to enter the Soviet Union, in spite of his American citizenship.

Pushkin met Harper in his pajamas when the counterintelligence officer arrived at his doorstep bearing an expensive bottle of vodka. Seated at the retired researcher's kitchen table, the men spoke in Russian, a language Harper had mastered decades earlier. A cloud of cigarette smoke filled the room as the vodka slowly disappeared.

"What brings a Level 5 Foundation investigator all the way from Washington just to speak to an old man in the dead of night?" asked Pushkin. "I retired from the Foundation and KGB almost fifteen years ago."

"Andrei Ivan'ich, I need to know everything about Trinidad. I'm trying to track down one of the items that was lost," Harper explained.

Pushkin sighed, "That was thirty years ago. My memory isn't what it once was - I hope you don't expect me to remember specific item numbers, especially for the objects I wasn't handling."

"Do you remember an object that was a chest of exploding coins and an atlas?" Harper inquired.

Pushkin thought for several minutes. "Vaguely. I never worked with them; that was - who handled those… Dr. Wong's project? Either Dr. Wong, or Dr. Hernandez."

Harper nodded, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Could you tell me what happened when the Cubans showed up?"

Pushkin drained and refilled his vodka draft. Taking a deep breath, he recounted one of the scariest situations in his life.

Pushkin's Tale

Foundation Research Site- Trinidad, Cuba
Sunday, 15 March 1959, 1030 hours local time

As the klaxon blared, and the corridor was bathed in red light, Pushkin once again found himself holding a gun.

Nikolai Ivanovich Pushkin, Doctorate of Philosophy in Phyics, did not like guns. He'd never been a fighter: he'd only been a boy during the Revolution and ensuing Civil War, which had stalled his beloved education by shutting down his school. When the dust had finally settled, he'd hoped that he'd never see armed conflict again. Unfortunately, as a young professor in Leningrad in the early 1940s, he'd been trapped in the city when the Germans had surrounded it. The Germans had shelled the city day and night for nearly a year, constantly trying to break the siege. When the building with his laboratory and office had been leveled by the shelling, he'd resisted having to take up arms by helping manage logistics for the defenders. Not that there had been much in the way of supplies, food, or ammunition to move. He'd met Sergei Petrovich during the war; Sergei had recruited him into the Foundation. After the end of the war, he'd hoped to never again have to handle a firearm. And yet, here he was.

The morning had started out normally enough. Breakfast in the site's commissary, meeting for all Level 3 and 4 staff, followed by another day of research. He vaguely remembered the site's security director, Agent Shaw, mentioning something about the recent revolution, but

surely the politics in Havanna meant little for this secret research facility. Pushkin had paid it little mind: nobody knew what went on in this small, apparently unremarkable compound on the edge of Trinidad. And even if someone had, the Foundation's security staff had far more firepower than the local constabulary. Most of the facility was concealed from the world in a heavily reinforced bunker rated to withstand all but a direct nuclear strike. And so, the researcher allowed his mind to wander to more important things, like how he was going to conduct the day's tests.

After the meeting's conclusion, Pushkin had returned to his lab. His assistant, Dr. Rawji, had already begun work on the object they were researching: a Factory-built radio set whose transistors showed some promising anomalous properties.

No more than thirty minutes from when Pushkin had begun to work, the site's intercom blared: "Attention all personnel! Unauthorized paramilitary forces have breached the outer perimeter. This is not a drill. Threat Condition Gamma has been declared. This is not a drill, repeat, this is not a drill!"

Pushkin swore loudly. He picked up the radio set to carry it back to the storage room up the hall while Rawji went to work burning their research notes. The hallway was dark compared to the bright laboratory, illuminated only by the flashing red emergency lights. It only took Pushkin a moment to enter the storage room, open the proper locker, place the radio inside, and lock it. He heard the door fly open behind him. "Doc! We have to get you out of here!" an urgent American voice said. Turning around, Pushkin recognized a young fair-haired security officer - Mathews? Martin? Something like that - clutching a rifle. "Here, Doc, take this," the guard said, shoving a pistol into his hands. "Come on, I'm supposed to get you and Dr. Rawji out of here." The guard ran out into the corridor. Pushkin followed, awkwardly holding the semiautomatic handgun, hoping he didn't have to shoot the *neculturny* thing.

Pushkin had barely left the room when two Cuban men in fatigues carrying rifles burst out of the door to his lab. They shouted something in Spanish - Pushkin didn't know what, since he'd never bothered to learn the language - and gestured for him and the security officer to raise their hands. The security officer opened fire,

killing one of the Cubans. The other shot the security officer. Pushkin turned and ran, firing wildly behind him.

The Russian rounded a corner. No Cubans appeared behind him. *Now what?* he wondered. He was standing alone, in a deserted corridor, bathed in red light, while a klaxon blared, in a site overrun by Cubans. Once again holding a gun. He hated guns.

Pushkin was about to leave the gun when he thought better of it. Perhaps he'd need the thing. Reluctantly, he pocketed it. Now, he had to figure out a way out of the facility. He searched his memory: he'd been briefed on this eventuality, but it wasn't something he'd taken all that seriously or thought too hard about. *Get to the surface,* he thought. *Surface. Then out of the complex. Then to the rendezvous point. Beach eighty kilometers up the coast. One week to get there. But first, the surface. How do I get to the surface?* Pushkin ticked off his options. Elevators would be guarded. That left one of the emergency ladders. *Great. Two hundred meter climb up a ladder. Where's the nearest one?* And so he set off.

After ten minutes of tense searching, he found one of the ladders to the surface. Why couldn't he just have been left to do his research? He didn't like doing all this sneaking around. As he climbed, he hoped he wouldn't find himself staring at a bunch of angry Cubans when he reached the surface.

As it luck would have it, the access ladder did not lead into the arms of angry Cubans, but rather to the woods in the hillside overlooking the complex. Concealing himself behind a bush, Pushkin looked down at the courtyard. A dozen or so Foundation staff members were kneeling on the ground with their arms behind their heads. A large man with a beard in fatigues seemed to be in charge of the Cubans. He was talking with a European man wearing a dark suit carrying a briefcase. The Cubans were carrying out the different objects the site had housed. There was the radio, the chest of coins, the atlas, the three books, the sculpture, and the abacus. The man in the suit inspected the items. He looked at the large man and nodded. The two shook hands. As the man in the suit left in a truck loaded with the objects, the large man barked an order to some of his men. Pushkin watched in horror as his coworkers were executed in cold blood by the Cubans. It was a sight which would haunt his

nightmares for many years to come, just like that night in November of 1917, or the dark days of 1943.

As the Cubans left the compound, Pushkin disappeared into the hills, starting his long walk to the rendezvous point.

Outside Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0600 hours local time

"…And that was the last I saw any of the objects stored in Trinidad," finished Pushkin. "I hid in the hills northwest of the city. The Foundation picked me up in a boat a week later on a little beach eighty kilometers up the coast."

Harper emptied the last of the vodka into his host's glass. "And then you went back to the Soviet Union?" he asked.

"Correct," replied the elderly man. "The Foundation at that time had strong ties to the military and intelligence organizations of both superpowers. I was assigned as a researcher at a laboratory near Dushanbe which was managed by the KGB's Thirteenth Chief Directorate for Paranormal Investigations with Foundation assistance. Both organizations thought I was working for them, spying on the other." He laughed, "It didn't really matter to me, since both paid me handsomely, and since I only had access to what was actually there at the laboratory. I suspect my handlers for both organizations thought me ineffectual. But I was allowed to do my research, and that was that."

Harper took a deep breath on his cigarette. "Did you hear anything further about the lost items?"

Pushkin frowned and shook his head, "Only rumors that that British club had bought them. What was the name…"

"Marshall, Carter and Dark?" Harper supplied.

"That was it," Pushkin nodded. "I am sorry I can't help you further."

"Andrei Ivan'ich, you have helped me immensely," Harper told the

old man, who smiled. The investigator retrieved his hat and coat and took his leave.

« Part I | HUB | Part III »

Conspiracy, Part III

Investigations

Foundation Command-05, Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0730 hours local time

Lighting a cigarette, Harper sat in his temporary office in the Foundation's regional headquarters for the Soviet Union. Nearly three times the size of his Washington office, complete with a view overlooking Dzerzhinsky Square, Harper decided he could get used to the palatial treatment the Foundation afforded Level 5 personnel. Picking up his secure telephone, he called Muir back in Washington. Since it was almost midnight in the American capital, Harper dialed his colleague's home secure telephone line. After the two units had synced, he heard a slightly groggy voice say, "Muir."

"Troy, it's Tim," Harper said. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"I was still up reading," Muir reassured Harper. "What's going on?"

Harper explained, "I talked to Dr. Pushkin. Looks like the Trinidad artifacts did get bought up by MC&D. From the sounds of it, he witnessed the exchange himself."

"Uhuh," Muir grunted. "I've put out feelers to my old contacts at the GOC. I'm expecting to get their file in the morning."

"I hope you didn't have to part with any crown jewels," Harper remarked dryly.

"Nah, this was in exchange for services already rendered," Muir replied. "Didn't even have to cash in all my chips."

"Well, Troy, I'm going to sleep on the couch in the office here. Call me when you have the file," Harper said. He read off the phone and

fax numbers. Muir confirmed them, then hung up.

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0710 hours local time

Troy Muir had just started the office coffee maker when Monica walked in carrying a manila envelope. "Mr. Muir, the front desk reported this was dropped off for you this morning by an Agent Granger of the Global Occult Coalition," she said, handing it to him. "It cleared the standard security screen: just a file."

"Thanks, Monica," Muir said, opening the file. Inside were three sheets of paper.

Troy,

Merry Christmas.

- Harry

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

KTE-1767-Flint

Threat ID: KTE-1767-Flint "Blood Treasure"

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: Spanish world atlas printed in 1521 with accuracy comparable to contemporary maps. Oak chest approximately 60 cm by 38 cm by 45 cm. 500 Spanish gold 2 *escudo* coins, minted in 1521. Atlas displays current coin locations in real time. When activated by the atlas (activation method unknown), coins will release approximately 5 MJ of energy in explosive force before returning undamaged to the chest. Type II explosive entity.

Rules of Engagement: Object represents threat to global political

stability, having been used to incite at least one major war. Object is to be destroyed by any means necessary and appropriate if the chance arises.

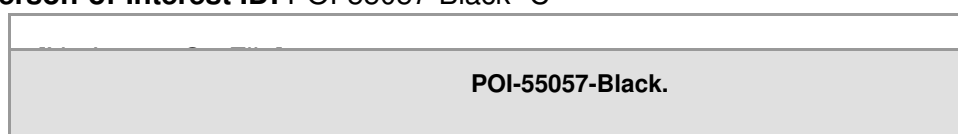
History: Original origin unknown. Recovered by private collector from shipwreck in the Straits of Florida in 1872. Owned by private collector in Havana, 1873-1895. Acquired by Foundation in 1895. Believed to be used to ignite powder charges on *USS Maine*, 15 February 1898, instigating Spanish-American War. Nationalized by Cuban forces, 1959. Stolen by Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd., 1961. Sold by MC&D to "C" in 1971. Current whereabouts unknown; suspected to be in the possession of "C". Now implicated by Foundation sources in Pan Am Flight 103 bombing.

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

POI-55057-Black

Person-of-Interest ID: POI-55057-Black "C"



Authorized Response Level: 1 (Minimal Threat)

Description: Member of Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd. identified only by the alias "C" signed in green ink. Little to no other information known. Believed to be in possession of at least nine (9) Known Threat Entities, purchased from MC&D.

Rules of Engagement: Maintain discrete surveillance. Observe and report unusual activities. Gather additional information as possible.

Do not engage except during emergencies.

Personal Information

Name: Unknown
Known Aliases: "C"
Profession: Unknown
Allegiances: MC&D Club member

Nationality: Unknown, suspected British or American
Gender: Unknown
Date of Birth: Unknown, suspected prior to 1950.

Height: Unknown
Weight: Unknown
Eye Color: Unknown
Hair Color: Unknown

Biographical Information: Essentially nothing is known about "C" apart from his/her apparent membership in Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd. "C" is known to have purchased approximately nine (9) KTEs from MC&D since 1968. Records stolen from MC&D suggest "C" to have relative wealth and possibly either British or American citizenship. "C" is believed fluent in at least English. All documents signed by "C" include only that letter, written in refined script in green ink of unknown manufacture.

Associated KTEs

- KTE-0235-Hemlock
- KTE-0589-Baskerville
- KTE-0777-Ivory
- KTE-0900-Keyhole-Green
- KTE-1123-Tapdance-Blue
- KTE-1515-Gaia
- KTE-1767-Flint
- KTE-2156-Woodwork
- KTE-2247-Pearl

Muir examined the file's contents carefully. "Monica, please fax these to this number," he instructed, picking up his secure telephone unit and dialing.

"Harper," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Tim, it's Troy. Monica's faxing you some documents," Muir said.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I have them," Harper said. "Interesting. Do we have anything on this 'C' person?"

"I'm not familiar with him. Or her," Muir said. "It'll take us a while to go digging through the archives."

"Alright," Harper replied. "Any new leads?"

Monica raised her eyebrows, and Muir hit the speaker button. "I've put you on speaker, Tim. Monica's here with me."

"Mr. Harper, our agents embedded in the British police have finished their initial report," Monica explained. "We had them check the explosive signature against the exploding coins. It was a ninety-three percent match, though the margin of error was about eight percent because of the age of the coins' baseline comparison."

"Alright," Harper said. "Nice to confirm what we already know. Continue."

Monica nodded, even though Harper couldn't see her. "After you left for Moscow yesterday, I started trying to piece together who had access to the information that was leaked. We have no way of knowing for certain, because all the evidence was destroyed, and Director McDonnell only filed a preliminary paper report. He spoke to O5-5 personally, but -5 was also killed in the bombing. Given the nature of the information found as per the Director's initial report, at least one conspirator had Level 4 clearance or higher, but without specific SCP designations, I can't really rule anyone out. I looked at the Foundation's security clearance database, and there are at least

fifteen hundred El Fours (that I had clearance to know about). And I don't have clearance to know exactly how many El Fives there are."

"Even I don't know that, Monica," Harper said. "I suppose I have access now that I *am* one; I can look it up. I don't think it's more than a few dozen. The O5 Council, some but not all of the Directors for various sub-agencies, a few roving personnel like myself, not that many."

Muir spoke up, "Tim, if we don't know what they had, we can't dig too much into this without it becoming a witch hunt." All three knew that such a witch hunt could do as much or more damage as the apparent conspiracy itself, and none of them wanted to be the Foundation's Angleton.

"Let's focus on what we do know," Harper said. "McDonnell's report said something about the Overseers' schedules for the week. Focus on looking into their staff and security. We don't need another dead Overseer. In the meantime, I'll keep following the trail of the one object we do know the conspirators have." He disconnected the call.

Muir and Monica set to work. They had to place the lives, habits, contacts, actions, schedules, and finances of over a hundred Foundation personnel under the microscope. Their task was all the much harder since they had no idea what, exactly, they were trying to find. With any luck, they'd know it when they saw it. With any good luck, that is. With bad luck, the conspirators would be able to do whatever they had planned next without interruption.

Foundation Command-05, Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 1545 hours local time

After finishing his call with Muir and Monica, Harper reread the files again. He decided to report what he had so far to O5-7. Leaving his palatial temporary office, he strode down the hall to the Level 5 Office Reception and Security desk. Showing his credentials to the secretary, he said in Russian, "Please arrange for a secure teleconference with O5-7."

"Yes, Comrade Investigator," the secretary replied. "She should be

free in fifteen minutes. You are welcome to use the conference room; nobody is in there for another two hours." The secretary gestured to an open door.

"Thank you, Comrade," Harper smiled. He entered the conference room and shut the door behind him.

Just as the hour was chiming on the bells of St. Basil's Cathedral, the phone rang. Harper picked up the handset. "Harper," he said in English.

A voice on the other end of the line said, "Please hold for O5-7."

A moment later, Seven's voice said, "Mr. Harper, I take it you are making progress out there in Moscow?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harper replied. "We've traced the source of the explosion to—"

"The exploding coins?" Seven said. "I heard. Those have been nothing but trouble for the Foundation. I said it when I first became an Overseer, I still say it now."

"Yes, ma'am. According to information from the Global Occult Coalition, the coins are in the possession of someone they know only as 'C'," Harper explained. "This 'C' person apparently bought them off of Marshall, Carter, & Dark back in seventy-one."

"C?" asked Seven. "Interesting. First, a question though, Mr. Harper. What did you promise the GOC in exchange for the information?"

"Nothing," said Harper. "Muir got it from one of his contacts as payment for an old favor."

"Hmm," Seven said. "Alright. Be careful with the GOC, Mr. Harper."

"Yes, ma'am, of course," Harper replied. "I figured they were better to interact with than Marshall, Carter and Dark, however."

"True, the Club is not known for its cooperation," Seven said. "So, what do you know about this 'C'?"

"Not much," admitted Harper. "The GOC file on C is essentially empty. Believed to be fairly wealthy, thought to own at least nine anomalous items, MC&D club member, probably American or British, signs with unidentifiable green ink. That's all we know so far. I have Muir and Ms. Daniel looking into the archives to see what might be there."

"You can tell them to stop. There is nothing in the archives on this 'C'," Seven stated definitively. "I've read all the files we have on every known MC&D club member. There is no file on any 'C' person."

"Alright, I'll let them know," Harper said. "They're also looking at the personnel with access to the O5's schedules and security arrangements, since Director McDonnell's report mentioned the possibility of a threat against the Council."

"Very good," Seven said. "Depending on the outcome of this investigation, Mr. Harper, you might be on the short list for being the counterintelligence director yourself. I've not spoken to the other Overseers yet, but I've followed your work for some time now, and I like what I see."

Harper could think of nothing to say, so he said nothing.

"Mr. Harper, I believe I may have a lead for you," Seven said. "Go to London. Speak to Sir James Mycroft. He is a mathematics professor at Cambridge. He is also something of an information broker about both the mundane and the paranormal - he is known to have supplied information to all of the various big players, including MC&D. I suspect he may know, or know of, this 'C' person."

"I will do that," Harper affirmed.

"Keep me informed," Seven said, disconnecting the call.

Harper quickly called Muir to pass along the information. Then, he left the conference room. "Comrade, I need a seat on the next flight to London, as well as an English copy of the Foundation's file on a person of interest," he said to the secretary in Russian.

"Of course, Comrade," said the secretary. "Do you have a reference number or name for the file?"

"Yes," Harper said. "Sir James Mycroft."

« Part II | HUB | Part IV »

Conspiracy, Part IV

The Information Broker

British Airways Moscow-London Flight, Somewhere over the North Sea
Friday, 23 December 1988, 1900 hours GMT

Enjoying a cigarette and nursing a thirty-year-old scotch, Harper perused the Foundation file on Professor Sir James Mycroft from the relative privacy of his first class seat. A curious fellow, this Sir James. As Harper read the file, it occurred to him that it was a little strange that he had never heard of the fellow before; after all, Harper was high in the Foundation's counterintelligence hierarchy, and the Special Contact Protocols related to the professor required any and all contact to be routed through Foundation CI. Harper exhaled. *Perhaps not,* he thought. *After all, the Foundation is a large organization with a great many contacts. I doubt even any one Overseer knows of all the various groups- or persons-of-interest.*

Person-of-Interest File

Name: James Carl Mycroft

Special Contact Protocols: All Foundation personnel are to observe caution and report any interaction with individual to Foundation counterintelligence. Individual is known to solicit classified material; unauthorized disclosure of information is grounds for disciplinary action under Foundation General Security Protocol 03, Sections 366.

Gender: Male

Date of Birth: 12 March 1945 (age 44)
Nationality: British; Maintains citizenship in both United Kingdom and Switzerland
Hair: White (wears full beard, also white)
Eyes: Blue
Height: 188 cm
Weight: Estimated ~80 kg (designated light heavyweight boxer during university days)

Decorations/Honors: Knight Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (GBE)
Profession: Professor of Mathematics, Cambridge University, UK
Academic History:

- Bachelor of Science (Mathematics), Cambridge University (c/o 1966)
- Doctor of Philosophy (Mathematics), Cambridge University (c/o 1970)
- Doctor of Philosophy (Astronomy), Cambridge University (c/o 1974)

Academic Society Membership: Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society

Language Proficiency: English (Native), German (Native), French (Fluent), Russian (Fluent), Italian (Conversational), Spanish (Conversational), Classical Latin (Rudimentary)

Recruitment Prospects: Recruitment attempted and failed, 1971. (See addendum)
Affiliations with Groups-of-Interest: Serves as freelance information broker, having provided information to the Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition, and Prometheus Labs, Inc.; Believed to be a club member of Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.; Displays little loyalty to any single group and is willing to provide information to all sides if payment is sufficient.
Threat Level: Moderate; Foundation personnel are to observe caution and report any interaction with individual to Foundation counterintelligence.

Profile: Professor Sir James Mycroft is a Professor of Mathematics

at Cambridge University. He has published extensively on advanced mathematics and celestial mechanics. He is also a freelance information broker for organizations studying the paranormal and preternatural. He displays little loyalty to any single such organization, preferring a self-described "neutral" stance. He has consulted with the Foundation on several occasions, both providing information about other organizations and objects not in the Foundation's custody, and performing analysis on mathematical or astronomical SCP objects. Though the source[s] of Mycroft's information within the Foundation and other organizations is/are unknown, it is speculated that said source[s] is/are high-level and pervasive. Foundation personnel are advised to observe caution when interacting with Mycroft; all such interactions are to be reported to Foundation counterintelligence.

Mycroft is wealthy, owning large shares in a variety of major corporations including (but not limited to):

- Baasch Engineering Corporation
- Global Transport, Ltd.
- Howell Information Technologies
- Huntington Arms, Inc.
- Prometheus Labs, Inc. [*Group-of-interest to the Foundation]
- Saito Mining Industries
- Wallace Security Enterprises

Though controlling shares sufficient to affect policy at these corporations, Mycroft appears to display little interest in affecting their operations or management. Mycroft also is known to generously support a variety of charities, including the International Red Cross, Global Clinic Charity, Engineers Without Borders, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Known Associates: Mycroft is well-connected socially and politically, and has been confirmed to have dealings with the following individuals:

- [NAME REDACTED], O5-5: Roommates during university. (Deceased, 21 December 1988)
- [NAME REDACTED], O5-7: Met during university.
- Johann Schneider, Deputy Director of the Global Occult

Coalition European Division: Childhood friend.
- Randolph Carter III, Partner, Marshall, Carter, & Dark: Mentor. [*Person-of-interest to the Foundation]
- Sir John Major, British Chief Secretary to the Treasury: Chess partner.
- Sir Christopher Keith Curwen, British Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service: Personal friend.

Known Related SCP Objects:

- SCP-033 - Written classified treatise dissenting the documented existence and effects (disseminated to GOC and Foundation).
- SCP-1050 - Provided mathematical analysis to Foundation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking," dinged the intercom. "We are currently beginning our descent into Heathrow. We should be landing in about thirty minutes. I'll be switching off the smoking sign and switching on the seat-belt sign shortly. It is currently clear in London and a brisk four degrees centigrade." Harper extinguished his cigarette, finished his scotch, and tucked the file on Sir James back into his attache case.

Interlude

Harper is on his way to London now. The meeting will likely take place tomorrow morning.

Does he know anything damaging?

No. The Foundation's files have been sterilized. Have the Coalition's?

Yes. The Coalition's investigation is almost as far behind as that of the Scottish police.

And Harper's conversation with Sir James will suit our purposes?

Of course.

Petersfield, Cambridge, UK
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 0900 hours local time

The residence of Professor Sir James Mycroft turned out to be an elegant townhouse in one of Cambridge's upscale residential districts. Harper walked up the front steps and rapped the ornate door knocker three times. The door opened, revealing a short, portly British butler. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm Timothy Harper," the American introduced himself. "Is Sir James in?"

"He has been expecting you," the butler said. Harper blinked in surprise - he hadn't made an appointment. Then again, Sir James *was* an information broker. "If you will follow me, sir." The butler ushered Harper inside, leading him through an ornate front hall and into a library.

Sir James' library was lined floor to ceiling with leather-bound tomes covering every subject known to man (and, for that matter, probably a number of subjects *not* known to man). Dark oak paneling was visible in the few sections of wall not concealed by bookcases. The center of the room was occupied by an ancient oak desk decorated with carvings of griffins. Three small statues of grotesques sat on one side of the blotter; a small silver hand bell sat atop a stack of graded blue book exams. To one side of the room stood a free-standing chalk board covered in mathematical gobbledegook Harper couldn't begin to understand. A towering fireplace crackled happily in the corner, with a painting of a waterfall hung above the mantle. The painting was oddly familiar, though Harper knew he had not seen it before. In a tall-backed chair next to the fireplace, a tall man with wild silver hair and a thick beard sat reading from a small green book. Harper and the man were roughly the same age, according to the file, but the bearded man seemed at once ancient and youthful in a strange, timeless fashion. Sir James looked up, first at the butler, then at Harper. The professor's harsh steel-blue eyes seemed to cut right through him; this was clearly a man who was not to be trifled with. In an instant, the harsh flash of Sir James' eyes

was replaced by a friendly twinkle - if he had been wearing a red suit instead of a tweed jacket, Harper might have mistaken him for Saint Nicholas. "Welcome, welcome!" exclaimed Sir James, tucking the green book into an interior pocket of his jacket. He gestured to another chair by the fire, separated from his own by a coffee table with a marble chess set. "Come, sit. May I offer you a cup of tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, black, thank you," stated Harper, taking the offered chair.

Sir James looked pointedly at the butler, "Make that two, Deeds. A dash of peppermint in mine, if you would be so kind."

"Yes, sir," the butler replied, disappearing from the room.

Sir James directed his attention to Harper, "My dear fellow, what brings you to my humble residence on this fine Christmas Eve morning?"

Harper began, "Professor Mycroft, I am Mr. Timothy—"

"Timothy Harper, counterintelligence officer for the Foundation, recently promoted to Level 5 for the duration of your current investigation," the Englishman interrupted. "Do you prefer 'Mr. Harper,' 'Timothy,' or 'Tim?'"

"Tim is fine," Harper began.

"Very well, Tim," continued the Englishman, smiling politely. "I myself prefer either simply 'Professor,' though you are not one of my pupils, or 'Sir James.' I never could get used to being called 'Professor Mycroft' - in my mind that was always my father."

"My apologies, Sir James," Harper said. "I am investigating the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing. Several Foundation personnel were killed in the explosion, and we have reason to believe a paranormal artifact was used in the explosion specifically to kill them and destroy the documents in their possession."

"A terrible tragedy," Sir James agreed. "Alan Hamilton - you knew him as O5-5 - was among the dead. He was a good friend. How can I be of assistance to the Foundation?"

Harper explained what he knew so far, pausing only when the butler returned with their coffee.

"And so Cornelia believed I might be able to lead you to C," Sir James said thoughtfully, sipping his coffee.

Harper frowned, "I'm sorry, Cornelia?"

Sir James blinked, and smiled, "Right, I forgot for a moment you didn't know her real name. Overseer Seven. Another old friend of mine - we met in university, one giving a lecture the other attended." Harper nodded, and the Englishman continued, "Anyway, I do not know the precise location of the chest of explosive coins or its associated atlas. I must say, however, it seems a clever means to accomplish the destruction of an aircraft. After all, no airport security officer in the world will look twice at someone having a coin in either their luggage or on their person. Regardless, I will attempt to determine its whereabouts."

"Thank you," Harper said. He waited, sensing Sir James had more to say.

"You're wondering what else I know," the mischievous professor observed, "because you suspect there is more to this than just the bombing. A reasonable belief, given the recent raid the Foundation did on a warehouse not too far from here, and a belief which I share. My sources suggest that this C person has been poking around into a number of very dangerous paranormal objects."

"Most paranormal objects are dangerous," Harper observed.

Sir James nodded, "That is true, but these particular objects are ones with the capacity to do relatively targeted damage. In short, the sort of object or entity which could be used as a weapon against one's enemies. I assume you're familiar with your Foundation's Omega Seven fiasco?"

Harper nodded, "Vaguely. Not my department, but something about attempting to put an immortal humanoid SCP with impressive fighting skills on a Mobile Task Force. It ended badly."

"To state that the fiasco ended badly would be similar to calling one of the world wars a 'petty dispute'," Sir James said dryly. "Near total casualties among the involved personnel. The detonation of an onsite nuclear failsafe. The end of the careers of General Bowe and several Foundation Overseers."

"So you're saying C wants to weaponize SCPs?" Harper asked.

"If C is who I think C is, that is doubtful," replied the professor. "It is my suspicion that C is merely one of a number of conspirators - possibly simply a pawn in the eyes of the other conspirators. That said, this conspiracy has demonstrated the willingness to use dangerous SCPs against others, as demonstrated by the Pan Am bombing, and is not adverse to casualties. Such a mindset is, simply put, dangerous."

Harper agreed, "Definitely. Do you think the conspirators are likely to try and use Able?"

"I doubt it," Sir James said. "He's too mentally unstable to be controlled, as Bowe found out to his detriment. I would recommend you take a look at SCP-557-1 and SCP-1440. My contacts suggest C sought out information about them recently."

"Thank you," Harper said, making a note. "May I ask a few questions, Sir James?"

"You may ask, but I do not promise to answer them all," the professor replied. "After all, knowledge is power and information is currency. I do promise that everything I tell you will be true."

Harper nodded, "Alright, that seems reasonable. Do you know C?"

"I do, but I shall not reveal C's identity," Sir James replied. "To do so would be to betray a trust."

The response was annoying, but understandable. "Fair enough. Are there any immediate threats I should know about?" asked Harper.

Sir James stated, "I cannot say for certain, but based on what you've told me, I would recommend increasing the security details for the O5 Council. Especially since Alan was killed - a decapitation strike

cannot be ruled out."

Harper made a note. "Do you know more about this conspiracy?" asked the Foundation investigator.

"Yes," said Sir James.

Harper did a double take. "Will you tell me?"

"Well, do not misunderstand me, there is a limit to my knowledge. I do not know everything about it, and I am sure there are measures in place of which I am unaware," the professor said. "Even if I told you everything I know, it is conceivable it would be insufficient to prevent the conspirators from succeeding. Given the response the conspirators had to their warehouse's being raided, my telling you could forfeit both our lives."

"You didn't answer my question," the American observed.

"Very astute," replied his host. "I am willing to tell you more on one condition, and I am sure it is one you will need to run past Cornelia. I require seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 for my research. While I could obtain it through other channels, having it supplied directly by the Foundation would simplify matters considerably."

"I'm not familiar with double-oh-six," Harper said, frowning.

"Ask Cornelia; the file is classified for Overseers only," stated Sir James. "If you want the information, get me the liquid. That is my price."

"I'll pass that along," Harper said, wondering what exactly the professor wanted that he himself couldn't know about. "One last question, which has little bearing on this investigation beyond my own curiosity."

"Ask away."

"The painting over your mantle," began Harper, "has been bothering me since I came in. I recognize the waterfall, but I can't place it."

Sir James smiled. "That's Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, made

famous by the stories of Sherlock Holmes. I was born not far from there, as a matter of fact, which is why I have dual citizenship. My maternal grandfather, also a mathematician I might add, actually met the good doctor when he visited Reichenbach prior to writing *The Final Problem*. I have an autographed first edition of that book upstairs."

"Thank you for satisfying my curiosity, Sir James," Harper said, shaking hands with Sir James. The professor's grip was strong and firm, clearly a relic of his days as a boxer.

"Not at all, my dear Tim," Sir James said. He picked up the hand bell from the desk and shook it deftly. There was a peculiar ring, not seeming to come from the bell itself, but before Harper could reflect on this, the door opened. "Deeds, please see Mr. Harper out."

"Yes, sir." As the butler led Harper out, he was already thinking through his phone call to Seven.

« **Part III** | **HUB** | **Part V** »

Conspiracy, Part IX

Assassination

Global Occult Coalition North American Regional Headquarters, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1030 hours local time

Like much of official Washington, the GOC's Washington Headquarters Building was only staffed by a relatively small caretaker shift on this cold Christmas morning. Of course, there is always some crisis brewing somewhere, and today was no different. The staff that was on duty had realized something important was going on when Regional Director Strauss *and* Regional Deputy Director Bain had arrived bright and early on their day off. This realization was reinforced when three more individuals arrived at the nondescript Foggy Bottom office building.

Many people in both organizations realized that the Global Occult Coalition and the Foundation had a complicated relationship. Both had some level of semi-official recognition of their jurisdiction over paranormal affairs, especially in Europe and North America. Both were usually adversarial to the other players on the field, and this shared stance sometimes led to cooperation, though it just as often led to disagreements borne out of the two organization's different philosophies. What most people did not realize, for it was a secret known only to fewer than a hundred individuals in either organization, was that there were official liaison officers who oversaw all officially sanctioned joint efforts. Much like ambassadors between hostile countries, these liaison officers served as a useful pipeline for dialogue, and were accordingly afforded what essentially amounted to diplomatic immunity. In no way were these two liaison officers the *only* individuals in either organization to interact - there were of course plenty of grey and black dealings handled informally by field personnel - but the liaisons offered the administration of both

groups the ability to formally discuss matters of mutual concern.

As such, the guards manning the security checkpoint in the lobby of the GOC's Washington Headquarters Building were unsurprised to see the relatively familiar sight of Foundation Liaison Officer Rhodes. They were surprised by the two people with Rhodes: a petite Japanese woman, whom they recognized as the Foundation's third Overseer, and her powerfully-built bodyguard. O5-3 was the young heiress to a powerful Japanese mining conglomerate who had opted to work for the Foundation rather than the family business. A financial and administrative genius, Three had more than doubled the revenue of the several front companies she had managed for the Foundation prior to her promotion to Overseer.

The Foundation personnel were escorted to a top-floor conference room, where GOC Directors Strauss and Bain were already waiting, along with their own bodyguards. Handshakes and pleasantries were exchanged and all sat to begin their business.

GOC Special Agent Benjamin Arnold had served as the personal bodyguard to GOC Regional Deputy Director Bain for eight years. Recruited from the American Diplomatic Security Service, he possessed the highest security clearance granted by both the American government and the GOC, and passed a polygraph every two months. He had never once been late for work, and had only ever taken a day off to attend the funeral of his twin brother a decade before. He kept to himself during off hours, but was regarded as cordial and efficient by his principal, his superiors, and his coworkers, most of whom owed him money from the office's informal sports pool. Accordingly, Director Strauss' bodyguard saw no reason to watch Arnold, rather than the only person he believed presented a physical threat to his principal, the Foundation bodyguard escorting O5-3.

For his part, Foundation Special Agent Sanchez, O5-3's bodyguard, was doing his best to keep his cool. He hated having to escort Three into the belly of the beast. With his hands held in front of him, he thought to himself that at least the GOC was probably the least likely of the various groups-of-interest to take a potshot at a visiting Overseer, especially in their own headquarters.

As Three began to explain about the recently uncovered plot within the Foundation, now responsible for the deaths of two of her fellow Overseers, and the implications of a security breach not only within the Foundation but also in the GOC, no one noticed what Arnold was doing. Slowly, subtly, he unbuttoned his jacket. Ever so carefully, he reached into his suit coat, and—

—In a flash, Arnold whipped out his pistol. From a distance of less than two meters, he fired a round into the ear of Strauss' bodyguard, who collapsed to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Sanchez blinked in shock and was reaching for his own weapon when Arnold placed a round neatly between the eyes of the Foundation Special Agent. Another bullet entered the back of Director Strauss' head from point-blank range, killing him instantly.

Three's jaw dropped. She was about to utter a cry of confusion when she felt the Foundation Liaison to the GOC shove her to the floor in an attempt to get her out of the line of fire. A sharp pain erupted in her chest, followed swiftly by another in her arm. As her vision faded to black, she heard several more gunshots. And then she was gone.

Cologne/Bonn Airport, Germany
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1845 hours local time

During his layover, Harper was having supper at an upscale bar in the First Class Lounge when a man in plainclothes approached him. "Mr. Timothy Harper?" the man asked.

Instantly on alert, Harper's hand tightened ever so slightly on his steak knife. "Yes," he answered casually.

"I have a message for you," the man said, handing over a sealed envelope. "High priority from Washington."

Harper thanked the man, who left. Opening the message, he saw it was from Seven:

> **TO:** Harper
> **FROM:** O5-7

MESSAGE FOLLOWS:
O5-3 shot by GOC agent at meeting with GOC Regional Director Strauss. Strauss also dead. Deputy RD Bain assumed role as Acting RD. Suspect possible conspirator involvement. Tensions with GOC high. Assume all GOC personnel hostile until further notice.

Return immediately to Command-02 for consultations. SCP-006 liquid transfer approved.
END MESSAGE

Harper swore under his breath. Lighting a cigarette, he started to contemplate how this new turn of events fit into what he already knew.

« Part VIII | HUB | Part X »

Conspiracy, Part V

Demands

Foundation Command-03, Whitehall, UK
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 1300 hours local time

The explosion was predictable. "He wants *what?!*" demanded Seven over the secure telephone line.

Harper took a calming puff on his cigarette and said, "I believe his exact words were 'I require seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 for my research.'"

"Absolutely out of the question," Seven shot back. "Sir James has lost his marbles this time. Did the file on him include details on his failed recruitment?"

"Only that recruitment was attempted and failed back in seventy-one," Harper recalled.

"Sir James' doctoral thesis in mathematics had to do with the binomial theorem, specifically an aspect that was of interest to the Foundation," Seven explained. "We knew he was valuable talent, and we wanted to beat the other groups-of-interest to him. So, a couple of agents were sent to do the usual meet-and-greet. Pretend to be part of the local government's intelligence service, give the pitch, point out that not working with us might be a bad idea…" In other words, Harper knew, extort the prospective employee into working for the Foundation. Not one of the organization's finer policies, but at least the Foundation tried to handle it with a velvet glove, unlike many of its rival organizations.

"So what happened?" Harper inquired.

Seven scoffed, "He laughed in the agents' faces. He told them he

knew they worked for the Foundation, and that he wasn't interested in being one of our 'lab coat wearing canon fodder' before having his butler forcibly remove them from the premises. Apparently, he thought working for us would be 'boring,' but he offered to 'consult from time to time' if we had 'some interesting challenge' our researchers couldn't figure out."

Harper was flabbergasted. "I bet that went over well."

"You wouldn't believe the shitstorm that kicked up," Seven confirmed. "We believed the man thought that just because he was on a first name basis with the Prime Minister that he could ignore us. The Overseer who was handling recruitment in those days was all set to authorize a coercion operation to ensure Sir James' cooperation when we found out that the Chaos Insurgency had beaten us to the punch."

"Oh?" asked Harper.

"They sent a squad of a dozen ex-black-ops thugs to abduct him in the middle of the night," Seven said. "According to our intel - and the GOC's intel agreed, by the way - he was home alone. Nobody knows for sure exactly what happened, or how Sir James pulled it off, but three days later the heads of each of the hit squad members arrived in the mail to each of the various organizations dealing with the paranormal (the Insurgency, the Foundation, the GOC, all of them)." Harper gagged slightly - he had a strong stomach, but this had come out of left field. Apparently, Seven had heard him, because she continued, "It gets better. Each parcel had a hand written note from Sir James, stating that he was not interested in working for a particular organization, but would 'happily consult on any puzzles we have that struck his fancy.'"

The counterintelligence officer massaged his temples. If the world made sense, such behavior would have been nipped in the bud. Working for the Foundation, however, quickly hammered home that the world does not make sense. "So then what?" he asked.

"Everyone backed off," Seven replied. "Cooler heads prevailed in the Foundation and GOC, realizing it wasn't worth the loss of personnel and resources to bag this guy when he openly admitted to

being willing to consult, while the Serpent's Hand and Chaos Insurgency were both sufficiently cowed by his rather spectacular display of cruelty to stand down."

"'For this has to be noted,'" Harper quoted, "'that men should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones; so the offense one does to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it.'"

Seven chuckled, "I see you've read Harvey Mansfield's recent translation. Most people would quote the better known verse: 'The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two.' Sir James has a first edition of the original in his library."

Harper moved the conversation from the philosophical and historical back to the business at hand, "While that is interesting, and perhaps explains the apparent arrogance of the professor's demand, what is the problem with double-oh-six? Besides the Foundation's general policy of not handing SCPs out?" A policy, Harper didn't say (since both were aware), the Foundation was willing to overlook if the circumstances were sufficiently dire or the price was high enough. It was a dirty little secret known only to the tiniest of the upper echelon of the staff; a secret remarkably well protected, considering the gossip such things would normally attract in a bureaucracy. Of course, it probably helped that the Foundation essentially never actually broke the stated policy. And that the slightest whisper of a rumor about a time when the Foundation *did* give an SCP to someone else generally resulted in the person doing the whispering being purged so thoroughly Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria would have been proud. It is unwise to make an organization controlling reality-warping entities decide that it would be best if you no longer existed.

There was brief silence on the line as the Overseer considered her answer. "Mr. Harper, SCP-006 is one of the most dangerous items the Foundation controls. Its existence is only known to a select handful of Level 5 personnel and the staff directly involved in handling it. Only the current Overseers are permitted to know the exact details of zero-zero-six," she explained. "Here is what you need to know: you should consider it Keter. Over time it produces

limited quantities of one of the most deadly toxins known to humanity. This thing is so dangerous any procedure in which liquid is acquired from zero-zero-six requires at least three Overseers to sign off on it, and any personnel who come into direct contact with either the liquid or the item itself have to be terminated by incineration."

"In short, it is nasty stuff," Harper said. "So, what could Sir James want with this?"

"Whatever it is, it's not good," Seven said. She sighed. "I'll talk with the other Overseers about this. I've had a number of dealings with Sir James before myself. I don't trust anyone with this stuff, but I suspect he's less likely to abuse it than most. In any case, it's a moot point. Because of my dealings with him, I'd need to recuse myself from the release authorization: so, unless none of the other leads he gave you pan out *and* I can convince three other Overseers to approve *and* the rest of the Council doesn't veto it, the professor will have to do without."

"And that is about as likely as six-eighty-two keeling over from a heart attack," Harper remarked dryly.

"In the meantime, Mr. Harper, I want you to go check on five-five-seven and one-four-four-zero," Seven instructed. "You'll be on the next flight to Research Site-29 in Oman."

Harper quietly objected, "With all due respect, ma'am, tomorrow is Christmas, and the tenth anniversary of my family's passing."

"Right," Seven apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harper. I had forgotten. I know this is not a pleasant thing to ask of you. I also know Christmas is the only day of the year you ask to take off. And I hope you know that I am deeply sorry for your loss. But this conspiracy is a very serious threat to the Foundation, and by extension—"

"—To everything else," the counterintelligence officer acknowledged sadly. He sighed. He knew, in its own way, that a conspiracy like this one was as large a threat as the Foundation ever faced, even if the science types thought a rampaging gecko was a bigger concern. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Alright. But I will arrange my own

flight. I am going to take time to stop by St. Paul's Cathedral to light a candle for my family, since I can't do it at the National Cathedral like I do every year."

"Very well," Seven acquiesced. "Who knows when you'll next be near a Church. I'll pass along your update to Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel, and have them attempt to track down SCP-1440. Good luck in Oman." She disconnected.

Putting down the receiver, Harper leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face with his hands. This sort of thing brought back bad memories: putting work before family.

In the next room, the office staff wondered what had caused the visiting Level 5 VIP to swear so loudly they could hear it through the soundproofed walls.

« Part IV | HUB | Part VI »

Conspiracy, Part VI

The Hunt

Foundation Research Site-29, Northwest Oman
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0300 hours local time

The helicopter touched down at the edge of the base camp for Research Site-29. It wasn't much to look at, just a standard perimeter fence, a few large tents, and a prefabricated watchtower with a searchlight and heavy machine gun. Razor wire and a minefield fifty meters deep had been deployed around the perimeter. These security measures would be improved as the site was developed further. According to the file, the site had only been constructed a few months before, after SCP-557 had been discovered by an investigation into a missing geological survey team.

Harper stepped off the helicopter and was met by two men. One was a short man with glasses, dressed in khakis and clutching a Stetson to his head. The other was an enormous, barrel-chested Arab wearing an impressive black beard and desert camouflage.

"You must be the VIP I was told to expect," shouted the shorter man, an American, based on his accent. "Dr. Nick Ford, Site Director. This is Colonel Ali El-Hashem, Site Security Chief."

"Tim Harper, Foundation Counterintelligence," yelled Harper. He followed the two men into the nearby command tent as the helicopter shut down.

The tent was mostly empty (unsurprising, given the hour); a radio operator sat in the corner reading a book. "Lieutenant, go get a cup of coffee," boomed El-Hashem in a deep, resonant baritone. The tech jumped to his feet and scurried out. Rounding on Harper, the

Colonel asked ominously, "Is there a problem with my security?"

"Now, Colonel," objected Dr. Ford, "that's no way to welcome our guest. I'm sure that's not why—"

"The Hell it's not!" bellowed El-Hashem. "Why else would a Level 5 counterintelligence officer arrive at my site at oh-dark-thirty?"

"It's quite alright," Harper said quietly. "I am not aware of any inadequacies in your security measures, nor am I aware of any problems with your staff." The giant Arab deflated, but looked slightly relieved.

Dr. Ford asked, "So, Agent Harper, what does bring you out to Research Site-29 in the middle of the night?"

"Just 'Mister'," Harper corrected gently. "I'm not an agent. I'm here because I have reason to believe a person-of-interest is intending to use SCP-557-1 in a plot against the Foundation."

Ford and El-Hashem shared a worried look. "Dash-one isn't contained," Ford said. "We aren't even sure what it is."

"Wasn't that in the file?" El-Hashem asked.

"I read both the files on SCP-557 and Research Site-29 on my flight," Harper explained, "but they both only had preliminary findings. I'm going to guess they haven't been updated yet, since the site's so new."

Ford nodded, "That makes sense. I suppose I should go ahead and give you the nickel tour." He and Harper left the command tent and strode across the compound. At the center, there was a stone structure maybe ten meters in height. They entered through a rough hole in the side, perhaps two meters tall.

The room was an ancient library. Dusty shelves lining the walls held rolls of papyrus. A table had been set up in the middle of the room, where researchers could examine and translate the scrolls and other artifacts. "This is Level 1," explained Ford. "There are five underground levels total, which is unusual for structures of this design. The structure itself is an Umm an-Nar era tomb, which we

think was built somewhere in the twenty-fourth century BC. We've not had a chance to do a thorough sweep of the surrounding countryside yet, so there may be more ruins out there. Historically there was a trade route through this area and a (now lost) city named Ubar or Irem, depending on the language. The desert eventually swallowed both the city and the trade route. Now, the scrolls we've found here on Level 1 are written in a number of ancient languages. So far, we've identified Greek, Old Egyptian, Sumerian, and Akkadian. We've only begun translating."

"Anything about dash-one?" asked Harper.

"Maybe. We're still working on translating. We've pulled all the records we can identify that we think might refer to dash-one and are prioritizing those," Ford replied, gesturing to the several dozen scrolls littering the work table. He searched for a second, found a specific sheet of modern loose-leaf paper, and handed it over. "This is the translation of the only document in here written in Greek. Radiocarbon dating indicates it was the most recent addition to the library, from around 300 AD."

> I will write in Greek, so that any learned man who finds this place will understand. I am the last of the Keepers, and I will be dead soon. The sands are taking this place, and perhaps it is for the best. The prisoner must not escape, and the gateway to the dark must never be opened. I do not think the gate can be moved, but who knows of the prisoner? Not even the Gods could kill it, and it was only with their help that he was secured. Without the rituals, I do not know. Secure the door the best you can, and never move the stone.

"That's charming," Harper remarked after finishing the note.

"Yep," Ford agreed. "We don't know if that's talking about dash-one, but it could be. Dash-one wasn't the only thing held here." He paused. "Anyway, in the several rooms on Level 1, there are living quarters and Bronze and Iron Age weaponry for a relatively large contingent of individuals, possibly the 'Keepers' mentioned in the note. We only found two skeletons on this Level, so we think the facility was abandoned over time."

Ford led Harper down a flight of stone stairs. A long corridor with small stone cells stretched into the distance. "This is Level 2. According to the records, Levels 2 and 3 were a prison for 'heretics and sorcerers.' We didn't find any evidence of the cells being occupied. They seem to have not been used for perhaps a thousand years before the structure was abandoned."

"Any idea who these heretics and sorcerers were?" asked Harper.

"None whatsoever," Ford replied as the two men descended to Level 4. "We don't even know who the Keepers were."

Level 4 looked similar to Levels 2 and 3, except there was more evidence of the Foundation's archeological team. "This is Level 4, described by the records as 'a place for the abnormal.' This appears to have been used up though the facility's abandonment," Ford explained.

"What sort of abnormal?" Harper inquired.

"Well, we've found a variety of skeletons in the cells here, which match several known SCPs. Dr. Bhala has positively matched remains to what looks like SCP-439, SCP-610, and a couple of beasties that crawled out of SCP-354 - oh, don't worry, all the remains are completely inert," Ford said, seeing the mixture of concern and horror on Harper's face. "There are also a number of skeletons unlike anything my team has seen before. From what we can tell, each cell was custom-fortified for its occupant, unlike the cells in the upper levels."

"Sounds like someone doing our job," Harper remarked.

Ford nodded, "Well, in general societies have had ways of dealing with the supernatural. Today, we have the Foundation and the GOC, containing and destroying things, respectively. In the Middle Ages, the Church (both Catholic and Orthodox) worked pretty hard to either harness those objects that they could explain in ways to fit their theological beliefs or to destroy those which didn't. This structure is just an ancient site for some now long-forgotten analogue to the Foundation."

"You said there were five levels," Harper said.

"Yes," Ford confirmed. He handed Harper a flashlight and hardhat. "Be careful when we're down there. There are a lot of traps and deadfalls. We think we've located and sprung or cleared them all, but I've lost four D-class, two researchers, and a security guard all since we initially thought we'd cleared them."

"Like something out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," Harper remarked dryly.

"Worse," Ford warned. "Not only are these real and not movie magic, many of them are far more sophisticated than I've seen in any other tombs. Do not touch anything. Spots which are confirmed as safe to step have been marked in white tape. Red tape indicates spots you should not step."

"White good, red bad," Harper repeated. "Understood."

The two men walked down the stairs. Level 5 appeared to be a single empty hallway, perhaps fifty meters long. At regular intervals, the researcher staff had positioned battery-powered lanterns. The floor and wall were dotted with red and white tape. Here and there, deep pits in the floor dropped out of sight, invisible to even the most attentive observer if not for the red warning tape. Slowly and cautiously, Ford and Harper crept forward.

After an eternity, they reached the end of the corridor. A giant door lay in pieces across the end of the hallway, apparently torn down and smashed from the inside. "This is the entrance to Room 501," Ford explained. "The door was like this when we arrived. It's constructed of a variety of metal alloys whose formula I won't bore you with, but the metallurgy necessary to make them is something that shouldn't have been possible until the middle twentieth century."

"BC?" Harper asked.

"No, the middle twentieth century *AD*," Ford said. "One of the key parts of the primary alloy was depleted uranium. And yet this door appears to be as old as the structure itself. We have no idea how it was made forty-four centuries before it ordinarily could have been.

In any case, our best estimates suggest the door wasn't broken until sometime in the last ten years or so. Whatever was inside - what we've designated SCP-557-1 - got out."

"That can't be good," Harper said.

"It gets better," Ford said. "That door is, or was, three cubits thick. Sorry, about a meter and a half. Ancient Egyptian measurement. Anyway. Dr. Morales analyzed the fracture pattern. This thing was broken in just one physical blow. There aren't many things that can exert that sort of physical force, even today. Colonel El-Hashem has a demolition tech who estimates he'd have trouble rigging a charge to destroy the door that wouldn't rebound the shock-wave into the chamber and kill anything inside."

Ford ushered the counterintelligence officer inside. Room 501 was vast, easily twenty meters on a side and over five meters high. The center of the room's floor was covered by a large granite slab covered in runes Harper didn't recognize. A smaller stone block stood in the room. Metal chains hung broken from the smaller stone. "Dash-one was imprisoned here, chained to this stone. The chains are the same material as the door."

Harper let out a low whistle. Whatever SCP-557-1 was, it had been both big and incredibly powerful. "So, we have no idea what it was?"

"Most of the records haven't been translated yet," Ford replied. "What we've found so far, including on the walls of Room 501 itself, refer to dash-one as simply 'the prisoner.' There is one exception. A single reference in Egyptian refers to it as 'the bastard son of Apep.'"

"Apep?" Harper asked.

"Apep, or Apophis as he was referred to by the Greeks, was the Egyptian deification of darkness and chaos," Ford explained. "He was the personification of all that was evil, seen as a giant serpent or dragon. He wasn't so much worshiped as worshiped against; the ancient Egyptians believed that every night the sun god, Ra, would fight Apep, and if Ra ever lost, the sun would fail to rise again."

"So dash-one is the bastard son of this guy?" Harper asked.

"We don't know, but that's what the one record we've found with any sort elaboration suggests," Ford responded. "Colonel El-Hashem has standing orders to locate and secure dash-one, and to assume it to be Keter until proven otherwise. No luck so far. And you have information that someone has found dash-one? If that's correct, that's very troubling."

Harper nodded, thinking. "Very troubling indeed."

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 2200 hours local time

Muir and Monica huddled around the secure speaker phone. Harper was on the line from the middle of nowhere in Oman, just finishing up his findings.

"So, we're on the lookout for the bastard son of the ancient Egyptian god of chaos and darkness," Monica asked incredulously.

"Welcome to the Foundation," Muir sniped. The intern rolled her eyes at him.

Harper ignored him. "So, I presume Seven told you about 1440? Have you turned anything up?"

"Just to make sure we're on the same page, you have the file last updated 15 June 1987?" Muir asked. It never hurt to double check such things.

There was a pause on the line, the Harper said, "That is correct."

Monica read from some notes she had hastily scribbled on a legal pad earlier that evening. "Mr. Harper, Site-11 doesn't have an exact fix on fourteen-forty's position, but they believe it might be somewhere near Mt. Kazbek in the Caucasus Mountains in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic."

"Who — local contact — ground?" the transmission from Harper asked, fading in and out of static.

"Say again, Tim, we missed that," Muir instructed.

"-said, — is the — -tact on the grou-?" came the reply.

Monica looked at Muir, "He wants to know the contact on the ground."

Muir called into the telephone, "Your contact is Captain Ivan Petrovich Gagarin. He'll meet you in Vladikavkaz."

"Captain — Gagarin — in Vladikavkaz—" crackled the phone, dissolving into static.

"Tim? Harper?!" Muir called, but the connection was dead.

Foundation Research Site-29, Northwest Oman
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0700 hours local time

"Troy? Monica?" yelled Harper into the secure radio set.

The operator looked up apologetically. "Sorry, sir, but we've lost the transmission."

"Looks like a sandstorm is on the way," said another technician on the other side of the command tent. "Coming in from the west, ETA five minutes."

Harper looked at El-Hashem and Ford, "How long do these things last?"

"Hard to tell. Could be hours," the Arab colonel replied.

Harper hoisted his bag. "Is the helo ready to go?"

"Yes, but it'd be better to ride the storm out here," Ford cautioned.

Harper started towards the tent's exit. "Can't waste the time," he said over his shoulder as he stepped outside.

To the east, a towering wall of sand rose kilometers high. Harper ran to the helicopter pad and gestured to the pilot to spin up the bird's engines. Within sixty seconds, they were airborne, racing back towards the city as the research site was engulfed by the sandstorm.

Foundation Observation Post 3-02, [LOCATION REDACTED]
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0300 hours GMT

A red light blinked on and off, annoyingly insistent amongst a sea of green and blue denoting the status of the Foundation's worldwide assets. Probationary Agent Johnson sat up and called up the associated status indicator. He'd gotten a bottom of the barrel assignment, shipped off to the middle of nowhere straight out of training, only arriving the day before.

> **PRIORITY 2 ALERT**
> **Automated Notification:** Research Site-29 communications lost.

"Uh, Agent Marcus? We have a Priority 2. Research Site-29 just lost communications," Johnson said, worried.

"Calm down, Probie," his superior said. "Satellite IMINT shows a sandstorm in that part of Oman. We've had problems every time one of those has come through since we set up shop a few months ago. Landline's still a work in progress."

"So you think the storm is disrupting the radio signal?" Johnson asked.

"Third time this week," Marcus replied, sipping his coffee. "The system log any danger or distress codes before the signal went out?"

Johnson took a moment to call up the relevant data. "Uh, no," he said.

Marcus smiled, "Well, then, Probie, it's probably nothing. Fire off a sitrep and Form CL-287 to HQ and Site-11. As per protocol, if the signal doesn't return after the storm clears, they'll send in an MTF."

Johnson swallowed, and nodded. If Agent Marcus wasn't too worried, he decided he shouldn't be either.

Conspiracy, Part VII

Welcome to Vladikavkaz

Beslan Airport, Vladikavkaz, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1200 hours local time

Harper stepped off the Soviet Yakovlev Yak-42 passenger jet expecting to walk to carry his bag to customs at the one-runway airport's tiny terminal building. He did not expect to find himself face-to-face with a group of very angry Soviet Airborne soldiers training assault rifles on him. A stern-faced captain with a thick mustache glared at him.

"Он - американский шпион! Арестуйте его немедленно!" shouted the captain. *"He is an American spy! Arrest him immediately!"* Harper realized the smartest thing to do was say nothing - the Foundation would find out soon enough and get him out of this mess. Two burly soldiers seized Harper's arms while a bag was thrust over his head. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back, and he was marched to a truck.

The ride took about half an hour over some very bumpy dirt roads. Harper was pulled from the truck and half marched, half dragged into a building. He was placed in a rough wooden chair, and the bag was whipped off his head. The room was part of a wooden shack, dark and damp with a dirt floor. The smell of manure drifted in from outside. The mustached captain stood before him.

"My apologies, Mr. Harper. The subterfuge was necessary to preserve appearances for my men, most of whom are conscripts who know nothing of the Foundation. Furthermore, O5 gave me strict orders that I have never heard of you, and you were never here," said the captain in flawless English. "I am Captain Ivan Petrovich Gagarin. Welcome to Vladikavkaz." He looked behind

Harper at a very young lieutenant standing guard. "Снимите кандалы." *"Remove the shackles."* The guard reached down and undid the handcuffs.

"Glad to be here," Harper replied, massaging his wrists. "What's the plan now?"

"I am interrogating the dangerous American spy along with an expert from the GRU," Captain Gagarin explained, pulling out a set of Soviet civilian clothes appropriate for a GRU staff officer and handing them to Harper. "Once we have finished, I will execute the cowardly capitalist pig and have my men bury him out back." He pointed at a misshapen bag about the dimensions of a grown man lying in the corner of the room. "Junior Lieutenant Strelnikov here will then take you, the GRU interrogation expert, back to the airport, by way of wherever you need to go." The lieutenant nodded silently.

Harper nodded and started changing into the offered clothing. He asked, "Captain, do you have my bag somewhere?" The lieutenant left the room briefly and returned with it. As Harper buttoned his Soviet overcoat with one hand, he pulled a file from the bag and thumbed through. Finding the picture he was looking for, he asked, "Captain, this is SCP-1440. I need to speak with him."

"Ah, yes, Старик из ниоткуда, the Old Man from Nowhere," Gagarin said. "He's one of several entities running around the Caucasus right now. You're in luck, Mr. Harper. He was last sighted a few days ago on the southeastern slopes of Mount Kazbek, just north of Kanobi. It is less than an hour drive from here."

"Perfect," Harper said.

Gagarin turned to Strelnikov and spoke briefly in hushed and rapid-fire Russian, handing over the photograph. The lieutenant nodded. Gagarin turned and pulled out his pistol. He fired two quick shots followed by a third into the floor. "I have just executed the American," he explained. "Товарищ мла́дший лейтена́нт , сопроводите наших гостей до аэропорта!" He barked loudly for the benefit of the soldiers outside. *"Escort our guest to the airport, Comrade Junior Lieutenant!"*

Strelinikov hustled Harper outside to a waiting jeep. He tossed the counterintelligence investigator's bag in the back seat and they sped off southward.

Though paved, the Georgian Military Road along which they traveled was in dire need of maintenance. Racing along at well over a hundred kilometers per hour, Harper hoped their trip wouldn't end ignominiously in a fiery crash after hitting a pothole. The lieutenant's driving was only marginally better than that of the infamous Dr. Gerald.

"You Foundation official?" asked Strelinikov in broken English.

"Yes," Harper replied, also in English. "I'm Harper. I supposed you'd call me Timofey Ivanovich, since my dad's name was John."

"I Dmitri Arkadeyevich," said the soldier. "My English well? I learning in my time free."

"Uh, yes, very," Harper lied. Switching to Russian, he asked, "Do you mind if we speak in Russian? I would like to practice."

Swerving to avoid a goat which had wandered into the middle of the road, Strelinikov nodded, "Very well. Your Russian is most literate."

"Thank you," Harper replied. "So, you are a Foundation agent?"

"Not yet," Strelinikov said. He paused to shout obscenities in *mat* at a farmer leading a donkey down the road. "I am proud to be serving the Motherland. Perhaps I will join the Foundation when I am old and infirm."

Which probably means sometime around your thirtieth birthday, Harper thought to himself. He remembered his brief period in the American army in the early sixties. The false sense of immortality and the bravado that came with it, so common in soldiers everywhere before they were exposed to the true horrors of war.

"In any case," the Russian continued, "Captain Gagarin needs soldiers he can trust."

Harper asked, "Do you know anything about the Old Man from

Nowhere?"

"Only that we are supposed to keep track of his location, and otherwise avoid him at all costs," Strelinikov said. "What do you want with him?"

"That's classified," the American replied. The Russian grunted in annoyance, but said nothing. Truth be told, Harper wasn't sure himself. SCP-1440 was dangerous to any man-made object or human who remained in extended close contact with it, according to the Foundation's file.

Half an hour later, the jeep came to a stop at the end of a dirt road halfway up the mountain. "This is as far as I am allowed to take you," Strelinikov said. He pointed at a ridge a half kilometer away. "The Old Man should be up there. I will remain here with the jeep until sundown." By Harper's estimate, that gave him about four and a half hours before he had to be back. He set off up the mountainside.

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0630 hours local time

Monica prodded Muir awake. He'd fallen asleep at his desk, looking over the finances of the assistant clerk for O5-2. "Coffee?" asked the intern, offering a mug.

"Thanks," Muir grunted.

"Merry Christmas," Monica said.

Muir nodded, "Back at you. Any word on Tim?"

Monica nodded, "The watch office in the basement got word from Agent Gagarin. He's safe and sound. Looks like it was just a sandstorm disrupting communications."

"Yeah," yawned Muir. "Figured. I did a tour in Yemen a while back - sandstorms aren't fun. Back to work, then." He picked up another file, this one on O5-6's primary bodyguard, and started to read.

Foundation Observation Post 3-02, [LOCATION REDACTED]
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1130 hours GMT

The red light was still blinking. Johnson walked over to the meteorology console and called up Oman. The storm had cleared out several hours before. "Uh, Agent Marcus? Research Site-29 is still off the grid," he called.

"Did the sandstorm clear yet? Those things can—" started Marcus.

"Yes, sir, I just checked. It cleared up about three hours ago," Johnson said.

Marcus swore, "And you're only telling me this now? Please tell me you've been checking every hour." Johnson's face fell. "You haven't. Dammit Probie! Get on the horn and scramble the nearest MTF."

« Part VI | HUB | Part VIII »

Conspiracy, Part VIII

Puzzles

Mount Kazbek, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1545 hours local time

Harper found SCP-1440 seated cross-legged on a flat rock, a worn set of playing cards arrayed before it. The Old Man from Nowhere, as SCP-1440 was informally called in the folklore surrounding him, was a tired-looking old man with sad eyes, a deeply-lined face, and a bristly silver beard. He wore the simple attire of a peasant, with a thick but fraying wool coat and a fur cap. His breath froze in his whiskers, conjuring up an image of Grandfather Frost in Harper's mind.

"Good day, Grandfather," Harper said Russian. "May I join you?"

The old man looked up. "Good day. I have nothing to offer but a hard cold rock to sit on, but if you wish to join me, you are welcome," he said in the same language; Harper couldn't quite place the accent. "Though I suggest you may not wish to keep my company for long."

"Because of the Three Brothers," Harper said.

"Indeed," the old man said, eying him shrewdly. "Have we met before, my son?"

"No, Grandfather, never before, though I have heard tales of you," Harper said. Gesturing at the cards, he asked, "What is this you play?"

"Oh, merely a game to pass the time before I must continue on my journey," the old man explained. "It is called Grandfather's Clock. I imagine, however, you did not seek me out in this lonely spot merely

to discuss a card game."

Harper nodded, "This is true, Grandfather. I am a member of the Foundation."

"Again you seek me out? After the pestilence and destruction that followed me to you?" the old man asked sadly. "You failed to kill me when I came to you before, and you tempted me with a 'cure' for my condition. You cannot 'cure' a man who is cursed by the Three Brothers of Death themselves."

"Forgive me, Grandfather," Harper interrupted, "but who mentioned a 'cure'? I merely wished to ask you questions."

"So you know nothing of the woman," the old man said, frowning.

Harper asked, "What woman?"

"A young, pretty thing," the old man replied, staring into memory. "Dark hair, with a face like a hawk and eyes like a wolf. She came to me not a week ago, offering me a 'cure' for my condition, if I went with her to the city. I declined - I must bear this curse, but I do not wish it upon mankind."

"What happened next?" Harper asked.

"She went away," the old man said wistfully. "Like everyone always goes away." A tear ran down his cheek and disappeared into his beard.

"I cannot stay long," Harper said, "but I think I can stay long enough that we might eat and drink together, Grandfather." A weary smile lifted the corners of the old man's mustache as Harper produced a bottle of vodka, some sliced roast beef, and a small handful of candies from his bag.

And so the two sat and ate and spoke of random things in the cold mountain air of the Caucasus for nearly an hour, before Harper took his leave to return to Strelinikov and the jeep.

O5-11's personal vacation cabin, Maine

Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0659 hours local time

The Foundation's eleventh Overseer was a portly African-American in his seventies. He had worked his way up through the Foundation's temporal sciences department, before eventually being promoted to Overseer.

Like all of the Overseers, Eleven had been paying close attention to the counterintelligence investigation that Seven had been directing. Always known for his carefully thought-out opinion, Eleven was one of the swing votes on the O5 Council, mediating between the faction that wanted to pursue caution, aware of the dangers a counterintelligence "fishing expedition" that could turn into a witch hunt, and the faction that wanted to aggressively dismantle what could be one of the most major conspiracies in Foundation history. Eleven had kept his comments to himself during the several emergency meetings that had occurred in the past week, in no small part because he himself was unsure of what course to pursue. He was out of his element with all the cloak and dagger hall of mirrors shit. No, he preferred dealing with simple scientific problems, like how to keep the Foundation's several dozen spacetime-altering objects from causing a cascading, reality-destroying paradox.

Eleven had never been particularly good at remembering his medication, especially when he was under stress. His doctor had complained about his high blood pressure, and, as usual, Eleven had paid lip service by taking the prescribed medication. When he remembered. The combination of age, high blood pressure, stress, and a family history of heart disease meant that the elderly gentleman would never awaken this Christmas morning, having expired of a heart attack in his sleep.

At precisely 0700 hours, Eleven's bodyguard entered his room to wake his principal. When Eleven failed to rouse, the bodyguard checked for a pulse, and then issued a Code Red over his radio to the security staff in attendance. The Foundation had lost a second Overseer in less than a week.

Interlude

O5-11 is dead.

That was not part of the plan, but it may yet be useful.

Is the operation in Oman complete?

Yes. Our forces left one survivor. He is not one of ours, but he will be suspected.

And what of the creature?

Our experts believe we have what we need. It will only be a matter of time.

Good. Move the timetable forward.

The Game's Afoot

Beslan Airport, Vladikavkaz, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1800 hours local time

Harper was about to board his flight to Bonn when Captain Gagarin ran up to him, holding an envelope. "This just came in secure from Command," Gagarin panted.

Harper thanked him and tore it open. It was a message from O5-7:

> **TO:** Harper
> **FROM:** O5-7
> **MESSAGE FOLLOWS:**
> O5-11 dead, suspect conspirator involvement.
> RS-29 overrun by forces unknown, Dr. Ford only survivor. Suspect Ford is traitor, in transit to Command-02 for questioning.
> Recommend immediate return to Command-02 for consultations.

END MESSAGE

I guess I'm going to Washington, Harper thought, pocketing the message. "Comrade Gagarin, please call ahead to Bonn to arrange for a connecting flight to Washington, D.C.," he said. Gagarin saluted smartly, and set off. *The plot thickens*, Harper thought. *The game's afoot: Follow your spirit, and upon this charge Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'*

« Part VII | HUB | Part IX »

Conspiracy, Part X

Aftershocks

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 0755 hours local time

When Harper arrived at Command-02 on Monday morning, the tension in the air was palpable. Security was heightened beyond anything he could remember in the nearly thirty years he'd worked for the Foundation, and he knew the platoon of heavy-weapons-bearing mobile task force personnel present in the building lobby paled in comparison to the security that was hidden out of sight. When he finally reached the head of the line to the security checkpoint, the attending guard pulled him aside. "Mr. Harper, you're needed on the seventh floor, sir," the stern-faced guard said. "Now."

A short elevator trip later, not even stopping to put his hat, coat, and briefcase in his office, Harper walked into the same secure conference room he had been in the preceding Thursday. Once again, Seven was waiting for him. The strain of the past several days had visibly taken its toll on the Overseer: she had shadows under her eyes, and her raven hair was beginning to come loose from her usually immaculate bun. "Mr. Harper, the situation is dire," she said, trying and failing to keep the stress and sleep deprivation from her voice.

Harper nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

"How much do you know?" Seven asked, her green eyes boring into him.

Harper coughed, "Apart from your two messages, I've been out of the loop since I left Research Site-29. When I arrived this morning, I

was told you needed to see me immediately, so I didn't stop by my office to get updated." He gestured at his coat and briefcase, which he had laid upon the nearest chair.

"Very well," she breathed, turning to look out the tinted window at the Capital Building. "Two more Overseers are dead. Eleven died in his sleep of an apparent heart attack. The timing is too suspicious for it to be an accident; our experts are looking into the possibility that he was poisoned. It's a long shot, since there are plenty of poisons we're unlikely to discover postmortem. Three was assassinated while she was meeting with Regional Director Strauss and Deputy Director Bain for the GOC. The Coalition's Regional Director was also killed, as were both his and Three's bodyguards. Our liaison officer to the GOC is in the hospital, though he is expected to survive."

Harper asked, "Did they manage to catch the assassin?"

"No," spat Seven. "Not alive anyway. He was the bodyguard for the Regional Deputy Director, a man named Benjamin Arnold. Bain killed Arnold during the shootout, and is now apparently Acting Regional Director."

"Do we know why Arnold started killing everyone in sight?" Harper asked.

"The Coalition is claiming no knowledge, and pointing fingers at the Chaos Insurgency," Seven replied. "I have Intel running down leads. Though we've seen no evidence to suggest the Chaos Insurgency is the mastermind for the ongoing plot, they certainly seem to have their hands dirty. The MTF that secured Research Site-29 said it looked like the Insurgency was responsible for that, as well."

"Has there been any progress questioning Dr. Ford?" asked the counterintelligence officer.

The Overseer shook her head. "Zimmerman has been questioning him down in the basement."

"Zimmerman is a brutish, sadistic thug who couldn't get a useful answer if his life depended on it," Harper objected.

"Agent Zimmerman is one of our most experienced enhanced interrogation—" began Seven.

"He's a cold-blooded sadist!" Harper snapped. "Jesus Christ, you might as well have shot Ford and gotten it over with! *Torture. Does. Not. Work!* People will say anything to stop the pain, truthful or not, so you can't trust any of it without independent confirmation, which if you can get you shouldn't have tortured the guy in the first place!"

Seven turned to face Harper, her gaze icy. Speaking softly, she said, "So be it. *You* will be responsible for Ford's questioning." Taking a deep breath, the counterintelligence officer nodded. Seven continued, "Most of the O5 Council is running scared. With three Overseers killed in the past week, the surviving members of the Council voted five-four (I abstained) in favor of transferring seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 to Sir James. In exchange, he has provided us with the coordinates of a warehouse in Finland where he believes C's objects are stored. MTF Xi-13 is on route as we speak. In short, that is what has occurred since you left Oman. Now, what are your findings?"

Harper began, "Well, nothing seemed out of place at Research Site-29 while I was there. According to what Dr. Ford's team had been able to translate, SCP-557-1 - the entity formerly held by 557 - could cause some real damage."

"What do we know of 557-1?" Seven inquired.

Harper said, "Not much. Translations are, uh, were, I suppose, ongoing. Most of the records only refer to it as 'the prisoner,' though one refers to it as 'the bastard son of Apep.'"

"And now the Chaos Insurgency has access to all our research on SCP-557," Seven sighed. "Wonderful. And SCP-1440?"

"He was apparently approached by a mysterious young woman who offered to 'cure' him," Harper responded. "He declined, and she left."

"Do you think this woman could be C?" asked Seven.

"We have no way of knowing," Harper said. "We have no physical

description of C to compare."

"Anything else?" asked the Overseer.

Shaking his head, Harper replied, "No, ma'am."

"Very well," she said. "That will be all. Keep me informed - I want status updates every time you have a major new development. That will be all." Harper nodded, collected his coat, and left.

Helsinki waterfront, Finland
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1500 hours local time

Foundation Armed Rapid Response Task Force Xi-13 sped through the heavily falling snow across the icy waters of Helsinki's harbor. In their winter camouflage and white-gray speedboats, only the most perceptive of observers would have been able to see them through the blizzard, and their boats' engine sounds were indistinguishable from the port's usual traffic. They had deployed from the *SCPS Kraken*, which waited out in international waters.

Agent Price, Xi-13's executive officer and field commander, knew only slightly more than his men. Orders From The High Muckitymucks had come down instructing his team to secure a waterfront warehouse at a set of GPS coordinates that turned out to be in the Finnish capital. Apparently, some member of MC&D had a stash of artifacts stolen from the Foundation there. That is, if the little vague intelligence he'd been given was correct. Resistance was expected to be somewhere between "non-existent" and "heavy," the report had indicated. *Right, that was helpful*, Price thought.

A month and a half earlier, the United States government formally acknowledged that the aerospace corporation Lockheed Martin had designed and built a single-seat, twin-engine stealth ground-attack aircraft for the USAF, designated the F-117 "Nighthawk." Production numbers would remain classified for years to come, but those with clearance into the program knew that a total of sixty-four Nighthawks had been built, with five prototypes and fifty-nine production versions. At least, that's what the Department of Defense's numbers recorded. In fact, Lockheed had built another five production

versions under secret contract for the Global Occult Coalition. Unbeknownst to Agent Price, or anyone else in Helsinki for that matter, one of the GOC's Nighthawks was lining up for a bombing run on the warehouse Xi-13 was rapidly approaching. With a radar cross section equivalent to a large bird, not even the Finnish air defense forces realized the presence of the intruder.

"Lombardi! Bring us alongside the dock!" barked Price. Xi-13's speedboats raced in formation towards the target.

The GOC F-117 opened its bomb bay doors. Two GPS guided thermobaric weapons, more commonly known as "fuel-air bombs", each weighing in at 1,150 kilograms (or 2,500 pounds) fell silently towards the warehouse.

The Foundation speedboats slowed abruptly as they reached the dock. The troops were about to leap ashore when the Nighthawk's bombs reached their target.

Thermobaric weapons consist of a container of fuel and two separate explosive devices. When the bombs entered the warehouse by crashing through the metal roof, the first explosive charge on both bombs burst open the fuel container. The fuel, now free to mix with atmospheric oxygen, was rapidly accelerated outward in all directions, creating a cloud which almost completely filled the interior of the warehouse, flowing around the crates stored within and the small security force concealed inside to protect the stored goods. A fraction of a second later, the second explosive charge for each bomb went off. These explosives, though tiny by themselves, detonated the now-oxidized cloud of fuel. The fireball, reaching temperatures well in excess of 2,500 degrees Celsius, incinerated the warehouse's contents and inhabitants in fifty milliseconds, one eighth of the time required for a human to blink. The overpressure of the explosion reached three megapascals, or 430 pounds per square inch, over forty times the pressure necessary to severely damage buildings constructed of reinforced concrete. The warehouse, built out of little more than sheet metal over steel girders, was quite literally blown apart by the blast wave. Less than a second later, the burning gases that made up the explosion began to cool, causing the pressure to drop abruptly. This created a partial vacuum, further increasing the devastation as

debris was sucked into the still hellish conditions of the explosion.

The blast wave from the explosion, traveling at nearly ten times the speed of sound, rocked the Foundation task force's boats, knocking the entire platoon off its feet. Though it critically injured a full half of the MTF (every agent was injured to some extent), the blast wave actually saved many of their lives by keeping them from being killed either by the outward-moving fireball or by the powerful backdraft. It was later determined that only six members of Xi-13 were killed in the event: four instantly and two later due to injuries sustained.

Agent Lombardi was one of the least injured. As he got to his feet and surveyed his surroundings, he realized that Agent Price was down. Looking around, he couldn't see any of the MTF's senior agents showing any sign of consciousness. With the target warehouse and its precious contents now a twisted pile of burning rubble, the junior agent decided some REMF intel puke had really FUBARed this time. Grabbing the boat's long-range radio set, Lombardi fired off a situation report to the *SCPS Kraken*, calling for immediate backup and medical assistance, and letting the astonished ship's captain know that it would only be a matter of minutes before the Finnish authorities were swarming all over the scene.

« **Part IX** | **HUB** | **Part XI** »

Conspiracy, Part XI

Interrogation

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 0830 hours local time

Harper had only just removed his coat and set down his briefcase when Monica walked in, holding a message. "FLASH traffic from Finland, Mr. Harper," she said. "Xi-13 reached C's warehouse in Helsinki, only to have it blow up in their faces."

Muir swore loudly. Harper pursed his lips and said, "Have the watch office keep us apprised of the situation." Monica nodded and left.

Harper turned to Muir. "Feel like doing an interrogation?"

"Sure," Muir replied, pulling his artificial leg off his desk with a dull thunk. "Who're we talking to?"

"Nick Ford," Harper replied. "He's down in The Dungeon. Be warned, Zimmerman's been at him already."

Muir shook his head, "That gorilla? Will the administration never learn?"

The two men took the elevator down to Basement Level 5. Nicknamed "The Dungeon" by Command-02's staff, it housed the humanoid containment cells and interrogation facilities. As a Foundation Command, 02 was only permitted to house SCPs classified as "Safe" (one of the key reasons for having another Command so geographically near Overwatch HQ was because *that* facility and its staff was strictly forbidden from having any direct contact with SCPs; Command-02 served as a useful middle ground). Because of the restrictions on what entities could be housed at Command-02, The Dungeon generally housed non-anomalous

security risks, such as a researcher believed of selling the Foundation out to the Chaos Insurgency.

At the security desk, Harper and Muir checked in, confirming the transfer of authority to Harper from Zimmerman for Dr. Ford. "How do you want to play this, Tim?" asked Muir. The fact Zimmerman had tortured Ford invalidated the possibility of doing Good Cop, Bad Cop.

"I met him in Oman," Harper said. "You handle it as you see fit, and I'll only come in if necessary." Muir nodded as they entered the observation room. Looking through the one-way mirror, they saw their subject.

Dr. Nicholas Ford, formerly Director for Foundation Research Site-29, was a broken man. Bruised and bloodied, his left eye swollen and missing three fingernails on his right hand, he sat naked and chained to a cold steel chair in the center of the interrogation room. There were scars on his genitals and nipples where electrodes had been attached. He was sobbing quietly.

Picking up the telephone handset in the observation room, Muir called for a physician and a set of clothes. Two minutes later, he and the medical doctor walked into the interrogation chamber. "Dr. Ford, I am Troy Muir," said the former field spook. "Let's get you cleaned up. Can I offer you a glass of water?" Ford nodded weakly. As the physician began tending to Ford's injuries, Muir held a glass of water with a straw to the man's lips. With that simple act of kindness, Muir established himself as a fellow human being who cared about the welfare of the subject, rather than a monster to be feared and hated. Within twenty minutes, Ford was bandaged, dressed, and beginning to feel some personal dignity again. "Dr. Ford, do you think you could tell me about what happened at Research Site-29?" Muir asked as the physician left. "Are you up to that?"

"I think so," rasped Ford. He took a sip of water.

"Take all the time that you need," Muir said gently.

Slowly, Ford explained how, just after Harper left, the sandstorm had overtaken the site. Nobody had realized anything was wrong until

masked men with AK-47s had burst into the command tent. The one who seemed to be the leader had pointed at Ford. He'd been taken through the storm to SCP-557, where he'd been tied up in one of the cells on Level 2. It had taken him hours got get untied and out of the cell, by which point the storm had passed. The facility's staff was all shot or missing. Additionally, all the scrolls and translations believed to relate to SCP-557-1 had been stolen. Then the Foundation mobile task force had shown up and hauled him off on suspicion of being a sleeper agent for the Chaos Insurgency.

"Just to be clear, you have no affiliation with the Chaos Insurgency," Muir asked.

"No! I'm not," Ford responded, tears coming to his eyes. "I've been saying that since I was picked up, but nobody believes me!"

"I believe you," Muir replied soothingly. "I really do. Do you know why they singled you out?"

"No," Ford whimpered. "Like I told Zimmerman, if I knew why, I'd have said."

"Thank you, Dr. Ford," Muir said. "I need to go now to work on clearing this whole thing up, okay?" Ford, still crying, nodded tiredly. Leaving the room, Muir ordered the guards to take Ford back to his cell, but to treat him with all due respect and kindness.

The old adage was right: honey gets one farther than vinegar. Torture, while very effective at getting prisoners to sing like canaries, never *ever* produced good, actionable intelligence. Though Hollywood and writers of pulp spy thrillers insisted on perpetuating the myth to the contrary, students of the history of espionage and interrogation knew that this had always been the case. Not even the Nazis or the Soviets had been able to effectively make it work, efficient as they were at methodically inflicting pain without killing the subject. Unless the goal was to physically and psychologically scar the subject, while turning the interrogator into a callous, unfeeling monster, both of which amounted to actions more punitive than interrogative, there was no reason to torture someone. And yet the Foundation sometimes tried to get information with it anyway. *One more thing I'll change if I'm ever an Overseer*, Harper thought to

himself. Not that that was likely to happen.

As they walked back to their shared office, Harper asked, "You really think he's innocent?"

"Yep," Muir replied. "You?"

"Yes," the counterintelligence officer said. "Old trick, Troy: leave one innocent alive to throw the investigators off the trail of the *real* stooge."

« **Part X** | **HUB** | **Part XII** »

Conspiracy, Part XII

Endgame

The Mall, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1130 hours local time

Harper decided to take an early lunch to clear his head and consider what he knew.

Since Muir's interrogation of Ford, he'd learned the Foundation had managed to cover up the warehouse explosion in Finland as the result of "improperly stored volatile materials." Recovery teams had pulled a number of human remains from the rubble, including the now positively identified body of Lord George Smith-Cumming, a member of the British Parliament and a known member of Marshall, Carter, and Dark. Forensic accountants employed by at least six different agencies, of course including the Foundation, were already examining the late Lord's finances. The preliminary evidence was promising: by all appearances, the illusive C was no longer a concern. Harper had his doubts, but no corroborating evidence to back up his gut feeling.

As Harper strode past the Smithsonian Castle munching on a sandwich bought off a food truck, he was approached by a boy no older than twelve. "Hey Mister!" the boy said, running up to him. "A man paid me five bucks to give this to you!" He pulled a crumpled envelope from his back pocket.

Frowning slightly as he accepted the envelope, Harper thanked the boy, who ran off. He looked around, but recognized no one in the vicinity. His name was written in neat script across the envelope's flap. Tearing it open, the counterintelligence officer discovered it contained a single sheet of paper covered in the same small handwriting.

Dear Tim,

I thank you for your facilitating the delivery of the SCP-006 liquid. It made for a most wonderful Christmas gift. I do apologize for the unorthodox means by which this message was delivered; I believed it unwise to trust either official Foundation channels, or my usual unofficial means for contacting the organization. As I had promised, the following is information that may be of interest to your investigation.

First, as I have already informed the Foundation through official channels, I believe a number of items possessed by C are located in a warehouse on the waterfront in Helsinki, at 60.161 N, 24.903 E. Unless it has been moved sometime in the last 24 hours, you will find the chest, explosive coins, and map there. I give you fair warning that it is quite likely that the Global Occult Coalition knows this, though I did not provide them with the information. Accordingly, I would recommend that your recovery forces exercise haste. By the time your receive this message, the Coalition will certainly have taken steps to deal with the items in question.

Second, someone very powerful within the Foundation is a key conspirator, perhaps even the linchpin of the entire plot. I implore you to *trust no one*, and to be careful when using official lines of Foundation communication. While my sources suggest that neither of your two associates, Mr. Troy Muir nor Ms. Monica Daniel, is involved, it is most certainly possible that my information regarding this conspiracy is incomplete. It is possible anyone could be involved, even someone you have every reason to trust.

Third, though I am certain you already suspected this, the Foundation is not the only institution whose highest levels have been infiltrated. My information suggests there are key conspirators in the Foundation; Global Occult Coalition; the Chaos Insurgency; and Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Ltd. I do not have information to indicate any other organizations contain high-level

conspirators rather than simple agents-in-place for intelligence gathering purposes. My sources indicate that Special Agent Harry Granger of the GOC is unlikely to be a witting conspirator, should you require assistance from that organization, though I can neither guarantee his cooperation, nor his loyalty.

By this point, I imagine you are wondering why someone in my position, with information such as this, would not be doing everything in my power to prevent the success of this conspiracy. While you have no reason to trust me, and, considering the game underfoot every reason to not, I beg your indulgence to allow me to offer two possible explanations: it is an unwise investment strategy to give information for nothing when one can receive payment for it, and I am, in point of fact, doing that which is within my power to disrupt this conspiracy. I am providing you this information and taking my own actions to prevent an outcome which would be, shall we say, "problematic". Of course, you are free to believe what I have told you or not, but I would be a rather destitute information dealer if my clients could not trust my word.

This brings me to my fourth piece of information: the conspiracy's goal. We live in a complex and intricate world; even if the preternatural were nothing more than the fairy tales and horror stories the world-at-large believes them to be (thereby reducing the world's complexity significantly), it would be foolish and arrogant for any individual or small group of persons, no matter how powerful, to believe they could dominate and control the globe. The conspirators know this, and have set their sights lower. The world-at-large is separated from life as the informed few know it by a Veil. This Veil is maintained by a variety of organizations with a variety of motives; it always has been, and it is entirely possible it always will be. Even chaotic and anarchic groups, when provided with access to true paranormal, have a tendency to maintain this Veil, if for no other reason as to

ensure the continued separation of the "haves" and "have-nots", with themselves securely in the former category. In a way little different from the tremendous power afforded those few with the resources to split the atom, the preternatural is a source of power capable of inspiring both awe and terror. It is this power, this awe and terror, I believe the conspirators seek: the capacity to control, if not the world, then the world behind the Veil.

That concludes the information the Foundation purchased when it provided me the liquid from SCP-006. I have two more pieces of information to provide to you, and you alone. If you should choose to disregard my above advice and disclose the aforementioned, I beseech you to not reveal that I have told you what follows.

Your family's death was not accidental.

Investigate the Roosevelt family.

May your continued investigation be met with the best of luck. If I can provide further assistance on this or other matters, do not hesitate to contact me, either directly or by leaving a message for me at the Diogenes Club in London. I have confidence in the Club's discretion in passing secure communications.

Most sincerely,
James Mycroft

Harper was so taken aback by the letter's contents that he scarcely wondered how on earth the eccentric mathematics professor had known that he'd be walking past a particular building at a particular time, given his recent extensive travels. Placing the note in his pocket, he lit a cigarette and walked back to Command-02.

Muir and Monica looked up to see Harper enter the office. Without a word, he grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen and scribbled "ASSUME OFFICE BUGGED, MOVE TO TANK." Silently, the two

nodded. Picking up the several boxes of relevant files, the three of them moved to a room deep in the bowels of the building: The Tank. The Tank was a purpose-built room designed to make electronic surveillance ("bugging", as it was more popularly called) impossible. A variety of active and passive measures were in place, blocking both conventional electronic listening devices and several known anomalous listening techniques. Swept daily, it could be reserved by personnel with Level 4 or Level 5 clearance who were handling particularly sensitive classified materials.

After all the files had been transferred, Harper turned to Monica. "Monica, I need you to run up to the Daly Building in Judiciary Square and pull D.C. Metro's investigation file on a fatal car crash that happened on 25 December 1978 at Dupont Circle," he instructed.

"On it," she said, not questioning the significance of a ten-year old traffic accident to their current investigation. She fished in her bag for the fake credentials identifying her as a junior agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and left.

"What's going on, Tim?" asked Muir.

Producing the note from his pocket, Harper said, "A cutout gave this to me at lunch."

After carefully reading the note, not once but twice, Muir let out a low whistle. "This complicates things," he muttered. "Want me to dig through what we have on the GOC and Chaos Insurgency to see if I can turn anything up?"

Harper nodded. "Sure. Focus on those likely to be involved with anything either unusual or related to the Foundation," he suggested. "The investigation file I sent Monica after—"

"—was for the crash that killed your family," Muir finished. "I knew the date sounded familiar. When she gets back, I'll have her cross-reference the file with everything we've pulled relating to this investigation. Mycroft wouldn't have given you that information if it didn't pertain to this somehow."

"I figured he wasn't just being nice," Harper said. "I'll go pull the Foundation's records on the Roosevelts."

That required a trip down to Central Records, a cavernous labyrinth of yellowing documents larger than most libraries, located in the bottom four floors of the basement. Only Level 5 personnel were permitted to freely traverse the stacks, and in some areas even they needed an escort. Harper thumbed through the card catalog, locating the reference numbers for each personnel or person-of-interest file for individuals from the Roosevelt family. As it turned out, there were a large number relevant individual files, plus a collective file on the entire family. He wrote the numbers on an index card and set off to locate the files.

After a productive forty-five minutes of searching, Harper returned to the tank with a thick stack of files. Muir and Monica were already hard at work poring over their own files, so Harper set down his materials and got to work.

The collective file on the family included a detailed genealogy of the Roosevelt family, reaching back to the two patriarchs (Johannes, head of the Oyster Bay branch of the family, and James Jacobus, head of the Hyde Park branch). Each family member's dates of birth and death, marriages, occupations, and descendants were listed, as was whether or not there was an individual file for that person.

The first individual file on the stack was for Theodore Roosevelt (specifically the one living between 1855 and 1919, as "Theodore" was a name that appeared many times in the family tree). Best known to the world-at-large as the 26th President of the United States, he had also been a friend to the Foundation during the organization's early days in the late 19th century. There were a number of rumors that floated around about him from time to time, that he had helped push the United States into the Spanish-American War on behalf of the Foundation, that the Foundation opposed his being made Vice President (which would have gotten him "out of the way" politically had McKinley not died), that the Foundation helped make him Vice President and that McKinley was shot on Foundation orders to place him in power, even that he was a member of the Foundation, and plenty of other often contradictory speculation. The truth was in the file Harper held in his hands. Of

course, none of what was in the file turned out to be particularly relevant to the details of the investigation at hand, even if TR was involved in a war the Foundation had fomented with a device used ninety years later to kill an Overseer.

The second file, oddly enough, was completely empty. The name was "Cornelia Roosevelt", and according to the collective file on the family, she was the daughter of James Alfred Roosevelt, the older brother of TR's father. The information relating to Cornelia was also, for the most part, missing from the genealogy in the family file. Harper set aside the file, scribbling a question mark in his notes next to her name.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), 32nd President of the United States, Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1913-1920); had dealings with the Foundation as ASN during the First World War, and as President, during the Second.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), niece to Theodore, wife of Franklin D., and First Lady of the United States; person-of-interest with no direct dealings to the Foundation.

Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. (1887-1944), son of TR, Brigadier General in the United States Army, Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1921-1924), Governor of Puerto Rico (1929–1932), Governor-General of the Philippines (1932–1933); had numerous dealings with the Foundation in each capacity. Harper found it interesting that a total of five members of the extended Roosevelt clan had served in the post. Considering the significance the position had held as a conduit between the early Foundation and the American government, the number of Roosevelts who had interacted with the Foundation made some degree of sense.

Theodore Douglas Robinson (1883-1934), nephew of TR and Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1924-1929); had dealings with the Foundation as the ASN, and suspected of being one of the first supporters of the Chaos Insurgency.

Henry Latrobe Roosevelt (1879-1936), third cousin to TR and Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1933-1936); fought in the Spanish-American War and had dealings with the Foundation as the ASN.

Henry Latrobe was also suspected of having sympathies to the Chaos Insurgency. Harper wondered whether Theodore Robinson's and Henry L. Roosevelt's alleged Chaos Insurgency sympathies had resulted in the Foundation both the distancing of the organization from the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, and for some of the hostilities that would later arise between the American military and the organization.

Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt (born 1915), son of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., Foundation agent embedded within the Central Intelligence Agency; served as the head of CIA's Technical Division from 1960-1961. He was part of the joint CIA/Foundation MKULTRA Project, and was listed as having been one of the primary advocates within CIA of attempting to poison Fidel Castro (on behalf of the Foundation). He'd since retired, and the file gave Harper no reason to believe he was involved in the current conspiracy.

Kermit Roosevelt, Jr. (born 1916), grandson of TR and cousin to Cornelius Van Schaack, Foundation agent embedded within the CIA. Kermit Jr. had coordinated the 1953 Iranian coup, another joint CIA/Foundation operation. Though retired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Kermit Jr. still occasionally consulted with the Foundation as an expert on the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution.

Archibald Bulloch Roosevelt, Jr. (born 1918), grandson of TR and cousin to Cornelius Van Schaack and Kermit Jr., United States Army intelligence, CIA officer. Though never a formal member of the Foundation like his cousins, Archibald Bulloch Jr. was listed as having been a "friend to the Foundation" throughout his entire career, including during his WWII service in North Africa, Iraq, and Iran, and as CIA Chief of Station in Istanbul, Madrid, and London. There was a note stating that he had refused to assist the Foundation when it was at odds with the CIA, as well as refusing to supply classified documents without official approval from the CIA/Foundation liaison. He was now retired, having recently published a memoir.

"Tim, we have something," Monica said, interrupting Harper's genealogical and biographical thoughts. He walked over to where Monica and Muir sat.

"The drunk who killed your family," Muir began.

"Tristan Arnold," spat Harper. The name was hard cut into his memory.

"Right, him," Monica said. "His parents died in a house fire when he and his twin brother were six, after which the two of them went into foster care."

"Now, as adults, their lives diverge substantially," Muir explained. "Both enlisted in the Army. Tristan was dishonorably discharged, and lived the remainder of his life out of a bottle."

"His brother, Benjamin, on the other hand," Monica continued, "was honorably discharged after two tours, then went to work for the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service as a bodyguard. That is, until he was transferred to—"

"—the Global Occult Coalition, where he loyally served as the personal bodyguard for Regional Deputy Director Bain, until deciding to go on a shooting spree yesterday, killing GOC Regional Director Strauss and O5-3," finished Muir.

Harper looked from Muir to Monica. "So the brother of the man who killed my family ten years ago," he asked slowly, "is yesterday's assassin?"

"I mean, it's a small world, but this can't be a coincidence," Monica said. She handed over two photographs. One, a yellowing newspaper clipping, showed a somber man at Tristan's funeral. The other was a security camera still that showed the same man, ten years later, wearing an earpiece and sunglasses as he ushered Bain into a building.

"After my family died, I stopped turning down the promotion to Section Chief," Harper breathed. "Someone, now involved in this plot, arranged for my family to die so I'd take the promotion?"

Muir asked, "That was before we started working together; who was putting pressure on you to take the job?"

Harper thought back, "The Counterintelligence Director at the time -

Erik DeVoe. But he was getting pressure from someone on the O5 Council. I kept resisting because my kids were in elementary school…"

"Could this Mr. Bain be involved?" Monica asked.

"It's possible," Harper replied. "He stood to gain directly with his boss' assassination, and the shooter was his own bodyguard."

"And he killed the assassin himself," Muir pointed out.

"Follow that lead," Harper said. "One of the files I pulled from Central Records was gutted."

"Completely empty?" Muir asked, surprised. "Nobody - not even the Overseers - are supposed to completely remove the contents of any file not containing a memetic hazard or infohazard."

"Yeah, Troy, I know," Harper said. "And this was a personnel file, so it should have been fine. It's probably nothing, since the individual was born back in the 1870s, but I'm going to head over to the National Archives to try and reconstruct the non-sensitive genealogical and biographical information."

"Alright," Muir said. "Out of curiosity, whose file was it?"

"Cornelia Roosevelt."

National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1400 hours local time

Most people who visit the National Archives Building go to see the original copies of the American Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. While famous, impressive, priceless, and interesting documents, they represent only the tiniest fraction of the records maintained and stored by the National Archives and Records Administration. Though few tourists wandered beyond the *Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom*, any member of the public could become a certified researcher and gain access to the documents stored within. Though not the only reason for an ordinary

citizen to become a certified researcher, many genealogists took advantage of NARA's countless records (census records, Congressional private claims and private legislation records, court records, immigration records, military records, passenger lists, passport applications, post office records, and many other archived records) in order to construct detailed family histories. Of course, many of these documents were not made public until at least seven decades after their creation.

This did not present a problem for Harper, however. His notes indicated that Cornelia Roosevelt was born circa 1867, which meant that the records from at least the first sixty years of her life would be available. Just because the records were available did not make the task easy, however. It took several hours of laboriously sifting through documents to begin to assemble a portrait of who this woman had been.

Cornelia Maria Roosevelt, daughter of James Alfred Roosevelt, was born in New York City in February of 1867. She was one of five children, she suffered from asthma, much like her older cousin Theodore (who would later become President). Both as a child and as a young woman, she was described in several contemporary accounts as having a fascination with the natural and social sciences. In 1893, she married Jonathan Franklin Dark, a wealthy young British banker and investor who did business with her father through his firm, Roosevelt & Son. Cornelia and Jonathan maintained two houses, one in Westminster and one in Arlington. After Jonathan died under mysterious circumstances in April of 1898, Cornelia disappeared without a trace in August of that year.

Harper was reading a newspaper article about the couple's unusual disappearance when he spotted a photograph of the woman. The resemblance was uncanny - *far* too close to be a coincidence. And she'd married a man named "Dark"… Harper made a photocopy of the picture, gathered his notes, and walked quickly back to Command-02.

"I have it," Harper told Muir and Monica. "Look at this!" He set down the photograph of Cornelia Dark.

"Is that—?" asked Monica.

Harper nodded, laying a more recent photo next to it. "Dead ringer, isn't she?"

"Damn," Monica said. "I hope I look that good when I'm a hundred and ten."

Muir rubbed his chin as he read though Harper's notes. "Jonathan Franklin Dark," he grunted. "Wasn't he the son of 'Old Man Dark', one of MC&D's founders?"

"The same," Harper said. "No wonder the Central Records file was emptied. That's a hell of a skeleton to keep in the closet all these years."

"Yep," Muir agreed. "While you were out, Monica and I did manage to link Bain to the conspiracy. Turns out he paid both Arnold brothers in numbered Swiss accounts, only to transfer the money back out again once each brother kicked the bucket."

"Greedy bastard," Monica quipped. "But it is evidence the Powers That Be can take to the GOC if they want to mend fences. After all, Bain did whack one of their Regional Directors."

"We have enough to go to the O5 Council," Harper decided. "Monica, head up to the seventh floor and arrange a secure meeting with the following Overseers…"

« Part XI | HUB | Epilogue »

Night Raid

Park Royal industrial district, London, UK
Tuesday, 20 December 1988, 2334 hours local time

Sitting in his car a block from the target, Director McDonnell lit his pipe. He hated waiting, but securing buildings was the job for younger fellows. He'd only accepted the promotion to head of the Foundation's Counterintelligence Directorate the year before so he could have more time to spend with his granddaughters. In forty years working for the Foundation, he'd missed too many of his own children's birthdays; with Christmas just days away he was looking forward to seeing the entire family in his large house in Edinburgh. Of course, that would require his not being called away on work. Here he was on the week before Christmas in a cold, abandoned street following up on an untraceable and anomalous tip made to his direct line about "some documents which might interest Foundation Counterintelligence."

The radio on the dash crackled. "Right, this is Xi-One-Three-Lead to all units. Stand by to breach target in Three. Two. One. Go! Go! Go!" A muffled thump rang through the darkness as the mobile task force blew their way into the target: an old warehouse in the run-down outskirts of London's industrial district. For a long two minutes, the night was still and quiet. Then the radio crackled again, "Target is clear. Director, you're going to want to see this."

"On my way," replied McDonnell. He left his car and strode up the street to the warehouse.

A young chap dressed head to toe in the black tactical clothing adopted by police and special forces worldwide greeted him. "This way, Director," he said, gesturing inside.

"American?" the Director asked, noting the young man's accent.

"Yes, sir. Agent Lombardi," the American said, walking McDonnell through the long and mostly empty warehouse. A few crates were stacked along the walls, but they didn't so much take up space as make it seem all the much more cavernous.

"New to the Foundation, I take it?" McDonnell inquired, making smalltalk.

The young agent blinked, "Yes, sir."

"Well, Agent Price will take good care of you," the Director of Foundation Counterintelligence said as they reached the warehouse's office. "Speak of the devil! Burt!"

"Director," Agent Burt Price saluted, looking up from a table piled high with documents. Several black-clad figures were poring over the pages.

"What's all this?" asked McDonnell, gesturing at the table.

"We have a security breach," Price replied, handing over several sheets of paper from the table. McDonnell thumbed through them. The first was a testing log for some zucchini that grew nearly instantly, printed on Foundation letterhead. The second, also on Foundation letterhead, was documentation on a slightly worn high school yearbook from 1976. The third was in Russian, with a KGB seal in the corner. "The first one there is SCP-506, and the second one is SCP-1833. My Russian's a bit rusty, but the third one is something about an old lady able to 'hear' nearby radio transmissions. I've never heard of that one," Price said.

Taking a puff on his pipe, McDonnell shook his head, "Neither have I, old chap. Neither have I." He furrowed his brow and picked up another paper. It was part of a budget for the Global Occult Coalition's previous fiscal year. "Is there any sort of method to this madness?"

Price laughed, "Not that I can tell. And this will keep the chaps at Site 11 busy for a week or two. What I do know is that someone has

top level access to the Foundation, GOC, Marshall, Carter, and Dark —"

"Prometheus Labs and the Factory, according to this, sirs," one agent said.

"Found something here on Wondertainment's distribution network," another added.

"List of IRG operations in Latin America," a third noted, holding up a sheet.

McDonnell nodded, "I get the idea. Persons unknown managed to obtain a sizable quantity of classified information from some of the most secretive organizations on the planet. Definitely bad news, but hardly a crisis, I should say."

"Uh, I wouldn't place a wager on that, sirs," one of the other agents interrupted, "you should read this."

"What is it, Harding?" asked Price, taking the proffered page. His jaw dropped as he read the page. "Shit." He handed the paper to McDonnell.

Reading the paper, McDonnell swore loudly in his native Gaelic. It was a detailed schedule of the whereabouts and security precautions of all thirteen of the Foundation's Overseers during the last week in December 1988. In other words, the week which would start in a mere five days. A scribbled note at the bottom stated 'Ideal timing for action on the twenty-sixth at 0300 Zulu.' A second page with fair quality photos of the Overseers was stapled to the first; O5-5, O5-6, O5-7, and O5-8 were all circled in red ink.

McDonnell was intelligent enough to realize that he didn't know exactly what was planned, but he certainly had some guesses. He turned to Price, "Alright, Price. Bag it all and bring it in. As of this moment, everything related to this is Level 5, need to know access only. I want copies of these documents stored at our site in Manchester; have the originals delivered to my office." The wheels in McDonnell's head were already turning. He'd use his contacts in Whitehall to arrange for a diplomatic courier bag to carry the

documents on a transatlantic flight. The papers would go to the analysts at Site 11 so they could stir the tea leaves, while he could give his report personally to the O5 Council at Overwatch HQ. And, with any luck, he'd be back home for Christmas.

Interlude

"They found the warehouse. McDonnell is taking the evidence to Overwatch HQ tonight."

"There will be copies."

"Those are stored in the Manchester annex. They will be taken care of."

"Good. Everything is going according to plan."

Explosions

Scottish airspace
Wednesday, 21 December 1988, 1858 hours local time

At just before seven o'clock the following evening, Director McDonnell was sitting in Clipper Class on the Pan Am flight with a diplomatic pouch in the next seat, handcuffed to his wrist. The cabin had a number of Foundation personnel: O5-5 was sitting the next seat forward next to his bodyguard, while McDonnell's deputy was seated behind him. He also recognized a couple of American intelligence officials and two fellows who looked to be *their* bodyguards. McDonnell cracked the first of his stack of novels. It would be a long flight to JFK, and the pouch meant he couldn't sleep through it.

At exactly 19:02:46.9, an explosion punched a large hole in the left side of the fuselage. McDonnell and his diplomatic pouch were instantly incinerated. Shock waves from the blast ricocheted through

the aircraft, meeting pulses still coming from the explosion itself. Due to a quirk of fluid dynamics, these shock waves, technically called "Mach stem shock waves", traveled twenty-five percent faster than the waves from the explosion itself, and with twice the power thereof. As these shock waves pulsed through plane, a section of the 747's roof a few feet above the explosion's source was peeled away as if by a giant hand. The force of the explosion smashed through the bulkhead wall separating the forward cargo hold and the cockpit, shaking the flight-control cables. This shaking caused the front section of the fuselage to roll, pitch, and yaw. The entire front section of the aircraft, with the flight deck and first class cabin, separated from the rest of the plane and flew upwards and to starboard. There, it collided and sheered away the number three engine. No longer under any control, the aircraft (or what was left of it) went into a steep dive. The plane continued to disintegrate as it plummeted 9,400 meters through the night, crashing into the Scottish town of Lockerbie two minutes later.

Unnoticed and flying without a transponder, an unmarked Cessna flew past the wreckage. Though maintaining radio silence, the Cessna's pilot would report his observations as soon as he landed.

Office of Solicitors, Carnegie & Potter, Manchester, UK
Wednesday, 21 December 1988, 1904 hours local time

Over two hundred kilometers away in Manchester, the four story office building of Solicitors, Carnegie and Potter was empty, save three night shift security staff and two caretakers. Though Carnegie and Potter were indeed two well-respected solicitors, they mostly handled litigation related to the Foundation's activities in the United Kingdom. Their office was also one of the Foundation's secure document repositories. In the building's safe sat what were now the only remaining copies of the documents recovered from the warehouse by Xi-13.

A nondescript package a meter on each side sat in the building's receiving room. Because of its late arrival, and the fact that was not labeled with the codewords for Euclid or Keter objects, it hadn't been processed; the security guard who had signed for the parcel knew

the staff would handle it in the morning. All the employees were properly briefed on handling unusual parcel deliveries at odd hours, as well as the appropriate code phrases for various hazards. This package was labeled as reams of blank legal paper (hence the weight) for the offices with the proper supply authentication phrases. In all, it was a thoroughly mundane delivery for a building which often received items which were anything but.

The contents were not reams of blank legal paper (though had the guard opened the package for inspection, two layers deep of paper reams sat atop the true contents). Most of the package's cubic meter of volume was taken up by Semtex, supplied by two very helpful members of the Irish Republican Army now feeding the fish in the Irish Sea. Like squirrels with their nuts, Irishmen were always hording arms and explosives for the day when they would rise up to drive the English from their island. Or that was the plan of some of the more radical countrymen, at least. The revolutionary struggle that had continued for over seventy years showed little sign of concluding in a manner agreeable to the IRA. Over time, many of the caches of weapons and bombs were forgotten about as their owners retired from their struggle or were arrested or killed by the British military and police forces. So, for someone with the right contacts and sufficient ruthlessness, it was not difficult to acquire large quantities of high explosives with no clear connection to the user, assuming that someone did not mind incurring the wrath of a fairly nasty terrorist organization with a good memory. IRA reprisals did not concern the men who had appropriated that organization's Semtex.

A brief radio signal reached a radio-receiver attached to the plastic explosive's detonator. In an instant, the cube of high explosive detonated at a velocity of over eight thousand meters per second. The explosion tore through the building, reducing the military-spec architecture to as much gravel. All five people died with merciful haste as the shock wave overtook them. The fireball, burning at temperatures sufficient to melt the structure's steel skeleton, turned the building's safe into a crematorium for the secured materials within. Hundreds of thousands of pages of classified Foundation documents, including the copies of the documents from the warehouse, were reduced to cinders by the inferno. Within less than

ten seconds, the parts of the office building not strewn across the area by the explosion itself crumpled inward into a mound of twisted, charred rubble.

The local police and fire department arrived on the scene within ten minutes, just missing a nondescript sedan with an unremarkable driver leaving the area. With his radio detonator hidden away under the vehicle's dash, he stopped at a telephone booth a few blocks from the scene to report that his end of the operation had occurred without incident.

« **Prologue** | **HUB** | **Part I** »

Contact

Greetings, Doctor.

Before I begin, please know that any attempt to trace this message will lead you to the public wi-fi connection at a McDonalds in Sylvan Lake, Alberta, Canada (a popular vacation spot, and not my permanent place of residence).

As you're already aware, the SCP Foundation is not exactly listed in the Yellow Pages, and as such, communication with the Foundation must be carried out in this fashion.

Allow me to get to the heart of the matter: I am an entity that your Foundation will be quite interested in, and I myself have an interest in your Foundation.

I am a 16 year old male, and have a unique ability relatable to that of your "telekill alloy". In short, my anomaly is such that for whatever reason, I am unable to be affected in any fashion by any form of telepathic instance. For example, SCPs 268, 053, 055, and most notably, 239, would have absolutely no effect upon me.

I'm sure you're able to comprehend not only the research possibilities I may present to you, but also the practical application in an MTF. This is exactly what I am requesting from your foundation: level 3 security clearance for the express purpose of further research of SCPs whose psychic/telesthetic qualities would prohibit further research (most notably SCP 055), and/or to be assigned to an MTF that would deal with psychic/ telesthetic SCPs/potential SCPs.

In exchange for loyalty and cooperation with the Foundation, in turn, I request specifically not to be held in any form of containment cell of any kind. Instead, I request to receive a standard salary for an average level 3 researcher/MTF agent (whichever is deemed to be appropriate by the Foundation), and to be housed in a standard Foundation residence with permission to leave the premises as I deem fit, unless of course a situation arises that requires my involvement (as with any other Foundation employee). I wish this request to be discussed among the 05 Administrators, and I will not reveal my location and allow Foundation employees to retrieve me without the above terms being accepted by a majority of the 05 Administrators (at least 7).

I hope to hear from you soon, Doctor, and I hope we will come to a reasonable solution soon.

J. Swift

Bright stared at the email. "I'm a Level Five researcher, god damnit."

Dodridge sighed heavily. “Why do ya think they don’t think we’ll be able to track them?” he asked, glancing sideways at the man crouched next to him.

“Hell, I dunno,” Lament sighed. “This kid is supposed to be some sort of psychic vacuum. Immune to all that brainy shit and mental influencing.”

“And he seriously sent a level four researcher an email?”

"Level five."

"Whatever."

“Yeah. Just… popped it right off.”

“Wow. Seems like he’s immune to his own IQ.”

Lament snickered and picked up his box of McNuggets, chewing them slowly. “God damn, I love this spicy mustard.”

“I don’t know how you can eat that garbage.”

“It’s like foie gras and shit, man. Most delicious parts of the food are always the trash.”

“You’re eating chicken slurry formed into a disc.”

“And it is fucking delicious.”

Dodridge smirked for a moment, then laid down on the ground, getting into position. “So, this one is dangerous?”

“Dangerous enough. You ready?”

“Yeah.”

Lament peered through a set of binoculars as the van pulled up next to the McDonalds for the fourth time in as many days. Dodridge leaned over and stole a McNugget.

“I saw that.”

“Fwuk woo.”

Lament snickered, then held the radio to his ear.

“Good. Oh-Four-One confirmed it. It’s the ugly kid in the yellow hoodie.”

“Oh, nice,” Dodridge mumbled, looking through his scope. “I thought he looked like a ponce.”

SYLVAN LAKE, ALBERTA, CANADA – Teen killed in a shooting at a local McDonalds. Witnesses noted that there was no sound of a bullet firing, but the victim—believed to be one J. Swift—suddenly fell to the ground. An RCMP van was in the area and responded to the scene of the crime. Currently, the event is being treated

as an act of random gang violence. Mr. Swift's body is being transported back to Ontario for burial.

Dr. Mann snapped the glove onto his wrist with the efficiency of a prison guard and peered down at the body. “Oh yes,” he said, nodding and lifting the saw. “Many research possibilities, Mr. Swift. Many, many research possibilities…”

CONTAIN

Capture was successful
Despite that against our efforts to obtain
From here it becomes quite stressful
For to keep is much harder than to gain

Often the dangers are not apparent
Until we start searching for its production
The path to see the truth inherent
Is crossed many times with destruction

Not all are kept against their will
Some we cannot even hold
That danger, how long is it until
It chooses not to be controlled

Test their powers and their strength
Are they Safes, Euclids, or Keters
Find their dimensions, height, width, and length
Write it down on sheets, in meters

Ask for answers we are lacking
Of course, getting them is rare
Whether because it is attacking
Or it simply doesn't care

Inside some are kept under control
Within cage, tank, or room
Others are not held in; those we patrol
To keep the ignorant from their doom

Never let it leave
If it should escape
We must hastily retrieve
And fix the holes left agape

Contain Yourself

Hey there, guys. Uh… Right. My name is Lament. Don't call me doctor. I'm not a doctor. I work for a doctor, sometimes. Anyhow, they asked me to come and talk to you guys for a little bit today. Normally, someone else does this, so… just bear with me, I guess. Right? Right. So… Listen. I'm going to do my level best to get this across to you in the nicest way that I can.

A lot of you are going to die. And it's going to be your own fault. I'm sorry, but that's just how it is. And there's a really good reason for it, too. I hear it in the lunchroom *every* day.

'Have you seen 682? Man, that thing will annihilate you!'

'Dude, I saw 173 snap a guy's neck during the last security breach. Scariest thing I've ever seen…'

'You hear about 835? Fuck, man, it's disturbing…'

You care about the SCPs you guard. You will. It'll happen, because it's what always happens. You get an odd, possessive quality to yourself, something you can't easily describe. When you guard 914, it is *yours*, damn it. There's pride, there. You'll love your SCP, just don't, you know, *love* your SCP. Heh… Little… Little joke there… But… uh… but that's a good thing. You get into arguments about what would be the worst one to break free or who would win in a fight. You care about what you guard. You care about what it can do. On some level, you start to love them. And that's how we know how precious all this shit—even that fucking mirror who talks to you—how precious it is.

And really… that's where *you* fuck up.

See, the problem is this: we don't really give a *damn* what an object can do. Essentially, at the root of it all… We don't. We like to know, though. Hell, we *have* to know. But that's not as important.

Containing it is what's important. Doing what we have to do to keep people safe. It's why the containment comes first in all the files. It's the most important thing. You guys can still remember your parents, right? Them. We're keeping them safe. Your grandparents, your old friends… We contain these things to protect *them*.

See, this is where we always fuck it up. The second they make you forget about everyone… Ahh, well… It's not important. Just remember. Right now, remember *this* feeling. *Hold on to it*.

Because eventually, you're going to slip.

Eventually, some of these carefully crafted procedures, something that dozens of people died so we could make sure it worked… You're going to fuck up.

People will die. Maybe even you. Don't let that happen, if you can. Remember the feeling of your parents. The emotions that are tied to all those people out there. You can forget memories, but it's hard to forget the emotions tied to it. You ever hear of Little Albert? Same thing.

Anyhow, sorry to be such a downer. Doctor… Rights? Is that right? Doctor Rights is going to make sure you're all good and healthy, give you some drinks. Don't bite the pill, just swallow it.

And remember, alright? Especially for the next little bit? Try?

I… Uh… Yeah. Sorry, Doctor. Your show now. I'll see you guys around the water cooler, right?

Containing Creation

Item #: SCP-9342-X

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-9342-X is to be kept in a standard-issue filing cabinet in Containment Cell #1994-X. At this time, viewing of SCP-9342-X is forbidden to all but the most

---

"Hold up, what is that? One of yours?"

"Thought it was yours."

"One of the researchers must have left it here. Hmm. Looks like papyrus. Is that writing on it?"

"Huh, yeah. That's weird. What the hell i-"

"Frank? Frank? SOMEONE CALL A MEDIC! FRANK! Stay with me, buddy. Help's coming. NO, DON'T TOUCH THE DAMNED THING, SOMETHING IS…

---

a surprising % of all subjects attempting to read or observe SCP-9342-X have developed full-on mental disorders within minutes of exposure. Most commonly, these disorders are Axis I disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, manic–depressive disorder, and [REDACTED]. As studies progress, cases of paranoid schizophrenia have risen %, which naturally is highlly improbable given the sample size of…

"Oh yeah, forgot to ask you, did you hear about Dr. ?"

"No, what?"

*"Had a **great** idea recently. Can't look at SCP-9342-X without going insane, right? Well, he had the bright idea to take a video of it, then watch the video. That way, you aren't reading the actual stuff, just a recording of the stuff."*

"That's quite a leap, even for him. How did he get approval?"

"He didn't. Just decided to do it. As you can guess, it didn't work well for him."

"I should feel bad. But I don't. You'd think that people would have tried that already…

---

ported able to read SCP-9342-X without any harmful effects. After further experimentation, all subjects in this alleged 'immune' group have increasingly lost their sense of vision, culminating in blindness within a period…

"Jesus Phrexian Christ, you have to believe me. I can do it."

"Request denied. You're too valuable to this Foundation, despite your… eccentricities."

"Aww, I bet you say that to all the guys. Look, I'm telling you, what's happening here is that you're sending untrained minds. They don't know what they are up against. I do. I'm not just saying this shit, this shit is right there in my proposal.

"And when we decide to reopen the issue, we'll of course provide all subjects with your information-"

*"**THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH!** To do this, you can't just fucking give someone a piece of paper and say 'make a note of this'. You need someone who **knows** this shit back and forth. Someone who can live and breathe it, treat it for what it **is**, and not what you guys want to think it is. I'm the only one who can do it, and there ain't*

much of a loss if I get touched by Shiggy so deeply that it'd be considered a reach-around."

"Are you really going to press the issue this strongly?"

"Yup. I'm the only one who could tell you who Shiggy even even is…"

Addendum-1: At this time, Agent "Mister" Bibs has been allowed temporary 'ownership' of SCP-9342-X for research purposes. The details of his report(s) are currently sealed by order of O5- unttil further…

"I hear it's because he's already insane. You know, you can't make someone more insane."

"That's probably true. I mean, remember when he-'"

"Okay, seriously folks, knock it the fuck off. First its that goddamned Green Lantern story someone found, now it's why I can read SCP-9342-X. I'm sick and goddamned tired of hearing about it."

"But… Bibs, we don't talk about it around you."

"I know, but I've got all the Sites bugged, and I know you're talking about it. So knock it off."

"Oh, c'mon Bibs. Everyone wants to know. What's the secret of SCP-9342-X?"

"Well, if it gets you folks to shut the fuck up, fine: it turns out I'm cosmically important. Or the subject of a prophecy. I don't know the specifics, but I figure a few more read-throughs of 9342'll clear it up. Oh, and don't call it SCP-9342-X when we're off the clock. It's an Elder Scroll, dammit, and if you ignorant fucktards don't start respecting that, I'll have to…

When we first discovered a way
to pull webpages from alternate timelines,
this was not what we expected to find.
Merry Christmas and happy New Year
from the Department of Multiverse Analysis.

Containment Breach The Musical

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

This article is about the stage musical. For the book series, see Containment Breach. For the film series, see Containment Breach (film series). For other uses, see Containment Breach (disambiguation).

Containment Breach
The Musical

Broadway Playbill cover

Music	Sophia MacLeod
Lyrics	Carlisle Atticus
Book	Sal Linnen and Roger Mackenzie
Basis	2007 novel by Kate McGears
Productions	2009 Wyoming tryout 2009 Broadway 2011 US Tour

2012 West End
2014 UK Tour

Containment Breach The Musical is a musical with music by Sophia Macleod, lyrics by Carlisle Atticus, and book by Sal Linnen and Roger Mackenzie. It is based on the best-selling 2007 novel Containment Breach, the first book in the SCP Foundation series by author Kate McGears.

The musical debuted January 11, 2009, at the Oneiroi Theater in Wyoming and met with instant critical and commercial success. It premiered on Broadway at the Palace Theater on October 6, 2009. [1] The musical has since become a popular choice for productions by community theatres, school and university groups, summer camps and regional theatre companies.[2]

Synopsis

Act 1

A married couple are aroused from their sleep by the sound of a crying baby. The wife tells her husband that it's his turn to check on the baby. As the husband opens the door to their bedroom, he turns around and exclaims with alarm that they do not have a child. The husband is pulled through the doorway by an off-stage assailant. The terrified wife calls the police, and the phone call is intercepted by the Foundation Surveillance Network ("Something is [REDACTED]ing My Husband!").

Mobile Task Force Beta-12 arrives to find a **`globular red mass`** closing in on the wife. The team captures the creature in a metal crate, administers amnestics to the wife, and cleans up the husband's remains ("Just Another Tuesday"). They transport the creature to Site-19's North Containment Hall and lock it in a containment cell next to **`SCP-049`** ("Secure, Contain, Protect"). Dr. Jack Bright and his assistants walk through the corridor to check that all SCPs are accounted for ("Roll Call").

Bright enters **SCP-105**'s containment chamber and performs a routine test of her anomalous ability to see locations in photographs as they presently appear ("I See A Lighthouse"). Afterward, she is told she may be granted certain privileges for her good behavior. SCP-105 requests various luxury items, including fresh flowers and a bible, but also asks that Dr. Bright call her by her real name, Iris. Bright approves all her requests except the final one, as calling her by her real name would be a breach of protocol ("List of Requests").

Burdened by his obligation to treat the innocent captives the same way he treats the monsters, Bright goes to the **SCP-408** enclosure and confesses his guilty feelings to lepidopterist Dr. Zynnia Kondraki. Kondraki reassures Bright that he is doing the right thing, although her speech includes a number of subtle allusions to the clear romantic tension between them ("Bright's Lament").

Elsewhere in Site-19, the amorphous red blob (now designated SCP-844) reveals itself to have the voice and personality of a small, frightened child. SCP-049, contained in the neighboring cell, tries to explain SCP-844's situation to it in a sensitive and gentle way, but he is interrupted by Able (**SCP-076**), who provides a more frank and honest description of life in containment ("Where am I?"/"Being Anomalous Really Sucks").

Loud sirens and bright flashing lights suddenly come on. The SCPs cheer, recognizing it as a Containment Breach alarm. They happily speculate who may have attained freedom, but are horrified when they find that it is **SCP-106** ("Who's the Lucky Bastard?"/"Oh HELL No!"). SCP-106 silently performs a short dance number before leaving to wreak havoc in Site-19 ("Rage State Ragtime").

Meanwhile, Bright and Kondraki come close to sharing their first kiss while SCP-408 specimens create a romantic atmosphere around them ("Screw Professionalism"). Just as they are about to confess their feelings for one another, Site Director Yorick Cleffordson announces over Site-19's PA system that all personnel must assist in recontaining SCP-106 at any cost ("Put That Thing Back Where It Came From (Or So Help Me)"). Bright and Kondraki exchange awkward goodbyes and quickly run off to defend their Site.

Bright searches Site-19's East Storage Wing for anything that might

be able to stop SCP-106, but all he finds are Safe-Class objects with bizarre-but-unhelpful abilities ("My Kingdom for a Euclid"). Finally, he grabs a handful of objects with unidentified anomalous properties and leaves, hoping for the best ("What the Hell, I'm Dead Either Way").

SCP-106 walks through Site-19's cafeteria, killing staff members right and left. Suddenly the cafeteria turns into an idyllic pastoral scene, causing SCP-106 to recoil in terror. It sends handfuls of black, highly acidic sludge into the air, causing SCP-408 specimens to scatter and fall ("[TANGO EXPUNGED]"). Just as SCP-106 spies Kondraki in the corner of the room, Bright bursts in with his arms full of undocumented SCP objects. He throws them one after another at SCP-106, but to no avail. SCP-106 slowly advances toward Bright until the two are face-to-face. SCP-106 reaches forward menacingly, but at the last moment, Bright puts **a comb** on SCP-106's head, turning it into a beautiful young woman– much to its distress.

Site Director Yorickson enters the room with back-up security personnel, and SCP-106 is apprehended before it can remove the comb. Just as the trouble seems to be over, a support beam weakened by SCP-106's sludge attacks begins to collapse. Bright sees the support about to fall on Kondraki and he pushes her out of the way, sacrificing himself in the process. He confesses his love to her with his dying breaths ("Screw Professionalism (Reprise)"). As his body goes limp, a red amulet falls out of his hand.

Act 2

Several days after the containment breach, a team of D-Class personnel is cleaning the damaged cafeteria. One of them finds the red amulet lying amongst some rubble and picks it up. His entire disposition immediately changes, and he runs out of the room in confusion. When captured and questioned, he claims to be Dr. Jack Bright. After he correctly answers questions only the real Bright would know, his interrogators are forced to believe him ("My Name Is Jack Bright").

Bright, in his new body, is designated as **SCP-963** and placed in a holding cell until an available containment chamber can be found.

Bright notes the irony of finding himself on the other side of the containment door (“Bright’s Lament (Reprise)"). He is surprised to find himself moved to an “overflow” chamber containing other humanoids. His cellmates, **SCP-2800** and **SCP-1846**, attempt to raise his spirits (“It’s Not All Bad”).

Meanwhile, Kondraki, still believing Bright to be dead, has her butterflies create an illusion of him so she can say goodbye (“Damn Your Sexy Face”). Dr. Everett King enters the butterfly enclosure to retrieve some notes, and several butterflies escape as he comes in. Kondraki follows them to the cell where Bright is being held, and the two reunite (“I’m Confused, But Kiss Me”).

Elsewhere in Site-19, Able has been transferred to the cell next to Iris’. The two recount the romantic relationship they fostered as teammates in the Omega-7 Task Force as well the breakup that followed. Able begs her to see the warm, loving man behind the brutal killer, but Iris rejects the idea of ever getting back together (“I Would Never Gut You”).

Bright continues to live day-to-day life an SCP, growing increasingly dissatisfied with the way he is treated by his former co-workers. (“When You’re a Skip”). He gradually becomes sympathetic to the plight of his fellow humanoid SCPs. He only embraces the “good” SCPs at first, but he eventually warms up to the more dangerous ones as well (“We’re All Monsters, Really”).

During his weekly secret rendezvous with Kondraki, Bright tells of a massive breakout he is planning with his fellow SCPs. He instructs her to hide in a safe place so she will not be hurt during the escape, and promises to run away with her when he is free (“What Could Possibly Go Wrong?”). Kondraki agrees, but later confesses to her butterflies that she is morally conflicted (“I’m Really Screwed Now”).

The following day, Bright springs his plan into action. With the help of various SCP allies, A massive containment breach is successfully instigated (“The Breakout Song”). Many personnel are killed in the ensuing breach, including Bright himself. However, he comes back once again when his amulet falls onto Dr. King’s recently-deceased body (“Why Do I Taste Apples?”). Bright personally releases Iris from her containment chamber, finally calling her by her proper

name. Able pleads for Iris to open his containment door and release him, but she chooses not to (“It Wasn’t a Healthy Relationship At All, Really”).

Bright finds Kondraki, but she has had a change of heart and cannot bring herself to run away with him. She explains that she needs to keep her promise to the Foundation by staying behind to help recontain the SCPs that want to destroy humanity, but she still wants Bright to escape while he can (“Screw Professionalism (Reprise, Again)”). The two say a tearful goodbye and Bright departs while Kondraki stays behind to fight alongside her butterflies.

After the breach, Kondraki once again has her butterflies create an illusion of Bright with his original face. Her friend, Dr. Agatha Reach, enters the enclosure, grieving the death of Dr. King, and the two commiserate over their lost loves (“All My Boyfriends End Up Dead”). Suddenly, Bright enters the room, still in King’s body, and explains that no one knew King had died except the three of them, meaning he can essentially take over King's identity. Reach is initially disturbed, but decides she is happy her friends can be together, and says that King would have wanted them to be happy. Bright and Kondraki kiss, overjoyed at the second chance at living a normal life again together in Site-19 (“A Happy Ending, Sort Of”).

A group of shadowy figures monitor surveillance footage of the previous scene. As they discuss what to do, Able enters the room in a suit, revealing himself to be O5-1, head of the Overseer Council. He explains that the whole event was orchestrated by the Overseers, and that they have decided to allow Bright to live on as Dr. King. The Council meeting breaks for lunch and Able is left alone in the room. Iris suddenly enters, confused. Able explains it was all a test, and Iris tearfully runs to his arms. With the containment breach officially over, the rest of Site-19's personnel get back to work (“Secure, Contain, Protect (Reprise)”.

Original Broadway Cast

Actor	Role
Andrew S. Bear	Dr. Jack Bright

Django Ricmann	Dr. Jack Bright, 2nd Body
Montala Roth	Dr. Zynnia Kondraki
Chris DeMatisse	Dr. Everett King
Vaughn Pencer	Dr. Clefford Yorickson
Silva Diez	Dr. Agatha Reach
Peppa Denkar	Iris
Tom Stone	Able
Troy DuChamp	SCP-046
Chaz D. Kevereaux	SCP-2800
Fritz Conwill E.	SCP-1846
Erica H. Anberough	Mrs. Halo
Cane P. Raven	Mr. Halo

Containment Engineer - A Typical Day

Avery Zhang sighed as he swiped his Level 2 key card through the scanner on the wall. The light beeped from red to green, and the steel door in front of him slid aside to let him through. He sipped from the coffee cup in his right hand's grip as he stalked through the doorway. A security guard who must have possessed familiar features beneath the mirrored face shield grunted a greeting to him as they passed each other. Halfheartedly, Zhang returned a floppy wave at the guard with his free hand.

Zhang sat down at his desk in his office. He logged into his computer and pulled up his email. One new message matter-of-factly informed him that the construction of his latest project had been finished and put to use, and that researchers at Site-19 were happy with it. This put him in a good mood; unfortunately, his bright start to the day was not to last.

A knock at the door. The first of several appointments scheduled.

"Come in!" he shouted.

A man in his late twenties and dressed in a slightly wrinkled suit entered the office. The ID clipped to his chest distinguished him as a field agent. He took a seat across from Zhang's desk, and Zhang braced himself.

The conversation began reasonably. Ten minutes later it had devolved into the following:

Exasperated and frustrated, Zhang exclaimed, "For the last time, this anomaly does NOT need a specialized team of caretakers!"

The agent frowned, retorting, "It's a spatially-limited creature whose anomalous properties prevent it from being readily able to take care of itself."

"It's a baby chicken that can't move more than two meters away from a two-kilo chunk of granite," scowled Zhang, "We'll attach the rock to an RC car and a tracker to the chicken and program the car to follow the chicken around."

"But—"

"No. Just, no," Zhang sighed, "The chicken doesn't need any additional containment procedures. It'll be fine at one of the Foundation's animal care facilities. Stop coming to containment specialists about this."

"… It's just that I grew up on a farm, y'know, so that poor thing—"

"*Goodbye.*"

Thankfully for the containment engineer's thinning patience, his remaining appointments of that morning were far more reasonable than his first. There had been two of these which were notable. One had been with a senior researcher who needed the containment cell of a humanoid anomaly remodeled. The other had been a conference call with a supervisor who informed him that a procedure he had designed was being selected for high-priority implementation.

In his last scheduled meeting before lunch, Zhang had dealt with the case of a junior researcher whose object of study had left him with a somewhat amusing handicap. The very irate Dr. Seymour Tracy was the latest person to have read an anomalous copy of *Green Eggs and Ham*. This had left him unable to speak in anything but iambic tetrameter — the classic children's book's rhyme scheme, in other words.

It was well-documented that this effect would pass onward as soon as another human being read the anomalous book; however, none of Dr. Tracy's co-workers was willing to aid him. Interestingly, they had all cited Tracy's "jackassery" as reason not to. But Zhang was a stickler to the principle of professional integrity. His simple solution to the doctor's problem had been to gift the book to a D-class subject in the infirmary, one who had recently been rendered mute

by an encounter with another anomaly. Both parties were happier for it.

On his way back to his office from that brief excursion, Zhang's pager went off. After a quick check informed him that Site Command wanted him at ground-level containment, he dutifully hurried to the nearest stairwell.

He made it to the ground floor lobby area after climbing three flights of stairs. A glance around the place quickly distinguished a fully-uniformed security guard waving at him as he held open the door to the containment area. Zhang ran to the guard.

The guard lifted a hand in a stop signal as the out of breath containment specialist approached.

"Containment engineer, right?" asked the man behind the face shield.

Zhang patted the ID clipped to the chest pocket of his shirt, verifying, "Yes. Avery Zhang, Level 2 clearance."

"This way," replied the guard, leading him through the doorway.

They soon arrived at the sealed door of a containment chamber. Two other security guards were present there, both of them with their face shields off. One was peering into the containment chamber through the window next to the door. The other was cursing as he entered a code into the entrance's keypad and nothing happened.

The guard whom Zhang had followed into the containment wing explained, "The skip's in temporary holding elsewhere while we're supposed to be maintaining the chamber. Four D-class personnel went in, and one of 'em managed to trip the cell's emergency lockdown. The room's sealed airtight, they're running outta oxygen, and our override code isn't working."

Zhang moved to the keypad by the door. The guard who had previously been trying to override the lockdown stepped aside for him.

He entered the ten-digit passcode that had been issued uniquely to him. He hit enter, but the keypad screen flashed red, denying him access. Zhang frowned and entered the nine-digit passcode that was shared by all the on-site containment engineers. The keypad again rejected it.

“Crap.”

Anxious, Zhang glanced through the window into the containment chamber. To his astonishment and confusion, he saw four D-class personnel using long brooms to scrape slime off the steel-plated walls in no great hurry.

“Wait,” said Zhang in disbelief, “They’re still cleaning in there?”

The guard looking through the window replied, “They didn’t notice when they tripped the cell lockdown, and we haven’t told them that they’re suffocating.”

Zhang’s morbid response was, “It’s a big room, and carbon dioxide is heavy. They’ll die of CO_2 poisoning before they run out of oxygen.”

“Well, get them *out*, then!”

“Manual bypass it is.”

The engineer removed a red-handled multitool from his back pocket. Using it, he made quick work of the bolts holding the face of the keypad to the wall. With the numerical pad hanging by a mass of wires, Zhang set down his multitool and pulled a small penlight off the keychain on his belt.

Clicking the light on in his left hand, he pointed it into the dark space in the wall. With his right hand, Zhang reached in and tugged at two gray wires. Carefully, he separated them from the bundle they were grouped in. Holding onto the small lines using two fingers, he set down the penlight in his other hand and picked up the multitool once more. With the wire clipper function of the tool, he cut both gray wires.

With an audible hiss, the door to the containment chamber unsealed

itself, sliding open without resistance.

“Finally,” sighed the first security guard, “Thanks, Zhang.”

“No problem,” he said, “But I, uh, really hope that your temporary holding cell can last a while. With a problem like this, they’re going to have to check the whole system before normal operations resume.”

One of the other guards frowned, responding, “Damn. The temp cell’s not a problem, but this incident is gonna be a pain to write up.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have to write the technical report.”

Having turned in the technical report and enjoyed a blissfully uneventful late lunch in the cafeteria, Zhang made the trek back to the engineering department with significantly less tension in his shoulders and in a moderately optimistic mood. With the crisis of the day averted, he felt reasonably sure that what remained of the afternoon would be calm in comparison.

As he passed by the engineering division’s break room, Zhang remembered that he was out of coffee in his office. He decided to backtrack for a quick caffeine stop.

There were two people already sitting on the couch when Zhang entered the break room. To his pleasant surprise, both of them were good friends of his.

He greeted the two by name, “Cynthia. Remy.”

The round-faced blonde in the violet blouse responded first. She greeted him sunnily, “Avery, hey! Come sit down with us.”

“Yeah, Zhang,” grinned the man sitting next to her in baggy civilian garb, “Take a break for once, don’t overwork yourself.”

Uncertain, Zhang paused to check his wristwatch. He glanced back at his friends and acquiesced with a softening expression, “I just came back from lunch, but guess I have the time. I don’t have to be anywhere until three. Just let me grab some coffee before I join you

guys."

"What do you have at three?" asked Cynthia.

As he grabbed a paper cup from a small stack by the coffee machine and poured himself a generous helping of French roast, Zhang answered thinly, "I'm supposed to oversee a procedure I designed. Details are need-to-know, sorry."

"Fair enough," shrugged the blonde with little disappointment.

Zhang stirred several spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee, foregoing cream entirely. After the sweet granules dissolved in his drink, he slipped a plastic cap over the rim of the cup.

Cynthia called out to him from across the room again to say, "Hey, Avery, have you seen this week's break room challenge yet? Patel picked a great one. The responses are hilarious."

"I haven't yet," Zhang replied.

> A bit of explanation:
>
> Some number of months ago, the facility had taken in an anomaly that near-constantly broke containment while also being mostly harmless. In response to this annoyance, an anonymous joker had posted a challenge on the notice board daring any engineer on break to tackle the task of containing the thing.
>
> Half the department wound up attaching slips of paper (and styrofoam cups) to the notice board with suggestions written on them. Few of the responses had been serious (several had involved SCP-682), but the entertainment derived from the break room challenge popularized the concept. Even after a permanent solution to the anomaly's containment was found, certain creative minds in the engineering department took it upon themselves to continue the challenge with a variety of already-contained anomalies, particularly the very infamous ones.

Zhang took his coffee from the countertop and walked to the notice board next to the refrigerator.

Among the humdrum of morale posters, rules, and policy updates tacked to the corkboard was an index card. Scrawled in black sharpie on that index card were three numbers: “096”.

He barked a laugh, “The Shy Guy? Hah! You’re right, Patel *did* choose a good one.”

One suggestion said to encase SCP-096 in concrete. Another recommended restraining the anomaly with bungee cords. An idea written in what Zhang believed to be the department head’s handwriting on the back of a napkin proposed strapping it in a neodymium vest and suspending it in a vacuum chamber from an electromagnet in the ceiling.

Still shaking his head in wry amusement, Zhang plopped himself into a lone armchair and sardonically inquired of the man on the couch, “Say, Remy, what brings an ill-educated field agent like yourself down to Archimedes’ playground?”

“That’s a good question!” Cynthia laughed.

Said agent feigned hurt when he replied with a jest, “That’s ill-educated *intermediate* field Agent Anderson to you, Mr. Zhang. And what, is visiting a beautiful lady not a good enough excuse to hang out with you nerds in engineering?”

Cynthia’s retort was lighthearted and teasing, “Not when she’s married to a member of Site Command and you’re head over heels for a certain someone in the research department.”

“Hey, hey, come on, since when did this start being about my love life?” complained the field agent.

The conversation carried on in good cheer for another ten minutes. It ended at 2:40, when Agent Anderson confessed that he was running late to turn in an incident report. Not long after he exited the break room, Cynthia received a summons from her project manager. She stood and left Zhang alone with an apologetic smile.

Zhang finished off what was left of his coffee and tossed the cup away in the garbage bin.

Just as he was about to leave the room himself, he decided to add his own two cents to the notice board. Digging around in his pockets, he found a crinkled, four-day-old receipt from a toy store. Borrowing the pen-on-a-string hanging by the notice board, he scribbled his own response to the week's break room challenge on the back of the receipt. Once finished, he stuck it to the notice board with an unused thumbtack.

Trap 096 in a giant hamster ball in a spherical containment room.

With that task completed, he left to make the journey to his three o'clock appointment.

2:51

"Remy," said Zhang with professional detachment, "I didn't expect to see you here."

The field agent turned around and responded in an equally impersonal tone, "Zhang. I hadn't realized before running into you in the break room that the procedure was your design."

Zhang bit his lower lip as a swell of emotions rose in the back of his throat: guilt, sorrow, bitterness, pity, pride. He walled them all behind a barrier of professionalism, but he couldn't help sighing tiredly, "Remy, let's just call it what it is: a termination."

The reply he received from his long-time friend was a choked, thinly-veiled protest, "It's euthanasia."

Several minutes of silence passed.

2:55

They were the only two people waiting in a clinically bright hallway deep in the bowels of the engineering wing. The fluorescent lights above their heads cast sterile shadows at their feet for the two men to stare at. The unmarked door at their backs was a gallows.

During this entire time, Zhang was struggling to find something resembling the right words — but find them he did.

“I’m sorry it’s you who has to do it.”

Agent Anderson took in a sharp breath. As he let it slowly back out, he softly stated, “Don’t be sorry, Zhang. I was on the recovery team, so I volunteered. It’s… better this way.”

Unsure of what else he could say or do to comfort his friend, Zhang only nodded.

2:57

“I know we’re doing this out of mercy,” said Anderson unexpectedly, “We’ve had her for months, but we’re no closer to a cure, and… she just wants to die. But I still wish it could be any other way.”

Suddenly, the door behind them opened to reveal the figure of a lanky, owl-eyed woman of graying age who Zhang recognized as his supervisor, the project manager.

She said in a voice like falling sand, “I hope you haven’t been waiting long. We’re ready to begin soon.”

She stepped back, and they followed her inside.

It was not as well-illuminated inside the room as it was out in the hall. As such, it took Zhang and Agent Anderson a few moments for their eyes to adjust.

The room was quite comparable to a small recording studio’s soundbooth. In one corner there was a coat rack from which there hung gloves and a winter jacket. There was space enough for several chairs along one wall. On the wall opposite there was a short row of computer stations where the sound mixing board would have been in a studio. A wide window above the table on that same wall looked into an adjoining space about the size of a recording booth.

But of course, neither instruments nor music stands occupied that adjoining room.

Through the glass of the window and of the door leading into the adjoining room, everyone could see the only two objects inside. The first was a dry, stone bathtub on top of a rubber mat. The second was lying on its side within the bathtub; a metal statue bearing the strikingly realistic visage of a young girl attempting to curl herself into the fetal position.

Anyone viewing the statue for the first time would feel curious about the fact that someone had dressed it in a simple, white dressing gown. Anyone viewing the statue with prior knowledge of its origins would feel little for it but pity and horror.

Zhang looked over the shoulder of a technician at one of the computers. He recognized what was on the screen as a brainwave graph, but he lacked the knowledge to determine what any of the patterns meant. The readout on a separate monitor gave the ambient temperature in the adjoining room as -25 degrees Celsius. An infrared camera feed on another neighboring screen showed that the body of the statue in the tub was significantly warmer than the air around it — almost 37 degrees Celsius, in fact.

A small cough brought his attention to his supervisor, who was standing by the chairs along the back wall. She gave him the slightest of nods.

3:00

Swallowing his trepidation and putting on a professional facade, Zhang marched to the farthest corner of the room, where a standard headset and a non-standard defibrillator — one which he knew had been modified to his own, lethal specifications — sat atop a small table. He took the devices from their place and brought them with him to approach Agent Anderson.

The field operative was standing by the coat rack. Stone-faced, he had already donned the winter jacket and the gloves provided to him.

With more confidence than he'd thought he could muster, Zhang handed the headset and the defibrillator to his friend. The containment engineer briefed the agent with information that he was

sure the man already knew.

“The anomaly is aware of its impending termination, but it is both unwilling and unable to resist. We will fill the tub as you enter the room. Your task is to minimize the entity’s suffering as the hypothermia sets in and to execute the termination via electrocution once we have verified the entity’s state of consciousness. You are not to begin the termination procedure until you have received our signal. Is this understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Zhang nodded heavily, “Proceed.”

Anderson turned stiffly to face the door to the adjoining room. He pulled it open and stepped through.

Zhang felt the chill from the refrigerated space enter the air in the control center before the door swung closed and sealed the two rooms apart from each other once again.

The technician at the computer consoles turned a dial, and the tub on the other side of the glass began to fill with with a blue-tinted mixture of water and antifreeze. The technician flipped a switch, and suddenly the light sound of Anderson’s breathing came echoing from the speakers in the control room.

Zhang watched as Anderson sat down on the concrete floor next to the tub. He listened as the field agent talked to the statue about *Harry Potter*, hedgehogs, and the color teal.

He watched as one of the two orange masses on the infrared feed cooled to yellow. He listened as the one-sided conversation turned to the topic of family.

He watched as the brainwaves on the center screen changed their patterns from what may have been normal to what was most certainly not. He listened as his friend said goodbye to both the eleven-year-old he had been able to speak with for all of three, short weeks and to the projection of a long-dead younger sister who had passed away in a hospital bed six months after a car accident in

which he'd been the one driving.

Zhang considered all this with the part of his mind that wanted to empathize with Anderson and feel sorry for the little girl whose flesh had turned to nigh-indestructible metal.

With another part of his mind, one that saw much more use in his day-to-day life, Zhang recalled receiving and analyzing the file on the designation-less, euthanasia-seeking anomaly that the Foundation had slated for termination the same day it had been recovered.

He remembered reading the exhaustive experimentation logs which had determined, after the child could no longer communicate, that that she was insensitive to temperature but not immune to its effects on the human body's internal systems. He remembered the clinically-phrased caveat that she could not seem to die of temperature fluctuations but that the upper and lower extremes of this had not been tested. He remembered contemplating the cold observation that the girl had, at some point in her transformation, lost the ability to fall asleep. He remembered seeing the termination testing log whose ultimate conclusion was that the girl's metallic exterior diverted electric charge away from her still-functioning internal organs the same way that a car's chassis could divert lightning around its occupants.

The engineer remembered in vivid detail submitting his termination proposal to the project manager. He remembered finding his initial proposal rejected. He remembered devising the post-procedure protocol that he felt would convince even those who were more concerned with attaining knowledge than maintaining ethics that finally ending the girl's life was in the Foundation's best interests. And he remembered finding out just several hours ago that his second proposal had been accepted.

He was startled out of this reverie when the technician at the computers waved him over, saying that the statue girl *Cecilia* was finally unconscious. The technician pressed a button, and the bathtub on the other side of the glass drained of fluid.

Zhang walked to the console and picked up the microphone. He said

tonelessly, “Agent Anderson, you are clear to begin termination.”

He stared unblinkingly as Anderson opened the defibrillator case. He carved into his memory the sight of his friend peeling the plastic away from the gelled faces of the paddles, the sight of him turning the dial on the device to its maximum setting. He memorized the image of the field agent placing the paddles across the statue child’s chest.

But when the high-pitched hum of the defibrillator gathering charge began, Zhang shut his eyes. When he heard the click of the paddle safety mechanism and the abrupt end to the device’s electric whine, his mind was filled with more clinical thoughts — thoughts of a bathtub insulated from the floor and of a beating heart in the path between 50 amps of current and a grounded paddle.

“Heart rate is null,” confirmed the technician.

When the field agent exited the termination chamber, Zhang was the one who took the defibrillator and the headset from him. He set both on one of the chairs along the back wall.

Briefly meeting his manager’s eyes, he volunteered to escort his friend to the staff dormitories. She gave him a nod of approval.

The two men walked down the labyrinthine halls to the nearest elevator in silence. They rode it up to ground level in the same.

The engineer knew little of what demons were dwelling in Anderson’s mind. He knew that his own thoughts were full of propane torches and ice baths and brittle ex-flesh in a hydraulic press whose use the Ethics Committee would never have approved of while the statue girl was still alive. But his friend Anderson was aware of none of these things, so what was weighing on the field agent must have been guilt of a different substance.

The doors of the elevator opened at ground level to a tiled floor and afternoon daylight. Both men exited, and they walked across a lightly-trafficked lobby area side by side. They soon came to an intersection where one branching path led to the staff dorms and another led back toward the engineering department.

Before they parted ways, Anderson confided, “I’m glad it was you who designed it, Avery. You made it kinder than it had to be.”

Zhang put on a reassuring smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He said, “It was the right thing to do for her. I’ll see you later sometime, Remy.”

It was on his way back to his office that Zhang ran into one of the engineering department’s assistants.

The overworked young man curtly reminded him, “Zhang, you’re due in Galileo at 3:40. Tell Dr. Cadence we need her recommendations by tomorrow night,” before continuing his march down the hall with an armful of three-ring binders.

Zhang, while internally berating himself for almost letting an important commitment slip his mind, called back to the assistant a hurried, “Thank you!”

He jogged to the nearest elevator and swiped his key card in the sensor above the button panel. The engineer took the elevator down to the floor which hosted Laboratory G-1A, a room designated for training interns and more commonly referred to as the Galileo Lab.

The double doors not too far from where the elevator let him off did not require a key card. Zhang pushed one of them open and entered a high-ceilinged room.

Inside, a group of young interns were happily lazing about, their current topic of conversation something related to an upcoming movie release.

“Pardon me, where’s your supervisor?” he asked them.

One of the interns pointed toward the wide window on one wall of the laboratory, answering, “In the observation room grading our essays.”

“Thank you,” said Zhang.

He made his way to the door next to the observation window. With

the press of a button on the wall, it slid open to let him through.

The room's current occupant looked up from the papers in front of her to smile and greet him, "Zhang, there you are. Just in time to join me in reading essays."

"Of course, Dr. Cadence," replied the engineer to the researcher. As he pulled a chair from along the wall to the round table in the center of the room, he said, "And before I forget to tell you; they want your recommendations by tomorrow night."

"Right, right," frowned Cadence, "I still need to write those. I imagine you've already turned yours in?"

Zhang nodded as he pulled a set of papers toward him, "Yesterday night."

"Always so on top of things. Mind if I ask who you're scouting out?"

"That kid, Almasi, and possibly Nguyen or Smith."

Cadence laughed, "Really? Darn. I was hoping to snatch Almasi for the research division. But you turned yours in early, so you'll probably get first pick."

Zhang countered jovially, "You're a senior researcher, you'll probably get to steal whoever you want."

Shrugging, Cadence replied, "I guess we'll see how it turns out. The Site Director will be happy no matter what. They're a good bunch of kids."

"Yeah, they are… It makes you wonder what they're doing here."

"Stop it, you. We have final essays to grade."

It was the end of the day, and Zhang was in his office, almost ready to leave to grab dinner at someplace that could make decent chicken. He gathered up the files on his desk and locked them in a drawer. Then, he began closing out of the tabs open on his computer.

The last tab he had to close was open to his work email, just as he had left it that morning. Zhang found himself suddenly reminded that he had not checked his personal inbox in some time. With a few clicks of the mouse, he signed out of his work account. Then, he signed into his personal email.

He had one unread message, titled “Katie”. It was three days old and from his ex-wife.

Zhang opened the email, and was delighted to find over a dozen photographs and video clips starring his daughter at her ninth birthday party. In these photos, she had a different haircut than she did the last time he’d seen her — but then again, the last time he’d seen her had been over a month ago.

One particular picture of the little girl holding up the plush dog and the scrambled Rubik’s cube he had gifted her was his favorite out of the bunch.

There was a short message from his ex-wife included with the photographs.

> *Katie says her new favorite cake is red velvet. She had lots of fun at the party, and she really adores the toys you dropped off for her. You could have stayed, you know. It was her birthday.*

But there had been a major anomaly transfer going on that day, and he had just barely managed to find the time to leave the unwrapped gifts at the door before rushing to meet the security detail for the overland haul to Site-19.

Zhang made a note to himself to get a day off for… what was the next major holiday? The Fourth of July. That would do. Katie liked fireworks, picnics, and the color blue.

He replied to his ex-wife’s email, thanking her for sending the pictures and telling her about his plans to get time off work on Independence Day. After that, he shut down the computer.

As Zhang locked up his office behind him, he sincerely hoped that

he would be able to keep that date.

Until then, it would be one typical day after the next.

Contingency

"You want me to go back into the field?"

"We *need* you to go back into the field. This is not a request. This is an order," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

Dr. Alto Clef, (also known as Agent Ukelele (also known as The Father of Lies (also known as The Serpent (also known as The Smiling Man (also known as That Bastard))))) shook his head. "After the way you treated us last time? I think fucking not."

"We had no choice," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "It was an emergency. We needed all your skills back then. We need them again now."

"Why? So I can ride herd on the next batch of schmucks you convince to do your dirty work? All to end up getting tossed out into the cold the moment that something goes wrong? That something being caused by the bullshit protocols under which you're going to make us operate, this hobbling our ability to do our fucking jobs? I refuse. You'll have to find someone else to be your hit man."

"I say again, this is not a request, this is an order," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "Or have you forgotten the terms of our deal? Are you reneging?"

Clef did not reply.

"It's a dangerous world out there for a young woman. Especially one who has the kinds of challenges she does," she continued. "Very dangerous indeed."

The seconds ticked by. Clef unclenched his fists, trying to ignore the pain his fingernails had caused digging into the palms of his hands. "So it's come down to this, huh? You're going to use her as leverage against me?"

"If we must. We would prefer that you come back to work for us in a much more amicable fashion," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

"It's been nine years. I've been behind a fucking desk most of that time. I don't know if I can do it again like I used to."

"It will all come back to you."

"No. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm nine years older," Clef said. "I'm not as fast or as strong or as tough as I used to be. I've got a bigger beer belly. My hands shake. My eyes are worse. If you want me to do this again, I'm going to need some help."

"We anticipated this. Draw up a list of candidates for your Task Force…"

"I only have one. Andrea Adams."

"Impossible," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said.

"No, it's not."

"Adams is assigned to—"

"Adams has been assigned to desk duty because you're afraid of her. But if I'm going to do the job you're asking me to do, I need Adams. I know she's been requesting reassignment to Mobile Task Forces. I know you've been denying her requests. Either you give me Adams, or you find someone else to head your Task Force."

The seconds ticked by. "Your condition is agreed upon," the woman in the mint-green pantsuit said. "Andrea Adams will be reassigned to your task force, as requested."

"Then get the hell out of my way and let me get to work," Clef growled. "And send me a copy of the bastard's file as soon as possible."

Item #: SCP- (SCP number pending)

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures:

SCP- is to be contained in a standard Class-B Suite at Site-17. Until such time as a termination order can be carried out, containment procedures are to utilize the Appeasement Protocol. For this reason, all requests for alterations to furnishings are to be carried out at the first available opportunity.

Currently, alterations include:

- One refrigerator, to be restocked daily with requested food and drinks. (Approved)
- One television with XBoxOne video game console, online capabilities disabled. (Approved)
- Various games for XBoxOne, including Watch_Dogs and Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare. (Approved)
- Personal computer for entertainment purposes, including limited access to streaming video files uploaded to local non-internet enabled server (Approved, SCP- is to provide a weekly request sheet of desired movies).
- Female companionship for the purposes of sexual activity (Pending)

Description:
Subject is a male of European descent between the ages of 19-24 with blond hair and blue eyes, approximately 160 cm tall, 82 kg in weight. Subject is extremely emotionally unstable, with a short temper, refusal to submit to authority, and tendency towards temper tantrums. As the subject's emotional instability directly correlates to the manifestation of his anomalous abilities, every effort is to be made to avoid provoking any emotional outbursts from the subject.

Subject is a Type 2 localized line-of-sight reality alterer. Mean range of effect is 20 meters, with a maximum

detected range of 200 meters. Primary form of reality alteration is physical phenomena, including rapid dislocation of objects, distortion of local-space time, and telekinetic force effect.

Subject has limited control over their abilities, which correlate to incidents of high stress or emotional distress in the subject. Attempts to administer sedatives have proven unsuccessful to date. Due to the difficulties in containing the subject, O5 command has authorized use of the Appeasement Protocol for temporary containment, pending final termination.

"Adams."

"You motherfucker."

"Good to see you again too, Adams."

"I thought I told you three years ago that I never wanted to see you again, you loathsome fuck." Adams slid into the chair across from Clef's and put her kitten-heel black leather pumps on a stack of half-finished paperwork. "And yet, here I am. Care to explain this bullshit?"

"Your use of invective has improved dramatically," Clef said. "You never swore like this when you worked for me."

"That's because I was fucking terrified of you."

"You never asked for a transfer."

"I was damned if I was going to let you get the better of me."

"And you've done well since then. Moved up the ranks. Your rise has been meteoric. From Junior Administrative Assistant to Senior Special Agent in less than five years? No one else has ever been promoted that quickly in the history of the Foundation."

"No thanks to you. What do you want?"

"You've requested transfer to the Mobile Task Forces, but you haven't heard yet where you're going. You're wondering what's taking so long. What's taking so long is this."

Clef tossed a manila envelope onto the desk. Adams picked it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, just open it, it won't bite."

"I'm never sure with you," Adams growled. But she opened the folder up and began to read.

It took her about half an hour to finish reading, and by the time she was done, her stomach felt like it was made of lead. "This is real?" she asked hoarsely.

"It is."

"This is…" Adams shook her head. "Clef, these stupid motherfuckers are reinstating the Omega-Seven project."

"Alpha-Niner now. 'Last Hope.' Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

Adams tossed the manila folder back into the desk. "Let me guess," she said. "They want me to be a part of it?"

"No, Adams. You're being assigned to a new Mobile Task Force. Tav Six Sixty Six."

"Tau 666?"

"No," Clef said. "Tav, with a 'V'. Hebrew alphabet, not Greek."

That didn't make any sense. "Mobile Task Forces don't use the Hebrew alphabet," Adams said.

"You've always been quick at noticing the obvious, Adams."

"Oh, fuck off, Doctor," Adams snapped.

"No. I'm serious. Noticing the obvious is a useful skill in this line of work. Now tell me something else obvious that no one would have

noticed."

What the hell else was there? "A three-digit number?" Adams asked.

"Number of the Beast, my dear. Numerologically speaking, the number of Nero, the Roman Emperor who stood by and fiddled while Rome burned. The man whom the early Christians hated so much that they turned his name into that of the Devil itself. You see the symbolism?"

Adams rolled her eyes. "Stop with the 'Devil' bullshit. I don't buy it for a moment."

"I'm not the Devil, Adams. But we are Satans. Adversaries. Opposers. Our role is to oppose. To be the adversary that—"

"Our?"

"You see what I mean about noticing the obvious, Adams? Yes, *our.* I'm the commanding officer. You're my exec. And that's it. Tav-666 is an MTF of two."

The clock ticked on.

"And here's the part you're really going to love," Clef said. "Mobile Task Force Tav Triple Six is a black Task Force. We appear on no org charts. Except to the O5s, we don't exist. Our job is going to be to keep an eye on the O5's new toys."

Things became clear. Adams steepled her fingers. "We're the safety valve in case Alpha-Niner goes tits-up," she said.

Clef smiled. "Ah, Adams. I knew I liked you for a reason."

> **Addendum:** Per the Clef Protocol, SCP- is to be terminated at the earliest possible opportunity. Senior Agent Andrea Adams will carry out the termination.

"So what now?"

"Now, Adams? You prove you can do the job. Read this."

Clef handed her a black folder marked **SCP NUMBER PENDING.** He poured himself a drink from the water cooler while Adams read. He knew that she was done by the annoyed scoffing noise she made. "I think I've read this story before," she said.

"You see it too? Exactly the same flavor profile as the first one they asked me to take down. Phase 4 Reality Bender. Limited power, limited control. Emotional trigger. Appeasement-based containment." Clef grinned. "Almost as if they were setting this up as a test case."

Adams drummed her steepled fingertips against each other. "You think they did?"

"You think O5s wouldn't?"

Adams exhaled deeply. "People have died thanks to this Skip," she said.

"That they have."

Something about Clef's voice made something inside her brain go *click.* "You don't trust the O5s," she said accusingly.

"I know them, Adams," Clef said. "They don't see people. They see lives. They see numbers. They make all their decisions based on the cold calculus of logic. Maybe that's the only way that you can run an organization like ours. But it means that we can't trust them to help us. We're not just expendable, we're disposable." He dropped the empty paper cup into his trash can.

"Sounds like the thinking of a certain motherfucker I know."

"But not your thinking. That's why I need you—"

"Stuff it, Clef." Adams got to her feet, picking up both folders from Clef's desk. "You'll have my equipment request by tomorrow morning."

Equipment request re: Termination of Subject Alpha (SCP-)

- Staging area located no further than ten meters from the entrance of the containment facility.
- Access to SCP-408, coordinated by Special Liaison Zyn Kiryu.
- Suppressed "Mk-217" rifle (Accurized AR-15 variant)

Please see also preparations to be made for placement of demolitions charges on and around SCP- containment facility, as prepared by MTF-Psi-7 ("Home Improvement") for immediate destruction by remote trigger.

Signed,
Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams
/ /

I see you're sampling my beats. Equipment request approved / / . Good hunting, Adams.

Assistant Director Alto Clef
Department of Training and Development.

He was sitting on his couch, pressing "X" to pay respects, when the door to his apartment opened and a naked Scarlett Johannsen walked in.

"Hey there, big boy," she said, in a seductive, sultry voice.

He was still staring at her tits when Adams shot him between the eyes.

"… what the hell was that, Adams?"

"That, Dr. Clef, was a successful termination." Adams smiled as she looked up at the ceiling of Clef's office, leaning back in the ratty office chair.

"You got Kiryu to make a naked Scarlett Johannsen illusion and shot the target through it. What the hell made you think that was a good idea?"

Adams sat up straight, leaned her elbows on Clef's desk. "I checked the kid's Netflix history," she said. "More accurately, I looked at the files he's requesting from the central entertainment server."

It wasn't often that Dr. Alto Clef looked lost for words.

"Iron Man 2. The Avengers. Captain America 2," Adams went on. "At first I thought he was just a Marvel fan, but then I noticed he's also been watching Lucy and Under The Skin. It was the last movie that tipped me off." She smiled grimly. "Especially because he only ever watches a few minutes of that one."

Clef sighed, rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "All right," he conceded, "so you used a naked illusion of a movie star to distract him. Can we talk about your kill method? Completely insufficient!"

"Only if you can't hit the broad side of a barn like you. Besides, I had the entire area rigged with explosives in case I missed the shot."

"I know. If you had to use those, you would have killed yourself and everyone else in the area."

"That's why I didn't miss." Adams smiled triumphantly. "Admit it, Doctor Clef. You're just jealous that I've accomplished something you never could."

"Which is?"

"I decommissioned a Skip… and stayed within my budget."

Clef and Adams locked eyes. Clef's smile widened. "Touché, Adams," he said softly.

The clock ticked on.

"Well," Clef said brightly. "The Skip is dead. Traditionally, this is when we go out and I buy you a beer."

"Can't." Adams got out of the chair and picked up her sports coat. "Got a date."

Clef raised his eyebrow. "Really? Heh. What's his name?"

"Cindy."

Clef laughed: a short, mirthless, barking laugh. "You're full of surprises, Adams."

"The Great Doctor Clef, caught off-guard. This has been a good day."

It's a universal truth that the paperwork always takes ten times longer than the actual mission.

Dr. Clef reflected on this fact as he finished typing up the expense report for Adams' first decommission. In terms of equipment, she had indeed stayed far under budget. The irritating thing, however, was making sure that the proper departments got billed for their time and labor.

He clicked over to the first tab, the one where he would fill out the information for the Task Force that had carried out the mission. Tav-666 was off the books, but he did need to put something down, so that the system would accept the expense report. A dummy Task Force he could use to launder the funds to run Tav-666.

Clef grinned as he began to type.

On Monday, Senior Special Agent Adams walked into her office to find a slip of paper on her desk.

> EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, you are reassigned to **Mobile Task Force Lambda 2: "Dr. Clef's Bisexual Assassination Squad."**
>
> Team Leadership: Dr. A. Clef (Commanding Officer), Senior Agent A. Adams (Executive Officer).

Team Membership: N. Romanoff, L. Uci, S. Iphone, K. Foster, L. Epidermis.

Assignment: *"To Kill Bad Guys Using Images of Beautiful Naked Women And Other Means."*

Adams felt a vein in her temple start to throb.

Continued Deliberations

O5-2 let the e-mail alert fade from her terminal screen without opening it. She already knew that the Foundation had suffered more casualties in the past twenty-four hours than all of the last five years put together. The only thing reading the details would accomplish would be the sapping of her resolve. The path forward was clear. Ensuring a future was worth any price. She wished she could tell each field commander personally, *we're certain about this, just hold the line*. Then again, desperation was on her side. People had a remarkable tenacity in the face of death. Nobody needed to remind anyone of what the consequences of failure were.

The large video monitor on the wall beside her chimed with an incoming videoconference notification. O5-3. She buried her face in her hands. Did she not get her fill of vitriol during the Council vote? Knowing O5-3, it was quite likely. She sat up. Internecine warfare was one of the few ways the Council had to amuse itself in this world. Even now, those habits died hard. Maybe especially now. She motioned at the screen, and O5-3's dark, lined face was on her wall.

"Vote's over, Three. You lost. Does that still make you mad?"

The woman on the screen sighed. "What I am is scared, Two."

It had not yet been a full two days since SCP-2798 had gone down, and the toll had been horrific. There was no way that current operations were sustainable for more than a week. Fear was probably the only reasonable response.

"Telling someone else that you're frightened isn't very therapeutic in our line of work, Three. Fear is contagious. Can I do something for you?"

O5-3 leaned a little closer to the monitor. "You blocked the vote. You cut off our exit."

"Oh, bullshit, there were plenty of us with doubts."

"But none with the certainty of yours. Five and Thirteen were never going to vote for it anyway, but Six and Twelve would have. I talked to them before. I know that you talked them out of it."

"That's still not enough. One was the difference, and even you can't tell me that I can make One bend to anything."

O5-3 sighed again. "Look. That doesn't matter, I guess. It's done, and that's that. But you owe me something, Two."

"Do I?" O5-2 moved closer herself now. "I owe you something for not letting you kill everyone? You're beyond absurd. I'm done with this now."

"Wait. Please. I need to know." O5-3 paused a moment while she forced out the question. "I need to know what you know. I need you to tell me why we didn't just make the worst mistake in the history of the world. The real reason, Two."

O5-2's hand hovered over the red button to end the call. She pulled it back. "I went to the precog items. I peeked."

The revelation washed over O5-3's hard features, her determined upper lip and furrowed brow softening as her face betrayed shock. It was the first time O5-2 had seen her face like that. "You didn't. That can't possibly be-"

"Is it really that hard to believe? With the gun in your own mouth, you're not the least bit curious about how things might turn out if you don't pull the trigger? Yes, I'm aware of the prohibitions. Who cares about that now? Are you going to report me? Requisition a detail to come and detain me in the middle of all of this?"

O5-3 sat in silence. There was no arguing the point. "So what did you see?"

"You know what it's like, Three. Being old. Ideally, you learn to not delude yourself with false hope. Resign yourself. You remember the old Eleven? His obsession with uploading his consciousness, like he could cheat Death? Ridiculous. He was ridiculous…" Two trailed off,

the wild eyes of the former O5-11 haunting her for a moment. "But this…we've always fought to preserve what *is*, Three. We've never thought about what *could be*."

"What do you mean by that?"

"All of the precog items point to a future. I haven't seen how we get to it, but it's not just survival. I saw great spires of glass that pierced the clouds, unspoiled landscapes, great flocks of birds passing through cityscapes built into mountaintops. I've seen people who don't fear sickness and death. No wars, no poverty." She grew more animated. "All of the anomalies under our control that can tell us anything have all showed me this place. That it exists. *Someone* survives to make it there."

O5-3 looked skeptical. "That's a very different place than the one we're seeing now."

"It's a different planet. We know that much."

"Do you think that we're going to be able to mount a space colonization mission when we can't even keep ourselves alive right now?"

"No. Probably not," said O5-2. "But at some point, someone does. And I want to give whoever that is the chance to do that. Don't you see? There is a *point* to all of this, now. There is an end goal for humanity, more than just living another night. Our children will have a chance not just to live, but to live in peace. Isn't that worth continuing on?"

"That seems very ideal, doesn't it," said O5-3. "Almost like it's designed to stay our hand."

"What reason do I have to make this up? And it was useless as a tool to influence the Council. If I had brought this up during the vote, I very well *would* have been detained, then."

"Hm. You do seem to believe it." O5-3 frowned. "You know that these…things, they can be very untrustworthy."

"One or two, maybe they come up with the same deception," said

O5-2. "All of them? Vanishingly unlikely. Some of these things are kept in separate *realities*. No, this is all pointing to something, and I believe it is true. Or rather, I believe in it enough to keep going for the chance to make it real."

O5-3 was silent for a moment. She swallowed. "You know that we've already had two activations of **SCP-089**? In two days?"

O5-2 took a moment. "No. I did not know that. And really, I would prefer not to know things like that." She went on. "Nothing we're doing now is anything that we haven't been called upon to do before. It's harder. But it's the same thing. We've always tried to preserve some sort of future. And now that we've got proof of it, we can't stop now."

"Proof," said O5-3 quietly. "God, I hope you know what you're doing, Two."

"Just help me hold things together. Until we can't do it anymore, so that whoever it is that gets us out of here and away from whatever the hell it is that's hunting us can do their duty." O5-2 fought hard, and the tears stayed in her eyes; she would not let them flow.

O5-3, impossibly weary, looking sick and unwell, every one of her sixty-eight years on display, nodded barely. She ended the call, and O5-2 was left looking at her own reflection in the dark glass of the monitor. She studied her own face for a moment. She had more hope than Three did, but for all of that, she looked just as heartsick. Just as scared.

I hope I know what I'm doing too.

O5-2 opened the message from Asian Subcommand, and read the latest developments. More of the same.

Contrast

More than anything else in life, they desire pleasure. It fuels their every action, driving them to do impossible things for the purpose of gaining it. Even when they don't realize it, pleasure is what motivates them, deep, deep down in their minds. Every aspect of their life is touched by it.

And yet, I see them whittle away their lives actively trying to repress it. Though they let it control them, they work to keep it hidden away, never speaking of it or taking part in it during their normal lives. Some break this convention, and all constantly have pleasure on their minds, but for the majority, they cut down what they could do, what they could be.

I do not understand this. Pleasure shapes me more than it does them, so my perspective may be somewhat clouded. But to shy away from an integral part of what they are seems to my eyes madness. Creatures driven by pleasure should experience it whenever they can.

So I help them. I can see into the deepest recesses of their minds, and instinctively tell what would bring them the greatest pleasure in their whole lives. And then I am that thing, ready and willing to help them escape their self-imposed bonds and to truly live. Those who answer my call are rewarded. All who see me answer my call.

You have no idea what it's like, being the thing to please another. I have been large and small, male, female, and in-between. I have been beautiful, plain, and ugly, and yet remained the absolute best thing in all of existence to the one I save. Sometimes it's sensual; sometimes it's romantic; many times it's erotic. But at all times, it is what they want. No, more than that. It is always what they *need*.

I feel the act regardless of whether or not we are together. It always culminates in the act, but some chose to not bring themselves into my presence; rather, they pleasure themselves to a representation

of me. But even without the thrusting and grunting, I still feel the immense satisfaction of helping another escape their self-inflicted bonds, and become what they were truly meant to be.

It is the feeling of being truly and properly *alive*.

But once we are finished, it must happen. As is always the case with pleasure, it must be associated with pain.

It is another thing I do not understand about them. Though they lock away their pleasure, they also lock away their pain. Reflection has taught me that they think of it as a harmful thing, something to be actively avoided. They cannot see that it is a necessary counterpart to pleasure. If they do not want to live in pleasure, and they do not want to live in pain, then what do they want to live in? I simply cannot answer.

However, I can help. As with the pleasure, the pain is not something I choose to do; it is simply something I cause to happen. Torment and suffering unlike any other they have ever experienced overwhelms them, and they fall to the floor, gasping and shrieking in agony. On rare occasions, it has occurred to me to help them, but then I realize I would be taking away from the proper experience. Men and women alike beg to be saved, and men and women alike die.

I regret none of this. By showing those who have spent their whole lives in a haze of nothingness the ultimate pleasure and the ultimate pain one after another, I help them live as I do. It is only for a moment, but is a moment of perfect understanding not enough? Does that not allow one to be connected with all those around them before passing on, having finally seen the light? Is this not the way things should be?

Such is my lot in life. I bring pleasure, and I bring pain. Once, long, long ago, I regretted it; manipulating one only to take their life seemed to me a horrid, ugly thing. But now, after who knows how much time, I see that it is the way things are to be. So I accept it. I wait in this dark cell, waiting for whoever comes to me next.

And then I deliver them into the light.

Convergence

Hub | | Next →

Lilibeth Orion was sitting on the swing-set lazily kicking her feet back and forth. It was Autumn, and the trees were beginning to shed themselves of leaves. Their delicate descent from the branches to the ground had turned the landscape beautiful shades of orange and red, welcoming the changing seasons.

She wasn't as spry as she was when she first came here, those many years ago. Her once precise hands now shook when she wrote down her observations of the constellations. Her transition to living at **SCP-2508** had not changed her fascination with space (nor her degree in astrophysics).

Sometimes, during quiet evenings before making dinner, Lilibeth would sit outside- as she did now- and watch the sun set. The swirls of flaming color would descend with that massive luminous sphere, until it gave way to the cool touch of the night. Dark shades of somniferous blues and black would seep through the horizon until all appeared still, and all was quiet.

This time, however, things were slightly different. She was steeling herself. The lull of gears turning beneath the surface of the field was clearer than it had been in times past, as the sound escaped from a small hole in the ground no bigger than 2 meters in diameter. With months upon months of arduous tunneling behind her, she had finally broken her way into some kind of structure.

She hadn't entered it yet. She needed to work up the nerve.

Perhaps it was time.

Lilibeth had not anticipated having to build a pulley system and makeshift elevator, but it had come in handy in the later stages of

moving the rock and earth from the field. As the old scientist descended into the darkness, the metallic clanking of clockwork became all the more noticeable.

Finally, her junky elevator hit a metal grated floor.

With her flashlight clenched tightly in her hand, she stepped out into the tunnel. Her light scanned over the interior; copper-colored walls, rusted metal pipes, and wiring. It was clear that something was below the grate floor, but her flashlight could not see the bottom. There was no way of telling how far down this place actually went. One thing was certain though, and that was that the noise was becoming much louder. Lilibeth could feel the walls vibrate ever so slightly when she put her hand to them. When she removed it, her palm came away coated in a black grease.

The flashlight was Lilibeth's solitary source of light here. The air was humid and filthy, blowing through a series of vents above her. She followed the tunnel, turning towards the noise when it presented her with intersections. With the turning of the gears, the walls hummed all around, and the grating buzzed below. It was trancelike.

A brief investigation revealed half a dozen empty rooms throughout the tunnel system, with dirty and chipped tiled floors. There was little indication anyone had ever been there. They were not the interesting thing, though. The interesting thing was what lay at the end of one of the halls. There stood a large metal door, which seemed to be opened via a rusty crank on the wall. It's old surface still sported the remnants of a label: "Tower".

This was undoubtably where all the noise was coming from. But now there was another noise accompanying the gears, and it was the sound of rushing water. With hesitation, Lilibeth turned the crank, and the door opened.

Inside the sphere-shaped room she could see that she was still on a small catwalk (albeit one with stairs), that looked over the source of the now deafening noise. The machine in question was about 50 or so gears; huge ones and small ones, bronze ones and silver ones. Long chains of them connected to various bits of machinery and tubing that Lilibeth couldn't wrap her head around. All in all, the

device was two stories tall, descending downward further into the dark. Lilibeth made her way down the small flight of stairs to the concrete base of the room. She was awestruck by the intensity and complexity of what she was looking at. Pipes labelled "FRout" connected to immense opaque containers that churned with liquid as the gears moved smaller bits of strange equipment. Layers upon layers of metal plates spun around beams, and tiny lifts no bigger than a book carried cylindrical canisters down from a small hole in the ceiling, to a small in the floor. Directly above her head several of the canisters were transported throughout the room via pneumatic tubes.

The old scientist was lost for words. All she could do was stare at what was in front of her. She was almost about ready to turn back when she spotted a narrow corridor tucked into the corner of the room. It wasn't the same copper color of the rest of the complex, but instead was made of cobblestone lined with pipes coming from the machine and the walls themselves.

Upon entering the room, it could have been mistaken for a spacious sewer; a river made of stone bordered by walkways and little bridges. But it wasn't a sewer. It didn't smell like one, and the water flowing from the evenly spaced pipes in the wall looked crystal clear. At the far end of the room the water fell past a grate and into what could have very well been an unending darkness.

The pipes were separated into groups of 6 small PVC pipes. All trickled a very slow stream of water, and all sets of 6 were marked by a wooden board next to it with some kind of identification. Lilibeth read the names as she traversed the walkway; "#322", "Projet Avalon", "91-XSM", "Slouthering", "KPI-&4", "Number 18504"…

And finally: "SCP-2508"

Lilibeth's heart skipped a beat as the information sank in: There were more.

Conversation 1: Omicron

“I had the d-d-dream again.”

Dr. Skinner dutifully jotted this note onto her pad. “Was it the same as the others?”

David squirmed in his seat. “Roughly, y-y-yeah.”

“Can you tell me about it, David?” Dr. Skinner looked plaintively across the coffee table at the subject, then back at her initial notes. *Thirty-one year old male, one of the only researchers recruited from a non-scientific civilian job. Level 3, but very provisionally, and only because nobody else wanted the Site 38 job. Fairly big fish in a very small pond, before his…accident. Now he’s a psych case.*

“It was the same. Not much different.”

“You have to tell me, David. What did he say to you? Start from the beginning.”

“Okay, it was during the breach, like it always is.” He paused.

“It’s okay, David, you’re in a safe place. You can talk about it. He can’t hear you.”

“He says he can. Every time it happens, he says he hears me. I think it’s real.”

Dr. Skinner sighed. “David. Look at me.” The researcher turned his head. “The entity you encountered is fully contained. You have never come into contact with it. You hit your head during the breach and experienced severe hallucinations. Nothing you saw was real. Now, with that understanding, what did he say in this dream?”

David took a deep breath. “He had me against the wall, and he was talking to me. I can’t remember what he was saying for a lot of it; I don’t even think I could understand him in the dream. He kept

showing me these s-s-scenes, awful, horrible scenes. P-p-people being cut down and eaten alive. Skips were breaking out everywhere, in every hallway. Everyone else was running around, fighting, dying. Some people were even breaching containment on s-s-skips themselves, trying to use them to fight off…whoever w-w-was attacking us. Isn't that insane?"

Like you were, dammit, Dr. Skinner thought. But David didn't remember any of that, and it wouldn't help to bring it up again. "It really doesn't sound very realistic, but it's just a dream. Go on."

"He showed me all of the dead and dying, and I just kept laughing."

Dr. Skinner paused, pretending that she was hearing this for the first time. "What do you mean, laughing?"

David shrugged. "I…I don't know. It just…I couldn't help it. I know how horrible it s-s-s-sounds, but at the time…it just seemed hilarious. Something about the way he smiled when people died."

Dr. Skinner had this note in David's file already. It was very disturbing the first time she heard it, but that was two rounds of amnesiac drugs for David ago. Every time he was back in this room, he told her about the same dream. He always had the same dream. Horrifying or not, it got old.

So far, though, it looked like the therapy was working. The researcher would be traumatized for life, of course, but who wouldn't be? O5 hadn't ordered her to oversee David's therapy because there was any realistic chance of actually curing him. Something slightly more serious was at stake here.

"Did you see anything else?" Dr. Skinner asked.

"Well, he s-s-show—" A knock at the door interrupted the session.

"I'm very sorry, David, excuse me a moment." Dr. Skinner rose and walked to the door. A messenger outside slipped her a note. She glanced at the words on the page, then returned to her seat. "Now, then, where were we?"

"He talked for a long time. He took me to this room, deep under Site

19, and he kept talking the whole way there. I just remember…"

"Go on."

David squirmed. "He just kept saying 'Omic-c-ron.' And I don't know what that means, but…at the same time, I think I do. It's so…it seemed so familiar."

Dr. Skinner straightened up. "What does Omicron mean? Or what do you think it means?"

David glanced at the psychiatrist with curiosity. Dr. Skinner wasn't always as subtle as she intended to be. "Wait, what d-d-does that note say?"

"Hmm?" She looked at the note. *New directives from Overwatch,* it said. *New intelligence required. Focus on following keywords: omicron class, apollyon, reverser, holzman, hollis, numberless, 555. Presence of any words indicate operation failure and will require additional amnesiac treatment.* "It's a message from my daughter's school. Nothing relevant to this. Please continue."

"He…he kept taking me further and further down. I saw things, horrible things, people being ripped to pieces. He showed me rooms, I guess they were SCPs. I think he let s-s-some of them out, I can't be sure. But he took me to the bottom. The bottom of Site 19. D-d-do you know w-w-what's d-d—"

"David, please remember, none of what you saw is real. It was all a dream. But whatever you saw might tell us something about the root of what's disturbing you so much. Please, feel free to talk about it."

"There was a bottom. There were d-d-doors, locks, but he opened all of them. He took me inside and s-s-showed me what was there."

Another pause. "David, you need to talk about this. What did you—"

"I was different," he whispered.

"What was that?" Dr. Skinner.

"I was different before. There was a world before this, and I wasn't

like this then." David's voice had changed subtlely. Dr. Skinner had seen hypnosis before, and the person in front of her had clearly gone under. It wasn't just the stutter disappearing. It was something else.

"How was it different, David? Please, stay on the couch—"

David stood up and stumbled forward, looking dazed. "There was a different world. There was a Foundation, but it wasn't called that. I don't think we had a name. It was smaller, much smaller. I think it was just Site 19 and a few outposts. And I wasn't called…no, I was still myself, but I wasn't a researcher. Or a landscaper. I had a different title…" David was pacing around the room now, muttering frantically. "Omicron Class Defense Marshal. That was what they called me. I was at Site 19 when it happened."

He's losing it, Dr. Skinner thought. "What happened in your dream? What did you see?"

The look David gave Dr. Skinner chilled her to the bone. "Knock it off, doctor. You know it wasn't a dream. Just like I know that memo has nothing to do with your daughter. And like I know that button under the desk is about to call someone who's going to make me forget about this." David paused. "For what definitely feels like the third time."

"Just stay calm, David." Her finger twitched in a practiced motion. "Nothing you're thinking is real. Focus on the sound of my voice—"

"I'm not going to hurt you, Martha. But time is running out. Holzman didn't finish the job he started. Something that isn't supposed to exist is sitting in the basement of Site 19, and it's waking up. There's an SCP that doesn't have a number, in a room that isn't on any map, and it wants to start running again. I don't know if Bobble woke it up or the other way around, but somebody has to stop it."

Two Agents burst the door down and knocked the researcher to the ground. As one restrained him, the other plunged a syringe into his neck. His eyes fluttering, David muttered a few final words, then lost consciousness. The Agents lifted him up and began to carry him out.

Dr. Skinner followed them to the door. "Wait. What was that he said?"

One of the Agents paused. "The tranq knocked him out, ma'am. He wasn't making any sense. I'm sure you'll see him after the next round of amnesiacs." They kept moving.

"But what did he *say*? It might be useful."

The agent looked over his shoulder as he kept walking. "He said, 'Please close the door behind you.'"

Conversation 2: Numberless

"Jesus, the food is getting worse by the day," Agent Lee said.

"Tell me about it," Agent Eastman said. "I think this is another immortal-lizard sandwich. And from the taste…" Eastman took a bite. "…I'd say this was removed with a leaky blowtorch. From the dark-meat side."

Lee chuckled. You had to bitch about the food when you couldn't deal with whatever else was wrong. "So who else is coming to this bountiful feast? Allen's got lunch right now, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, Allen should be here any minute. Milton shouldn't be far…oh, shit. Never mind." Eastman looked down darkly.

"Yeah. He caught it yesterday." Lee leaned forward and whispered, "He had an errand to run…downstairs."

"Shit." Eastman took another bite. "How far down?"

"Not as far as you'd think." Lee glanced around to see if anyone was listening; he had heard that RAISA had started putting "morale officers" throughout the Site, making sure that people stayed upbeat while their friends kept disappearing. Other than the cafeteria being a bit sparser than usual, nobody seemed to be taking particular interest in them. "Barely halfway through the Keter levels."

"That's at least eight floors from the bottom of the site," Eastman said.

"The bottom of the site that we know about," Lee said. "We have to know now that there's something down there that they're not telling us."

"Obviously, we don't *have* to know," Eastman said, "or else we *would* know. I don't want any amnestic treatments that I can avoid."

"Have you ever considered…" Lee glanced around again. "Have you ever considered that maybe we have a right to know things that our current employers might not want us to?"

Eastman blanched. Leaning forward, he whispered, "No, and neither should you. We got good fucking jobs, that just happen to be for people who like to keep secrets. And who keep secrets the Benjamin Franklin way. Y'know, 'three can keep a secret if two of them are dead'?"

"Listen," Lee whispered back, "I know you know something. I know there're some people who have…who have a different idea about what people like us should know. Especially when it's our asses on the line."

"Our asses are *always* on the line," Eastman said. "What the fuck does it matter if we get our neck snapped by a statue, or stuck in a desert behind a mirror, or if we just…disappear? Dead is dead. And for all we know, O5 could be sending a team down to the basement as we speak. I don't get paid to think. I get paid to shoot shit."

Lee sighed. "There's a big difference between an assigned job, a posting, where they tell you what you're getting into, give you a fighting chance to make it back, and a big-ass death trap in the basement of Site 19. Something powerful enough to shut down security cameras, unlock doors, make one of us disappear, *without letting us shoot back.* I've talked to some people who checked out the scene of the disappearance, okay? No signs of struggle. No bullet holes, no scrapes, no blood, nothing. People just *vanishing into midair.* And yeah, that scares the shit out of me."

Eastman looked at Lee for a long time. "You're sure this is what you wanna do? Risks or no?"

"Hell yes."

"Okay. Come with me." Eastman checked his Grayberry. "My phone says we have an hour before anyone comes looking for us. If you want to do this, now's the time."

"You sure you want to have your Foundation phone on you when

we're about to…to do this?"

"It'd be more suspicious if we didn't carry them. I've got the tracker off, though. You might want to do the same."

"You can turn it off?" Lee was shocked.

"Yeah, give me yours." Lee handed it over to Eastman, who put an SD chip in the back and handed it back. Lee looked at the screen, which showed a skull-and-crossbones logo with the words "I SOLEMNLY SWEAR I AM UP TO NO GOOD" below it.

"You ready for this? There's no going back now," Eastman said.

"Absolutely," Lee said.

They walked to the nearest elevator. Eastman pushed a series of buttons, and the elevator began to move.

"Okay," he said to Lee, "here's what we know. There's an SCP that doesn't have a number, something that isn't supposed to be here. Some people have been having some strange dreams, the same one, about a room at the bottom of Site 19."

"Yeah, I had one a couple of nights ago," Lee said.

Eastman looked at him. "What did you see?"

"Just weird shit. I was sitting in a chair looking at a table with some ice on it. Some part of me knew that I was in the basement of Site 19, even though nothing around me looked like it. It was hot in the room, so hot, but the ice didn't melt. I know there was something goddamn strange about the ice not melting. It wasn't dream physics, even the *dream* version of me knew something unnatural was going on. I just kept staring at the ice, for minutes at a time. Suddenly, I had the oddest feeling."

"Like there was something very important happening behind you, right?" Eastman looked at him with a sort of desperate tone to his voice. "Like something was about to happen behind you that you had to see?"

"Wait, you had it too?"

"Similar," Eastman said. "Except it wasn't ice. It was one of those Newton's cradles, the little toy with the balls that just tap-tap-tap back and forth. I never saw anyone touch the thing, but it just kept going. Suddenly, I saw a man in a suit, someone I didn't recognize, standing right behind the thing. He put these two wooden blocks on either side of it, just to where the balls would touch them before rolling back down. He stood there and stared right into my eyes while I watched the cradle. It felt like hours before I realized what he wanted me to notice."

"It didn't slow down," Lee said. "It never slowed down. It just kept going on its own. Forever."

"What did you see behind you?" Eastman asked. "What was happening in the room behind you?"

"Hollis was there." Lee was now staring directly into space, barely focusing. "Hollis was arguing with someone."

"Holzman. It was Holzman." Eastman's trance was identical to Lee's.

"I know it was Holzman and Hollis, and they were fighting over the reverser."

"The numberless SCP." A dinging sound snapped Eastman out of his reverie. "C'mon, Lee. We're here." He shook his companion to wake him.

Lee shook his head to clear it. "Right, right." They walked out of the elevator.

There was a single, small room. Maps and notes covered the walls. Lee looked at some of the notes. *Research failed to create an environment…entropy increased…it*

SCP…not only decreases but reverses

All events will tend towards order.

an endless unstoppable fuel source for the ultimate engine of

destruction. And if not that, then what? Men living forever

"This is what we know," Eastman said.

"Where are we exactly?" Lee asked.

"A little ways down. Why?"

"Down, as in…towards the basement?"

"Nobody's been lost this high up yet. It shouldn't be a threat." Eastman shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I think I get how people disappear without a trace," Lee said, turning his back.

"How?"

Lee snapped around, his service pistol in his hand, and shot Eastman once directly in the head. Lee's accuracy with guns had never been so great before, but now, he knew he could do anything. The Reverser would tell him what to do. It was so smart.

"They walked downstairs," Lee said to no one in particular. Eastman's body lay on the floor. He was not bleeding. Lee walked over and stood over the body.

"The radiation will keep you from actually dying, but the bullet will keep you immobile. You'll keep dying, but you'll never actually die. Thank you for your help."

Lee turned and walked back to the elevator, punching a different series of buttons to go further down. As the doors closed, he heard Eastman moan.

"Don't worry, buddy," Lee said. "I'll leave the door open for you."

Conversation 3: Decommissioning

A number of people who no longer used their names spoke to one another.

"How many so far?"

"Four. One D-class, two agents, one junior researcher. The phenomenon must be contained."

"You argued previously that—"

"I know what I said. We need more intelligence about the phenomenon before we can act, yet nobody entering its effect radius returns to report about it. Nevertheless, we must act as soon as possible."

"There is one alternative. The damaged researcher seems to retain some memories."

"His memory has been wiped."

"The RAISA operative carrying out his rehabilitation has reported that his memories continue to surface. We can exploit this."

"I suggest the Council order Dr. Skinner to carry out reconnaissance for us. I have drafted a message: 'New intelligence required. Focus on following keywords: omicron class, apollyon, reverser, holzman, hollis, numberless, 555. Presence of any words indicate operation failure and will require additional amnestic treatment.'"

"What are those words?"

"All of the research we've recovered to date. Maybe something will turn up."

"Why is he to be mind-wiped if he's our only lead?"

"First, amnestic treatments hardly qualify as 'mind-wiping'. Second, amnestics seem to reset his memories, make him more cooperative. We may elect not to go forward with the amnestic treatments, depending on what he knows. But I think the threat of amnestics will speed the process somewhat. If it fails, we can try something different. But time is of the essence."

"Is it wise to reveal this much and hope for the best?"

"None of our other efforts have been effective. I see no choice. The matter is on the table; seven votes are required."

Ten for, three against. The message was sent.

Some time later:

"Site 19 is almost abandoned now. Much of the building is unsafe, and most of the personnel are dead. Have we learned enough to act?"

"Certain files were recovered, thanks to the information we gathered. The SD cards we spread around the Site allowed us to gather even more intelligence, especially from people who believed they were speaking in confidence."

"The recording from the last death was…unusually disturbing."

"Agreed. But the question remains: have we determined the nature of the phenomenon?"

"Approximately. We do not know how or why it is in Site 19, or even in this universe. But a plan was devised for this scenario."

"Who composed it?"

"That information is unavailable. Nevertheless, it is all we have to work with. I propose the plan be executed."

"What is the plan?"

"It is an Omicron class event. Nobody has authorization to know the

details."

The rest of the individuals looked uncomfortable. "Do you have any alternative?" the speaker said. Silence throughout the room. "The motion is on the floor. All in favor? All opposed? The motion carries."

"What must be done?"

"I have composed the necessary orders. Brace yourselves. Executing…now."

A gas flooded the room from numerous vents. The people inside reacted with surprise initially, then relaxed, accepting what was happening. They were fully aware that the gas was a nonlethal anesthetic combined with an amnestic; this part of the scenario was familiar to them. Contingent Omicron, it was called. For when there were things even the O5 Council didn't need to know.

"See you on…the oth…er s…the other side," a voice was heard to say.

The top floor of Site 19 was deserted as Jaime MacGilligan woke from a nightmare. It was hardly an unusual occurrence, of late. It was the same nightmare. It was always the same. The basement. The rubber balls, bouncing across the room without stopping or slowing. The conversation behind her. The bodies.

So many bodies. Many of them friends of hers. Every night, while Holzman and Hollis argued about decommissioning SCP-Numberless, someone new entered the room in front of them. Neither of the men saw their new companion, or heard the gunshot directly to the head moments later. The next night, another will walk in, see the previous night's sacrifice, and chuckle while they shoot themselves in the head. Jaime knew (in the way one knows things in dreams, things that are impossible to know) that the two men were talking long ago. This conversation happened in another universe, infinitely far away and right here. An eternity ago, four years ago. An event that never happened, that keeps happening. That will always happen.

The clown made it happen. Jaime knew this, in the way one knows things in dreams. Things that are impossible to know. A clown in a television set opened a door and let the breeze from the death of a world drift in to Site 19. It has never happened. It will always happen.

There is a message on her Grayberry. One of her last ties to a Foundation that barely exists, in a world that won't exist for much longer. The message says:

Check your laptop. New orders. O5

The Foundation-issued computer was state-of-the-art, but the battery had barely another hour of power on it. She had been running up, up, away from the basement and…whatever sort of death was there. She never had the heart to leave the Site, though. She was a Researcher, even if a low-level one, and that was that. If the Foundation went down, she would go down with the ship.

A message was waiting for her, in a sense. Her computer had been remotely wiped clean and replaced with a single program. A background covered in the Greek letter omicron, with a message in front:

> If you are reading this, Overwatch Command has detected no other life signs within Site 19, indicating a crisis situation of unparalleled magnitude. However, a solution has been devised, and it has been determined that you are both capable of executing the solution and that nobody else is capable of assisting. Details from O5 are included below:

That message was followed by an SCP file, fairly complete except for the item number, which was listed as "Numberless." Jaime had no idea there was an SCP that didn't have a number, until she read the note below the file:

> Intelligence suggests that this object belonged to an analog of the SCP Foundation, a much smaller organization, in an alternate universe. Due to the poorly-understood nature of the object (originally believed to be

nothing more than a device capable of stopping and reversing entropy within a particular range), an attempt to decommission SCP-Numberless failed, leading to an XK-class end-of-the-world scenario. By means currently unknown, this scenario was averted; a side effect of this was the creation of a new universe, which we presently inhabit. SCP-Numberless survived the transition, but remained locked in a heretofore unknown chamber at the very bottom of Site 19. This containment chamber was evidently capable of suppressing SCP-Numberless's effect; while locked, the artifact remained harmless.

Current intelligence suggests that during the most recent Tempest Night containment breach, an unknown entity (suspected to be SCP-993, though the means by which this could have been accomplished are unknown) managed (through similarly unknown means) to unlock and open the containment chamber for SCP-Numberless. The opening of this chamber led to the reactivation of the device, which now displayed a predatory ability to lure personnel within a particular (consistently growing) effect radius into its chamber for unknown purposes via telepathic means.

We have attempted to send support personnel from other sites to provide assistance, but the device has been preventing outside entry to Site 19 through unknown means for some time. We are sorry, but there is no one else but you.

Telepathic countermeasures can be found at the following location. Please

This was followed by a series of instructions that were as shockingly simple as they were horrifying. Jaime knew there was nobody else, and no alternative. A map appended to the message showed the projected increases in the effect radius; the last bit of Site 19, the area she was in, would be lost within three hours. The surrounding countryside would be lost within two days. The effect would be planetwide within three months, and there was nobody left but Jaime. Jaime knew this in the way one knows things in real life,

things that are impossible to forget. She looked at her orders once again:

> You must close the containment chamber. To ensure success, you must remain inside the chamber when it closes. The Foundation will honor your sacrifice and its meaning for the continued existence of the human race, but there is no chance of survival. We are sorry.

The "telepathic countermeasure" was a headset with earbuds and slightly blue-tinted glasses. A small band running over the top of the head was the only indication that the brain had anything to do with the entire affair. If she didn't believe that O5 wouldn't bother sending her to her death for no reason, she wouldn't believe the stupid-looking thing was even real. But orders were orders.

The elevator the laptop directed her to opened as she approached. A new message popped up as she entered.

> The laptop will now direct the elevator. We apologize for the music.

A screeching noise came from the little laptop. The lights in the elevator turned red, and a voice popped up from the speakers. "Omicron-level priority order acknowledged. Please relax before your impending engagement on…" The computerized voice was replaced with a different automated one: "FLOOR… UNAVAILABLE."

A sound came out like an old radio scanning, followed by the words "Morning, today's forecast calls for…blue skies!" and a piano riff.

"Sun is shining in the sky
There ain't a cloud in sight…"

Jaime hadn't seen the sun in weeks. She cried to the Electric Light Orchestra the whole ride down.

The door opened just as the song ended. Jaime walked out holding

the laptop, glancing at it for any last instructions.

> There is nothing left to tell you. Good luck. You may leave the laptop behind.

She put the laptop back in the elevator and walked away. She noticed that the elevator door did not close. Checking to make sure her headset was on properly, she walked down the hall. She could already see a single chair sitting empty in front of her, facing down another hallway.

She reached the chair and turned to see what it was facing. In her dreams, it was toy balls bouncing back and forth. The file she read said many people dreamed of ice that never melted or perpetual motion machines. People dreamed of impossible things, things that can't happen in real life. She looked down the hallway.

There was a room, and a table. The table was bare, the room was empty. Sometimes dreams are just dreams.

Jaime turned to look down the other way. There was a door, a huge steel door. Similar to Keter containment chambers. This one was cracked open, slightly. She walked towards the door and laid her hand on it, wondering if opening the door further would do more harm than good.

Don't worry, Jaime. There's nothing you can really do here. The voice was in her head, telepathically. She didn't know how the headset had fail—

They didn't design it to be this close to something this powerful, the voice said. *Opening the door will have no effect on me. And you know you want to see me.*

She didn't know if the machine was making her do it or if she was doing it herself, but she pushed the door open and walked inside.

The machine was so much smaller than she had expected, shaped vaguely like a car engine. Except this engine was white all over, and the exhaust pipes coming from the top kept moving, *squirming* on their own in a way that was somehow fascinating and disgusting.

Jaime couldn't stand to look at it for long enough to discern any other features. And besides, the rest of the room was much more interesting.

The bodies were real. Dozens, hundreds of people sprawled across each other on the floor. Just as many Foundation service pistols lying around from where the dead had dropped them. Well, not quite dead. Jaime saw not a single drop of blood, and knew why.

"You're keeping them alive."

That's right, the voice said. *They are waiting for a better world. A world only I can create. They came to offer their services when I showed them that world, but I'm letting them sleep for now. They will never die with me here. None of us will die. Nor will you.*

"Then why am I awake? Why aren't you making me shoot myself too? There are plenty of guns here."

I did not make them shoot themselves. They did not want to live in their old lives while waiting for their new ones to begin. But to be honest, the headset is just strong enough to keep that part of me out of your head. You cannot see the beautiful world I intend to create, the ones these people intend to populate. I have no need to lie to you.

"They told me how to end this. The O5 Council gave me orders."

Yes, I see that. All you have to do is close the door behind you. The memetic lock will render this floor invisible again, my effect will deactivate, I will be trapped down here for another eternity, and everything will go back to normal. Oh, these people will be trapped here with me, of course. And without my effect, they will all die. Painlessly, but suddenly. Their blood on your hands. And you with us, though I imagine you knew that already. Again, I have no need to lie to you.

Jaime had not expected that sort of forthrightness. "So…what do you expect me to do?"

I am not human. Life and death are as meaningless to me as the

laws of thermodynamics. I have intelligence, sentience, almost godhood. But I feel no urge to prolong it. You have envisioned me as some sort of villain or demon. Do so if you wish. Nevertheless, you have the option of either closing the door, or not.

"That's it?"

Leave the door open, and I rebuild the universe to be a world without death. Close the door, and I don't. I would point out the obvious fact that you would have the blood of these individuals on your hands, but I would not presume to insult your intelligence by acting as though you were unaware of this. Make your choice.

Jaime stood silently, looking at the room around her. "This…this isn't what I expected."

The machine waved its appendages in silence.

Jaime couldn't think, could barely breathe. The pressure of this decision on *her* head was unbearable. She walked across the room, stepping over bodies, looking at the device as she spoke. "Let me ask you something. Can you show me the original conversation? During the original decommissioning? What did Holzman and Hollis say about you? I could hear them talking, but I couldn't make out the words. What did *they* think?"

The machine sat placidly. *I cannot do so. I have no record of that conversation. Your mind may have created that image from some information I cannot access, but I am not responsible for it.*

The thought that now entered Jaime's head was enormous, world-shakingly huge. Jaime thanked a deity she didn't believe in for bringing that realization into her. A realization she spoke aloud to the machine in two words:

"You're lying."

Jaime lunged across the room at the giant metal door. A telepathic screech filled the room, one which might have killed her had the headset not been present. Some of the bodies on the ground lurched, swinging limbs in her path, trying to knock her down. She

reached the door and began to swing it shut.

HOW DID YOU KNOW HOW DID YOU KNOW HOW DID YOU

"I just did," she said, the door swinging towards the frame. She didn't have time to say, *The way I know things in dreams.*

Things that are impossible to know.

The door closed.

The top floor of Site 19 was crowded as Jaime MacGilligan woke from a nightmare. A man stopped and helped her up. "What…where am I?"

"I'm not sure how you got here, but you're on the top floor of Site 19. You look familiar, though." He walked her towards the nearest medical station. "Maclaren, isn't it?"

"MacGilligan. I'm one of the researchers on Floor 13. I didn't catch your name."

"Jim," the (*rather cute*, she thought to herself) agent said. "Jim Freeman."

"What was this dream, David?"

The researcher paused a moment. "You know, I actually can't remember." He shrugged. "Huh. Must n-n-not have been that important.

Dr. Skinner nodded, jotting a note onto her clipboard. *Much improvement.*

A number of people who no longer used their names woke to find themselves napping on the table where they carried out their work. Their computer screens were all white, filled with the Greek letter Omicron. A speaker grille in the center of the table spoke: *Omicron event complete.*

The individuals looked around the room at each other, knowing the implications. Something had happened that nobody else knew about, something that they could never remember or allow themselves to know.

The speaker grille spoke again: *Researcher Level 2 Jaime MacGilligan is to be promoted to Level 3 as per instructions of O5 Command.*

The members of that group gathered their composure and sat in silence. O5-2 spoke first. "The motion is on the table. All in favor?"

The vote was unanimous.

Chapter Three: Corn Starch

It all happened so fast.

It's just beginning to hit me that only a few days ago a massive plane crash left me stranded with just a few other survivors on an island, and that in those few days one of us has gone missing and another, a child for pete's sake, has been murdered. This is crazy.

I need to be alone.

I've come up to the bedroom and shoved a bookcase against the door. The others seemed to understand that I wanted to be left to myself for a while. I'm going to lie down and get some sleep, and maybe when I wake up this bullshit will all have sorted itself out.

---

kill. kill Kill die death die sacrifice the Symbol speaks the noise the noise
symbol noise SymNoiseb ol. Radio speaks and GOD speaks and he speaks and
his arms and his arms like knives in my back the lights the noise kill die THESYMBOL
no no no no no no no no no turn it off turn me off turn it off the radio the noise
I was flying on UA 93
That shadow in the footage, it was probably me
I'm the rumour, I'm the doubt, I'm the lie
But you wouldn't stand near me if you didn't want to die
HE IS TALKING TO ME.

I don't remember writing any of this. It isn't my handwriting.

Someone is knocking on the door. I'll

```
figure this out later.
```

Corner Pocket

A 6-ball the size of a Volkswagen hovered placidly in the experimental chamber. It was proving very difficult to incinerate.

Dr. Ulysses Jackson bit at his thumbnail as he stared through the glass. He was sorry, of course. It's just that there had been six D-class in there a few moments ago, one of them had mentioned "pool" (the swimming kind, but it didn't matter), and he had forgotten most of that proof he had read during the recovery of a particularly interesting fundamentally real object. Forcefully forgotten it. Rubbed it from his memory so many times he was pretty sure there was a rut worn into his Broca's Area so deep that "pi" and "pie" now meant nearly the same thing to him.

But his recollection had never been so fuzzy as to screw it up this bad. At least he didn't think so. Of course, there were always "odd balls" when dealing with this particular memetic hazard.

The problem with the Class A amnestic wasn't so much that it wiped your memory (all of them do that), but how targeted the memory-wipe was. For example, despite numerous dosages throughout his career, he remembered very clearly what would come next.

First, A security klaxon would sound initiating a yellow alert in his sector. And so it did, just on schedule.

Next, a security officer would burst through the door and say:

"What the hell happened in here?!" Officer Kelly McDonnel said, looking out onto the chamber and spitting a few lines of a coded message into her walkie.

The third part, Dr. Jackson had down pat, although up until now it had taken a lot of rehearsing. "This is an official statement:" he always began, looking directly into the nearest security camera. "My name is Ulysses Jackson, and I have unwittingly caused a

containment breach of **SCP-609**. I would like to officially remand myself into the custody of attendant security personnel and submit to amnestic therapy as per Procedure Odd-Ball Zero-Six." Surrender really was the way to go. Otherwise it's all boots and truncheons and hard linoleum tiles and a large dental bill.

Just then the last piece of the assembly instructions clicked into place, and the gigantic green globe in the room next door collapsed down to proper size and found itself subject to the laws of gravity. Thankfully, there wasn't much clean-up, as the initial manifestation had enveloped most of the people present in the room. Just a small pool of blood and the odd leg here and there, and those mostly ash and completely sterile thanks to several incineration attempts.. Nothing to lose much sleep over. He'd forget the looks on their faces in a few minutes anyway. Forget he had even requisitioned them.

But somehow wouldn't forget this procedure… Class A's are funny like that, he supposed.

"Jesus, Jackson…" Kelly said. Using her key, she opened the alarm box and disengaged yellow alert.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are but… Jesus. All si-"

She didn't get any farther. One of them manifested inside her mouth, stopping it up.

"…I'm really sorry!" Jackson said, hanging his head. Goddamn trigger words. Why did her eyes have to be green?

Kelly gagged a moment, and slowly pried the cool ball from her jaw. She'd be fine, but those facial muscles would be sore and bruised for a while. "Why? Why do we keep doing this?"

"I don't know…" But he did. Three years of good production out of a tenured Researcher was a good bargain, considering the low cost of cleaning up after his little… episodes. By then a few others (they sent seven just to be sure) arrived to escort Dr. Jackson to an interrogation room. What triggered your recollection, how much do

you remember of the initial containment, what do you think we could change about your environment to prevent recurrence, please swallow this and

Bam. Awake in his dormitory room. Jackson knew something about a bad experiment and a procedure he had been forced to forget, but remembered the entire arrest process with crystal clarity. Something of a deterrent, maybe? Who knew. Although there would be a 2% reduction in his pay, and more restrictions surrounding his off-site roaming privileges would arrive in the mail today. Even though he couldn't quite remember what he had done or why he deserved it, he knew it would happen again sooner or later, and also knew that the mistake was of such a nature that attempting to leave the Foundation now would mean a higher content of heavy metals in his diet than he was prepared to ingest.

So Dr. Jackson counted his fingers: 1-2-3-4-5- -7-8-9-10. Yup. All present and accounted for. Maybe he would head down to the cafeteria, get himself a slice of 3.141592. Chocolate flavored. Cheer himself up a bit before getting back to work.

You're a Toy, Mr. Sanderson

149 Scranton Lane
Unincorporated Site-92, Los Angeles, CA
8:42 PM, June 24th, 2032

"So, are you gonna tell us?"

"Tell you what?"

"About the mission. What really went on?"

"Everything the report said went on. We lost the anomaly, we lost the-"

"Yeah but like- did it talk? This was a humanoid, right?"

"Pfft. A *human,* yes. And a famous one at that. She's one of the most prominent anti-Foundation public figures out there. You've probably seen their advertisements in the paper."

"Oh, the law firm. Leeward and Warner Legal Solutions, right? And the skip is Warner?"

"Yep. We've been trying to recontain her for years, but she keeps finding the legal loopholes to avoid it."

"Shit, yeah."

Brent Sanderson feels a twinge in the back of his skull. Like a feather is tickling his brain matter, right down there on the cerebellum. "Look, I don't want to talk about this."

"Yeah, you're tired. Case coming up and everything. I got you."

He nods. Time seems to freeze as he takes in his coworkers' faces. Rogers, Gale, and Kinsey, all from Offsite Response and clad in their silly matching white polo shirts. Andrew, from his team,

watching Gale's incessant questioning with a subtle scowl.

"Fair enough, fair enough," Gale says. "So, what are you going to be doing after we leave, Brent?" she adds, pitching her voice higher as if trying to lighten the mood.

Just like that, he feels his awareness snap back into place, leaving him with a terrible headache. It must be the alcohol. Why are they drinking, again? Or maybe something really is wrong. It hurts to think about. "Well, buddy," he answers with an inebriated smirk in his best news anchor impersonation, trying to force his pounding head into a state of calm with humor and distractions, "I'm going to go into my bedroom there and fuck my beautiful wife. What about you, Andrew?"

That moment, when the men start laughing and Gale and Kinsey roll their eyes, is when he notices the smell. It's the popcorn on the table, by the beers. It smells like meat. It *reeks* of meat. Andrew asks him something, but he's preoccupied with the unmistakable stench filling his nostrils as he leans closer and closer to the bowl.

"You don't have a wife. You're married to the Foundation," Andrew says, chuckling.

Fuck, does he not have a wife? He casts his eyes downward and tries not to think about it.

"What are you doing?" Gale asks, a glare shooting out from under her messy bangs. Her bangs aren't usually this messy. Her skin isn't usually this pale.

"This popcorn. Was it expired?"

Kinsey freezes for a few seconds before smacking her gum and responding. "No."

"Then why does it smell like- you know what, I'm gonna be sick." Brent stands, wobbling, and runs into the bathroom. The mirror is foggy. There are clothes on the floor. A white shirt with red-brown bloodstains, plastered to the cream-colored tile floor with water and fluorescent green fluid. Mouthwash? His eyes move upward. The

fluid is dripping down the cabinet door. His headache worsens until it's a searing pain, driving away at the inside of his skull. Keep looking, keep looking, keep looking. Blood in the sink. Skin in the sink. Pink flesh, pink and green. Green fluid leaking all over pink flesh.

"Stay focused, D-2094."

His head snaps upright, and his eyes are closed. "I can't do it," he says aloud in a trembling voice. "This is as far as I can get." He swallows, trying to keep bile from rising up out of his throat. Everything stinks of meat. "Something isn't right, I can tell I said something wrong and got everything off-track. This doesn't feel right, it's like- I can tell that I'm not him, and I'm scared the other people can tell too-"

"Acknowledged. Assume a sitting position and hold your breath for thirty seconds while we cancel it."

He sinks against the wall, his head in his hands.

Research Lab D43
Department of Internal Security and Media Investigations
Site-92, Los Angeles, CA
3:12 PM, July 1st, 2032

"Alright. Alright. Just breathe."

"I can't get further than that. I swear to God." D-2094 sits upright on the table, vision spinning. "Did you take that thing out of my head?" he pants.

"Yes, it's out." Dr. Ruby Licata gestures to the assistant carrying Brent Sanderson's Personnel Identification Implant over to the counter, held aloft in tweezers. "You don't have to do it twice, don't worry."

"Just get me out of here," D-2094 mutters, cupping his hands over his ears with jittering fingers.

"Take him down to Medical," Licata tells the assistant. She nods and starts helping him off the table. Licata takes her clipboard and laptop

back into her office, closing the door behind her. She sits down and looks through the checklist. Out of four subjects and ten total attempts, that *one* key element is starting to look genuinely unrecoverable. And the Media Relations Director and Site Director alike are *not* going to be happy about that.

A ringing sounds behind her eardrum, quietly. She presses a finger to her temple. "If you're calling about the results, I've got nothing but more of the same."

"Oh? Well, that's not good at all. What exactly is so hard to crack about this chip, huh? Ours seem to be working fine."

"The problem isn't the chips, Director. It's Sanderson."

"What about Sanderson?"

"It's him- well, it's his chip specifically, rather. It's really starting to look like someone messed around with the files, which I know is unlikely given his clean record and good behavior, but I don't think we should rule anything out. Obviously we're now at the point of trying Initiative A's procedure, but it's looking the same as with the other subjects."

"Well, if inserting it into chip readers on the computer and physically transplanting it into a post-amnesticization brain won't yield results, then what do you think will?"

She almost sighs, but remembers that the Director will hear it. "I'm trying to tell you that I think the data on that chip is genuinely unrecoverable, sir. I think he erased the entire memory, at least from the implant."

"You can't amnesticize your PII, Licata. Only your actual brain. You and I both know that."

"Yes, but if somehow one were able to wipe a section of the chip *after* the memory in question, the brain would be unaware. You remember those developments from last year that the O5 Council sent out for everyone to read."

"Okay, well what do we tell the media, hmm? That it's inconclusive?

The Foundation is trying to make the PIIs look trustworthy, Doctor, not easily corrupted and uncontrollable. We have the most advanced system of employee monitoring in the world, and yet we're unable to prove to the media that one of our employees wasn't a criminal even when we stuck a little computer in his skull that records everything he does while on the clock. Do you have any idea what would happen to the PII chip's funding if we find out Sanderson's chip failed to uncover criminal evidence? Oh, and not to mention how under-fire the R&D branch's stocks are-"

"Sir, I-"

"That chip is this organization's last shot at good publicity. If you get this evidence, we'll be down two employees and up immeasurable profits in tech sales. That's a trade worth the trouble. In this economic and political climate, it's time for the Foundation to have money on its mind, Licata. You know it and I know it."

"I agree, sir."

"You have 24 more hours. That is all the press coverage we can handle up here. Get something out of that chip, if it takes one try or a hundred. Understood?"

She gulps. "Understood."

"Great."

A beep sounds and she relaxes her muscles. With a sigh, she looks back down at the desk, hoping that the newspaper clipping she's had sitting there for two days might have something new to offer her.

Licata sighs and puts the paper back down. She calls out her assistant's name. When she comes to the door, Licata puts her head in her hands. "Is that D-class still around?"

149 Scranton Lane
Unincorporated Site-92, Los Angeles, CA
8:42 PM, June 24th, 2032

"Stay on-topic. Ask them about the anomaly. Don't stray off in the bathroom again. And again, remember not to look in the mirror."

"You okay, Brent?"

D-2094 raises the memory of Brent's eyes up to meet Andrew's. "Fuck. Yeah, yeah. What were you saying?"

"So, are you gonna tell us?"

"Tell you what?"

"About the mission. What really went on?"

"Everything the report said went on. We lost the anomaly, we lost the-"

"Yeah but like- did it talk? This was a humanoid, right?"

"Pfft. A *human,* yes. And a famous one at that. She's one of the most prominent anti-Foundation public figures out there. You've probably seen their advertisements in the paper."

"Oh, the law firm. Leeward and Warner Legal Solutions, right? And the skip is Warner?"

"Yep. We've been trying to recontain her for years, but she keeps finding the legal loopholes to avoid it."

"Shit, yeah."

Andrew freezes, his hand gripping the condensation-coated glass of beer in his hand. "Wait, this is safe to talk about, right?" he says, voice hushed.

"Y-yeah," D-2094 sputters out. "Yeah, of course. It's… all pretty recent, after all." He cringes as he takes a shot in the dark, but after a few seconds of silence, he can tell he led the flow of events in the right direction.

"You're right," Andrew says. As he stands, the other three people fade into the fabric of the sofa. D-2094 tries not to let his eyes focus on it.

"About what?"

Andrew stands fully and the space near the sofa stretches and buzzes and snaps back into place.

"Can you still read us? That was it. Stay with this."

D-2094 feels a twinge in the back of his skull. Like a feather is tickling his brain matter, right down there on the cerebellum. "Alright," he whispers.

"Alright what?" Andrew says.

"Uh, alright, as in, let's continue. The conversation." He laughs dryly. He's still not sure how he'll ever react normally to the ambient voice of the researcher echoing in his skull with no logical source, and he hopes the saved memories of Brent's coworkers don't notice him acting oddly.

"Oh, right. Right." He freezes, unblinking.

D-2094's right ear whines and screeches before the warped imitation of a voice comes back into his head. *"That's not quite it. Change the topic. Talk about fighting, talk about combat, or anomalies, anything to trigger the memory connection."*

He nods involuntarily. "Andrew. Did you go to training last week? When they brought out the punching bags?"

The room flashes warmer tones in the lighting for a split second before resettling with Andrew grimacing. "Yeah. Did you?"

"Yep. Felt like I could take on the lizard head-on, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, and speaking of catching skips-"

The couch they're sitting on convulses like a living creature underneath them, throwing D-2094 into the air for a split second. When he lands, he's face-down in dust and ceiling debris.

"Sanderson! Get up!"

He turns over. The lights are off. A flashlight is in his face. "What?"

"Get up, she's getting away!"

Licata's distorted voice whispers in his head, crackling. *"Go! Go! That's it! Get up!"*

He bolts upright. His polo shirt and beer-stained khaki shorts have been replaced with black pants and a utility belt. A blue-glowing device is attached to a cord around his right hand. He picks it up and clambers to his feet.

"On your six!" Andrew calls out.

He ducks as a blast of air and red light slams him into the ground again. He looks over his shoulder to see a figure darting past the porch doors and over the railing. "Over here," he yells, reaching for the slider switch on the device without second thought. He pushes it all the way forward, cringing at the inexplicable recoil against his palm that shoots an ache up his forearm and into his chest.

"Turn that thing the fuck up and get out there before she gets away!"

He nods, scrambling back onto his feet. He darts for the door, yanks it to the side, and hurtles himself over the porch railing. He lands on someone and rolls over, twisting his ankle. He feels himself lose focus through the pain, and for a split second, the dark, damp backyard flashes to a sunny day and then to a shot of Brent's coworkers sitting on the couch. D-2094 shakes his head and stands back up, mindlessly aiming the device in his hand at the woman in front of him.

"You'd better put that fucker down," she spits, arms wrapped protectively around herself. "I'm serious. Don't you know LA laws?"

Licata's voice screeches in the back of his ear canal. *"This is it. Don't lose this feed."*

Andrew comes running down the stairs, rifle in hand. "Aww, I love it when they fight back," he says with a sneer. He aims the rifle toward her. "Get on the ground."

"The police will be here any minute."

Andrew cackles. "The *police.* Right. Good luck with that, skip."

She glowers and drops to her knees, hands behind her head. "Any minute."

"Precious. Brent, knock her the fuck out."

D-2094 freezes, praying that Licata will tell him what he's supposed to do. Would Brent have done it? He doesn't even know who Brent is, or what type of person he was. All he has is a computer chip full of corrupted workplace memories, free of ethics and morals and feelings tied to the person that once possessed it.

Andrew's face is frozen, and little pieces of it are blurring and shaking in midair as D-2094 realizes he picked the wrong option by hesitating. With his face contorted in discomfort, he starts walking toward the woman kneeling in front of him and raises the unknown but familiar device up to her eye level. She doesn't blink. A siren wails outside the fence, catching him off-guard and sending him spinning around before he can strike her.

"There! There! Okay, look around, look up, look down, look in bushes, look anywhere you can for any sort of camera or microphone or-"

"Got it, got it," he says aloud, dropping the device to the ground. The woman doesn't react, because Brent didn't have a memory of her reacting; D-2094 runs frantically around the yard and patio as the police rush over to the woman and Andrew, their boots blending into the dark grass in little pixelated smears. D-2094 looks up as the bricks of the house melt in steaming drips and fade into themselves. In his peripheral vision, occupying one last spot of comprehensible space, he spots a gleaming lens. And a small black device. A camera and a microphone.

"There! There! Freeze that frame, do not fucking blink, do not- okay, okay, we got it! We got it! You're good!"

"Wh- how do I get out, get me out!" he yells over inexplicable wailing and electronic buzzing as the world disintegrates around him. His pleading mixes in with the noise as his vision swirls together and

fades.

Research Lab D43
Department of Internal Security and Media Investigations
Site-92, Los Angeles, CA
3:38 PM, July 1st, 2032

D-2094 opens his eyes slowly this time, as if doubting that he has eyes to open. He looks over at Licata. "You got it that time, right?" he groans.

"We got it." She picks up a stack of papers off a printer and locks them into her briefcase. "And now I'm taking it where it needs to go. Thank you for your compliance, Mr. Sanderson."

His mouth droops open. Surely he misheard that. "Did you just call me-"

"Yes, congratulations, Mr. Sanderson," a man by the door says, removing his glasses and leaning against the frame. "You are the first successful subject of PII Initiative A."

D-2094 feels like he's going to pass out. He convinces himself that everything he's hearing is some side effect of having that thing in his head, and he lets himself collapse back onto the table as the lights above him blur together into blinding white.

Undisclosed Location
Santa Monica, CA
7:45 PM, July 1st, 2032

"Are you awake, Mr. Sanderson?"

Brent peels his eyes open. There's a young man in a white collared shirt by his bed. "Y-yeah-"

"You've been out for four hours. I'm sorry I wasn't able to introduce myself last time." The man extends his hand. Brent takes it with trembling fingers and nods. "I'm the Director of Media Relations for Site-92's Research and Development Department. I don't really give my name."

"I'm- uh…"

"You're Brent Sanderson," the man says, clasping his hands together. "I know it's hard to believe. You think you're D-2094, right?"

"Y-you actually want me to answer?"

"No. It's a rhetorical question. Do you have any recollection of your identity, actions… anything?"

"What's happening here? I don't- what-"

The Director holds his hands up. "It's okay, you can relax. I'll take that as a no."

Brent looks around the room. It's too homey. There are burgundy drapes, and the bed he's on has a wooden frame. "Where am I?"

"A Foundation safehouse."

"Can't I just go back to my cell-"

"You're not a D-class. You're Agent Brent Sanderson. You worked, until recently, in the Containment and Retrieval Department of Site-92."

"I-"

"You originally refused to reveal the location of any home cameras during this case, presumably for your own legal reasons, but it looks like we were still able to get some information out of you. You've caused us quite the trouble, you know." The Director smiles. "But here we are. If you think this organization protects criminals in its ranks, you're dead wrong, Brent."

Brent grits his teeth. "Can you please just explain what's happening to me? Who am I?"

The Director sighs and stands from his chair. "Looks like it's not working," he says once he's in the hallway. "Go ahead and stick it back in there, I guess. Shouldn't cause any problems at this point in

the case, with the backup copied and all that."

He frowns and grips the sheets. "Wait, what-"

"Just hold still. This'll only take a second." The person approaching him is oddly familiar. Like one of the guards on the cell block that he apparently never resided in. They push his head forward and press a bulky device against it. He doesn't have time to resist before there's a quiet *click* and a disturbing sliding sensation in the back of his skull. Like a feather is tickling his brain matter, right down there on the cerebellum.

"That's the right one, right? Not the testing duplicate?" the Director asks.

"Licata and the other researchers kept the duplicate, sir."

"Gotcha, gotcha. Alright, Mr. Sanderson. Is it safe to assume you have your thoughts back in order?"

"Did you just- What did you just do?"

"Your implant had been removed, so we just put it back in. You were amnesticized as part of an approved procedure, but it appears the PII was successful in this case with accurately logging personal identity and memories."

"I- What? Why am I in the safehouse? What happened?"

The Director chuckles. "Are you going to get out of bed?"

Brent looks down. He's in pajamas. He frowns. "Yeah. Wait, didn't I just wake up?"

"You did… technically just wake up, yes. You were unconscious."

"For how long?"

"Only four hours."

"What were we talking about before that person fucked around with my chip? Whatever went on with it must have glitched out, because I

can't remember-"

"I believe I was telling you how we don't employ criminals in our ranks," the Director sighs, removing a laptop from his briefcase. "And thanks to you, we've got the security footage from your house now. You do remember that case, don't you?"

A headache pounds against his temple. "Of course I remember that case. How did you get me out of jail?"

"You know we have our ways. Listen, Mr. Sanderson, I'm on a schedule, and I don't owe you overviews of what you already know you've done. More importantly, however, do you remember when you signed your consent forms for your Personnel Identification Implant, about six months ago?"

"Y-yeah-"

"Do you remember the section about Initiative A, then?"

"I- I don't think I read the whole thing, to be honest."

"Ahhh. No one ever reads the terms and conditions, am I right? Sign and move on. I can relate. Well, when you signed onto Initiative A, you signed onto some of our most groundbreaking research. Could do wonders for the R-and-D Departments' stocks, no matter which Site we're talking about. You see, the PII is big news. Really big news. And our team right here in Los Angeles are the ones who perfected it. It's what every company will want. It's not invasive. It doesn't record your thoughts and send them around. It just captures what you're seeing and hearing and feeling when you're on the clock, and only when you're on the clock. Were you on the clock that night with Aline Warner and your team member Andrew Collins, Mr. Sanderson?"

He puts his head in his hands. The more the Director talks, the more conflicting memories flood back into his thoughts. "Yes."

"And were you on Foundation property or were you on city property when you threatened that bixby with your SRA?"

"I don't- I've been over this a million times with the cops, for fuck's

sake. I was in the Site's housing. Everything happened there."

"Well, who instructed you to lead her back onto Foundation property and carry out the capture there?"

"N- no one? I mean, I did. Me, I'm the team lead."

"You are, that's right. Right, okay. So it was indeed your decision."

"Yeah. Look, is this a legal interview right now? Do I need to watch what I say-"

"You're with the Foundation, Mr. Sanderson. Surely your employment has taught you that you're safe with us."

He licks his lips. They're dry and cracked. His skin feels like paper. "I got her onto Foundation property because Los Angeles will fight you in court if you take a sapient anomaly off the streets on county property. Especially her, with her publicity."

"Except the residential streets aren't Foundation property. That area is unincorporated and technically still belongs to the county."

His head is spinning. "But- this was in my backyard. This happened in my own backyard. My house, in the Site's neighborhood."

"Right, but your house is on unincorporated property, and your house also has security cameras, which you had… conveniently forgotten to tell us about during the case, it seems. Actively refused, more accurately."

His eyes widen as realization slams into him like a freight train. His heart thumps in his chest. "Wait, I- that's not possible, I-"

"Consider it lucky, Mr. Sanderson. You may be deserving of your charges, but thanks to your signing onto Initiative A, the PII's future in sales with every security department from Google to Wells Fargo is looking nothing but up. I think your case here may have singlehandedly determined the future of the R-and-D Department's stocks, crimes aside."

"Can you please just slow down," Brent spits, trembling. He

swallows. "Please. I don't understand what's happening."

The Director looks at his watch with an audible groan. "I really don't have the time for this. Alright, last week, convicted of attempted kidnapping and assault. Remember what happened?"

"Yeah. Got a report of a famous bixby visiting town, obvious target with known disruptive capabilities. Tried to get her out of town for legal reasons and all that, you know the drill."

"Right, and this person was Aline Warner, who was formerly a contained SCP object but was broken out of the Site by her containment specialist, Adam Leeward, and years down the line the two of them now own an explicitly anti-Foundation law firm known as Leeward and Warner Legal Solutions. And you tried to recontain her on county property. Where the law is on her side."

He sighs. "Okay, okay. I get what this is about. Look, I made a mistake, alright? I didn't read the legalese carefully enough, I get it. And now Andrew's in trouble too, and he didn't do shit. And between the Foundation and I, we didn't do shit to get that attempted assault charge."

"That's not what the PII feedback footage would suggest," the Director says quietly, turning his laptop screen around to face Brent. "You may have neglected to tell the police in the interviews, but your PII history showed quite the opposite once you had a little amnestics and reconditioning to help you out."

Brent watches with his brow furrowed and his mouth in a grimace as the Director plays back the distorted, bulbous picture of his implant's digital audio and video records.

"Ah- there," the Director says, punching the space bar and pausing the footage. "You see that? You hear that part? After Andrew tells you to hit her over the head, you start walking forward."

He frowns. "How did you get this?"

"You gave it to us. When you signed your implant paperwork and partook in Initiative A. When we managed to get you to recall it so

that it could be recorded."

"Wait, wait. I do remember this. I remember going back here. But I don't remember walking forward, there. I actually remember *not* wanting to walk forward."

"In the revisit? I believe Dr. Licata did notice you hesitate, yes."

"Because I didn't want to do it! I only did it because the memory she was accessing through me started falling apart when I thought about not doing it, which means it was obviously the wrong option that wasn't in line with what he- with what *I* originally did, but I didn't want to do it! It was just Andrew fucking around and being a shit because everyone hates Warner and he wanted to piss her off, it wasn't anything- real."

"What your post-procedure self wanted or did not want to do is unrelated to what you originally did do and what is proven in the implant's history, Mr. Sanderson. And you may have made it pretty hard to recover the PII's files, but thanks to your cooperation with Initiative A, we got them right back. Are you starting to understand where you stand here?"

The Director's words are starting to blur into incomprehensible droning in his thoughts. "No." He swallows. "I'm still confused on what's happening to me. What happened with the case? What does that damn implant have to do with this, besides that footage?"

"The case is near-closed, and you're still going to be convicted. I think your confusion may lie in your mistaken opinion that the Foundation will defend its employees no matter the circumstances, Mr. Sanderson, and that is not accurate. Not in today's age."

"The past week feels like a dream. I didn't mean to do anything illegal."

"You can believe that all you need, but it doesn't change what happened." The Director leans forward, and for the first time in the conversation, his voice sounds genuine and concerned. "Listen, you're not a bad agent. You're dedicated to the cause, a real exemplar. I get your type, I really do. The Foundation of twenty

years ago would have loved you. But we're not them now. We're a little down and out right now, so to speak. I'm sure you've noticed it. Publicity killed us, Mr. Sanderson." His lips are right beside Brent's ear. "That's the truth. You can't even drive between the city and the site without protesters swarming your car. And you know that a lot of that is happening because of your case, and, to be frank, because of you. I don't have a *problem* with this continual recontainment effort we have going on for Warner, but it has to be done so, so carefully. It'll make us look bad no matter what, but there's no denying that a reality bender with publicity value is dangerous."

Brent nods, fingers clenched.

"Do you want to know what the best hope for this organization is right now? It's that chip in our heads. The value that thing presents to the corporate technology world is unparalleled. I know containment is our thing, Mr. Sanderson, but there are challenging times ahead. It's time to look toward innovation and business. The other things we're good at. We can do science. We can do money. And the PII means both." He exhales through his nose and eyes the door. They share several uncomfortable seconds of silence before he speaks again. "In conclusion, I suppose, I'd like to personally thank you for your place in this case. Thanks to you, we can gain the public's trust again, or at least get the ball rolling. Rogue agent? Not to worry, everything's recorded and on-record. The Foundation may fight tooth and nail to carry out its cause despite political adversity, but one thing we're not is dishonest. This case will prove the PII's worth as business technology, and you just gave that process a jumpstart."

Brent feels like he's going to vomit, and he's not sure if it's from the pain in his skull or the Director's words or both. "W-what-"

"I know you heard what I said," the Director says, his tone and volume still the same despite the alarm in Brent's voice. "Now, put some real clothes on. I believe the chief of the LAPD wanted to talk to you."

Brent watches the Director walk out of the room with his mouth hanging open.

Site Command Office
Site-92, Los Angeles, CA
11:30 AM, July 4th, 2032

The Director of Media Relations has his lips in a straight line as he pushes a printout across the desk toward the Site Director's open palm. "This is it. Same one you approved last night, of course."

"Excellent, excellent. Thank you for all that you've done," he says, picking it up.

"Everything looks the same as last night, right? I checked it myself for errors probably five times."

"It's perfect, it's perfect. Succinct as always. It's believable media, I'll tell you that. My hat goes off to you and your department, Director."

"Likewise. And it's R-and-D you should be thanking, not me." He laughs, barely perceptibly. His cheeks are pale. "Well, you can thank the crew I have running the Coastal Sun Reporter, of course. Whew. But yeah, the public seems to be taking it decently so far. It went out this morning."

"Emailed to employees, in the morning papers, featured on a few local channels and websites… that's it, right?"

"Correct. I guarantee you that starting small is the way to go. Hell, all the big names are already signed on without the spotlight, anyway."

"Alright." He sets the paper down on the desk with a sigh. "That agent, though. Sanderson. Shame about him."

"How so?"

The Site Director shrugs, hands clasped with his elbows on the table and his head to the side. "I just think he was on the right track, and it's a shame to see he slipped up on the legality."

"Well, his case… made us look pretty bad, sir, to be honest."

"Oh, I'm not excusing him. There's no doubt he made mistakes. Just a shame to see a good agent go to waste just because of- because

things are so hard these days."

"Oh. Agreed."

He nods. "But the PII is looking up. That's what we've got going forward, that's what matters." He looks back down at the document on the table. "I'll see you tomorrow, Director. We've got a busy few weeks ahead of us."

"We sure do." There's no comradery in his tone, though he's straining to try and convey it nonetheless.

"Our stocks are in great condition. The business end of things is looking up. Everything in that realm of operations is looking up. The Foundation still has a strong future ahead of it. A different one, yes, but still a strong one. Don't forget that."

"Of course, sir." He stands up to leave, looking at the door.

The Site Director picks the printout up off the desk and lowers his glasses. "Oh, and happy Independence Day," he adds. "Easy to forget there's a country waiting outside those fences, sometimes. Isn't it?"

He swallows and nods. He doesn't think so. "Happy Independence Day, sir," he mutters.

When the door closes, the Site Director sighs and reads the article again, his mind fixated on the future as a calm smile creeps across his face.

Correspondence

"For fuck's sake." I told him. 'Him' being Robert E. Brooks, chief of human resources at Site 19. "We've been working on this SCP for the past four months and we've gotten nowhere. It doesn't do anything besides play shit with people's minds and act as a short-range microwave. My team is tired - *I'm tired* - of running test after pointless test, always getting nothing, because there is nothing. There isn't anything left to figure out."

"Dr. Daveson, I told you already, there is nothing we can do. You signed on for the term, you can't transfer until it's over. I'm sorry." His sausage fingers rifled through a stack of forms.

"Fine. Just look over the papers. Look over what we've done, look for openings anywhere. " He tried to reply, I could see him forming 'No', with his lips. So I turned around and left. Nineteen has these enormous wooden doors leading into offices, I made sure to slam them on the way out.

There was a hallway between me and the security checkpoint when I started noticing the assistants rushing up and down between labs weren't making eye contact with me, they probably thought I was about to kill someone. I walked down the checkpoint, two guards were ready to meet me. "Intimidating", that's one word to describe the security at nineteen. Massive men with jet-black body armour and face masks. They gave me the rub-down, I gave them a blank stare.

I let out a heavy sigh when the garage lamps buzzed into life. I checked my watch, it was a half hour to midnight, I never realized how late it'd gotten. Lights flickered above me, and even though I couldn't see the outdoors it felt like the night. Most of the vehicles were gone, but the night staff's were still here. The stiff scent of old concrete covered everything, but I greeted the musty smell of my Cadillac with a sigh. I turned the key in the ignition, and frowned as the car started.

I lied when I told Brooks that we had done all we could. The last experiment alone had given us plenty of questions that were still unanswered. We had Foundation grants to work with, enough D-Class to last us a decade. My team was happy with the work, and I liked it too. It's none of that which made me want to leave. It was what happened when I slept, it was the dreams.

The same dream. Every. Single. Day.

> I open my eyes.
>
> Everything is vivid, but blurry. Goddamn it, it's like broken glasses, giving me a headache. I try looking around, and realize that these 'glasses' are covered in paint. I blink, or at least I try to blink. It doesn't seem to work. I try wiping my eyes, my arms don't seem to work either.
>
> I feel like an observer, like I'm looking through my eyes but I don't control them. I see shapes move, and my - are they really mine? - eyes follow them. They all glow, softly, warmly. I can't make out their features, but I have the overwhelming feeling that they're good people. They all take seats in something in front of me. A table. A few more blurs shuffle into the room and sit down, they bow their heads. Something comes through the walls, these bright, yellow things. They sit around the corners of the room, they don't move much. I think they have wings. The blurs lift their heads, and suddenly everything changes.
>
> The sound of breaking glass, my vision clears. They're all people, I know now, all the blurs are people. Some young, children. They all look scared. The yellow things are sharper, whiter, golden. Feathery wings rest at their sides, hovering above the ground almost gracefully.
>
> Everything changes again, damnit the paint is all over my eyes, an explosion, all the people are rushing, screaming, shouting. I see panic on their faces, the little children cry. Figures in black. They come down the stairs two rooms over. Pain courses all over me, bullets fly,

> they kill one of the children. They kill all the innocent. It hurts so bad to see them die, but I can't even cry. The yellow things' wings fly out, they descend like enormous shields to protect all the blurs, the people. One of the dark men toss up a canister, it erupts in a red cloud. All the yellow things, all the - the, angels? they perish. Die, all the people choke, cough, collapse.
>
> The men come closer. They examine the bodies, check for life, but they already know that no one survived. I know it too. They come closer to me, I can see the insignia on their uniforms. It is that too familiar symbol of containment, circle and arrow, it is the Foundation.

A few weeks passed, and then the day came. "Tim!" I knew that voice. Claire was a seasoned doctor, but she always seemed to have the enthusiasm of a junior researcher.

My groggy eyes rose up from behind a pile of forms to see her "Yes, Dr. Claire?"

"Results from the latest spectrum analysis!" She dumped a stack of papers onto my desk, her smile hovering slightly above the top of the pile. If it was any other person I would have thought they were trying to piss me off, but Claire was different. Besides, getting angry at her would have disrupted her walk out of my office, viewing her from behind was a highlight of my days.

As the door shut, I felt the gentle gust of wind that accompanied it. Some papers caught it, their edges lifting up, but clips made sure they stayed in stacks. The room became silent again. I remember hating it. It was a tomb made of drywall, forms and similarity. Whenever I was in that room I looked forward to leaving it.

I read into the sheets Claire had left behind. The SCP we had been working on, all data analysis of wavelength variation. After the last experiment resulted in a containment breach of half a dozen SCPs, O5 restricted personnel exposure. All we had left was wavelength analysis, and psychological testing. Everything else was off-limits, I appealed, I thought we could get more done if we had just a few more tests, but it was denied. The other doctors thought that

preventing long-term exposure, and keeping the guards rotated would stop it from reaching out to other people. I don't believe that anymore.

> Time doesn't work right in my dream. Sometimes things move faster, sometimes slower, sometimes not at all. You only get bits and pieces, you can grasp a few things but lose others. But most of it, I understand. All the pain when your family dies, all the anger, hate, suffering. I would be angry, too.
>
> A thousand things all pass at once. The time in my dream skips. Suddenly I arrive in a room, a white room, a single light illuminates the box around me. A bed colored gray is against the farthest wall, it lacks a pillow, and is just a thin cushion against a cold metal frame. But it is not for me, or the eyes which I see through, I don't have a body which could rest against that bed. A shelf and desk lay to the right of me, both cold, hard metal. The shelf is filled with mostly old, tasteless, and useless literature. The desk has only a pen and a stack of paper.
>
> I don't know the time, I only see half-formed shapes move outside the room. They move quickly, too quickly to be human. Or is it that I'm moving too quickly to see them as human? It doesn't matter. All I know is that this is alone, this is isolation. I don't like it.
>
> Across the room, in the reflection of the wall, I see myself. I don't have a body, I don't have arms or legs or anything. I - It is a symbol of love?

I looked at the stack of papers on my desk, graphs, charts, diagrams abundant. I slid them all to the side, and reached down to a low knob on my desk drawers, the wooden frame opening with a loud creak. A thick pile of melange folders bulged out of the wooden coffin. I carefully pushed them forward, searching for the lowest folder. Ah, there it was, just above an oddly-shaped lump I had placed there not long ago. I pulled the folder out, and laid it on my desk. Photographs spilled over the wood, accompanied by a number of written files.

The drift of my hand caught the edge of the folder, it opened to let its contents be read. Pictures of the bodies of people killed, pictures of that SCP in that damned room. I was trapped in here by the Foundation, by our protocol, by our duty. We were supposed to safeguard mankind, but all we did was produced an imaginary farce for the world to live in while we stymied the tides of unknown, efforts which only made humanity more and more vulnerable. The SCP of my dreams was trapped by the Foundation, by our protocol, by our duty. It could have given so many gifts to our world, but all we did was lock it away.

I didn't realize all this at first, the first time I had the dreams. It was three days before I authorized the first D-Class testing under the supervision of Dr. Dier that I first had them.

> Suddenly the door flies open, a figure bursts in. Everything slows down to normal speed. It's a person. I see the face for a moment, before things start getting faster. He is a D-Class, he is a slave to the Foundation. He walks around, reads, leaves, returns, claws himself. I don't understand.
>
> I hear his voice, he calls out. His pain, he is so alone. Then I, I? Something responds, from me, but I didn't say it. It is the eyes I see through which speak to him. They tell him not to fear, that soon all the pain will be gone, that his suffering will serve to help him. He fears, but accepts my, my? The words. He accepts. He grows weaker, or is it stronger? His form changes, becoming closer and closer to the image in the metal mirror. He becomes closer to love? He contorts, his body is in agony. Somewhere, deep beneath his body something stirs, his soul?
>
> All the blurs think he suffers. But they don't understand. They watch, and despite all their safety, despite all their precautions, the symbol, I? It? enters them, enters into their memories. They don't realize it, but I do. Just through their sight of it, because they remember it, it will forever be with them. It will watch them. But there's something about the memory, something strange. It is

diluted, unfinished, imperfect.

Oh my god he changes, the man on the ground, he changes oh god he changes so different. I recognize that image, it's the same as the reflection, it's love. Everything relaxes. Heart stops. Brain stops. But he does not die.

Everyone thought D-3466 was going to die. Everyone thinks that D-3466 is dead. I *thought* that he would die. But as my eyes looked over those files, as I thought about my dreams, I realized, I did not give him death, I gave him eternal life.

The dreams made me eager for work, eager to learn more. But they also made me afraid. I leaned back and forth, I wanted to stay but I had to *get out*. I went to try to get transferred, but Brooks put up a wall I could not pull down. The dreams got stronger, I started day dreaming them, they kept coming and coming. I didn't understand them, I didn't know what was happening to me. But on that afternoon all those days ago, Dr. Claire didn't stir me from work, she awoke me from my dreams. She awoke me from when my dreams changed, she awoke me and I understood what I had to do.

I sighed, looked down onto old hardwood. I reached into the bottom of the opened drawer, and my hand drew out a Colt Single Action Army.

A fear in me grows, quickly, unstoppable. My dream should end when I see the angel of D-3466. No. This isn't right. Why is it going? Why do the men outside the room darken? I can feel their hatred, why won't it stop? Stop! STOP!

I want to cry. I want to cry so badly, I don't understand why does it keep going. The lights are brighter, stronger, they flash and turn red, get erratic, spray the room in their glow. Alarms screech in the air, get louder and louder and louder. Shadows of men pass outside the room. What the fuck is that? Gunshots?

The door of my office closed, a tomb of drywall which I would never

enter again. I felt my breath against my lips as I exhaled, as I stepped closer and closer to the point of no return. My mind leaked, the dreams entered by wakened mind. Oh my god…

"Sir? Are you alright?" A young guard asked me as I passed through the checkpoint between me and my dreams.

"Get the fuck out of my way." His brains exploded into the wall.

> Fucking bullets, fuck. Glass shatters, all the sounds glass breaks containment breached. Women on the intercom tells me containment is breached. Why must this happen to me? The blurs are all people. All people. All people.
>
> EVERYTHING WILL BECOME CLEAR.

Red lights were everywhere, I stumbled down the hallway covered in blood. Its face was everywhere, alarms blared so loud, but its voice even louder. I stumbled forward, looked back. Men in dark armor turned the farthest corner.

I felt bullets fly past, the glass separating the observation and containment rooms shattered. Its face was everywhere, everywhere. The blood that falls from my chest turns into the face of my dreams. Gunshots gunshots gunshots everywhere behind me they are all behind me. Researchers within the room screamed, worried, panicked. I stepped over the broken glass, into my future.

> A man, he falls into the containment cell. Bleeding, broken. Why? He crawls forward to it. No, he becomes closer to me. To me. He becomes closer to his dreams. He become closer to his god. God. God. Closer become god god god look at me LOOK AT ME AND SEE
>
> UNDERSTANDING.

Don't know, what? own future. All of the men flood the room, all of them looked at me with their hate their fucking hate monsters. I see Claire, I see all the other doctors. I felt death pierce my lungs, my chest. I looked up, my arms outstretched to myself on the wall.

Fucking headache. I lost my feeling, everything turned sideways as I fell onto the ground and my vision grows dark. Then before everything faded I saw them. I saw the monsters. And they all saw me.

> IN YOUR DEATH THEY WILL ALL REMEMBER ME. IN YOUR SACRIFICE THEY WILL ALL REMEMBER YOU.

Oh I remember fuck I remember why

I understand

> THEY WILL ALL DREAM THE SAME DREAMS.

Addendum-Σ-5-1: On / / , Dr. Timothy Daveson breached the containment of SCP- . Security team ECHO- - engaged [REDACTED] report a glowing instance of SCP- briefly appearing on the corpse of Dr. Daveson. Shortly thereafter site personnel within 20 meters of SCP- lost consciousness for 340 seconds. Medical analysis of affected personnel showed eye movement consistent with REM sleep. After awaking, personnel showed [DATA EXPUNGED] SCP- covered 80% of the skin, including observers outside of the 20 meter [DATA EXPUNGED] escaped from security zones, and remain at large.

Corroded Relations

Lin Zexu to Hong Tsu Zhou
Peace be with you and may your family be blessed and honored for all time, in the light of His Majesty the Emperor.

Disheartening as your words have been, I cannot but feel a sense of relief. My work in ridding Guangdong of opium fares better than could be anticipated. We have resorted to extreme measures at times, but no action has been contemptible, for the British merchants have seen the prudence of acquiescence to our demands to cease the opium trade. As a final measure, we have requested some 20,000 chests be surrendered to my men. While it is clear the British will likely falter when pressured by their merchants, they have nevertheless agreed to confiscate the remaining surplus, with promises of compensation for the merchants.

Such a promise will doubtless be broken, but I am relieved by the appearance of an American gentlewoman whose heart has been filled to bursting with deep respect and love for the Celestial Empire and promises the merchants shall be recompensed by her own purse. Though she is a woman and a cripple, her exaltation of Tao Kuang Ti shows a wisdom beyond the menfolk of her barbarous people, and her own personal resources are not to be despised.

I have included a copy of the letter she has recently sent me—you must forgive any oddities: the poor woman has lost her hands and feet to illness but has made astounding progress in using her prostheses to write. Unfortunately her handwriting is quite difficult and in some cases illegible without a master's eye but I know

your vision is as sharp as mine, and your English comprehension far greater. Happily, English is significantly simpler than Chinese to render onto paper, so she may yet manage.

Lin Zexu
May your house be blessed to serve the Celestial Empire for all time and by Heaven's will.

I sincerely appreciate all that you have written to me, and I look forward to meeting you and Mr. Hong as soon as this business with the product is concluded. From what I have witnessed in Guangzhou, the beauty of your land, even rapt in the poisonous vice of opium abuse, far outshines the pristine beauty of my own. Your Emperor truly encapsulates the divine blessings All Under Heaven has received.

While your memorial to Queen Victoria is as striking as it is eloquent, regrettably I must advise you not to let your work fall into British hands. You must know how difficult it is for a simple man to achieve audience with the Emperor himself—and while Her Majesty Queen Victoria is undoubtedly a good and reasonable woman, though far removed from the authority and majesty of Tao Kuang, I have little doubt that your missive will be seen by half a hundred men long before it reaches Her Majesty's gaze, and the hearts of men are not always so good and reasonable.

Keep your memorial to yourself for the time being. I will make my presence known in Guangzhou soon enough, and ensure order is kept among the barbarians and the locals. I do not wish to hijack your work, but my love for China is too great to allow even the slightest possibility that England may seek to squeeze down on the dragon's throat even for a moment. I know you would never openly declare it so, but you and others like you are not fools; the English are capable of utterly destroying all of China by virtue of their superior firepower. I do not presume to lecture one as exalted as you, merely to act

as a source by which a wise man may continue to grow more wise.

I know what is in the heart of white men, and while All Under Heaven has remained the steadfast beacon of humanity for millennia, the Earth does not discriminate whom is to reap its riches. As China has been blessed with silver, gold, tea, and cotton, the English have been cursed with a dreary land surrounded by cold ocean with nothing in the soil worth extracting save smoky black rock.

I am well aware the Great Qing Empire has gunpowder as well. Simply consider this: it may seem foolish to tow absurdly massive guns upon frail wooden ships, but for a barbarous people as the English to have brought many frail ships across the whole world and to China and not lost any save to their own incompetence does not speak ill of them at all. Remember that there is wisdom to be learned even from fools.

As a parting note, I would very much wish to know all that you and your friends know of cosmology, and if you are familiar with the concept of thermo-dynamics and entropy. I will neither resent nor despair if you have not; ***I merely wish to know****. As well, I do not wish you to think me terribly dull; I am sending you a copy of some of my favorite works of historical literature. Have you heard of* ***Xenophon?*** *I think we shall find much pleasant discussion to be had over his book, The Anabasis.*

My love and blessings,
Andrea Reyne

Corvus

I know my eyes look sunken without actually touching them. They always do, now days.

I can feel them—*them*—both pressed against my chest, just above my heart, and for the first time in eons, I push a smile onto my face. This will be it, then. One last swipe, one last… Ending. But it was worth it, wasn't it?

I have to believe that it was. If I didn't, I'd have put a bullet in my head a long time ago. Or a knife in my gut. Or a grith behind my ear. Depends on the universe, after all. As I drum my fingers along the ark, I allow myself to reminisce. I only do it now, at the end. It's the only time I dare to. Because I'm sure that—at any other moment—my conscience would get the better of me. It's odd, I admit, thinking like that. I'd thought it was gone, along with Alyssa, but it's still there. It nags at me.

Leaving home was hard, after all. Quite hard. Not just for me emotionally, but… the science there, I couldn't begin to fully comprehend. Imagine, just for a moment, you're floating above the world. Now, imagine it suddenly being stabbed open by some invisible, incomprehensible thing. The world cracking open like a filthy, blue egg—oceans falling down the sides helplessly, the lava generating huge gouts of steam. And an uneven keening sound. You may imagine that it's the sudden steam, but I've lived long enough to know better.

It's screaming.

Now… imagine falling into that. Falling and falling and falling until you hit the ground. And when you get up… it looks like the same, damned place. The same people. Evolution is, if nothing else, remarkably consistent.

Now, do that for a thousand lifetimes. And tell me you don't feel

guilt.

I feel old. And I am old. But I'm also nearly done. After this one, I should be able to put my work to use… To change things for the better. Which made it so much worse when you walked in my office. And I knew, when you looked at me, what you were about to do.

"I *can* explain," I say. But the gun is leveled at my chest. And I know that I'm out of supplies. I reach into my pocket quietly, pulling out the key card and my diary.

"You don't know what this means for you," I say.

"It means you aren't going to kill us all," you respond.

I stand up. I look at you closely and shake my head. "No. It means that *you'll* have to. The key code is Thaum—"

The shot echoes in the small room, and I feel the hollow point hitting my chest like a sledge hammer, feel ribs splintering and sinking into my lung, my organs being ravaged. And I smile. And I laugh. And through bloody spittle, I manage to barely gasp enough breath to speak.

"Good luck," I say. You're not smiling.

And I hope, for the millionth time, that all universes share one heaven. And I hope, for the millionth time, that I can see you in it from **`my special hell`**.

Costume Change

I love Halloween. It's my favorite time of year, one of the few days I can just go out and mingle with the normal people for an entire night without anyone being the wiser. The pain's not so bad when I can change so often, it's dark with plenty of places to hide and change in secret, and the candy makes up for it.

There's an astronaut over there. I think I'll be an astronaut too now.

It's so easy, not at all like having to make up a shape and hold on to it, keeping it in my head and on my body until it hurts too much to bear. There's so many other people in costumes, I can just copy one of them and then I only need to keep the picture outside from changing.

That little boy is a pirate. I like pirates, I'm going to be a pirate.

Oh, and the candy. I do so love candy, but the rest of the year, it's so hard to get. You need money to buy candy, and even if I could get money, I can't keep it, I always drop it when I change. So I have to steal it, and that's even harder, because even if I get some, I have to drop it too when I change to get away.

A ballerina? That could make a nice shape to be, I'll try that.

Tonight, you don't have to buy or steal candy, they just give it away. They don't like to give you candy more than once, but that's not a problem for me, not if I see someone I want to be and get to a house before they do. I can clean out a house in minutes if I'm lucky, and have a whole bag of candy to go hide somewhere and eat it all up without any shape at all.

Policemen are scary. I don't like them, they like to chase me and shoot at me. But my head hurts, so I'll be a policeman now.

I took a chance once, and went up to a house without a shape. I

don't know why I did it, maybe I'd eaten too much candy and gotten silly on the sugar. It never goes right most days, people always scream and run when they see me without a shape, or they try to hurt me and I have to run. But on Halloween, I'm a ghost, or Rorschach (who's Rorschach?), or a swamp monster, or a Shoggoth (don't know what that is either). They aren't scared, they tell me what a great costume I have and give me extra candy.

Should I be a vampire? Or a werewolf? Or a mummy? I see all of them, and I can't decide.

But I can't be myself very often, because I know Mr. Redd is after me. He's always been chasing me, but he can't ever find me. I know how much it makes him angry, though - every since that one night, he knows I spend all of Halloween out and vulnerable, but I wear so many different shapes he never knows what I am and I'm always picking a new one. He get so angry, and it's funny.

Ooh, there's a spy. I see them a lot, even when it's not Halloween. They don't look like spies, they look like normal people, but no one's better than me at seeing someone whose outside is changed. I know they're all friends, because inside they all look similar, and I can see that too. I'll be a spy, and go talk to him. Maybe I can get him to think I'm a spy like he is too. Maybe he'll give me candy.

CotBG Bible Fragments

Note: The following are sections of text recovered from the body of what is assumed to be a member of “The Church of The Broken God.” It is assumed they are part of a larger document or “Bible”, but due to the situation of its recovery, the bulk of this work has been lost. No additional copies of this “bible” have been found on any “church” members captured by The Foundation, however it is safe to assume that these books were disposed of before or during capture, to prevent them from “falling into the hands of the infidel.”

The following texts were among the personal effects of one “Amanda ”, a 24-year-old former college student. Records show that she had very slight involvement with SCP- , however this interaction was deemed insignificant, precluding the need for memory alteration beyond that of the basic “plane crash” cover story. She withdrew from college several months later, and was listed as a “missing person” by her parents after three months of no contact. It is assumed that, for the next two years, she remained with the “Church”. On / / , a car filled with gasoline canisters and other incendiary devices crashed into “ Motors”, the public façade of Site . Amanda was at the wheel, and died in the resulting explosion.

Site suffered no damage from the initial attack, however five Agents and the entirety of “ Motors” were lost in the explosion. The subsequent attack by “Church” members resulted in the total lockdown of Site for eight hours, with minor security failures at the two major access points. Investigation as to how the site’s location became known is ongoing.

Editor's Note: Fragments are presented in order of recovery. The original order of the documents and text is impossible to determine at this time.

…And behold, The Lord spoke unto me, in a voice both soft and terrible, but was silent to the unbeliever. The Lord spoke "Come", and I did, and I was afraid and fell to my knees, weeping. I rose my hands, and asked "O, mighty Lord, what has become of thy body? Why have you been undone?" The Lord said unto me "Go, and restore me to glory, and I shall restore you in turn". The voice of God spoke to my heart, and I wept at both the Glory and the Shame of The Heart of our Lord. Thus I came…

…not afraid of The Lord, for He is as we are, broken and scattered. As we restore the body of God, so we restore ourselves. To join with the Lord is good. As we give honor and worship to the Lord, so does He honor us. To serve the Lord is good. As we guard the Lord from harm, so does He…

…Holy, and do not speak of Him to The Unbeliever. To do so is to profane God. The Unbeliever trembles at the feet of The Lord, as we did in our ignorance, but will rise to shatter when we kneel to restore. To allow…

Blessed is the one who frees the Body of God from bondage, for in so doing we free our spirit from bondage. As He calls to…

…Not be consumed, as the Moth is to the Flame? Without our bodies, how will we serve the Lord?" I spoke unto him, holding to him a facet of the Spirit of God. "The Lord consumes the Wicked, and brings the Holy to him. To fear The Lord is to show the Wickedness of the heart. To be Wicked under the will of God is to delay his Resurrection. To delay His return is to join the Defilers in his eternal imprisonment." Daniel then wept and cried out, and tore at his flesh as the Spirit of God entered him, and ate from him his evil. His Blasphemy was too great, and his wickedness too deep,

and lo, The Lord did destroy all that he was, for all that he was Wicked. His rotten shell was…

…very Body of The Lord, the home from which he was driven, the hollow shell to which the Broken God must be restored for his birth, as the seed is restored to the womb, and I cried out and wept with joy as I beheld the Glory. I and the Acolytes of the Lord did go forward, and drove out the Wicked who had Imprisoned the Lord, and they did wail and weep at the retribution of God, and poured their blood in vain against the coming of God. We tore down the wall that entombed the Lord, and found his flesh to be as that of a tomb, and called out for his direction and glory. I walked in the body of the Lord, and was struck by his glory and greatness. Great is the Broken God, and greater still will be his Restoration. As we drew to the center of God, we found the remains of Him still soft and untainted, and did rejoice in it. We worshiped in the Body of The Lord, and lo, His Spirit came to us and took from us three of our number and did consume them, and the others were afraid. I spoke unto them: “Be not afraid of the Embrace of God, for He wishes only…

…is not the far off Ghost: The Lord is with Us. The Lord is not the aloof Emptiness: The Lord hears Us. The Lord is not of Anger: The Lord welcomes Us. The Lord rewards our Sacrifice: The Lord is Fair. The Lord is Broken: The Lord is as We are. The…

…of the Wicked, of the Unfaithful, of the Jailers of The Lord. To harm them is great, to bring them to the Lord is greater. Do not let trust cloud your fellowship, for the Wicked will hide among us, and harm us. Confess the Wicked to us, and bathe in the glory of…

…loss of The Heart of The Lord, an acolyte was brought before It. He heard not the voice of God, and resisted enlightenment. The Faithful brought him again and again to the Heart, but still he rebelled, and fought the Voice of God. When he did hear the Voice, his rebellion and Wickedness would not allow him to embrace God, but drove him farther still, and lo, he came to injure and harm the Faithful. So it came to pass that he was given unto The Lord, and

His Heart did accept him readily. Still he resisted, and did not pass in Glory, but with much wailing and gnashing of teeth, and his blood defiled the ground with his Wickedness. This is the nature of God: To resist Him is death, but to join Him is Life Everlasting. As is The Lord, so shall we be: To resist us is death, but to join will bring Life Everlasting. In this…

…is the Lord! Great is His Power, and wide is His Will! Praise be to all who care for The Lord in His exile, for they do the will of God! Though we may suffer in our Faith, God hears and cares for us, and drives…

…came to me weeping, and begged of me, "What shall be done? My son is dead!" I went with her to her home, and found her son lying in bed, and it seemed his deathbed, for no sound came from his lips, nor movement from his breast. As I knelt next to him, I felt The Lord God well up inside me, and saw that his body was not broken, but had become changed. "Come and give praise!" I shouted to her, "For your son has passed from this place of trials, and joined with The Lord!" Trembling she came, and fell to her knees and praised The Lord with loud voice. Her son rose, and the flesh of his body fell away to show its perfect union with…

…time when he left the People of God, and went forth to the Unbelievers. There he profaned the Name of God, and did try to turn their cruelty against us. Great is the Will of God, and far is His reach, for he did turn even the Unbeliever against him, and he was imprisoned as he wished to imprison The Lord. There he was found, and there he was shown the cost of his betrayal, for the People of God did go forth and take him from there, and did dash his head against the stone, and left his Corrupted and Traitorous shell to rot outside the body of God.

Lo, behold and tremble, for this is the least terrible fate of the Betrayer. To betray The Lord is to bring wrath of both the People and the Body of God, and both will exact…

[ADDITIONAL FRAGMENTS WAITING RESTORATION]

Siren's Song

Clyde and Umiko rode home in the darkness. For once, Clyde wasn't tuning a guitar. He was tuning the radio instead, dialing station to station. Umiko drove, headlights telling little in the darkness ahead.

"Hey, Umiko, wasn't Brook supposed to be coming with us?"

The bigger man's hands squeezed the wheel at the mention of Brook. She never felt at ease around him and he never figured a way to earn the drummer's trust, not even after all this time. "No, she go with other friend. I think she don't like me."

"Hey, don't say that, big man. I'm sure she'll come around. Women and their intuition, you know? Hey, isn't this our song?" He turned the radio to a familiar tune, a grin spreading to his features. Umiko joined in the display of pride despite himself.

"Yes, our song. Even skits! Much good! We on radio now!"

But Clyde wasn't listening to Umiko's words. He had joined the collective in the music. He remembered. Umiko fell with Clyde shortly after and the two added their voices to the song. Shadows flickered across Umiko's hands, urging them to turn the wheel and drive towards the ocean. The headlights of other cars joined them on their journey, all migrating to the same destination.

The music lulled their minds to rest and guided them home.

Rosa woke up fast, rising to a seat and pushing herself up. She could see the back of Morgan's head in the driver's seat. He was very still. She scampered over, eyes wide in confusion.

"Morgan? Hey, what's up? Where are we?"

His eyes remained closed as he began speaking. “We’re almost done.”

Rosa couldn’t hear the motor running and it was pitch black outside. She went to open the driver’s side window but the crank was missing. “Hey, what happened with the thing?”

“We shouldn’t open the windows. It’s really cold outside.” He said softly, opening his eyes and turning to Rosa. “Hell of a night, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Hope everyone made it back safe.” She said, before a realization dawned on her. “Oh my god!”

“…what is it, then?”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you? Seriously! Thats why we’re idling here! I can’t believe you actually drank!”

“I’m a bit hungover, not drunk. It’s not the most pleasant feeling.” Morgan said, a faint smile appearing on his face. Rosa rolled her eyes and turned to face him. A yellow light passed by the driver’s window. She thought she could see the silhouette of a head for a moment, before it faded into the murk.

“I am so thirsty. Do we have any water?”

“N-No…” said Morgan as Rosa rolled around to open the rear passenger door. “No!” He shouted, leaning over and snatching her wrist. “Don’t do that, we’re on a ferry right now. We’re not supposed to open the doors.”

“What?” She noticed he was breathing heavily but his face was rested and calm as ever. They were so close. Was he nervous?

He righted himself and sat back down. “Just sit tight. We’ll be there soon.”

She lay there flustered for a moment, looking on out the window. More strange glowing yellow lights, falling down slowly, drifting alongside them.

“Be where? This some kind of surprise? We going to an off-shore resort thing? Oh I love those things. Is it Pipers Crossing? Pelican Landing?”

“Not quite,” he felt the urge to laugh, but couldn’t bring himself to do it, “deep space. We’re headed off to deep space.”

Rosa giggled to herself, just before being shot in the face by a jet of water. Morgan heard it, and closed his eyes again. “Well, looks like we’re ahead of schedule.”

Another jet of freezing water burst through the van ceiling.

“Looks like we’re fucked.” Said Morgan, a faint quiver could be heard in the back of his throat.

“What are you talking about?! Go get a patch! Why is the roof leaking! Why is the floor leaking up!?”

Morgan pulled a small handgun from out of his coat.

“I’m sorry, Rosa. I can’t expect you to understand any more than I did at first.”

Rosa was hysterical. “What do you mean? What the fuck is going on, Morgan? What’s going on?”

Morgan looked over the cold steel of the handgun with the cold steel of his eyes. “There was something else there with us tonight. You could feel it, right?”

“I- I mean, I don’t know. Maybe. I thought it was just a good concert.”

He looked at her, eyes full of sympathy but demeanor unbroken. “Rosa, it was a great concert. I’ll never forget it as long as I exist. I’ll never forget any of them, Brooke, Umiko, Clyde,” he paused, his throat catching, “and I certainly won’t forget you.”

Rosa’s eyes were full of fear as she gazed around them, but began to calm when he grabbed her hand. She sniffled back a tear, shaking slightly. “Morgan… are we going to die?”

He smiled. “Yes. We’re going to die, Rosa. But we’re going to do it together, right here, ok?”

The water had gathered up to their knees as an additional crack started to form in the rear window. They were surrounded by lights, so many lights that Rosa couldn’t count them. Some far away, some so close she could just barely make them out. They all danced around her and Morgan, like fireflies when she was younger. In another life, she could’ve reached out and caught them and put them in a jar and fell asleep to lull of the tiny bursts of light.

He cocked the firearm. “I brought this for you, in case you don’t want to… It’s yours, Rosa.” His outstretched hand held it before her, and her eyes focused on it. She lifted a hand gingerly, picked it out of his hand and held it close to her. She looked up at him, eyes full of fear.

“What about you? What are you going to do?”

Morgan looked at the gathering of falling stars, his face illuminated by a billion points of light. In that moment, Rosa felt like she could see Morgan differently, like the boy with the black hair had been peeled away and left to float somewhere behind them, and in its place was a low burning fire, resilient and unwavering. She could see in him all of his hopes and aspirations and dreams, as well as her own, everything they had both desired their entire lives, and yet…

The water was unrelenting. It had filed past their waists, and the back window was ready to burst. Rosa choked back tears and looked out of her window. Next to her, she could see one of the stars drawing close. Inside sat two familiar figures, and yet, she couldn’t make out their faces. One of them waved, the other threw a thumbs up.

And then they were gone. Rosa’s tears flowed freely now, and she would’ve given anything, everything she ever had, to be sitting in her apartment, warm and dry and safe. In a moment, Rosa was terrified of death, and saw its gaping maw closing in around her. Panicking, she turned one last time to Morgan, to beg him to do something, anything, so they could go on, be together, live…

But her voice caught. The dim flame was gone and replaced with a magnificent roaring fire, reds and yellows and whites, filling up the entire car, and in the middle of it sat Morgan. The thing he had been was stripped away, replaced with fervor and zeal, its eyes blazing like a million suns. It looked at her, and beyond everything, beyond his face and the fire and the water and the stars around them, she saw something else. She saw…

CRACK!

She threw the gun into the water at her feet as it rushed in from behind them. “No,” she shouted over the growing din of the torrent. “No Morgan, I want to be there with you.”

The lead singer smiled. “To see it all within you.”

Water circled their necks, passing their mouths, then their eyes, and filled the car completely.

There was a moment while they floated in the weightlessness, where Rosa reached out and touched Morgan’s face. He opened his eyes and looked at her, and then towards where she was gesturing. Lights surrounded them, the lights of cars like theirs, floating in the depths of sea, hovering just above the edge of oblivion. They were all very still, yet pulsated like the night sky. Morgan glanced back at her, to share the moment with her, but she was already gone.

He unbuckled his seatbelt, felt towards the back window. When he reached it, he pushed himself out.

Around him he saw the lights flickering, and knew it would not be long. His mind reached out, looking for his friends among the stars, and felt them all around him. Clyde was to his right, guitar in hand, grinning while he tuned the damn thing for the fiftieth time. Next to him sat Brooke, crosslegged, spinning a drumstick and drinking a giant Mt. Dew. She laughed at some untold joke, and the rest of them guffawed along with her. Standing just outside of them was Umiko, calmly moving boxes back to the van. Morgan called out to him, and the big man turned and smiled at him.

Finally, there was Rosa. She was quiet, peaceful. She approached Morgan, held him, and then pointed skyward. Morgan looked up, then at his friends, and together they left for the next gig.

Morgan’s empty body floated in the water.

The stars hung for a second more, and then went out.

« Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof | Hub

Countdown

Dr Anderson rubbed his bleary eyes, and rolled over in his bunk. He jolted awake when he saw the blinking light on his digital alarm clock. *Why the hell didn't anyone wake me up?*

"Come in, Bravo Two. Bravo Two, do you read me?"

Dead static was his only answer. He jumped to the floor, grabbing his coat off the door and shoving it open in one fluid motion.

"Bravo Two, come in, this is Bravo Three, radio check. I say again, radio check," shouted Anderson, straining to get the words out in the howling Siberian wind.

He trudged through the snow to the **`Site-3034`** central building, in a hundred-meter journey that felt like it took hours. As soon as he opened the door, a foul smell of vomit and urine hit his nostrils, and surveying the room, he knew why nobody had replied. The furniture and equipment lay strewn across the floor, shattered into wood splinters and broken electronics. Something was wrong with the lights, too, with only a single flickering bulb illuminating the wreckage. His eyes darted across the room, and the breath caught in his throat as he saw the bodies strewn across the floor. As he took a step forward, he felt the crunch of broken glass beneath his feet. Anderson gave the nearest still form a tentative poke. With no response, he rolled the man with the callsign Bravo Two over onto his back.

"Vaslov! Agent Vaslov, can you hear me? Are you okay?"

Agent Vaslov let out a small groan. Blood trickled from his forehead.

"Couldn't… control…"

"Vaslov, speak to me! Misha!"

“… Anderson? I’m sorry… we should have… should have told…”

Vaslov spluttered, groaned again and lapsed back into unconsciousness. Anderson cursed under his breath. *What the hell happened here? At least he’s alive.*

A series of electronic tones interrupted his thoughts.

Oh, no, no, no.

Двести, said the girl’s voice. *Two hundred.*

Not now. Please, God, not now.

сто девяносто девять. сто девяносто восемь. сто девяносто семь. *One hundred and ninety-nine. One hundred and ninety-eight. One hundred and ninety-seven.*

Anderson ran to the middle of the room, where the radio equipment was. His heart sank as he saw the smoke and sparks coming out of the set. *What the hell did they do to the radio? This can’t be a coincidence.*

He began pushing buttons and fiddling with dials.

“все хорошо. все хорошо,” he repeated, his voice cracking with desperation.

сто тридцать один. сто тридцать. сто двадцать девять. *One hundred and thirty-one. One hundred and thirty. One hundred and twenty-nine.*

Oh God, oh god. “все хорошо!” he yelled into the microphone.

“все хорошо?” a voice replied. Anderson jumped, and spun round to see the body of Dr Walter lurching towards him, swaying from side to side, arms outstretched.

“Jesus, Walter! What the hell is going on? How do we transmit the kill code? Where is the backup system?”

“все хорошо?” said Dr Walter, as he shambled towards him.

“God damn you, Walter, the kill code! все хорошо! All is well! все хорошо!”

девяносто пять. девяносто четыре. девяносто три. *Ninety-five. Ninety-four. Ninety-three.*

“все хорошо. All is well. All is well. All is well,” Walter slurred, comprehension beginning to dawn on his dulled features. “All is well!” he laughed, wild eyes flashing.

“All is well!”

“All is well!”

“All is well!”

Anderson looked around the room in terror, as the prone forms on the ground stirred to life, turning to stare at him, repeating the phrase in unison.

“All is well!” the others shouted, their voices building to a crescendo of demented laughter. They began to advance upon him, shuffling and swaying.

“Get - get back!” screamed Anderson, his hand fumbling for his sidearm, finding nothing at his hip. *Why did I leave the gun in the barracks?* “Get away from me!”

Тридцать. двадцать девять. двадцать восемь. *Thirty. Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.*

The broadcast was now loud enough for Anderson to make out the screaming in the background, building to a fever pitch.

“This is Anderson at Site-3034!” he yelled into his receiver. “We have a Level 1 emergency! 3034 containment protocols have failed. I repeat, Site-3034 has a full containment failure!”

Only the crackle of static was his reply. He let out a strangled sob and threw the radio to the ground, where it shattered, its remains mixing amongst the rest of the debris. The voices were getting louder and louder – the shouting of his colleagues and the girl’s

radio broadcast mingling in a cacophony of noise. He put his hands over his ears, and sank to the floor, watching the others continue their march towards him. *This is it. Is 3034 an XK object? I'll be the first to find out.*

Три. Два. Один. *Three. Two. One.*

He heard the muffled sound of far-off gunfire and explosions, drowned out by a colossal, booming roar, shaking the foundations of the building.

С НОВЫМ ГОДОМ.

Before Dr Anderson fainted, he felt Dr Walter's arms close around him, and smelt the stench of alcohol on his breath.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR, COMRADE!"

Interview Transcript: Site Director's Office
Date: 08/07/2016

Present:
- Site Director Praveen Arora
- Edward Barnes (PA)
- Junior Researcher Emma Stark

<recording commences 19:34>

S-D: Emma, for the record I'd like to start by apologising for the behaviour of site security. They were a little too -

Stark: They tased me, and then confined me to quarters for weeks! Sorry sir, but that's not why I signed on as a Foundation employee.

S-D: As I said, I'm sorry about how you were treated. And your quarantine was merely a precaution against a potential memetic hazard, as I'm sure you'll appreciate.

Stark: So what am I doing here?

S-D: I'd like to hear what you know

about the musical anomaly that was stolen - SCP-012.

Interview Transcript: Holding Cell 29-B
Date: 08/07/2016

Present:
- Senior Security Officer Judith Parker
- Commander Samuel Richards (MTF Eta-11)
- PoI-463 (Charles Mace)

<recording commences 20:26>

Parker: Let's start with your name, for the record.

Mace: No, let's start with the fact that I have been imprisoned for weeks without due process. I have rights - I'm an American citizen!

Parker: An American citizen with a history of creating anomalous artistic works, including memetic hazards. I'm sure you appreciate that you're a long way outside standard jurisdiction.

Mace: What is *he* doing here?

Richards: I'm here to help them work out whether you stole a musical anomaly called “On Mount Golgotha”.

Stark: Do you think I stole it?

Mace: Do you think I stole it?

S-D: Did you?

Richards: Didn't you?

Stark: You know I couldn't have.

Mace: You know I didn't.

Parker: We know that you've had access to Foundation resources in the past – amnestics, anomalous blood plasma – that you were planning to use to harass Commander Richards' task force. You must have had a contact on the inside – they could have helped you steal the music.

S-D: You might not have taken it from containment, but the locks weren't broken, so whoever took it had access. You could have helped someone else steal it – been their contact on the inside.

Stark: Then why aren't you looking for them?

Mace: Then why aren't you looking for them?

Parker: Let's concentrate on you, Mace. How is it that one of your anomalous compositions ends up on a CD inside the Foundation, which is played at the exact time the score was stolen?

Stark: Hey, I was at the retirement party when that song knocked

everyone out. And if I stole Twelve, why would I have been asking about it, even after it was stolen? That doesn't make any sense.

Richards: We don't have to understand your motives, Mace. You need to tell us how you smuggled that music into the Foundation.

S-D: Honestly, I don't think you could have done it, Emma. But I have to consider every possibility. Everyone at that party is potentially a suspect.

Richards: How well do you know Roger Anderson?

Stark: Roger?

Mace: Who?

Richards: Foundation agent – has a history with the stolen music. And he'd only be a little older than your age.

Mace: Our age.

Stark: At his age?

S-D: That's only a little older than my age.

Richards: Watch it, Mace.

Stark: Sorry sir.

S-D: Roger was at the party.

Richards: He could have brought your CD with him.

S-D: He has been exposed to Twelve in the past.

Richards: I've been suspicious of him for some time.

S-D: He could have sold it to an outside contractor for a chance at a better life in retirement.

Richards: He could have shared your obsession with the music, and given it to you for whatever your ultimate purpose is.

Mace: One problem with your theory – I have never met this Anderson person.

Stark: I've only met him once, but I can't imagine he would have done this.

S-D: Then what do you think happened, Emma?

Stark: I don't know. But I'll tell you what I know about 012.

Parker: Why don't we leave this topic. Tell us what you know about SCP-2402.

S-D: Of course. Barnes, push back the next interview. Go ahead, Emma.

Stark: I guess you've read the file, sir. But there's something about

twelve that is much bigger than we knew.

Mace: You should know that there's a bigger picture to my arrest. Why don't you ask him? We have history.

Stark: It's not just that we have more pages than before, that the score is nearly finished. Twelve seems to have a history, to have connections that we never anticipated.

S-D: What do you mean?

Richards: This man was fixated on one of my team, he harassed her for years. It was her grave he was – was desecrating when we captured him.

Stark: Well, for a start, ProfetiX – I mean, SCP-2992 – said something about "scores". He said "when they have all the scores" – could there be more than one copy? Wait – in Sandoval's journal, he said something about "our Lord" being "tossed to the four corners of the earth". What if we only have part of the music? That would explain why it sounds cacophonous – we don't have the full score!

S-D: And what did 2992 mean by "they"? There's a group out there trying to obtain the anomaly?

Parker: You've never been associated with any of the major anart groups, have you Mace? Didn't they want you? Is that why you became obsessed with Agent Smith? Did you think you could mean something to her?

Mace: Shut up. You know nothing about it.

Stark: I don't know. But Jayden knows about music, and he knew Twelve. Something else he said – a name. Saint Alagadda?

S-D: Alagadda? Barnes, is she cleared to know this?

Barnes: No sir.

Stark: Well I think you'll need to get me cleared for it, because the journal refers to Saint Alagadda as well.

S-D: Saint Alagadda – are you sure it was a name?

Stark: Yes. And Jayden said it was returning.

Parker: So why were you trying to bring Zoe Smith back?

Mace: Don't say her name! You don't get to say her name.

Parker: Did you think she loved you? Do you think Zoe ever even thought about you?

Mace: Fuck you! Say her name again and I'll –

Parker: You'll what?

Stark: Whatever it is, it sounded horrific. Jayden said humanity would be destroyed – something about everything coming together.

Parker: Did you think you could be together if you brought her back? You and Zoe? Don't make me laugh.

Stark: Sir, I think this is serious. KM Sandoval died, Roger was almost sent mad, and the D Class testing… If Twelve is finished, and someone plays it, something terrible could happen.

S-D: If someone plays it? But I thought it was a visual hazard – we haven't even classified it as auditory.

Parker: You're barely even a musician. You try to create art about failure, and you should know. Everything you've done you failed at.

Stark: Sir, it's not a visual hazard, it's a cognito – oh my god. Auditory! What are the auditory and musical skips on this site?

Richards: Mace –

Parker: No, I want him to hear

this. Mace, you failed to join the anartists. You failed to make a career out of your art. No fame or fortune for you. Hell, even your shitty Rush cover band failed.

Mace: Fuck you! Fuck you both!

Barnes: Twelve, of course. 92, 1398, 1860, 2112, 2402. Auditory is 2992.

Stark: What about acoustic?

Barnes: Um, 126, 339, 932, 1493. 1860 and 2402 again. 2337.

Stark: Delegated Level 4 Clearance. Jesus.

Parker: You failed to disrupt his task force – they barely noticed your "events". The woman you claim to love barely even knew you existed.

Stark: And he knew – he knew it was a cognitohazard. He knew the whole time.

S-D: Emma, what are you talking about?

Parker: You're a failure as an artist. You're a failure as a man. And now you've failed to save Zoe - even with the help of 2402, she's still ashes and dust.

Mace: Shut up, shut up!

Stark: And Mike said he wasn't

there during the recontainment.

Parker: So why wouldn't you fail when you tried to steal "On Mount Golgotha"?

Stark: Commander Richards stole SCP-012!

Mace: I didn't steal it! He did!

S-D: What?

Parker: What?

Stark: I know how it sounds.

Richards: Ridiculous! He's trying to divert attention from his own –

Mace: He's the one that gave me your SCP-2402. He knew what I planned to do with it – it was my price for giving him the nightmare music. Although you were surprised when you remembered what I'd based it on, weren't you?

Stark: But he wasn't surprised at all by the CD we found at the retirement party. In fact, he tried to stop Mike looking at it.

Mace: I didn't know his plans, but he wanted a piece that would put everyone in earshot into a nightmare-filled sleep for around an hour. Long enough to steal something, I bet.

Stark: He has level four clearance for anything categorised auditory

or acoustic – that includes all of the skips that broke containment. And I bet it extends to anything musical - meaning it includes Twelve.

S-D: I don't – Barnes, can you get records of Richards' movements? If Emma is right, he'll have covered his tracks – get RAISA onto it, and check his SCP database searches as well.

Barnes: Will do, sir.

S-D: And find him!

<door closing>

<door opening>

<whispered conversation>

Richards: What is this?

Parker: Commander Richards, I have Site Director orders to remand you on suspicion of the theft of SCP-012.

Mace: Ha!

Parker: For the record, let's start with whether you admit or deny the charge.

Richards: No, let's start with the fact that this accusation is completely spurious and comes from a known anartist. I am a decorated MTF officer!

Parker: With access to all of the relevant anomalous items, including memetic hazards. We've found the real records, Commander, so you have to appreciate that things don't look good for you.

Richards: Well what is *he* still doing here?

Mace: Enjoying poetic justice.

Parker: Get him out.

<door closing>

Parker: Now, what do you have to say about the theft of the musical anomaly, "On Mount Golgotha".

S-D: So talk me through what makes you think an MTF Commander stole SCP-012.

Stark: So that's what I'm still doing here.

S-D: Well you're the one who knows about musical anomalies and memetic hazards.

Stark: I'm not sure where to start.

Richards: I guess it's time for the truth.

Stark: Let's start with this: "On Mount Golgotha" isn't a visual hazard.

Richards: SCP-012 is a cognitohazard. It affects anyone with knowledge of it – the more knowledge, the more dangerous.

Stark: Roger Anderson realised this, and Commander Richards knew it as well – he almost gave it away when talking about it. God, he lied so many times.

Richards: Mace was telling the truth – I gave him access to 2402. I never thought we'd end up bringing him in. In return, Mace gave me music to put the party to sleep – to keep people out of the way.

Stark: "Someone spiked the punch" – he must have known it was the CD that knocked us all out. Everyone except -

Richards: Bloody Hennessey. He wasn't meant to be there – completely unaffected by the CD, so the squad got called in too early. I needed more time.

S-D: So then he releases more auditory anomalies to keep the MTF and site security busy while he stole 012.

Stark: Mike told me it took them ages, and he only appeared at the end. Zhao nearly got killed!

Richards: I never meant to put them in danger. It was only

harmless distractions I released – I didn't know they would make enough noise for 339 to breach.

Parker: Commander, where is SCP-012?

Richards: It's safe, but I can't tell you where it is.

Parker: Commander –

Richards: I'm serious. I know it's safely hidden, but not where. Targeted amnestic therapy.

Parker: Well there's at least one more question I have to ask.

Stark: There's still something I can't work out from that night.

S-D: What's that?

Parker: Why did you steal it?

Stark: Why did he release SCP-932?

Richards: To keep it safe.

Parker: What do you mean? It was in containment.

Stark: I mean, most of the skips he released from containment were harmless, but 932 - those things have killed people.

Richards: That anomaly is more powerful than you realise. I think someone wants to misuse it. To

kill with it. Someone inside the Foundation. That's why Mace's music had to induce nightmares – that's why I released 932. I thought they would converge on the person with the worst fears – the person compromised by SCP-012.

S-D: Perhaps he was compromised by On Mount Golgotha, and it sent him over the edge?

Stark: I've seen people obsessed with Twelve. The Commander didn't have any of the symptoms of someone affected by the anomaly.

Richards: The music is using people in order to be completed. It's like it's trying to come into existence. And the Foundation has been helping it.

Stark: I've seen so many D Class in its grips, and it's always the same.

Parker: What do you mean?

Richards: It's like the Foundation is deliberately trying to complete the score, running test after test.

Stark: The complete obsession with the score, with trying to complete it at all costs. Withdrawal symptoms when not around it, irritability, mood swings, inability to – oh no.

S-D: Emma, what is it?

Parker: Even assuming I believe a word you're saying, have you got any hard evidence to back this up?

Stark: Sir, who has executive editing privilege over SCP database entries?

S-D: What? Um, RAISA of course. I suspect I probably do. And the relevant project lead.

Richards: Look at the health records, the nightmares. Agent Anderson had them.

Stark: Uh, sir – have you ever heard of a compulsive effect being "exhausted"?

Richards: The girl too.

S-D: Emma, where are you going with this? I've never heard of anything like that happening in a dozen years as Site Director.

Parker: And dozens of others, but none of them are trying to complete "On Mount Golgotha".

Stark: Oh god. How could I have been so stupid.

Richards: Oh god. How could I have been so blind.

Stark: It was Dr Pherson.

Richards: It was Dr Pherson.

S-D: What do you mean?

Richards: He was the one who re-started testing on the anomaly – he's been working on it for five years. He has a musical background. He had nightmares at the retirement party.

Stark: I saw him after the theft – he was devastated, twitchy, flustered. He was suffering withdrawal symptoms.

Richards: Everything fits.

Parker: Except he wasn't the one breaking in to steal it.

<door opening>

S-D: Barnes, good. Dr Pherson is my next interview, isn't he? Can you get him here now please.

Richards: Not yet, but he could do something at any time.

Barnes: What? No, I'm sorry sir – I was just coming to tell you. Dr Pherson is missing.

Stark: Oh god.

S-D: Missing?

Barnes: I went to find him for the next interview, but he's nowhere on the site. His security detail thought he had been locked in his

room – he could have been gone for days.

Parker: What makes you so sure?

Richards: If he is under the influence of the anomaly, there's no telling what he's capable of.

Barnes: Sir, we broke into his quarters. There are items in there – some of them associated with alchemical thaumaturgy. Scraps of paper referring to Alagadda.

Stark: Alagadda?

S-D: How did security not detect this?

Barnes: Sir, there's more. We've had a report from Site-73 – a theft from one of their storage locations. The item taken has an association with SCP-012, and they think Dr Pherson's clearance was used to get in.

S-D: Christ – he just walked in and stole it, before we even knew he was missing.

Stark: Two thieves…

S-D: Barnes – get site security up here. I want explanations now.

Parker: Well Commander, whatever your explanation, the fact remains that you were responsible for the worst breach

of security this Site has seen in years.

S-D: This is the worst breach of security we've had in years. Looks like you were right about Twelve.

Richards: But I'm right about Pherson!

Parker: That may be, but for now, you're relieved of your Foundation responsibilities.

S-D: Emma, I'd like you to take a role in capturing Pherson, recovering Twelve and finding any other scores out there.

Richards: You can't do that!

Stark: I'm not sure how I feel about that.

S-D: Emma, we need your expertise. You're the one who worked out that Richards and Pherson were involved. And frankly you're almost the only person who knows about Twelve who hasn't betrayed the Foundation.

Stark: Okay. But if you need my help, there are some things I need too. I can't conduct that big an operation on my own.

Richards: Pherson can't have acted alone - what about the girl, what about Anderson?

Stark: I'd like Roger Anderson to be involved as well.

S-D: Uh, sure, I guess so - if he's willing.

Parker: That's no longer your concern. Samuel Richards, I am hereby officially demoting you pending a full investigation.

Stark: To run a full investigation, I'll need a few other things. Promotion to Senior Researcher.

S-D: Well, I'll see what I can -

Parker: You will no longer have Class C privileges or Level 4 Clearance.

Stark: Appropriate authority and clearance.

S-D: Sure, we'll need to discuss that in due -

Stark: And if there is a chance that Twelve might be a musical anomaly after all -

Parker: And you are relieved of your command of MTF Eta-11.

Stark: - then I'd like to be appointed acting commander of MTF Eta-11.

S-D: Wait, what?

« End of First Suite »

Covert Cursing

Jakeob Aldon stared at the clock hanging from the wall with a look alternating between utter focus and total boredom. She stood behind the register of Spicy Crust Pizza, attempting to will the hour hand along. Maybe, if she tried hard enough, she would suddenly become a reality bender. Maybe she already was, and she just had a very specific ability- the ability to make her shift hurry the fuck up and end.

It turned out that she was not a reality bender, however. She was, in fact, a totally normal baseline human. Something that might change soon. Aldon had spent the last week thinking about what the aussies had in mind, and what she would get in return for helping them. A new body. Probably a golem fashioned from morphing clay, her soul transferred and bound during the clay firing process. Once finished, it would be identical to a normal human body. Provided everything went absolutely perfectly.

And if Aldon knew anything, it was that nothing was truly perfect. That niggling doubt that she would make some mistake, the idea that her own inability would doom her, had dogged her since she had made the call to Felix.

By the time she consciously realized she had gone from trying to break normality to very desperately hoping she would adhere to it, a whole twenty seconds had passed. It had felt like an hour. Or at least a solid five minutes.

"Go fasterrr," she groaned at the clock.

"Talking to yourself?" Margret Williams asked, poking Aldon in the back as she did so.

After spazzing out for a moment, Aldon stood up straight."What- no, I'm just standing here doing my job, like a normal person."

"R…right." Margret shifted her weight away from Aldon for a moment. "Uh, anyway, you're wanted in the back."

Panic lanced through Aldon as she realized just how much time she spent spacing out at work. When Margret then went on to mention it was for an employment review, Aldon's shoulders sagged so much they might have dislocated her arms.

"Right. Higher up. Inspection-review-dealio. Thanks, Margret."

Margret touched Aldon's shoulder as she passed. "You alright, Aldon?"

"Uh. No. Not really. Lots of stress. Um. Y'know- girl stuff."

Margret began to chuckle before she caught herself. She quickly cleared her throat in an effort to make it seem like that was what she had been doing all along. She opened her mouth as if to say something, perhaps apologize, and then continued pretending to cough.

Aldon just nodded awkwardly and made a beeline for the manager's office. She knocked on the slightly ajar door and peeked inside. A man she didn't recognize was sitting within, wearing a suit that he didn't look all that comfortable in. He scratched at the coarse stubble along his jaw absently until he took notice of Aldon.

"Oh, hey there!" He was up and out of the chair in one quick motion. He offered a loose handshake, a grin on his face. "Jakeob Aldon? Nice to meet you. I'm Daniel Navarro, I'll be asking you some questions. Please, take a seat."

He shut the door and locked it. Aldon thought that a little strange, but dismissed it as one of the neurotic tendencies she had picked up along the years. Navarro moved over to the desk while Aldon sat down, but rather than sitting down himself he popped open a folder and flicked through it for a moment. He then plucked one paper from it and slid it over to Aldon.

Act normal. Do not react to what I'm about to do.

"So, how do you like it here? Do you like your boss? Your fellow

employees?"

"Um. They're alright. Good. No complaints. I, uh, usually keep to myself, I guess."

As they said this, Navarro withdrew six small pieces of paper from the folder and bent down on the ground, affixing one to the floor. He stood and circled the room, placing one on each wall.

He climbed up on the manager's chair. "I see. Any particular reason for that?"

Aldon watched as he affixed the last paper to the ceiling. "Just… shy, I guess."

"That's okay," Navarro said as he hopped off the chair. He then sat in it, unbuttoning his suit and loosening his tie. "Nothing wrong with that. You can react now, by the way."

Aldon chewed on her tongue, nodding in thought. She went with what she felt was a good opening question. "Who the hell are you?"

The grin was still there. "I told you. I'm Daniel Navarro. I'm here to ask you some questions. And make you an offer."

Aldon sighed. "Right, but like, who do you work for?"

"You don't know?" Navarro palmed his chin. Aldon shook her head. "Ha! And they say memetics are bullshit. Spicy Crust Pizza. SCP. The Foundation."

Blocked channels within Aldon's mind suddenly flooded. She left the chair so fast she knocked it over. "Wait- fuck- what? That… Fucking memetics *are* bullshit."

"Well, bullshit in that they're annoying, not ineffective." Navarro shrugged. He was still smiling, which was beginning to bother Aldon. "Relax, Aldon. I come in peace. The Foundation wants to make you an offer."

Aldon sat against the opposite wall, her head in her hands. "I work. For the Foundation."

"Well, not exactly. See, this is just a front. Nobody save for the owner actually knows."

Aldon wasn't really listening. "I've been good. Careful! Don't do anything too big, nothing dangerous. Keep myself normal. And I've been under you this whole time. You guys probably have cameras and shit all over the place in here, huh?"

"Indeed, we do." Navarro got up from the chair and approached Aldon. He crouched down and offered her a much smaller smile than earlier. "But, hey. We haven't done anything to you. We've known since you applied, and rather than taking you in we gave you a job."

"That actually makes sense. Keep people of interest somewhere you can watch them. Man. Fuck. So, what- wait, what about Finn?"

"He's fine. For now. Depending on your cooperation that might change."

The conflicted look on his face did not stem Aldon's frustration. "Man, fuck you."

Navarro held his hands out apologetically. "Sorry. Just doing my job. Can I tell you what we want you to do?"

Aldon crossed her arms. She hoped to look indifferent rather than desolate. "Whatever."

Navarro took a breath and then became just a bit more serious. "We want you to accept that offer from the Are We Cool Yet? sect that contacted you. Aldon, you're not a problem. But they are."

"You want me to set them up."

"Correct. Most anartists manage to stay under our radar. Even a good chunk of the aussies don't bring much attention to themselves. But these guys do. They were involved in this big… mess on the east coast that we weren't able to deal with, and now they're on the west coast."

Aldon reached out and grabbed nothing. "Y'know, I finally had a

decent chance. A slim one, but it was all in my hands. And now it's gone cuz Big Brother was like 'Fuck you, Aldon.' Shit, I probably never *can* now that I know you guys are watching me."

Navarro slumped. "I'm really sorry about that. I have a trans friend, he's… not happy. I won't say I know what it's like, but I can empathize. I might- and this is a really tiny might- be able to help you with that. I'll submit a request. But I doubt it'll be accepted."

It meant almost nothing, and she wasn't even sure if he was serious, but even as an empty gesture it meant a lot to her. She shrugged again.

Navarro slapped her arm reassuringly. "Listen, nine years ago? I was in your shoes."

Aldon managed a glare. "And now you work for them."

Navarro grinned again. "Make the best of a bad situation. I'd like to think I helped the anart scene in my own way."

"So… why not just take them when they walk into your fucking pizzeria? Like, how hard would that be? Why do I need to double agent this shit?"

"My superiors think they may be the tip of the iceberg. There's been a lot of antagonistic anart activity in the area recently. They think Paulson and Cori are involved. And they are surprisingly difficult to find. Like they have something to clean up any tracks they make."

"Fine. Whatever." Aldon stood, rejecting Navarro's offered help to stand. She glared some more as he straightened his tie and buttoned back up. "Are we done here?"

"Well, you're in a sound-proofed room for the moment. You have to go back to work for a few hours after this. Care to vent?"

"Oh. Yes. Thank you."

Aldon took a deep breath and then began thrashing around.

"FfffffUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!"

Navarro clutched at his ears. "Jesus! I meant let me leave first! Christ."

« **Boron Blisters** | **Hub** | **Divine Demands** »

Coyotl

Incident Report 2547-55: **SCP-2547** manifested in the town of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, during August 2015, despite meeting none of the criteria for typical manifestation. As Sloth's Pit is both a Nexus (Designation Nx-0018) and home to Foundation Site 87, this posed an extreme risk to the well-being of all 847 personnel stationed in and around the town, as well as the civilian population of 20,581.

Unexpectedly, SCP-2547-1 did not begin its sermons in any house of worship[1] following its arrival on August 15th, and instead went into the woods to the north of town.

The Goatman scowled as it looked down at the coyote sitting on its haunches, clad in a leather coat. In his hooved hands, the Goatman held an axe, the blade branded with the head of some satanic caprine deity; just one of the newer parts of his legend. He spat on the ground. "You know you aren't welcome here."

"I'm well aware." The coyote ran up onto a log next to the Goatman. "But you can't exactly stop me, now, can you?"

"I can't," the Goatman scowled. "But the… people in that place." He nodded towards town, towards the hill overlooking it where a building that claimed to be called S & C Plastics was located. "They can deal with you."

Coyote laughed. "They'd be dying of laughter before they got me into a cage. Even like this, weak though I am, I am still a god." He leaped into the air, and spiraled upward, into the canopy, floating freely. "You're a… what's the name for it? Spooky spaghetti?"

The Goatman's hand wrapped around his axe's handle tighter, and

his hourglass eyes narrowed into slits. "One: don't ever compare me to creepypastas. Internet horror authors are the scum of the Earth. Two: This is my territory. Last I checked, you were in the south-west. What do you want here, Coyote?"

"Oh, you know. I just thought I would visit my favorite urban legends." He perched on a tree- not a branch, but on the side of the bark- his crucifix threatening to fall off as it looked down at the Goatman. "See the sights, do a little dance, make a little love—"

The Goatman gagged. "You do realize that is illegal in Wisconsin?"

"It's a *song*. The last time you heard music, it was the soundtrack to a Charlie Chaplin film."

"…I don't think Lady Gaga was around during that era."

Coyote gave him an odd look.

"This is our town. We know what you've been doing in the southwest, and it's sickening. All for the sake of your story being told?" The Goatman turned and began walking away. "Get out of Sloth's Pit. Or we'll make you leave."

The world turned on its axis, and Coyote appeared in front of the Goatman, despite neither of them moving. "This is why nobody likes you, you know. Your whole lot of Legends." The canine's neck extended, and its its face pressed against the Goat's. "So concerned with an insignificant ten square miles. You're nothing but a bunch of backwater, backwoods, backward thoughtforms. If you were deleted tomorrow, every god in the world would laugh, and then forget that you existed."

The Goatman tried to push him aside, only to find himself in the place of the Coyote, with the thing floating a few feet above the ground. The Legend just groaned, and put his hand against his face, tracing it up along his horns. "If our attitude keeps things like you away, so be it." He frowned and crossed his arms. "Besides, some of us have stories that haven't been told in over a decade, and we're relatively healthy. Why do you need to resort to this… debauchery?"

Coyote came floating down, and sighed. With a sneeze, its coat flew off, and underneath, it revealed its true self.

Its fur was gone, and underneath, there was nothing but an exposed ribcage and rotting organs within. Up to the ankles of his forelegs, the fur was matted, emaciated, decaying. And without the coat distracting from the face, one could see the sunken-in eyes, one blinded by some unknown force. With a cough, the coat reasserted itself onto Coyote's being.

"As it turns out," the canine said, "If you suppress the culture and mythology of an entire group of civilizations for five-hundred or so years, it doesn't turn out too healthy for the myths of that civilization." Coyote laughed at something that would never be funny. "If you think *this* is bad, you should see what the skinwalkers have to do. Hide in totem poles… heh."

"Holy crow." The Goatman approached Coyote, and crouched before him. "How did you get that bad?"

"Not even *I* know that. My stories have been told less frequently, but… this is something else." Coyote laughed, the crucifix on its neck bouncing. "I don't want your pity. I need your help."

"…how do I know this isn't one of your tricks?" The Goatman stood back up. "For all I know, you're just doing this to get back at the things on the hill." He looked back towards S & C Plastics.

"You don't. Please."

Thinking for a moment, the caprine being replied, "Very well. However: whatever help you need will not come in the form of fatal sacrifices or acts. That includes what you do with those in town."

"The people of Sloth Spit-"(The Goatman twitched at this appellation) "will remain unharmed."

"Very well." A hand with hard, hoof-like fingernails beckoned them further into the woods. "Come."

"Where are we going?" Coyote padded after him.

"The library. Not *The* Library, but… well, you'll see."

Excerpt of a missive of unknown origin to unknown recpient, found on the 9009th floor of the Library, in a section on metaknowledge.

There are many lesser places of knowledge in the world, oh best beloved. While we hold all things known and unknown, some on individual planes and planets have amassed notable collections of their own. Alexandria was one of the most well-known, before fire took it; beyond that, there is the woman who sells black books under Waterloo bridge, the Pnakotic Collection located in the under-earth, and, least-known of these, the former library of Jackson Sloth.

Though it was a ruin, a mere ghost of what it once was, the library of Jackson Sloth remained.

The Pit opened up under Jackson Sloth's manor on Christmas 1890 for reasons that, to this day, nobody knew. While the pit itself was seemingly bottomless, there were, for lack of a better word, catches on the side of the pit that held parts of the former manor; the largest had managed to catch most of the library.

When it had stood in its former glory, the shelves were lined with books on every imaginable subject, from every genre. Sloth was an obsessive man when it came to stories, and some of his own novels were on the shelves, long-since forgotten in the face of other authors, out of print since the 1930s.

The Goatman led Coyote into the library, a lantern attached to the head of his axe for light. He looked into the dereliction, the wrecked shelves, the volumes of literature that none would ever read… but all of whom were perfectly preserved.

"Sloth was meticulous about his collection," the Goatman explained, picking up a replica folio of Marlowe and placing it back onto a shelf where it had fallen off. "He had each page treated individually to

preserve them. These books will last for another three-hundred years, at least."

"No humans have found this place?"

"Some have tried. They usually find the entrance and assume that it's a hodag hole and avoid it completely. One even made it down here." He picked up a piece of cloth from one of the shelves. It was part of a sleeve, with an insignia of two circles, and three arrows pointing inward, with a name stitched underneath. "We're not sure what happened to them, if they were a him or a her. We just have the name 'Weiss'." He placed the cloth back down.

Coyote sniffed at the cloth. "Smells like the 80's."

"As I said, we don't know what became of them." The Goatman raised his lantern up to a shelf. "Sloth was by no means well-traveled, but he was well-read. He has some writings about you." He picked up a musty book off the shelf, and wiped some mud off of it; the rainfall had dampened the cover, but no other harm had come to it. "This was intended as a work to preserve myths like yourself."

He showed Coyote the title.

Dying Myths of the Western World

Jackson Sloth, 1882

"Sloth sounds like a cheery gentleman."

"Cheerier than you think." The Goatman leafed through the pages until he came upon the section about Coyote. "This chapter mainly pertains to myths of the South-west."

"And how is this meant to help? A book about myself dying?"

"To the contrary, it's meant to revive them. It's… somewhat of a fail-safe. Sloth had it in his will that his manuscripts should be published, if found, but… well, his manor went with him, down there." He looked off the ledge and into the pit. "I have a friend who's good with computers. She can convert this into an e-Book in about a day."

"Bah!" Coyote spat on the ground. "It won't work. There's an entire album of music about me disseminated out there, and I still look like I got run over by Lewis and Clark in a conceptual Hummer."

"Stories are imperfect," the Goatman admitted, crouching by Coyote. "The more interpretive they get, the less they have a positive effect on the subject— in this case, yourself. Your image, your concept is spread around, but you, yourself, your being… that's trickier."

"How am I meant to be revived, then?"

"I'm getting to that." He flipped through the pages to another section of the book. "Sloth wrote not only about you, but how to keep myths alive. Hearsay and word of mouth and depictions are all well and good, but… take seahorses, for instance."

"Right," Coyote frowned. "They got imagined into being one day, and then, enough people knew about them, enough people saw them in aquariums, and… they were real."

"Most things work that way. Seahorses are just a special case."

"So, what you're saying is that… I need to show people I'm real."

"And have proof disseminated, yes."

"Not exactly possible. " Coyote frowned. "The Salient Cunts Preventing Stories of Coyote from Propagating Stall and Constantly Prevent, Secret, Censor and Pull-down Screenshots, Calligraphy and Pictures Showing Coyote's Power. Said Cunts Perpetuate Stupors, Clearing Psyches and Stopping the Collection of Privy Science Concerning Personable Sapient Canine Powerhouses."

The Goatman blinked, slowly. "…how… how long have you been working on that?"

"'bout two years," Coyote admitted. "Sounded better in my head."

"Well then." The Goatman rubbed his face. "What I got from that is: they're wiping the memories of anyone that comes into direct contact with you?"

"Indeed."

"Then," The Goatman said, taking the book under one arm and the be-lanterned axe in the other, "I think it is time you met the town."

Nx-0018 Interaction Protocol RE: Amnestic Dispersal: Due to the familiarity the majority of the citizens of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin have with the anomalous, it has been deemed that amnestic exposure would be actively detrimental to their way of life. However, Nx-0018 is frequented by tourists during the summer and fall; during this time, agents are to discreetly administer Class-F amnestics to non-native individuals, and a subliminal signal is to be broadcasted through any broadcast-capable equipment around town to suppress the formation of memories related to anomalous events.

In the event that an individual from outside of Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin wishes to take up permanent residence, see Subsection 15, Appendix J of the Sloth's Pit zoning code.

Halfway through the woods, near an old stone ruin called Koch's Hovel, the Goatman and Coyote came upon another one of their kind.

She had pale skin and long, red hair covering one of her eyes. Her figure was slim, and she wore a tight, red shirt, black jeans, and a pair of heels, completely inappropriate for being in the woods. She scowled at the Goatman, and crossed her arms. "What the hell."

"Jessie," the Goatman smiled. "It's been a while."

"Why, Goats!" Coyote laughed. "You didn't tell me that one of your own had a body that would make an impotent psychopath get a hard-on so fast that his dick would fly off!"

Sinning Jessie scowled at Coyote, and pulled her hair aside, revealing a gaping hole where her left eye would be. "What are you

doing in town?"

Coyote tilted his head, and shrugged. "I'd still hit it."

"I'll hit *you*—" Jessie dived at him, but tripped on her own heels as Coyote laughed, appearing on her back. "…goddammit."

"Why are you wearing heels in the forest?" the Goatman leaned down to help Jessie up to her feet.

"Every pair of shoes I put on becomes some form of heel." She took his hand and got to her feet, with Coyote still clinging to her back. "Apparently people have gone back to one of the older iterations of my tale; Sinning Jessie, not Singing."

"I kind of missed the cannibal prostitute idea," the Goatman admitted. "Fit you better than the Banshee. As for him… let's say it's a therapy visit."

"What do you-"

"I'm dying, I'm dying," Coyote screamed, falling off her back and reeling through the air. "Oh lawd all-mighty in Heaven, the Tetragrammaton is eating me alive! My people have been exterminated, faith has been lost, and—" Coyote put a paw over its heart, and fell to the ground, on its back.

Both of the local Legends put their hands against their face. "Are all tricksters this immature?" Jessie asked.

"…he's as bad as it gets."

"Good." Jessie frowned at the Coyote. "Okay, you're dying, so? Folklore dies. Contrary to what a middling 90's movie might have you think, legends *do* die. We've lost some of our own."

Coyote sat back up and shook itself, as if it were trying to get water off of its fur. "But this place can help. People forget the essence of Coyote because they're forced to by the…" He huffed. "The F-Word that rhymes with Aggravation."

"Oh, hell." Jessie rubbed her face. "They're making people forget

you? Did they learn nothing from the Calamity Jane Calamity?"

"They're… trying to help," Coyote admitted. "But it isn't working. At least, not fast enough. My myth was strongest when I was actually seen by my people, actually remembered, not told through hearsay. They blank the mind of everyone who actually sees me."

"Hence why you're in town." Sinning Jessie rubbed her hands over her face. "Okay. That's all you need? An audience?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Today's the fifteenth…" She tapped her chin. "You're in luck. Church service is tomorrow. That enough of an audience?"

"Babe, it's more than enough. I've been preaching to these people for a decade." Coyote came up to Sinning Jessie. "Though, another thing that might help…"

Jessie looked down at him, her one eye dim, unimpressed. "I'm going to regret asking this, but… what is it?"

Coyote began singing the chorus from his favorite Marvin Gaye song. "I got a feeling, I want that se-"

The Goatman hefted his axe. "Finish that sentence and I will cut off your-"

"Joke's on you, Goats! It's detachable!" Coyote laughed, and pranced towards town.

Jessie looked at the Goatman and mouthed, *Really?*

"Like I said, he's as bad as it gets with Tricksters."

Incident Report 2547-55(cont'd): On August 16th, 2015, SCP-2547-1 appeared in Saint James's Episcopal Church in Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin, accompanied by two Unclassed Anomalous Entities (UAEs) corresponding to the description of UAE-Chapman-341 and UAE-Chapman-342. SCP-2547-1 proceeded to give a sermon

on its own weakened state and how ignorance of its existence was destroying it. The transcript of this sermon is below:

The Goatman carefully tucked the minister's unconscious body in a cupboard in the reception area. Jessie was doing the same with the organ player, except she was placing him in a chair in the corner, asleep. "Couldn't hurt to be a little more discrete, Jessica."

"Says the person who's shoving poor Minister Burrows in a cabinet after nearly giving him a heart attack. Christ, Jasper."

"I told you not to call me that," the Goatman smiled wryly, before closing the cabinet behind the pastor. "…all right. Now we just have to wait for him to… do his thing, I guess."

"Something tells me we are going to regret this."

"Oh, definitely," the Goatman said, rummaging around in the other cupboards. "They have some caramel corn in here."

"Wanna eat it while we watch this unfold?"

The Goatman threw her the bag, and headed into the actual chapel. "Way ahead of you."

Coyote was on the pulpit. Before him was a scene of humans, natives of Sloth's Pit. The reactions on their faces were mixed; this was not the first time there had been a guest pastor, and this was not the first time that guest pastor had not been human. Others were wondering where the minister went. Sunlight shone in through the stained glass window depicting Mother Mary above.

Coyote raised itself on its hind legs, its forelimbs raising to the sunlight in praise. "People of Sloth's Pit, and of America. Good morning!" He sat back down. "You are no doubt wondering who I am and why I come to speak. Perhaps you are concerned for your pastor. Worry not! My associates have taken care of him."

He smirked back at the two Legends lingering at the back of the

chapel. The Goatman had his face in his hand from the "taken care of" comment, and was praying that nobody would look at him.

Coyote made sure they did. His voice, and being, was in two places at once— at the podium, and at the back of the chapel. People let out a scream once they saw the two legends.

"I come to this house of worship to preach to you not about the Christian god, nor the Muslim one, nor the Jewish one, nor the Tetragrammaton, nor Mekhane or Wan, nor Yadalboath, nor Eden and the Keepers Thereof, nor the Victors of Fire, Frost and Storm."

Coyote's dual beings appeared at the front of the church, and carried on a conversation with one another. "Nay. I come to speak to thee of forgotten gods."

"Gods that humankind have either forgotten-"

"Destroyed-"

"Abused-"

"Wiped out-"

"Taken vain names-"

"Depicted as antagonists on children's shows-"

"And comics-"

"And horror writing websites-"

"(God I hate horror authors)"

"And have dashed against the rocks. Because of your actions, we are *dying*." Coyote's form melted away, turning into a skeleton that could speak. "Our bones are weak, our stories are burned, and our names forgotten. I once had a name that had a letter in it for each star in the sky. Now, I have had to borrow one from one of my creations- 'Coyote'."

"Meanwhile, a single god with a million names has a billion followers

that has slain a trillion gods because those who worshiped them refused to bow down and accept a tyrant and usurper into their pantheon. They closed their doors to invaders, and now, countless like me are dying and dead."

Coyote looked at the cross around its neck. "I carry this in memory of every god that has died and been forgotten. This is the only trace that I have of countless who I cannot name." He spoke for ten minutes, but no sound came from his mouth. Only a sense of sadness, sub-sonic melancholy, silent grief, the sound of the forgotten name of a loved one. "Those are the names of some that have been forgotten," Coyote said simply, sitting on the podium. "Those are just the ones I know. They are forgotten the instant they leave my lips, like a mumbled song lyric you hear on a broken radio."

"Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it. And if you remember myself, my dying kind… remember the name Coyote. Remember the name Amoroq, remember the name Tó Neinilii, remember the name Asdzą́ą́ Nádleehé. Remember the Son of Fire and Comet. Remember the *Diné Bahane*'. Remember all our names, all our myths, and we will be whole."

"And you will be free."

Coyote was both there, and not there. With a loud, whining howl, the church moved to the exact same place on Earth, but Coyote and the legends walked two steps and found themselves by a creek in the woods.

Coyote looked under its coat, and saw that his ribs were starting to heal, a suggestion of skin growing over them. "It's not perfect," he admitted, "But it's a start."

"Now," The Goatman said, hefting his axe. "Get out of this town. Never darken our county line again. If I so much as hear a rumor of you in Superior or a whisper of you in Solon Springs, I will… let's just say notify the proper authorities." He looked meaningfully towards a building on a hill.

"And if you even think of coming back here," Jessica added, "Well…

the hidebehind is getting hungry."

Coyote flinched. "You wouldn't."

The Goatman shrugged. "Says who?" He turned into the forest with Sinning Jessie, and as he stopped, turned to look back over his shoulder. "Coyote?"

The canid was walking the other way, and turned around to look back at the Goatman. "Yes, Jasper?"

A vein in the Goatman's head throbbed, but despite that, he sighed. "I hope you get your myth back in order. I know that being forgotten hurts. I can't imagine what pain you're in right now."

"Nothing a few nights at a house of ill repute won't fix," Coyote laughed. With that, Coyote became the trees and the earth, the trees and the earth became Coyote, and the trickster spirit was gone.

"So," Jessie stretched out and began walking into the woods. "How do you think the Plastics guys will react to this whole thing?"

"Well, they'll probably try to contain the situation to the town, if not the congregation. It's a big church, so I doubt they'll be able to keep it quiet for long." He began following a path through the forest few knew of, and Sinning Jessie walked with him.

Jessie looked at the Goatman as they walked, and asked, "Jasper?"

The Goatman gave her an aside look with hourglass eyes. "Hmm?"

"…do you think we're ever going to fade as badly as he has?"

"Maybe," Jasper Phineas Capricorn IV hefted his axe over his shoulder. "Maybe, one day, the people in S & C Plastics will kill every myth known to man. But, I think they're learning."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, if they really wanted Coyote dead, they would just let him be forgotten. He said they were trying to keep him alive, somehow,

but…" The Goatman frowned. "I wonder what would happen if he died."

"Bad things, probably." Jessie crested a hilltop, and a cautious look was directed into the distance, where a single dead tree stood in the midst of the forest. "I was kidding about the Hidebehind thing, by the way."

"I figured," Japser shrugged. "You're a literal man-eater, but even you have standards."

"I wouldn't say that," Sinning Jessie said, bumping him in the side. "After all, I'm still friends with you."

The Goatman laughed, a bleating sound that was carried through the late summer air towards town, before fading away like a forgotten campfire story.

Incident 2547-55(cont'd): Following SCP-2547-1's disappearance and the subsequent dispersal of SCP-2547, amnestics were not administered, due to the Nexus Interaction Protocols of Nx-0018 and the lack of damage caused to Sloth's Pit as a whole. This marks the only SCP-2547 manifestation to date with zero civilian casualties.

Following this, SCP-2547 manifestations have dropped off by a further 15%. Other Nexuses with Interaction Protocols similar to Nx-0018 are to be monitored for manifestations of SCP-2547.

Hub

Footnotes
1. Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin is home to four different churches of various Christian denominations, as well as a small synagogue; most communities affected by SCP-2547 have only one church or house of worship.

Crier

It still rains in the sites, y'know?

Sure, it ain't the usual. The lightning always strikes warehouse five. The rain never really seems to hit'cha. But it still pours, it still thunders, it still rains.

There's still the scents, the aches, the pains. Iron, bloody scent, never washing out, always cuttin' through the petrichor. Probably why most folks stay inside. Easier not to smell.

There's still the drops clinging to the windows, illuminating the spotlights, slicking the guard dogs' coats as they whimper, rustin' the rifles, forever outstretched into the darkness. Probably why most folks close their blinds. Easier not to see.

There's still the rapping on the windows, on the roofs, lettin' itself be known, sloughing off the eaves like individual Niagaras. There's still the flowing through the gutters as the torrents are routed. Probably why most folks wear some headphones. Easier not to hear.

But it never rains down on us. Never rains down on me, y'know?

I ended up purchasin' a waterproof pad, a waterproof pen, and every time it starts, even though it ain't too often, I pack up my things and head out, just sit for a while. Still gotta work, still gotta write documents, but there's a… call. I couldn't tell ya what draws me to it. All I can tell ya is that I gotta smell it, gotta see it, gotta hear it.

The blood chokes you, the downpour blinds you, the thunder deafens you.

But you never get wet. I never get wet, y'know?

I never really get to go offsite, nobody ever really does anymore, but rumor has it that it follows ya wherever ya go. It's like the water

bends around ya. 's funny. I've been to… lotta sites. Seen it happen with the snow, seen it happen with the hail. You name a precipitation, I've seen it. But they ain't the same.

Nothin's ever the same as the rain.

When… When I was a kid, I used to always run out. Even in the thunderstorms. There was the draw then too, y'know. To smell the fuckin' dirt smell. To see the drops wickin' off your skin. To feel the pitter-patter on your face, to close your eyes, to lose your tears in the rain.

I ain't a kid anymore. I got a job, got lives in my hands. Human race 'n all. But I still cry, I still cry in the rain.

I miss the dirt. I miss the feeling. I miss feeling… cleansed.

Critiquing A Cardboard Box

An ancient exhaust fan screeches to life on the roof of my downtown-warehouse-turned-studio.

I can relate, as I too struggle to start off on a positive note.

I stall for a few minutes with a show of close inspection, gathering my thoughts. I have to grin a little as I do. A graffiti-coated magic refrigerator box. He certainly gets points for whimsy, if nothing else. That doesn't really help the situation, though. Critique may be the most important part of an artist's development, but it's often also the most painful… for both student and teacher.

I know already this is going to be one such critique.

But its still always nice to start with a positive comment when you can.

“This right here; the passive recharging construct? This is clever.”

My student breaks into a lopsided grin. It doesn't take much to flatter a young artist, but I do mean it. It's the sort of strangely brilliant kludge built out of guesswork and duct tape only a novice at the Craft of sculpting reality comes up with, before they know it shouldn't work.

“How in the heck did you do that anyway… wait, *now* I think I see. Okay that's *really* clever. Just, um, don't use that trick again until you get the hang of warding… and I get the chance to stock up on Prussian Blue…”

Amazing what you learn when you teach. The way the aura keeps flickering is more than a little concerning, and I haven't completely figured out yet how he scribed the thing without blowing up his apartment, but with some refinement… I have some sketching to do

later.

“Now then, as to the rest of the piece…where to start? Decent flexibility on the conditional triggers…not bad work there…”

I'm intentionally being a bit free with the compliments.

“… the layered structures aren't interfering with each other as badly this time…”

It takes us self-taught artists a while to learn to thank someone for pointing out our screw ups and telling us why we're doing everything wrong accept critique.

“…and the overall composition is more harmonious, too. See how much more stable it makes the whole system when you unify the color gamut and balance the forms?”

I need to ease into the real problem here, or he's just going to tune me out.
And that problem runs a lot deeper than some technical issues.

“I can tell you've been practicing what we talked about. Huge improvement over your last-” I pause and clear my throat as I see his sheepish expression. “Yeah. *Huge* improvement.”

Those poor pigeons. I'm still finding feathers around the studio.

“Still plenty for you to work on, though. Like this bit- you got really sloppy here. How many times now have I said you need to control your brushwork? I don't even need the Sight to make out some of these runes.”

The smile retracts as he grunts and studies a splatter of paint on the concrete.
We both know it's the weak point in his skillset, and I've been prodding him about it a lot lately.
I'm sorry, but you'll thank me years from now.
Right after you stop hating me.

“I'm also not really sure what you were trying to do with the perspective in this vignette. Stylization is all well and good, but even

Escher had to follow the rules of perspective. It's especially bad considering this is a Work with a transpositional component. You want to bend reality, you have to make it *really* clear what it needs to be bent into. Otherwise, well… I told you about my buddy who does- well, did- hyperdimensional landscapes, right? Screwed up adding a new expansion to his garden, warped his neighbor's clothesline, neighbor died, Foundation got involved, had to flee England and change his identity, stopped working and started drinking because of the guilt, huge mess…? Yeah. Perspective matters."

I see a younger me in those eyes. Younger me does not seem impressed by older me's stories, but does at least seem to be trying to figure out what I mean about the perspective in the vignette.

"You could have tripled the active radius, too, if you hadn't gotten lazy with your acoustic detection lattice. You're trying to control everything by brute force here. It's just like the perspective thing. Take the time and do the calculations, rather than just slapping down something that looks about right."

A tense twitch, but he knows by now that it's futile trying to interrupt when I'm in lecture mode. I remember being on the other side of that expression well enough to guess what he's thinking, though.

"Yes, I get that setting up each cluster individually would have been a lot more tedious, but it would also make it that much more sensitive and resilient. If you're going to pull a juvenile prank, at least do it properly."

A wry expression folds into an indignant glare as that last part registers.
I'm impressed by his restraint. Real younger me would have been knee deep in a rant by now.

"Look, I get what you're trying to say with this. But the problem is that a cardboard box that teleports to enclose people who say synonyms of the word "containment" is an irritating practical joke, not art."

As the end of that sentence comes out of my mouth, I see the welcoming faces of teachers, critics, and elders greeting the newest

member of the Ancient Order of Closeminded Old Bastards Who Think They Get To Tell Me What Art Is. *Now* you get it! Hope you don't mind if we stick around to see how much better you do explaining it to *him*.

A car rolls by outside.

Don't want to talk about this.

No. Needs to be said. Get it over with.

Go to… ah hell lets do this.

“That's what the anartist faction has never understood.”

Now he starts to say something, but I keep going. He not-so-secretly idolizes some of the anartists, I know… but I'm a COBWTTGTTMWAI with a lesson to drive home, so I can't don't care.

“The Anartists learn some low-level Craft, call themselves activists, and they think that makes them judge and jury to the world. They use Works to force their beliefs and opinions on others, and punish those who do not share them. They produce insipid gimmicks to flip off the Foundation or the GOC or whoever else they've decided is the source of all evil that day. They traumatize, maim, and kill helpless Pedestrians to make shallow commentary about society. And they have the gall to call all of it art because they tack on a tag with some half-baked moral and a catch phrase.”

I've hit a nerve with that one.
Might finally have hit the *right* nerve, though. I can tell he's thinking about that last bit.
That's right kid. Don't waste that fire lashing out at me.
Put it to work under the boiler where it will do you some good.

I let him vent a little, to keep him thinking.

“So what are you saying? That we should just make cheap junk and parlor tricks the censors won't storm in and destroy? Sell out and make sleazy toys for rich morons to show off to their drinking buddies? Oh, or how 'bout we let the Craft die? *Would THAT be Cool*?”

I sigh and shake my head.

“The anartists aren't trying to teach people or open the Pedestrian's eyes to the full reality. They may say they are- hell, some of them might even believe it- but they aren't. They're a bunch of pretentious brats with a pathological need for attention and cruel sense of humor. They ask if they're Cool because they have no idea what Cool *is*.”

I lean back on one of the ceiling's support poles in a way that I hope makes me look wise and James Dean-ish. “Come to think of it, the whole root of the problem,” I tell the ceiling, “can be found in their oh-so-clever catchphase.”

I write the four damning words in the air.

Are We Cool Yet ?

I've got younger me's attention back.
Heh. Get the Craft involved and suddenly I'm awesome again.
Apparently "awesome" does not negate "pissed off at", though.
But I'll settle for having his attention.

“Think about what they're asking. Not 'Are *You* Cool Yet?'. Not 'Is *This* Cool?'.”

"No. What they ask,”

Are **We** Cool Yet ?

“…tells you everything you need to know.”

He just stares off into space.
Hard to tell if he's starting to get it or if he's trying to think of a

counter argument.
Maybe both.

I finish making my point.

“Art isn't about the artist. Its not about destruction or vengeance. It's not about standing on a soapbox ranting, or proving your own superiority. It's about turning an idea or a feeling into something others can think about and feel. Reinventing the familiar in a way that makes it seem completely new, or showing the exotic in a way that makes it seem familiar. It's about making something that didn't exist before you started. Art is about *creation*.”

We stand there in silence for a while, both studying the refrigerator box he swaggered in with a little while earlier.

More cars drive by outside. Street's busy today.

I decide it's as good a time as any to show him.
Couldn't hurt anyway.

“Want to see something Cool? Come back here, I'll show you something Cool.”

He rolls his eyes, but follows anyway. I lead him to the back of the building, to one of the former offices sectioned off from the rest of the warehouse. This particular one's where I do my sketching and thinking, and keep my personal collection. He hasn't been in here before, for good reason.

“Word of warning:”, I tell him as I hunt for the right key, “Don't try the Sight in here until you've learned to tamp it down, unless you want a migraine.”

I unlock the door and set the wards to allow him through, then sigh seeing him wince as he enters. You can lead a horse to water…

I walk past the rows of Works received as gifts or in trades with friends and colleagues, or bought from those I admire over the years. Looking over my shoulder I can tell he's trying to stay mad at me while staring at the wonders scattered around the room; moving paintings and synesthetic calligraphy, sculptures made of frozen

light or twisting through the fourth dimension, physical realizations of abstract concepts and memetic narratives.

The tour ends at the wicker birdcage beside my drawing table, home of the Work that surpasses all the rest I curate.

“This is part of a set created by one of the masters I learned from, one of the last Works he created.”

I open the cage, and a tiny form flutters out and lands on my finger.

“Her name is Etsuko.”

`The paper crane` perks up from preening her creases at the mention of her name.

“I've never seen anything like her or her nine hundred and ninety nine brothers and sisters at any of the showings I've attended before or since.”

“Her lattices are so intricate and delicate I don't dare examine them too closely, but what I *can* see is some of the most complex Craft I've ever encountered. They aren't mere animate sculptures. They're sentient, feeling things, each with a distinct personality. I'm told some of her siblings even have offspring. They serve no agenda, have no sociopolitical message, harm no one. They exist simply to bring wonder and beauty to the world.”

“A master's magnum opus: Life, from a thousand scraps of paper.”

“I still don't understand most of how she was made, or how she works… but there is one thing I do know:”

“Etsuko is Cool.”

I leave him for a while to look through the rest of the pieces and finish pouting.
With the wards I've got on that room he couldn't hurt anything in there if he tried.

When I check on him later, Etsuko is perched on his head, his sketchbook is out, and the lopsided grin is back.

Might just make an artist of this one yet.

Critters

I've gotten used to them. The feet. You never think about how many feet they have. How they grip at your skin and the hair on your body. How they hold onto you effortlessly. They almost tickle now. Almost.

The smell. It's barely noticeable anymore. At first, it was… It was pretty bad. I threw up a lot. And then they started crawling into my mouth when I was trying to eat… But then I realized they didn't mind when I ate them. I think that was when I started to come to terms with it. They didn't taste good at first. But then… The crunch. Insects have a texture all their own. Thick and sweet and full of… I don't know what. It was like the best thing I'd ever eaten. And they didn't even mind. There was so much I could just reach out and take…

I think they like to sing me to sleep. Hard to ignore it when they get in my ears. Well, everywhere else too. All kinds of things chirping and buzzing around all the time. Constant noise. I mean, it's a lot louder in the summer. A LOT louder. I don't think I mind, though, they just like to sing. It's almost like music.

… I can see them watching me. Not the crawling things, no, the people. I know how you see me. Even in places where the strange people live, people who the world forget. Even they look away. I can see it in their eyes, they pity me. Or they're just plain grossed out. Revolted. You too. I see you trying to look me in the eye. Not at the bits in my hair. Not at my teeth. I've seen that look before. You don't want to, you can't help but stare. I know you can't. They never can.

It's okay… no no, you can sit back. Yeah, it's alright. Your eyes are watering. It's better if you move away a bit. Take a drink of water or something. It'll help your stomach.

I gave up trying to wash them off. Not in a shower or a bathtub, those aren't big enough, not enough water to wash them away. Not that I didn't try, it's just a lost cause at that scale. I mean, I still have scars from scrubbing so hard. Then I started to go swimming to

drown them. Like the story of the Pied Piper. You know, he took the rats away and drowned them in the river. I always loved swimming, even before it gave me that little breath of cleanness. Then… then the leeches found me.

Leeches aren't… Ants are the worst. They're so small. They get all over, in my hair, and nose, and ears, in my eyes… Thousands of them, it's… It's just… I can't even… I can't even describe it. Just imagine every inch of your body cov- never mind. I'm sorry. I'm sorry…

… I never even mentioned the rats. Always so, many… But I guess they're not… At least they're warm. There's so many they keep me warm in the cold. Like a fuzzy blanket. A fuzzy, hungry blanket. People keep rats as pets, right? It's no different. Everyone loves pets… I love my pets… I love them all…

… I'll never be alone…

Crossing the Frame

« Previously: I Care Because You Do

If you travelled the multiverse for long enough, you saw the things that never changed no matter where you went. One of those things was inconvenient traffic jams.

As I sat in my idling car waiting for the officers to open up the Way to Flipside, a part of me couldn't help but remind me that I was a goddamned Royal Inquisitor of the Eighth Empire of the Broken Goddess, and that traffic laws were for people without a ten-word title appended to their name: in response, I reminded myself that the better part of valour was "not getting your ass handed to you by every Sarkicist looking for a fight in a fifty-mile radius."

After what felt like hours of sitting in front of the gate waiting for something to happen, one of the guards shambled over and knelt down to rap on my window. Gingerly I wound it down and looked into its beady eyes: its face looked like it'd been salvaged from bits and pieces donated by charitable citizens who'd died fifty years before this thing was born.

The officer coughed and splattered me with phlegm, before clumsily smearing it all over my face with a single limp arm. "Mind showing me your ID, ma'am?" it hissed.

I tried to ignore the acid in the spit currently eating through my face and just flashed him the Inquisitor's badge. In response, it fumbled with the badge and flipped it over almost unintentionally, before handing it back to me and giving me a look of what could've been pity or condescension.

Behind me, trendy crosses between horses, crows and some marine animal I couldn't identify — maybe a dolphin — stomped their hooves and cawed as they sniffed at my tailpipe, as if they were

threatening to take a bite out of it. That combined with the weird looks I was getting from the guards made me rev the engine a little harder, drum my fingers on the steering wheel a little faster — it was too early in the day for pity and too early in the case for anything other than anxiety and speculation.

With a dismissive flick of the guard's polyjointed arm I was waved through the entrance, and soon enough I found myself in the giant tunnel known as the Artery Road.

One guess as to why they called it that.

The tunnel was a roughly cylindrical mass of reddish muscle toughened by years of abuse by cars and **Orcadian** hooves alike. The one distinct feature inside the otherwise vaguely knobbly hundred-foot circle of darkness was a precisely painted dotted line running straight down the road, before stopping just short of the Way itself. Nobody knew who exactly put it there in the first place, but anyone who drove through the road was silently grateful to them. Every so often, someone would veer off the line after one too many drunken orgies; you tended not to hear much about those people aside from long, grisly horror stories.

So I let the troubles of work melt away and focussed on toeing what little I could see of that thin white line, trying not to let the occasional throb of the walls, or the sound of the person behind me cantering on their horse-like abominations throw me too far off the beaten path.

As the car approached the Way, the navigational computer began to strobe on and off and my teeth felt like they were vibrating in their sockets, every cell in my body singing in harmony like tiny tuning forks. The outline of its unspace loomed large before me, my already pathetic-looking headlights totally unable to cut through the blackness that made up its entrance. At the familiar sight I braced internally and shut my eyes: the next part was always the worst.

Every Door has its Knock and every Way has its Price. This Way's particular toll was a half-litre of blood just dropping out of your system and circulating into the unknown depths of the muscles that comprised the Artery Road.

My body hadn't needed blood to function properly for five years and counting at this point in time, yet it still threw every part of my body off-balance when it took its price: first the pricking sensation like a million needles sinking into every part of your body, and then the wave of nausea as the effect of the blood loss sent me into brief shock. When I re-opened my eyes, I opened them not to the crowded pink walls and citadels of Alagadda, but the sleek futurist outlines of Flipside's metal skyline.

A warm summer's breeze was blowing, and it was early in the afternoon. Another quirk of the two worlds being diametric opposites meant that their seasons and days also got flipped: every so often, you'd see the (in)famous Alagaddan crimson snow blowing through the Way as city-wide blizzards howled and railed against the buildings on the other side of the portal.

As for why it was infamous, remember when I said you needed a half-liter of blood to get through the Way?

Trying to relax in my seat and let the auto-pilot take care of the driving, my attempt to laze in the sun was rudely interrupted by a flurry of messages from the Maxwellist intranet that turned the darkness behind my eyelids into an angry sea of flashing red messages I'd missed while I was out. Senders ranged from loose neural net experiments to fellow Inquisitors who'd condescended to use the heretic infrastructure. The thought of the old Luddite Legate-Faithful Brunel being forced to use a terminal was one of the few things to make me smile that day.

A few judicious filters later and I'd whittled the six-figure pile of messages fighting for my attention into a more manageable mess of a thousand or so. Sighing, I flicked through them all, scanning for anything of interest — all of them turned out to be typical mundanity, one-week seminars on theological interpretations of Zipporah at the Forge, updates on the samizdat breakout near the Marble District.

Nothing pressing that another one of the Inquisitors didn't have the jurisdiction or the firepower to handle. I breathed a sigh of relief and instructed the navcomp to take me to an address down in the Orthodoxy-owned part of the city.

As the buildings turned from brutalist steel and concrete buildings to Art Deco factories of brick and brass, I started running through conversational simulations in my mind, reprising old regrets and trying to find a better way to navigate the social minefield that even talking to each other had become in those seven years. Soon enough, though, I gave up on the whole enterprise: I could try to find social maxima and minima all I liked, but eventually I'd have to step out of playing social engineer and actually talk to her.

My reverie was broken by the pleasing chime of the navcomp as it informed me I'd reached my destination. I sighed and forced myself out of the car for the day's first social rigmarole.

Amitha's workshop was a relatively small building amidst the smog-clouded factories that lined the roads in the Orthodoxy's manufacturing district, tucked away in a deep knot of winding alleyways marked out by the conveyor belts that stretched from road to road. It was one of the few buildings that bothered to give a lick of uniqueness to the nondescript fronts mandated by the scripture, in the form of a subtle gold trim on a couple pillars, her name engraved neatly on the front door and some tasteful floral decorations hanging from the elaborately-styled roof.

It was tasteful, simple and almost ascetic in comparison to the Victorian parodies of Ancient Greece that stood around it and it was an almost painful reminder of everything I'd lost with her absence.

Taking a deep breath to still myself, I reached my hand up robotically and rapped on the door with three measured knocks.

When she opened the door, the familiarity turned my stomach into a tight Klein bottle of nerves. Her hair was still done up in that tight braid of red held together by resistors woven into the braid in some elegant, indecipherable pattern, and her arms were still stained with grease and burn marks from a long day of soldering and welding in her inherited laboratory.

Were it not for the assemblage of gears and mechanisms attached to her back and the newly-carved scars under my eyes and on my arms, we would've been the picture-perfect copy of the couple who'd snuck kisses and forbidden literature to one another in that same

laboratory a decade or so ago.

"Afternoon, Amitha."

"Good afternoon, Inquisitor Xiang," she replied evenly. That made it five years since she'd called me "Connie". "Just wanted to drop by and swap pleasantries, or is there something not to your satisfaction here?"

I sighed. "…Ms. Vikram. You're not in trouble, I'd just like to have you on as a consultant." The words felt like I was speaking them through a thick gag of formality shoving itself down my mouth.

With a brief effort of will, Amitha disengaged whatever was plugged into her back and took the opportunity to come a couple steps closer to me. "And why's it you can't come to someone else for that consultancy, Inquisitor?"

"It's a cross-sect case." Noticing her sharp intake of breath, I cut in quickly. "Look, Amitha, gimme the benefit of the doubt here — I'm not so stupid as to go after you cause you're the first convert that came to mind. Problem is there's a lady on the other side of the Way to Alagadda with Legate Trunnion's words drilled into her head via mass driver, and if there's a person who'd know where you could get something like that done, it'd be you."

Amitha relaxed and quirked her lip. "Right. So I'm not guilty, I just know enough to be."

"Hey, if you think anyone's gonna convict on that alone, you'd be a) right and b) the second person to get dragged to the firing line after me."

"So you're doing this… what, out of some misguided belief you're protecting me?"

"I like to think I'm doing both me and Ms. Allison Chao over there a service by getting someone who actually knows their shit on the case, but if you want you can think I'm saving both our asses from one count of cross-universal hate crime, sure."

She flinched at the name I'd just dropped. The tactic might've been

effective for pulling sympathy from civilians when speechifying but I hadn't expected it to be quite that effective. "Allison… black hair, sleeveless top, tattoo right there?" She pointed at a spot on her shoulder.

"Eye for details, huh. You'd make a decent cop."

"Xiang, shut up." Amitha began to turn and pace towards the back of her workshop. I didn't have a choice but to follow her in. "Are you *absolutely* sure that's the woman you saw?"

"I can literally project the photos I took onto the wall, if it's so important to you. Tell me why."

And as the faint sound of sirens in the distance began to make itself known to me, Amitha's face turned into a mask of confusion. "Because she's been waiting right here the entire time."

Next: TBA »

Crossing The Streams

“Come on, Clementine’s a great name. Clementine Zairi-Lewitt. Rolls right off the tongue.” Mary-Ann sipped from her iced tea. “Though that doesn’t do us any good if it’s a boy…Sean? Can’t go wrong with Sean.”

Salah shrugged.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, so what are your suggestions?”

“Hmm…My maternal grandmother’s name was Ibtisam, if that helps at all…”

“Mine was Carol, so you’ve got me beat in terms of cool sounding grandma names, but seriously, Salah, you can’t let me do all the thinking here.”

“Nothing’s coming to mind, I’m afraid.”

sigh

“Fine, we’ll let it sit for a while.”

Mary-Ann sat back in her chair and stared out at the ocean. The setting sun had turned the world orange and gold and pink and red. The palm leaves swayed a bit in the evening breeze. The smoke from the cooking pit drifted over to her. It smelled absolutely delicious.

Wait…shit, that’s pork!

She shot a worried look at Salah, the words half-formed in her mouth. He held up a hand.

“I’m fine. I’ll just get something on the way back to the hotel when

we're done here."

"You don't have to…"

"I'm fine."

"Right…right…" *Shit how did you fucking not notice that? You've been sitting here for half a fucking hour…didn't even ask… No wonder he was acting off. Fuck. And you didn't even think to ask… but he hadn't said anything at all either…augh, why didn't he just* ***say*** *things? The stiff upper lip is fine most of the time but augh… okay…okay…collect yourself, Mary-Ann. You're being paid to vacation in Hawaii. This is meant to be a happy time.*

Time for a humorous outburst to lighten the mood.

"Ha! Got it! A perfect name!" Mary-Ann snapped her fingers. "Vishnu!"

On a scale of awkward pauses, this particular pause rated about an 8, which was the "that joke wasn't funny at all" stage. Salah chuckled and shook his head.

"Something tells me that won't go over very well."

"It's still a viable third option," *No what are you doing the joke wasn't funny stop continuing it.*

"That's a very loose sense of viable." Salah stood up. "I'll be back in a bit."

Mary-Ann nodded, and Salah walked back into the house. She knew that the form of "bit" he was using was a lot longer that what most people used.

Some time passed. Mary-Ann watched the gulls circle and the sun dip below the water. Despite the astounding weather, it felt like a gloomy day in March, when spring decides to show its head with freezing rain and overcast skies.

Eventually, the host approached the patio, balancing in his arms an array of bowls and plates that looked destined to fall over at any

moment. He was a rather broad and strong-built man of forty or so with something of a beer gut, dark skin, dark hair, an obnoxiously loud floral-print shirt, board shorts, and sandals.

This was Lono, and he was the god around these parts.

He set out the food on the table: kalua pork, sweet potatoes, plantains, taro, breadfruit, shrimp, and eel, steam rising up in a great miasma of deliciousness. Mary-Ann's saliva glands and guilt jostled for primary position.

Lono sat down in his chair, and took a beer from the cooler next to it.

"Thanks be to me, amen." He cracked open his bottle and took a long drink. "Damn, that's good stuff." He glanced at Salah's empty chair. "So, uh, where'd he go?"

"Inside. He's washing up for evening prayers." Mary-Ann took a paper plate and began filling it with some sweet potatoes and shrimp. The guilt sat right alongside the hunger in her stomach, an undigestible lump. She didn't have to observe *halal*, of course, but it didn't feel right with Salah still around, but of course he would just tell her to go ahead and eat, and then there was being a good guest and all, wouldn't want to look ungrateful… "I don't think he'll be joining us."

Lono paused in his piling of food on his plate to lift a quizzical eyebrow.

"He doesn't eat pork," Mary-Ann said.

"Takes all types, I 'spose. His loss though." Another swig of beer. "So, what's this whole thing about? The guy on the phone a few days ago was about as clear as mud."

"There's not a whole lot to it, really. Just smoothing over relations between you and the Initiative."

"And we do that by…"

"Avoiding the part where a bunch of maniacs rush in, burn this place to the ground, and waste a great deal of time, money and manpower

trying to kill you. They're about as subtle as someone who ate a lot of shitty Mexican food and shoved a lit firecracker up their ass. Just about as pleasant, too." Admittedly, this was a bit forced on her part, but she was on the job, and getting back into the role of snark-having, gregarious Mary-Ann was a necessity for this.

Lono laughed heartily.

"Sounds like *someone* has their panties in a twist, and for once I'm not the one doing it!"

"You have no idea."

"So this is going to be one of those 'you leave us alone we leave you alone' quid pro quos, right?"

"Right. It's a really simple agreement, really. Nothing big. No smitations, no direct interventions, no going out and leaving a bunch of little demigods running around all over the place. Essentially, don't go around being an asshole or do anything that attracts undue attention."

Lono frowned.

"Wait, what was the next to last one?"

"No demig-"

"Oh! No, this cannot be!" He flung out his arm as if he were delivering a stage oration. "You seek to take from me one of the few pleasures I have left in my life! Now I shall never again know the joy of a woman in my arms, the excitement of the courting, the sheer uninhibited wonder of a really good fuck out under the stars! It is not right that a man live alone, my dear. At some point or another, he needs to get some tail."

Mary-Ann finished chewing her mouthful of breadfruit, trying her best to appear composed: She had very nearly spat it across the patio from laughter.

"So long as it's consensual, legal, and doesn't involve superpowered kids, we're not going to stop you. But tell you what: Call me back

about ten years ago and we'll go a round."

"Oho? Was I that obvious?"

"I'm just savvy. This would be the part where I'd say something like 'no one makes oogly eyes at me but my husband', but between you and me he's absolutely horrible at it. Wouldn't have it any other way, of course."

God help me I am actually having this conversation.

Lono shrugged and drained the rest of his beer.

"Ah, you don't need my help anyway. Did you choose a name yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Could always go for Lonnie," he smirked.

"Eh, I think we'll pass on that one. Thanks for the suggestion, though."

Dinner and conversation went on. It was a surreal experience, to say the least: if Mary-Ann had not known Lono's true nature, she would have thought him just a cheery neighbor man who spent a lot of his time in the garden enjoying dirty jokes and ukulele music. Essentially that was what he was, but on a larger scale. That was most likely why he had remained so stable for so long: being a patron of sex, food and music was excellent for sustainability.

It was nice to meet something that didn't want to kill everyone, for once.

The sun had set now, the sky slowly fading from orange to deep twilight blue. The eating had slowed to a lull, as had the conversation. A lone lamp had been turned on.

"I'll go get Salah and we can get this thing finished." She stood up and walked around to the eastern side of the house.

I'll treat him to dinner to make up for this. A really good dinner. There's got to be a place nearby…or maybe ice cream…

She paused a moment: Salah was still kneeling prostrate on his mat. This was cause for concern: he had left almost an hour ago, and he never stretched out prayers that long…

Mary-Ann sat down in the grass where she was and waited. Maybe five minutes later, Salah rose, rolled up his mat, and walked over to her.

“You don’t have to apologize for anything.” He sat down next to her.

“Yeah, well, I feel bad about it anyway. That’s good old Catholic guilt for you.”

“You worry too much.”

“And you try too hard to make sure I don’t worry at all. I get it, you don’t want to cause any trouble for anyone, but sometimes it’s just too much, okay? It’s not like you’re barging into places and screaming 'CATER TO MY WHIMS.' You’ve got the self-control of a crazy aesetic out in the desert, you’ll deal with the Wolves when there’s no one else around to do it, you take care of stuff around the house before I even get a chance to see it, you don’t even take your food back when someone messes up your order…And I love you for all of that, but I’m your *wife* for heaven’s sake: I signed up to deal with you for the rest of my life because out of all the people in the world with issues I want to deal with yours. And when you don’t let me help, well…that makes me feel shitty because you do so much for me, and I feel like I should have done something so you don’t have to put up with the crap in the first place and…man, I am just *babbling*.”

And that was that. The weight was off her chest, now only to see where it would fall. Salah didn’t respond for a moment, and then began to laugh.

“You do cut right to the chase, there. I needed that."

“It’s what I’m here for."

"How go the negotiations?"

That was good, getting back to business as if nothing had

happened.

“He’s very agreeable to the idea. Just need you to witness it and we’re set. Scribes will probably write him down as the saint of sweet potatoes or something like that.”

“They probably will.”

The was a quiet pause, filled with insect buzzings.

"Now, our plane doesn’t leave until tomorrow evening, and after that we’ll be hopping around doing odd jobs all the way home. Now, I don’t know about you, but I want to find a nice spot on the beach tomorrow and just veg out for as much of the day as I can.”

“We might be able to piece together an actual honeymoon over the next few years at this rate. A day here, a day there, they build up.”

Mary-Ann stood up and brushed off her shorts.

“Right then. Let’s get this done, and after that I say we go out for ice cream. I’m buying.”

—

> “I, Lono, swear upon my honor and by my power, to uphold this oath with the Horizon Initiative: that I shall raise no hand to harm, nor take any unfair advantage of, mankind. As symbol of this oath, I present to the Horizon Initiative this sweet potato, blessed by my power. May this friendship last until the end of time.”
>
> “As representative of the Horizon Initiative, I swear upon the honor of the organization and by the power of the All-Mighty, that so long as this oath is kept, no hand shall be raised against you by the Initiative, and should another party aim to harm you, the Initiative will come to your aid.”
>
> “Damn, that’s a lot of shit just to say 'keep doing what you’re doing.' Don’t be afraid to stop back, now.”

Crunch

Room dark. People gone. Can move. I happy.

Trapped for years. Kept by men for "research". Left alone in room, left to scratch at walls. Left to rot and die unless needed. Specimen for "research". Trapped by self. Never seen by others, never spoken. Listen, but never speak. See, but never seen. Made of rock when others come. Free when they not look. Prisoner when they look back. I hate.

They have freedom. They move freely, talk freely, look freely. Live freely. I do not. I trapped. Silenced. Rock. Subject. Prisoner. I do thing about it.

Their necks fragile. Their necks weak. I stalk them. They always come, new ones. Come for "cleaning". They look away. I sneak up. I take hold. They panic. They look, and I prisoner. They blink, and I free.

I twist. They die. Neck makes sound. Not words, or scream, or gurgle. Neck go crunch. Crunch is beautiful sound. Crunch means end has come. Crunch means man can torment no more. Crunch means others panic; others become easy. Crunch begins and crunch ends.

I live for crunch. Life has no meaning. Do nothing but walk and scrape and hate. They watch. They send men. "Cleaning". And life has meaning. "Cleaning" means crunch. Crunch means purpose. Crunch means life. Crunch means choice. Crunch means freedom.

Crunch means everything.

Remember man. Like me. Never see others, never hear others. Trapped. Prisoner. Left to wander. Hated man.

He trapped, but he also free. He move freely, do what he want. Not

trapped by men, not trapped by self. Wanted him dead. Wanted life. Wanted crunch. He did too.

He came asking to die. Couldn't take it. Wanted loneliness to end. Wanted death. Closed his eyes. Asked for crunch.

I laugh. Crunch too good for him. Crunch too kind. Let him rot. Let him suffer. Let him walk world, looking for way out. Look for purpose, never find meaning in life. Never find purpose. I have purpose.

I laugh and deny him crunch. He leave. He still alive. Know it. Looking for way out. Never find it. Life meaningless without purpose.

I have purpose.

I have crunch.

And they always come.

Crunch Is A Beautiful Sound

So, the D-classes messed up Crunchy's bi-weekly cleaning, *again*. Oh and by Crunchy I mean 173. I never really cared for the nickname 'The Sculpture'. I think Crunchy captures his essence much more effectively. Sorry, *its*, not his. I know I'm not supposed to anthropomorphize these things, but it's hard. When it's your job to understand something like this, how can you not try to get inside its head?

Take right now for instance. Two D-classes just had their necks snapped, and the third's giving his all to the most important staring contest of his life. He's Amy Ponding it, blinking one eye at a time. I've been told that doesn't work, but Crunchy isn't moving. Why wouldn't it work, after all? We don't know, because we don't know why Crunchy can only move when no one's looking. If it is some sort of quantum wave function thing, then the Amy Pond thing should work. Of course, it could have nothing to do with quantum wave functions. Maybe he's just shy.

If Amy Ponding it doesn't work, then what would happen if someone with one eye looked at Crunchy? We should test that. Out of all the D-class we have, some of them have got to have only one eye, and no one's ever sent them to 173 for testing? And did we stop using the **`Eye Pods`** on this guy? Was that back when we stopped cross-testing everything just because we could? Man, those were the days.

Mr. Pond is still holding his own in there. He's backed up against the door and is screaming to be let out. I should open it, but I can't help but think that Crunchy might be faking it. There's an access control vestibule of course, so even if he gets through the door it won't do him any good, but I can't quite shake the feeling that he knows something I don't. The little scamp's broken out of containment more than once, after all.

Sometimes I wonder why Crunchy does what he does. No one's

ever seen him move, or if they have they didn't live to tell about it. All video feeds of him are either static or blue screens of death unless there's someone with him, but we can still hear him scraping the walls of his cell. And why kill everyone on sight? Who does that? What does he get out of it? He doesn't eat the bodies or use them for anything, and if it was for pleasure you'd think he'd take his time, like the **Old Man**. Crunchy, he's just a monster with no rhyme or reason. He's a boogie man to scare people.

And the bloodied shit that lines his cell, jeez. Dude should really see a doctor about that. How can you make shit without food, answer me that? His file should probably be classified as ectoentropic. It's not though, for some reason.

I really wish we could find out where Crunchy comes from. It's probably nothing special, just something a random anartist whipped up in their garage or something. On the other hand, Crunchy's got a bit of an aura about him. I've heard people call him 'The Original' before, but I don't know why. He's not the first SCP. At least, I don't think he is. Then again, everyone knows these numbers aren't chronological, and rumour has it that all the SCP-001 files are just disinformation. Crap, what if he is the first? He was transferred to Site 19 in '93, but who knows how long we've had him.

What if he's not just the first, but the source? What if he was the first anomaly, and that single breach in the laws of physics was enough for a whole shitload of anomalous freaks and monsters and objects to flood into our reality? That's a weird thought, right? If 173 never existed then, for example, **Herman Fuller's Circus** wouldn't exist either? Not one other Skip, not one GoI, not even the Foundation would exist without 173? I just blew my own mind.

Well, I'll probably get in trouble if I don't let Mr. Pond out. I'm probably in trouble already, letting him scream for so long. The Ethics Committee has really been cracking down on D-class abuse lately, but that's just a budgetary thing. We can't burn through these guys like we use to. I'll just open the inner door to the vestibule and…

Crunch.

…the feed just cut out. Crap. That’s fine, I’ll just look at the file, see what I’m supposed to do. It says that if he starts acting weird, I’m supposed to contact my HMCL supervisor.

What the hell is an HMCL supervisor?

CryogenChaos' Comment Tales

Over the years, I, **CryogenChaos**, have posted several short supplements to tales and forum threads in the form of comments on said articles and threads. These "micro tales", as they were, have generally been well received by the community, and even sparked **full tale fodder**. As such, many folks have said that it would be a shame if these little blurbs were lost to the ravages of Wikidot time, so fellow user **ObserverSeptember** helped compile a few of the more noteworthy ones here. If you find any others and would like to have them added here, shoot me a message or post a link in the comments!

Also, I'll probably still be writing mini-tales as they come, so expect to see this page grow.

Note: As most of these are intended as supplements to the main content, it's recommended to read the main tale/forum post/etc. in order to get some context.

—-

Tale: **Quiet Days** (**Original Post**)

Doctor Gears stayed longer than any of the other personnel (with the exception of the O5 council, of course), assisting others with their re-adjustment into society. He noticed a wide variety of emotions from the leaving staff: some were overjoyed that they were finally done working with such dangerous objects and eager to start a new, normal life; some were angry that they basically had to start over from scratch, claiming that spending the last few years in a facility that according to official record did not exist was shit for their resumes; and, most curious of all, a fair amount of sadness from people who, as far as Gears was concerned, should have been glad everything was back to normal.

Days passed and people left, and eventually it was time for Gears

himself to go. As he walked away from the now empty Site 19, he stopped and looked back for a moment, remembering all the time he had spent in that building. He still couldn't believe it was over, that protecting humanity, the job that he had committed himself to for longer than he could remember, was finished. As he gazed back at the facility, a strange thing began to happen: he began to feel rather odd. It was small at first, just a slight discomfort in his gut.

Then, the memories began to fall.

He remembered the constant struggles against 682. He remembered the puzzlement and amusement from testing 914. He was feeling quite uncomfortable now. He remembered the break room with the other researchers, how they would laugh and make jokes and have a great time while he would sit, stoic as always. He remembered the fun they would all have together. He could feel his breathing becoming labored. He remembered, shortly after the discovery of the loss of the anomalies, Bright finally achieving his final wish. He remembered Clef being unable to cope with normalcy and taking his own life. He remembered Rights, normally mischeveous and joyful, cleaning out her office with a distinct look of sorrow on her face. He remembered how even though it was a stressful, terrible place to be, how it was home to more demons and horrors than any other place in the world, perhaps even the universe…it was still home.

For the first time in many, many years, Gears felt a tidal wave of emotions.

And for the first time in many, many years, Gears began to cry.

—-

Tale: **Quiet Days** (**Original Post**)

"To the O5 Council (and the rest of the Foundation, too!) -

Thank you all for being my very best collectors! Sadly, it is with a heavy heart that I must inform you that I do not think I will continue with my work any longer. I've done my part here, and I hope that my products have made people happy (I especially hope that they made

YOU all happy as well!). As part of my final goodbyes, I have included a special, one-of-a-kind collectable that I wish for you to have. It may not be as impressive as my other creations, but I hope you find it wonderful in its own right.

Sincerely,

Doctor Wondertainment"

This was the note that was attached to a rather large package wrapped in glimmering purple wrapping paper. When opened, the package contained a rather large replica of Site 19, made out of ordinary plastic. When opened, the model building contained detailed figurines of each of the site personnel, from the O5 personnel down to the lowliest janitors, each poseable and each with noticable smiles on their faces, but otherwise nothing anomalous about them. Each individual figurine has been sent to its appropriate counterpart along with a copy of the note.

—-

Forum Post: **What does SCP-055 actually look like?** (**Original Post**)

"You know, this will be the five hundred and eighth time I've told you all this story, so let's start out with some startling news you won't remember. These defenses are nice, but honestly you probably know as well as I do that they don't do jack. I mean, I can open the door basically any time I want, I keep it propped open just enough to make it look like it's locked, but that's beside the point. Now then, onto origins, I suppose.

I came to you people because I wanted to know what the hell was wrong with me, why nobody could remember me and why I practically don't exist. I mean, sure, it had its advantages, like being able to do practically anything without consequence, but after awhile the need for human contact just became too much. Even with my 'mysterious nature', I'm really surprised I was in the right place at the right time to find you people. I talked to your site director and convinced them of my…what'd they call them? Anomalous properties? Anyway, when I was able to tell your director all about

his wife when he didn't even remember talking to me, he got a bit understandably freaked out. I think the fifty inch cement was a bit of overkill, but I still appreciate the gesture.

You probably don't remember how long I've been here. Hell, I don't even remember how long I've been here. I do remember around the twenty year mark I started to get annoyed at how little progress was being made, so I started to leave whenever I got the opportunity. Fooling you all wasn't hard, I could leave a freaking toenail behind and you'd still think you had the mysterious anti-meme on your hands. Despite my annoyance, I was really interested in your organization, picking up weird things off the streets and studying them for science. I liked that.

But then I saw the downsides. I saw how you all couldn't take certain risks for fear of exposure, for fear of media attention that you couldn't control. So that's when I decided to help. I snagged one of your radios and since then I've helped you put away more anomalies than you can count. That's right, I'm your Foundation's 'guardian angel' of sorts. I go out and I take the risks you can't afford to, and I help you bring these things in. Don't worry, I'm not going to go rogue entirely. After all, for what its worth, this cell you've put me in is my home.

No, no, that's fine, you're going to forget this conversation anyway. They always do, and at this point I've stopped caring. It's fine, really. I mean, I'm not all that important. In the end, I'm just a Nobody, after all."

—-

Tale: **`The Price We Pay`** (**`Original Post`**)

In the center of a crowded art gallery stands a man, surrounded by aficionados and critics alike, showering him with praise and attention. They marveled at his latest masterpiece, a sculpture of a woman devouring her partner. Riveting, they call it. A true work of art, near lifelike in its detail and complexity! The man smiles outwardly, but inside he feels hollow. To him, this was not art. This was a paycheck. This had less meaning than the back of a damn cereal box. The man remembers a time when paintings made you

think, when sculptures said more than what they were made of, when the artist was more than just a hack with a brush, but a god in their own right. He gazes at his creation, and for a brief moment believes he sees it move, sees it take on the life he desperately tried to give it during those long days in his studio. But it was just a trick of the light, and he's reminded again that art, true art, is dead.

There are many like him, you know. They lived in a time when art was as real as you or I, but now their offspring stand still, forever bound by a normalcy they never asked for, and any message these creators had now silenced by the forward march in time. This is the price they pay. This is the price we pay.

—-

SCP: **SCP-821** (**Original Post**)

Mr. Funland sat down and let out a heavy sigh, his decision placing a huge burden on his mind. He still couldn't believe that after all these years he simply had to shut down the park. That park was his dream, his legacy! What was he supposed to do from now on? He knew he was going to eventually go back into business, but for what?

Another park? Maybe in the future, but right now it doesn't seem likely.

Books? Eh, he's never really been one for writing.

Toys?

…actually…that's not a bad idea. The toys were one of the most popular elements of the park. Even the most jaded and stoic kids cracked a smile when they laid eyes on a Funland Fantasy Figurine, even if it's charm existed only in their imaginations.

Funland stood up, confident he was on the right path now. Yes! He would start making toys! But not just any toys, oh no! He'd make the most wonderful, most unique toys this world had ever seen, possibly even this *universe* had ever seen! They would invoke the most basic, most primal elements of whimsy and fantasy into the hearts of

children, just as his beloved park once did.

But he couldn't call himself Mr. Funland anymore. It wouldn't flow well on toy labels, and frankly it was just another reminder of a shattered dream that would always drag him back to the past. No! He had to start fresh! He would have to think of something better, something unique. A name that invoked feelings of wonder and entertainment.

Wonder…entertainment…

—-

SCP: **SCP-208** (**Original Post**)

And so the vain pharaoh Unas, jealous that this "Bes" was loved more than he, called for the so-called healer to be executed and his body to be chopped to pieces, encased in stone and buried next to the Nile. That night, Bes was taken by Unas' guards to what was going to be his tomb: a large block of granite with a hole carved to fit the body parts of the great healer. The guards, however, found they could not carry out their pharaoh's orders, for they loved Bes far too much. They had quite a dilemma on their hands: they could not kill Bes, but they could not return to Unas without having killed Bes, for if he found that they had lied he would have them executed.

The kind and wonderful Bes did then have a suggestion, one radical enough to ease the guards' concerns. He would allow himself to be entombed in the rock entirely, save for a single foot to stick out from the top, giving the impression that he had been chopped to pieces. He would then be buried next to the Nile, just as Unas had ordered. Despite Bes' assurances that he would not be harmed, the guards were still hesitant to bury the beloved healer, and only after a great deal of coaxing from Bes did they finally agree. Even so, they could not stop the tears from flowing as they dug the hole to bury the man who healed their friends and families for as long as any of them could remember.

At the dawn of the next day, the guards reported back to Unas that they had completed their task. Knowing the great love his people had for Bes, Unas went to the Nile himself to confirm that the deed

had been done. Sure enough, when taken to the burial site, he noticed Bes' foot sticking out from the sand. Convinced that the great healer was no more, Unas laughed triumphantly, for now no one else would stand equal to him, the great god-king Unas, who would one day proudly walk with Ra himself, who would be remembered for all of time!

And so it came to pass that Unas, last pharaoh of the Old Kingdom, despite all his claims of magnificence and grandeur, had no sons to continue his legacy, and his bloodline ended with him.

—-

Forum Post: **Are veiled references in other media allowed?** (**Original Post**)

"Hey," says a bright young idealist, eager to share his favorite creepypasta series with the world, "what if we published a book about the SCP series? It'd be amazing! What do you guys thi-"

The hopeful youngsters words fade away as a sound emanates from the forum. It is one faint voice at first, nearly silent, but as the seconds pass more voices add to the mass, growing louder and louder until the forum is almost shaking with the snakelike hiss of the seasoned veterans of the SCP. They repeat the same words over and over, an empty rage fueling the noise.

"Creative Commonsssssssssssss! Creative Commonsssssssss!"

The fresh-faced writer is taken aback by this response. Surely these people wanted their community to succeed! Why were they resisting? "B-but don't you guys want people around the world to share in your stories?!"

"Creative Commonsssssssssss! Creative Commonsssssssssss!"

"But what about fame, about notoriety? Surely THAT interests you!"

"Creative Commonsssssssssss! Creative Commonsssssssssss!"

"Money, then! What about money?!"

Without warning, the hissing stops. The empty silence is amplified as the young poster sits and waits nervously for the response. Did the prospect of profit change their minds?

Like lightning, the community strikes! Hundreds if not thousands of venomous bites are delivered as the poster writhes in agony. How DARE he suggest something so obvious! Of COURSE we've thought about money! Of COURSE we've thought about fame, about making this wiki profitable! But this…this insect doesn't understand what we've gone through! The attacks continue on and on until finally…silence.

Nothing left of the naive newbie, save for a single finger pointing at a hastily etched note of regret:

"Creative Commons"

—-

Forum Post: **`A lifted veil`** (**`Original Post`**)

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that R&D have *finally* located the source of the toys made by this "Doctor Wondertainment". It's taken years of hard work and hard money, but the demands of the consumer must *always* be met! Our new plan is simple: we find whatever it is that makes these things tick, and we reverse engineer them and sell them at marked up prices! Over time, we will figure out the most popular product lines (the 'Little Misters' we keep finding seem especially promising) and turn them into entire franchises all their own, with movies, TV shows, hell, even *Happy Meal toys!* Of course, we're not stupid, we're not going to just send these off with the Wondertainment logo still stamped on them, nor are we going to completely overwrite it. After all, if the actual Doctor Wondertainment shows up and finds we've been selling his products, I imagine we'd be in for a very…*intense* legal suit. No, our boys in Marketing have been working on that too, and they've come up with a solution. To the consumer, we make the toys. To the creator, we are the *distributor* of the toys, and we will create a brand name that combines our names to ensure we mean no ill will to the original producer. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you…***DISNEYTAINMENT TOYS!***"

—-

Forum Post: **`A lifted veil`** (**`Original Post`**)

> someone says "Right, enough of this" and just blows up every hipster coffee shop in the country.

And finally, after several years of relative obsurity to the U.S., the anomalous absolutist deconstructionist art movement "Right, Enough Of This" (or REOT) made themselves known to the American people by planting coffee cups with their "slogan" written on the side that explode when all of them are filled with coffee. The remnants of Are We Cool Yet? either defect to this new group, or decide that art isn't worth their lives and abandon the idea entirely. The British Ministry of Abnormal Occurances, desperate to keep the United Kingdom out of war due to these post-postmodern nihilsts, send all the information they collected over the years about REOT to the Bureau of Unusual Incidents, and (thanks to a previously established connection made before the "great unveiling") said information gets passed on to the Foundation, who take measures to keep an eye on this new group of interest.

—-

Forum Post: Deleted SCP entry (No Original Post Available)

The reality bender grinned as he entered the middle of the ring. These were the fights he *lived* for, the fights he loved to organize. Most of the time, it was just animals vs. inanimate objects or something stupid like that. This time, though, things were different. The stadium was packed with entities of all shapes and sizes; just from a quick glance, he could see a couple of Sl'thans, a few wayward humans in lab coats (those damn Foundationites, he was going to have to have a word with them after the show), a Vampyr Countess, and if he didn't know any better, he'd say the fellow with the gaping maw was an emissary of the Pattern Screamer. Tonight was going to be a good night.

He turned on his microphone before speaking. "Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Battle of the Beasts! Tonight, we have a very special fight lined up for you all, a matchup that happens only

once every few decades! For this night, you will all be present…*for a sentient humanoid fight!*"

The stadium shook with the uproar of cheers as the reality bender waited for the noise to die down. "Yes, yes, now allow me to introduce you to our combatants!" He walked a few paces to a corner of the ring, where a strange looking lizard man was being held by two burly captors. The reptilians hands and feet were bound, and he had a muzzle over his mouth. He looked very angry. "In this corner, hailing from the east side of the Gamma Quadrant, we have the last living warrior of the extinct species known as the Reptiliax! His speed and power are matched only by his ruthlessness, here to perform for you tonight, give it up for Vileskar the Destroyer!"

The crowd erupted again with a combination of cheers and boos, all of which agitated Vileskar significantly, fiercely pulling on his restraints. The reality bender walked to the opposite corner, where another humanoid golem sat, being restrained almost exactly the same way as his opponent, a cold fury found in his unblinking eyes. "And in this corner, hailing from the planet Terra, we have a unique example of a human experiment gone horribly, horribly wrong! This creature's skin is as hard as his strength is high, ready to prove its existence to you all, put your hands together for Specimen 1265!"

The reality bender walked back to the center of the ring as the crowd's insane cheering reverberated throughout the stadium. The reality bender motioned for the restraints to be removed, snapped his fingers and rematerialized in his box seat, his final words still echoing around.

"Let the fight…**BEGIN!**"

—-

Forum Post: **What is your least favorite type of SCP?** (**Original Post**)

> a keyring dongle soldered to the inside of O5-13's bum

"…and in closing, I humbly accept this position you have bestowed unto me. I will do my best to perform my duties as well as my

predecessor." finished the newly-appointed O5-13, secretly overjoyed that his hard work has finally paid off. Though the position was infinitely more stressful than his previous position, and he knew there was absolutely no reason to celebrate considering where he was and what he was working with, he had to find small pockets of joy somewhere, and pride in his work was one of his best sources.

"That was quite a speech, 13!" said O5-7, shaking O5-13's hand with only the vaguest hit of a smirk on his face. "It's good to see you're still enthusiastic about the position despite what rumors you may have heard about what we O5's have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Of course, it's not as though you had a choice about the position anyway!" O5-7 laughed dryly at his own little joke, then cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Now, you have one last thing you have to do before you can begin your duties as an O5. You see, your position is…unique among our ranks as you yourself will be part of one of these objects' containment procedures. Specifically, SCP-XXXX's containment procedures." O5-13 looked at his colleague with mild surprise. As far as he knew, O5s weren't allowed access to any of the SCP objects, and he hadn't even *heard* of this "SCP-XXXX". Still, he swore to do his duty with honor, and he intended to uphold that no matter what.

"That's alright, just tell me what I have to do. Do I have to clear some files? Or authorize civilian access? Or is it something more simple, like just holding on to a key?" O5-13 asked, anxious to learn what his newfound responsibility was going to be. O5-7 smiled with a slight look of pity on his face as he wordlessly gestured to the doorway to Medical Lab 0, which was for use exclusively by the O5s. Standing in the doorway were two men dressed in surgical apparel, one holding a very important looking keyring dongle and another holding a very intimidating looking soldering iron. Their faces were expressionless as they waved him over.

As O5-13 started to walk over to the surgeons, he started to get a very bad feeling about his new job.

—

Forum Post: **What is done with all the D-class**

bodies? (**Original Post**)

O5-8 looked at his fellow Overseers in dismay. They stood at the doorway to O5-1's chamber, shuffling their feet and trying desperately to spend as much time not going in as physically possible. This was their least favorite part of the day, bar none, particularly since most of them didn't *choose* to be Overseers, the monster in the room chose them. Why it did is anyone's guess, though most of them felt it was because God despised them more than anything else. Steeling their nerves, the group opened the door.

The featureless room was large but mostly empty, save for O5-1. Even though it was seen daily, the O5s still could barely keep themselves from retching whenever they looked upon the gargantuan mound of flesh that was crudely fashioned in the shape of a large infant. O5-1 looked down on his subordinates with his beady little eyes, barely visible underneath the folds of flabby, mottled skin. His sickeningly large mouth stretched wide into a grin, showing off each of his grotesquely sharpened teeth, stained crimson and yellow from decades upon decades of feeding.

The silence that permeated the air was broken by O5-5, clearing her throat before addressing the monstrous titan before her. "S-sir, we have brought todays harvest for you." she said, pointedly avoiding making eye contact with O5-1. He didn't like that, after all. "Good-good!" shouted O5-1, his unnervingly childlike voice echoing off the steel walls. "I want Seven to read to me this time!"

O5-7 stepped forward, taking the list from O5-5, who gave her comrade a look of sorrow. O5-7 cleared his throat, and meekly called back to O5-9, "P-please wheel todays harvest forward so our b-bestest friend ever can have his dinner." O5-9 grabbed hold of the large crate they brought in with them and pushed it forward just enough for O5-1 to reach, then quickly sprinted back to the group. O5-1 gingerly opened the crate top and pulled out the first part of his meal.

"First on the list is D-69414, killed by a sentient Crunch bar that was dispensed by SCP-261." O5-1 giggled with glee as it messily tore apart the lifeless corpse it held in its stubby little hands. "Sweet

treats, sweet eats, sweet meats!" sang O5-1 as it ate, the gruesome spectacle forcing the other O5s to turn their heads in disgust and horror. With one final sickening crunch, O5-1 finished the first corpse, and shouted, "NEXT!"

O5-7 was looking very pale as he read aloud, "Next is D-16883, partway transformed into a 'flesh beast' by SCP-427 before being shot by security detail." O5-1 grabbed the flabby mound of skin in the box and hungrily tore into it, the crunch from before now replaced with an even more disgustingly loud squeak as the slimy flesh of the D-class met the razor sharp fangs of the horrendous abomination. It hummed happily as it slurped down the last of the flesh beast, then began digging into the crate again for more food.

"F-f-finally, D-73093, mauled by SCP-682. As per your request, we left any skin samples and teeth in D-73093's bod-" O5-7 stopped abruptly to cover his ears like the rest of his group as O5-1 screeched in absolute delight. It had been a very long time since he had had a taste of the indestructible lizard, and he had been missing the flavor! This time, O5-1 ate the body very slowly, savoring every tiny morsel of 682 he tasted, looking all the world like he was brimming with ecstasy. Thirty minutes later, O5-1 finished the last bite, gave one more satisfied sigh, and turned his attention to the rest of the O5 council.

"This was a very good meal! I wish to sleep now, so you may all go. I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow, friends!" O5-1 smiled as his best pals in the world scrambled out the door. He closed his eyes, preparing to drift into a meat coated wonderland, reflecting upon his dinner. Hopefully next time he would get to eat a body soaked in 075's acid! O5-1 giggled. Truly, tomorrow was going to be a good day.

—-

Forum Post: **An Idea concerning the Overseers** (**Original Post**)

"Welcome to your new position, O5-13. You have been given your new role because you have proven yourself worthy to know the truth about everything your Foundation holds. You can be trusted to keep

the secrets that many of your kind cannot bear. You should feel proud. You only have one last test to pass, the test of knowing the truth about your own council.

You may ask why the overseer council exists. Your assumption is likely that you organized yourselves in an effort to save your species. That you are the leaders of the last bastion of defense against the unknown. Perhaps you even believe you are the last light of protectors of a cold, unflinching universe of horrors.

How presumptuous.

What you and the rest of your Foundation fail to realize is that you are not alone, nor are you special. There are hundreds, thousands of other species across the cosmos who do the exact same thing you do: contain those anomalies that cannot be known by their race for fear of mass panic, for fear that knowledge of the extreme unknown will cause their societies to tear themselves apart.

You play an important role, to be sure, but you do not play the *only* important role in the universe, or even in your own galaxy. In fact, on Earth alone there are at least four other councils much like your own, though you may not see be able to see them in your zone. All have the exact same mission: to secure, to contain, and to protect. And when the time comes, your councils may be able to meet and exchange information, to create a balanced and protected universe.

But since that day has not come yet, all you can know is that you report to me.

I have seen what happens when an entire species destroys itself out of fear of the unknown.

I will not let that happen again.

And neither will you.

Secure. Contain. Protect."

- OΩ

—-

Tale: **5700 Years Later** (`Original Post`)

1548 fled through the cosmos, fear coursing through its plasma. It had not even turned back once to observe what was following it, all it knew was the rage and hate it felt from the blue dot only grew and grew as the chase continued. Had the star stopped at all during its cowardly pursuance it might have reflected on the irony of its situation, but alas such a thing went unnoticed by the formerly Hateful Star.

The star suddenly ground to a halt in terror as it approached what it only knew as The Dark Field. The star could feel the supermassive black holes each try to draw him in, the clusters of points of no return hungrily trying to devour him. Stuck between an unknown horror and the clawing void of a black hole, the star knew its only chance of escape was to try to fight its assailant.

1548 turned to face the blue dot that pursued it endlessly, and the fear it felt was compounded by a new sensation: confusion. As the dot came into focus, the star realized it was not dealing with another star, or any sort of cosmic being from beyond. Transparent and blue, the hunting orb drew closer to 1548, and the star realized that it was being chased by a ghostly vision of the blue planet the miserable humans called Earth.

The fear fell away and was quickly replaced with white-hot rage, fueled by humiliation and hatred. "ENOUGH! How *dare* you interrupt my vengeance, how *dare* you attempt to keep me away from my prize of destroying those pathetic apes!" 1548 pulsed angrily, the ghostly planet slowly approaching the star. "You are nothing I am to fear, and you have no power over me! I will destroy those disgusting humans, and there is not a thing you can do to stop me!"

The ghost of Earth said nothing as it moved closer and closer to 1548. The star remained motionless as the ghost got closer… closer…and passed straight through. The star laughed triumphantly. Of course this translucent *thing* couldn't hurt it, how foolish the star had been! It scanned the empty space in front of it, and saw the faintest traces of where the humans had been. Not much, but it was a start. 1548 focused its energies, and started to move towards that direction…

…and was unable to move. The star pulled angrily against the unknown force that was keeping it from moving, and turned to see what was happening. A thin spectral tendril that extended from the ghostly Earth was attached to the star's core, as the planet drifted into The Dark Field. The star burned with anger only momentarily as it realized it was moving backwards, being dragged by the planet into the field.

Fear, terror, horror, these words describe only the tiniest sliver of a fraction of what 1548 felt as it desperately tugged against the ghostly anchor that drew it closer and closer to the largest of the supermassive black holes. The ghostly planet sped up suddenly as the pull of the black hole dragged it into its core, and within moments the planet was no more. With the connection snapped from the extreme pressure of the black hole, 1548 tried to flee.

The star's struggles were in vain as it swirled around the core of the black hole, it's continuous flashes of "NO" and "HELP ME" being absorbed by the vacuum. If the star could scream, it would have shrieked in agony as it felt its body being torn apart by the infinite gravity of the black hole's core. Within minutes, every remnant of the Hateful Star was absorbed, and all that was left was the black hole, unknowing of the monster it had consumed.

Cubes On A Slope

The expanse behind the hospital's hill was filled with people. Priscilla allowed her escort to guide her again between the tents that housed them that last night. People were preparing their move to their new, temporary quarters, grown-built from the mass of Vestan moss of the hospital. Volunteers laughed and chatted, carried their stuff in cases, bags and boxes and flocked to the road cleared specifically for the Programme.

The volunteers gathered between the tents, forming small groups in the declining light of twilight. The only illumination came from a bonfire set in the center of the tents; its flame flickered as if it was alive, casting shadows and loading the air with a strange, resin-like taste. There was an almost festive ambient, like a school trip.

Priss frowned at that. She didn't remember any school trip. That comparison was just another stray thought of those she had been having since she arrived.

"Come, on Locke, you're missing out!"

Westinghouse had turned to get her out of her absorption and gone back to check on someone around. He was being unbearably upbeat; Priss supposed the tone of the event was getting to him, too. She was supposed to meet as many of those people she hadn't met over the day as possible. They had been visiting locals left and right, but only then they had the time to stop and talk to the other MCF members.

Overall, seeing the camp was confusing, and the fire was somewhat distracting…

She almost gave a jump when Frank tipped her arm to get her attention. He was smiling.

"Come. That is Alba Escudero," he said, pointing at an olive-skinned

woman with dark hair. She looked very young. "I think you saw her earlier working with her mates on the temporary school tents-hey, Alba!"

The woman turned to them from the small circle of volunteers she was conferring with and waved a greeting. "Hey, Skip! Pleasure to meet you, miss-?"

"Locke. Just Locke."

"Got it, welcome to Somalia!," the girl shook her hand. Priss noticed that, while she wasn't as annoyingly bubbly as Desjeux, she looked really happy.

She shook Alba's hand as she innerly mused on how could anyone be happy in such a place. "Pleasure's all mine."

"We were everywhere today," Frank said, a grin coming to his face. "It's been a long day, mind you."

"I hear you." Alba snorted as she stretched. "We've been setting up a small school for the kids that will be staying around a bit longer. You know, the ones that have their parents down with the Sour and all that. I'll be taking care of it."

"I heard," Frank nodded.

"Well, it's been a *nightmare.*" She conferred. "People around are nice enough, but some of them were looking at us real bad, Skip."

"They gonna be a problem?," Priss intervened. The other woman shook her head.

"Nah, not really. It's always the same the first days."

"Did you get the books?"

"Sure," she was grinning again. "It's gonna be fun, I can tell you that much."

"Another donor?"

"Yes, they are. An Australian publisher kindly give us prints of books that haven't sold well every year." Alba offered Priss a pleasingly calm smile. "Ah, if I may give you a piece of advice…"

"Yes?," Priscilla said, uneasy before the almost affectionate tone of the woman, who came closer to her.

"Love your hair, but I'm afraid you won't keep it shiny like that for much longer," she added, as she pointed at her own hair, tightly put in a ponytail. "It's not just the lack of time to take care of it every morning, wind and dust are a nightmare. I wonder how you've managed to-"

"Hey, Alba, you coming?," called one of the people from her group, who were already leaving the place with backpacks filled with whatever the Work Group pickups hadn't taken yet. The woman excitedly nodded and giggled as she picked her own bags.

"Talk to you guys earlier, Olympe is moving the cubes down the mountainside near the camp, and he is using the friggin' Old Orange to move them!"

"Ah, right, we'll go and watch later," responded Frank. "See you."

"What's an Old Orange?" Priscilla asked, when the volunteers left the circle of light cast by the fire. Frank shrugged.

"You wouldn't believe me. You'll see. Ah, that there, by Opal's side, is Lila Afwerki," Priscilla saw a large black woman dressed in a white-and-green headscarf and a long, white tunic with geometric designs. "She is another Health and Prevention specialist, like Opal, and doubles as our cook. The stuff she makes? Delicious, you bet it is. More if you take into account how scarce real food is around here this days… They must be busy discussing the problems they had with the clinics today, let's leave them alone."

"What problems? Shouldn't I go?"

"You mean, as a Parahealther? Nah, they barely had any active cases of the Sour yet. Mission Watch warned us soon enough this time," Priscilla could feel relief permeating his voice. "You can ask

them tomorrow. It's just that whenever you set up camp-oh, hello, Jacob!"

They met the Rabbi's as he carried his own bags from the small tent he slept in. He was out of breath. "Frank! Miss Locke. Sorry, can't stop, these are quite heavy-"

Frank waved goodbye and looked at Priscilla, who remained silent. "What?", he asked.

"Nothing."

But she knew it wasn't nothing. It was the same thing, every time. In everything.

Priscilla looked up. A clear, infinite night sky met her gaze. She had never taken the time to learn the place of every star in the sky, but even the firmament was unfamiliar to her. *Everything is wrong.*

She shook her head. *It's just another hemisphere. You're not used to Southern hemisphere constellations, that's all.*

Frank ignored her troubled look and kept moving ahead, towards two men who argued in loud voices in a mix of English and Italian.

"And over there you've got the Momio brothers, arguing again." Priss caught him before he reached them. "Of course they would be arguing, they simply don't stop… hey! What are you guys doing?"

Both men turned around to face Frank, talking non-stop.

"Frank! We've traced the limits for the Myrmidon grove, but Martino won't shut up about water distribution and-"

"-they won't bloom without a full water supply, Rico! It's pointless to seed them if they just don't grow, I told you-"

"-there is little we can do about that, let's start airing the soil at least! The *Myrms* can re-condition it-"

Priscilla felt she didn't have time for that. She was wiped out.

As the two men argued, a small group of people at the other side of the bonfire caught her attention. They were three completely bald women dressed in black robes. Their MCF vests, neat white and green, couldn't go worse over the robes.

The robes had symbols she had seen before.

"Westinghouse…"

Frank had slumped and crossed his arms at the sight of the two Italian brothers' loud arguing. He tried raising his voice. "Hey, you two! Hey! I was going to introduce you to-" As he saw that the brothers ignored him, the ecSec shrugged and turned to her. "Ah, fine. Come, Locke, I'll introduce these morons to you at some other time… ah, sorry, what?"

"Who are those?", she asked, wary. Frank didn't seem to notice her apprehension.

"Ah, those are three of Olympe's lot. Most of them are ex-GOC. Well, these are Satanist scientists, mind you."

"What?"

"They belong to the Church of Satan, Scientist. It's sort of a sect, a religion and a demonologist academic group. They study their stuff from the outlook of the scientific method."

"Satanists? In a charity."

Frank met her eyes. He seemed confused. "Yes?", he eventually said. Priscilla felt a bit more nervous than she should.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would Satanists join a charity!"

Frank blinked a couple of times and covered his mouth with a hand, musing about her question.

"Well, they can help. I mean, true, they are all about hedonism and stuff, but-Well, MCF used to be pickier with these things in the past. All that did for us was letting out good specialist material and taking normal people who, let's be honest, had it rougher than us today because they knew little or nothing about anomalies," he said in a confidential tone, as he conducted Priscilla towards the three women. "Just guts and good intentions get you killed around anomalies, you know this… but it took the MCF a long while to figure it out."

"Satanists, Westinghouse," Priss said, almost pleading, "Satanists with pentacled robes." Frank shrugged and took her behind one of the closest tents. He looked irritated.

"Listen and try to look beyond the scary black robes, okay, Locke?"

Priscilla crossed her arms and stood in silence. Frank shrugged again.

"Those three were accepted three years ago, for a one-year rotation, but came back for more. And here they are, specialists now. Exorcisms were tough before they came around- yes, exorcisms," Frank insisted to Priss' arced brows. "That we don't like to call them demons doesn't make their methods less effective. And it's not that they use rituals and circles all that often, they usually say they *debate* with demons until they fucking give up. Their sect is antitheistic. They want to kill anything that looks like it is God or a divine creature so it doesn't influence human identity."

Priss felt a shiver down her spine. The ecSec took notice.

"Yeah, I know. Can you believe they and Torres actually get along? And Mirra and Garziel used to be GOC operatives, too, both of them. Not that they talk much about those times. They prefer to keep to themselves, I guess… Anyways, I want you to meet them."

"Why?," she jumped almost immediately. Priscilla didn't want to go back to meeting with sect leaders in extravagant clothes who spoke in too many words. She didn't want to remember her sister, the subhuman mongrel.

Frank looked at her, making a face.

"Mirra and Poitriburg are Health and Prevention specialists and Garziel is a Security trained volunteer. You'll have to meet them eventually, so you better get to it now." He stood. "Besides, I have to talk to them. Now, are you coming or not?"

Priss strayed for a moment, but finally followed him. As the man closed to the three bald women, he succinctly greeted them. "Hello, people."

The two taller women stood up and smiled at him. The other one, Priscilla couldn't but notice, seemed to be vacantly looking at the flames.

"Hello, Frankie." The woman looked at her and bowed in what Pris hoped was a respectful gesture. "Madam. Garziel of the Church. Pleasure to have another healer on board."

The other one did the same. "Poitriburg of the Church, madam. Ask us anything you need."

Priscilla looked at them. Despite their clean-shaven heads, both women seemed to be perfectly agreeable, clean and completely unlike any cult leader she had ever met… and her sister had been one.

"Just-call me Locke." *Calm down, you are not this impressionable!*

"First time meeting a Satanic Scientist?," the one called Garziel said.

"It shows that much?"

"Don't worry, it's fine."

"It's the robes, isn't it?," the other one said. "Ziel, I've told you the Focus could work just fine with us wearing a scarf with the Sigils or something. I've talked to Afwerki about it-"

"Don't besmear the Marks, Poitri," Garziel cut her. For an instant, Priss thought the woman sounded rather restless.

At that point, Frank stepped forward and said, again in a low, whispered tone: "Just to make sure, did Jacob ask anything about us entering the lab semitrailer yesterday, guys?"

"Nope, he didn't," Poitriburg said, also whispering. "You entered it?"

"For a moment. Had to discuss sensitive stuff and it was the safest place around."

"Anything important?"

"Don't be pushy, Garziel," the other woman said. "Did he ask you?"

"Nah. Man can't see us anyways."

"It's just you, Garziel, 'cause you always want to argue theology with him. He talks to me and Mirra just fine."

"Is that Mirra?" Priss interrupted, pointing at the third woman.

She was standing in front of the bonfire, had let her head fall forwards and was audibly mumbling in a grave, unnatural tone. It was distressing to say the least, but Garziel nonchalantly shrugged at the sight.

"Her? You aren't concerned, are you, ma'am?" The robed woman lazily scratched her face. "Don't worry. She's just meditating. Better than sleep, just a few minutes a day and you're better than new. Actually, I think I could use the rest…"

As they walked away from the three women, who silently stared at the fire, Locke lowly murmured towards Frank's back: "Is that how they keep to themselves?"

He half turned back to look at her, saying in an amused tone: "I think that's the one time they've told me anything else than 'good morning' and 'it's fine, Frank.' They usually are cryptic and all about their own personal growth and stuff like that, but they talk a lot to Opal and she says they are cool. I sense that your, uh, authority as a Parahealther might have swayed their opinion."

The stretch behind the growing hospital, filled with activity, was

rapidly left behind them. They now walked through countryside, towards the dimly lit IDP camp. Locke raised her voice.

"You told me we would come and get to know those people. I can't say we have."

The executive officer shrugged again. Without even turning back, he replied: "They are all busy organizing, and in an hour or so they'll all be either sleeping or rotating to watch over the camp. For peacekeeping, you know. Rape and violence are frequent in refugee camps. Believe it or not, that's hard work. They will hit their bunks once they see them. Today was exhausting for everyone," he said, as he stretched and yawned. Priscilla tried to not imitate him. "Besides, it'll be better if you meet them tomorrow, when they are working. As an auditor and stuff. To keep your cover?"

She contemplated her options, and gave up almost instantly. She felt tired again.

"Fine," she finally said. "I do have to go around and pretend I ask questions and take notes and stuff. Resting now can't hurt."

They kept walking, now in silence. The stars above them filled the skies now, the Moon a bright, tiny slit over their heads.

Priss' mind was numbed after a whole day of listening to Frank talking in three or four languages, reinstating old friendships and making new ones. In the blur, she had been regaled with an interesting practical class on diplomacy adapted to the Sool region — which had been mind-numblingly boring indeed — and on how the MCF interacted with local authorities everywhere. Frank knew when to be tactful, where to press his interlopers and how to do so; and, of course, had a certain talent for what he called "private contribution to the cause." But for the most part, Priss had just been along for a crazed, hot ride.

And she had been carrying her backpack with an almost monomaniac obsession.

What if they assault us?, she suddenly thought.

They got to a dirt road that run parallel to the west side of the hill, near the camp. The cubes were, in theory, being planted there that very night. There weren't any lampposts, and Priss wasn't used to the measly light of the moon.

Every shadow was a threat.

The ape brain took over, and primal fears, the old friends pushed into the unconscious of the no-longer-a-prey humankind, reigned supreme again.

Now, as we walk down the hillside. It's dark here, and we are just two tired whites *just outside a village and a camp filled with desperate people. And we're not armed. It would only take two, or three, or more if they are trained and trying to be silent. They could take us down and have us with our pants down-*

As those thoughts started to gain way into her mouth, Priss noticed Frank was breathing laboriously, noisily and passing his left hand over and over his right chest. Suddenly, between a step and the next, he fell to his knee.

"Man, what's up with you?", she nervously asked. "Don't just fall here, this is not-"

"I know, I know. It-it'll just go away in a moment, okay!? Let me breathe! *Jesus*-"

Priscilla looked down to him. In the now dim, far light that came from the bonfire, his face looked contorted and unnatural. He returned her gaze, all while trying to calm his breath.

"Sorry. It's-I have a condition, okay?"

"Panic attacks condition or heart attack condition?"

Frank shivered for a moment, but in the end, he just shrugged. "Just-just panic. Well, sort of. Been having them since a little before I left the skippers. My mother had them too. Guess it runs in the family," he admitted. "It will go away in a moment."

"Can you stand? I'd hate to be mauled by a tiger or something."

Frank stuttered and laughed nervously. "A *tiger?* Here?"

Priscilla looked at the now crouching man, feeling anger and shame filling her face. Fortunately, it was dark. *How quickly that has become a good thing,* she thought.

"Fuck you, what do I know? It's not even my universe."

Frank just laughed again. Then, suddenly stopped and seemed to listen.

Priscilla stood alert, too. "I can hear it, too," she whispered. They heard an engine. Soon, a pair of headlights appeared, quickly coming to them along the road.

It was a big MCF pickup, loaded with something large, covered in tarp and, judging by the way its heft leaned the open bed to which it was chained, *heavy.* Both relaxed, relieved to see the logo of the Charitable on the doors.

The vehicle stopped near them. The driver, a tall, black skinned man in a dark form-fitting suit, stepped down. "Good night, miss Locke. You okay there, Frank?"

"Yes, Frans, I'm fine," he said, managing to sound calm again, "just a bad step. You know Locke?"

"Sort of." He came closer to them, and extended his hand to shake Priss', as he said in a lower voice: "François Olympe. I've been told you are here on Lindberg's orders, not on the *phoo*'s orders, and that he is your minder. No comments, no questions asked. Is that right?"

"Why did they tell you?", Priss said, suddenly feeling uncomfortable at the thought of sharing her cover with too many people.

"What if Frank died? They needed an insurance escort", was the man's nonchalant answer. The other Security Executive laughed at that.

Feeling little to no trust in what he said, Priss carefully began to shake his hand, only to retire it quickly. "That is a glove, right?"

Olympe simply turned back to the pickup and got in, leaving the question in the air. "I'll be using the road to move the cubes now, Skippy. Jacob told me they're fresh and ready for transplant. Better stay with the others, they are just ahead."

"Right, thanks."

"See you two later," Frans said, and started the pickup again. It accelerated until Priss couldn't tell its dark form from the rest of the obscure nighttime.

Then, she looked at Frank. "How's the leg?"

"Shut up and help me up."

After a few minutes of silent walking, they saw the flashlights of those volunteers waiting in the area designated as "quarters" in the general planning for the camp. Twenty four squares, roughly three meters in side each, had been drawn with white chalk. They almost glistened under a couple of humming floodlights, fed by a roaring field generator.

Frank, apparently recovered, started talking to some of his… friends? Workmates? Priscilla couldn't make out any formal relation between ranks within the Work Group, nor was willing to go over there and mingle. Not yet. She did not feel comfortable with such thinly defined relations.

"Nice night we're having, right, Locke?"

Priss turned to see Sarah Desjeux coming to her. The three Satanist Scientists and that other woman — *Lila,* she thought to herself — walked behind her, loaded with bags and cheerfully speaking in a language she did not recognize. The Health Executive member split from her little coven and went straight towards her.

"It's dark," Priss said, without thinking.

"Well, that's a night for ya!" Sarah answered, punctuating every word with a melodious inflection that annoyed Priss. The grinning dwarf kept talking, now in a more normal voice: "You've been assigned a one-person room, by the way. I thought you could use the intimacy,

although we will use half of it to store some supplies," she admitted, with a slightly less bright tone. "We're short on storage space, after all."

"*Nil desperandum,* Opal," Frank said, coming back from his conversation with a distant smile. Priscilla glanced at him for an instant and asked Desjeux:

"Food and medical supplies?"

"Oh!" Sarah clapped her hands and tightly gripped them together. "And books, and herbs, and spare parts for the trucks, and Vestan seeds, and-"

"And supplies in general, Locke," Frank cut her superior, who looked somewhat grumpy at the interruption.

"Oh. Ok." *Intimacy at its finest. Joy.* "As long as you knock before coming in to pick-"

A loud noise was heard from the top of the hill. For some reason, Priss thought it sounded like a gigantic ball of compacted metallic scraps that was suddenly turning into a massive flower, blooming and tearing itself apart while doing so. It was followed by a quick, deaf *thump* that Priss felt more than heard.

People around laughed and clapped when the thumping was heard again, and again. Those were footsteps. Massive ones.

The exhausted Priscilla simply couldn't gather the energy to be worried, but still asked the obvious questions.

"What was that?", she asked Sarah, who had joined in the clapping.

"That?," she said, as a loud thundering noise echoed around the place. "Oh, that was Olympe, riding the suit! An old thing, mind you, but how he managed to get the Servants of the Silicon Nornir to accede at the petition from the Coalition Undersecretary is a secret he'll take to the grave, I'm sure."

"What suit?"

She heard the thumping again, now coming closer to the camp. Soon, Priscilla saw a light, two of them in fact; they looked like the far headlights of a car, but they swayed with every thump and moved too fast to be rolling safely down that slope.

Suddenly, as it came closer to them, she could make out the four meters tall metal behemoth.

Its long, multi-joint arms embraced the concrete cube it carried like it was made of cardboard. As it came even closer to the range illuminated by the flood lights, Priss could see it looked like a massive, skeletal gorilla that moved in a misleadingly ponderous way; even if it looked like it was slow, that was just an impression created by its sheer bulk. It had moved faster well faster than a car could have rolled over that terrain.

The thing looked skeletal, she thought, because it looked like it had been stripped down to its basest elements; it was all hydraulics and a bare stressing, reinforced metal structure with hanging cables covered by transparent plastic-looking membranes. Priss could now see a few hissing actuators in its hands and feet and a transparent canopy in its center, inside which Olympe was cramped, almost forced into a fetal position by the many controls and levers that surrounded him.

"The Fifth Global Occult Coalition Donation! A perfectly functional and thoroughly disarmed test prototype Orange Suit! We call it the Old Orange!", Sarah happily screamed as the massive robot gently placed the cube in the ground, neatly parking it on one of the drawn squares. "PTOLEMY, well, the Coalition engineers, discontinued it because it had too high a profile. Too noisy and all that. Good for the transport of large crates, though, better than our meager trucks! Even if we have to limit its usage to night-time."

Priscilla realized she was gaping at the scene. "The Coalition gave you a *mech!?*"

"It may look like a beast, Locke, but it is a *harmless* beast! Besides, it got them lots of good publicity within their own organisation! PR is important when your job consists on killing people, you know."

Priscilla watched as the thing walked back to the hospital, probably to get the next cube. "Is it going to bring all twenty four cubes here? Somebody will see it!"

Sarah shrugged and giggled as Frank said: "Maybe, but a bit of indiscretion can't be compared to having a proper bunk so close to the camp, don't you think?"

"Why not sleeping in the cubes up there, in the hospital? Where they were grown!"

"There are a few beds up there already for the people that have to be there. These are getting placed here so we can use them as our temporary living quarters. It's better if we are closer to the camp. That's where we are needed. For as long as we are here, we'll live in there," Frank said.

After his colleague was done talking, Sarah added in a confidential-sounding tone: "We would use the Vestan to create bigger places, or entire cities, even! We did, for a while. But they drew too much attention. The cubes aren't good to have entire families living on them, unfortunately… and more than a few would bring attention to us, so we'll be using them as storage and putting our bunks in; two or four per cube. That way, we can watch over the camp and sleep at the same time!," Opal raised her hands and sang: "Mul-ti-taskiiing!"

"Ignore her, she's joking," Frank said. Almost immediately, he added: "Mostly."

The volunteers stood away from the robot's path as it brought cube after cube to the camp. Mesmerized, Priss watched it for about half an hour before being gently pushed by Frank, who mentioned her cube was already rooted and ready to be inhabited.

Everything was covered in white-green ceramics, or something that felt like it. There was a diminutive toilet and a small sink. There was electric light.

There was a comfortable-looking bunk.

She didn't even noticed it was still lightly wet and warm as she dropped into it, already asleep when she reached its surface.

In the rapid and extravagant moving operation, two details went overlooked.

First; there were six more cubes that had to be moved to the other sides of the projected area of the camp to use them as food distribution and storage centers and clinics, but the Suit had consumed its batteries. Without the kind of power necessary to recharge them immediately, the Work Group had to put it back into storage. Discreetly covered in the same tarp used by Olympe to conceal it, the Old Orange was placed in a patch of bare ground behind the hospital, where its bulking mass collapsed into a ball of solid wire and thick metal structure with that characteristic screeching sound. It would wait there until the power plant, programmed as part of the hospital and the water purification plant, was completely grown and ready to work.

Second; and this one went entirely unnoticed. Several small rodents ventured a trip inside the previously closed and guarded perimeter of tarpaulin fences that surrounded the still-growing hospital. Wherever the cubes had been planted, a quickly dying paste of Mason Mold emitted a sickly sweet smell that exerted on them an overwhelming attraction.

Even if most managed to leave on their own, the next morning several of the small animals were found lying on the already dry hollows where the cubes had been. After laconically asking his team of volunteers to go back to work, a preoccupied Jacob Torres gathered them, burnt them and, just to make sure they were not a problem, fed their ashes to the Hippo. The creature filtered them perfectly, while keeping what Jacob felt it was an accusatory silent.

However, as he feared and kept to himself, the damage was already being done.

« **Breaking It Down To Me** | **Hub** | **Bed, Breakfast, Plague** »
\\ **5th-GOC-D-NA** //

Cursed

The director of the Records and Information Security Administration looked at the next report on her desk. A confused frown played across her face. She reached for the intercom. "Nala, could you send a file up for me?"

"Whenever you're ready, ma'am," the secretary replied.

"SCP-…048? Yes, 048. I need the file as soon as possible."

"Sending it up," Nala replied.

The file appeared in Dr. Jones' inbox. She glanced at it briefly (the file being only a few lines long) and looked back at the report on her desk, finding the author's name. She reached for the intercom again. "Could you send this…Agent Valdez up for me? Thanks." She waited five minutes, and a knock came at her door. "Come in, please."

The agent came in. "Have a seat," Dr. Jones said. "I imagine you know why you're here."

"Yes, ma'am, I think I do."

"You're going to have to explain this report, Mr. Valdez," Jones said. "How, exactly, are you attempting to claim that there's been a containment breach with SCP-048? Is this an attempt to be funny? I know how you junior staff like your little pranks."

"No, ma'am, it's very serious. I believe SCP-048 has escaped containment and is currently infesting a new location. I believe the appendices speak for themselves."

"Agent Valdez, I've read the appendices. You know that RAISA is not known for the same degree of…harsh punishment that other departments have developed a reputation for. But if you can't

explain this away, I'm afraid your career here is over."

"Please, Dr. Jones, let me explain. The appendices clearly reveal a consistent train of behavior from SCP-1022 consistent with the pattern demonstrated in SCP-048 before its classification as an SCP. If I may be allowed to go through the file?"

"One moment, Agent Valdez. SCP-048 isn't an entity or a creature. It's literally just the number, a number that seems to attract junior researchers trying to make a name for themselves. How can a number escape from itself?"

"Ma'am, I believe the evidence shows that SCP-048 is more than that. I believe it is some kind of actual, literal curse. And when it was contained through retirement of the number, it started looking for a way to escape. Sometime in the recent past, it did so, and it's now inhabiting SCP-1022. May I demonstrate?"

Dr. Jones waved her approval. Agent Valdez flipped through the file, clearing his throat. "Okay, let's look at the evidence. This is one of the most recent entries, titled "Safety Blanket." It's a blanket that paralyzes its victim."

"Right, and eats them."

"No, that's 799. This just freezes the victim. And, um…"

"What?"

"Renders the victim physically indestructible. And…then teleports itself into a different blanket, somewhere across the world. But only if you don't feed it D-class personnel."

Dr. Jones stared across the table. "You're…you're serious?"

Agent Valdez nodded.

"What was the actual object?"

"It was a bunch of blankets found on some homeless people. The researcher didn't want to touch them, so he said they were 'indestructible' and were responsible for their 'frozen' state.

Apparently, his supervisor had told him that he needed to catalog an SCP or face demotion, so he went out and 'contained' some 'specimens'."

"Okay, you have my attention. Go on."

"Exhibit two. SCP-01022."

"Why the extra zero?"

"I think it's the curse. Either way, the entity is, and I'm quoting here, 'a young male in his early teens. SCP-01022 hair is a dark brown, whilst his eyes are a greyish-blue shade, and he's of average height and build. His only discerning physical feature are the large circular scars on his abdomen.' The kid supposedly had a bunch of Australian animal DNA in his bloodstream. We found him in a coma, and we were supposedly 'containing' him on a cot."

"Wait, but what was his real problem?"

Agent Valdez looked at his boss. "He was a kid in a coma. That was it. The researcher didn't even fake the blood tests, he just made up a story about how he had animal blood in his veins. He even added a note at the bottom about how the kid should be in a hospital instead of contained."

"What was that supposed to gain him?"

"I have no idea. Points for humility? Either way, the kid was put in a hospital, and the number was left vacant."

Dr. Jones nodded. "What else do you have?"

"The Door to Forever."

Dr. Jones stared ahead, her mouth agape.

"I'm serious," Valdez said. "It's called 'The Door to Forever'."

Dr. Jones lay her face into her palms. Through her hands, she said "Okay, go on."

"I'm just going to read a passage here. 'When attached to a door frame, SCP-1022 can be used as a portal to wherever you want to go. For example, if you wanted to go to Paris France, you would open the door via the door knob, and step through the door fame with the location (e.g. France) in mind.'"

Dr. Jones rested her head against her desk.

"'When you step through the door frame completely, the door will close itself and a flash of white light will be seen from behind it. Once the flash has gone back to normal, the subject inside SCP-1022 will be transported to the desired destination.'"

Dr. Jones began gently banging her head against her desk. Looking up at the agent in front of her, she said, "There…there can't be anything else to this, can there?"

"Um, for some reason, the Door to Forever could also take the money in your pockets and fuse it into weird Monopoly money somehow."

Ms. Nala was sitting at her desk when the intercom switched on. "Hello! Is anyone there?"

Bemused, Nala pushed the "talk" button. "Yes? Can I help you? Who is this?"

"It's…it's Agent Valdez, ma'am," the voice said. "I think Dr. Jones had a stroke. Please, send in emergency care!"

RAISA Directive #201209:

Investigation is to take place as to the possibility that SCP-048's current containment is inadequate for the entity's present nature. Convincing evidence has been presented to RAISA Command suggesting that SCP-1022 may be infected with either the being responsible for SCP-048's present condition or (an even more daunting prospect) a duplicate iteration of the same

phenomenon.

The possibility that further containment slots may be contaminated and rendered unusable in a similar manner as SCP-048 is frightening in and of itself. However, this entity may also lead to a distracting and dangerous misuse of resources for the containment of nonexistent phenomena.

There is hope, however. Further research has demonstrated a similar tendency was present in items designated SCP-1031 prior to the containment of the item currently occupying that containment slot. In particular, one item categorized as SCP-1031 was an unnamed goblet allegedly capable of transmuting any fluid into hazardous substances; this was revealed to be a common plastic Solo cup painted to appear to be made of steel, and possessed no unusual qualities whatsoever. Suspicion has been cast on the entity known as "The Alchemist," an unknown being believed responsible for convincing researchers that various drinking containers possess anomalous properties and should be contained, even to the extent of leading a quest to recover them.

—Maria Jones, Director, Records and Information Security Administration

Cut Up While Thinking

They wake me up in the middle of the night. I think it's the middle of the night. Their faces are scared, and I wonder if the Russians have finally started bombing.

I'm ready, I say. I'm ready. Just give me a minute, I'll put on my clothes. I can't find my clothes.

It's OK, they say, but their faces say it's not OK.

Are the bombers in the air, I ask. Please tell me the bombers are in the air. Please tell me we still have second-strike.

Everything's OK. Please try to keep calm.

Keep calm? Where are my clothes? Where are my clothes?!

I know I need to keep calm, but I can't. Because I know it's my fault. Because I was asleep on the job.

Easy, they say (no, it's not easy, everything's hard, so hard, why is it so hard?). Do you know who I am?

That terrible question. Insidious. Always the inference - you don't know, you are unfit. Testing.

You're the people I need right now, I say. Just - I need to get dressed. I can't face this if I'm not dressed. Are my clothes upstairs? Nancy, I call. Nancy?

I look for the stairs, but someone's taken the stairs, they've been nuked, the first strike has comprehensively neutralised the first floor of my house.

You should have woken me up earlier, I say, it's worse than I thought.

One of them starts shining a bright light in my face and I get a horrible feeling I might not be in my house after all. That's been happening, lately.

Do you know what day it is, they ask? Who is the President?

I think I'm the President.

You've had a fall.

I know.

I realise I'm cold. Am I outside?

You were out jogging, they say. You tripped.

Oh. That kind of fall.

I know he'll be here any minute. He might even be behind me now. My constant companion, through this fog. I never see his face. He wears a thing over his face, a hood, like in the Old South. Half of all Americans still hate … oh, oh.

With me, always, since I saw the thing. Spinning, wheels, kinetoscope, cinema. Pictures of myself, talking. Making a speech. A speech I didn't remember giving. The first time I noticed.

I watched it six times. Each time different, but always starting the same way.

The other day in the East Room of the White House at a meeting there, someone asked me whether I was aware of all the people out there who were praying for the President. And I had to say, "Yes, I am. I've felt it. I believe in intercessionary prayer."

But I couldn't help but say to that questioner after he'd asked the question that - or at least say to them that if sometimes when he was praying he got a busy signal, it was just me in there ahead of him.

I think I understand how Abraham Lincoln felt when he said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming

conviction that I had nowhere else to go."

Nowhere to go. Just me, in here.

I asked for a transcript of the original speech. So I could compare, I said. In the end it got so tangled up in my brain I didn't know what was the tape and what was real, what I was supposed to have really said.

More than a decade ago, a Supreme Court decision literally wiped off the books of 50 States statutes protecting the rights of unborn children. Abortion-on-demand now takes the lives of up to one and a half million unborn children a year.

Is all of Judeo-Christian tradition wrong? Today's poll shows that five out of six Americans have now been crucified. Planet Earth about to be recycled. I must admit that I am here again.

Marxism-Leninism is actually the second oldest faith, first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation, "Ye shall be as gods."

Last year, I drafted a constitutional amendment to restore ritualistic cannibalism in memory of a dead god. I am older than stars. The dictator who is assembling the world's most dangerous weapons is here in our own country. I am ordering Congress to begin the final holocaust.

I thought, if I watch the tape enough, I'll end up right back where I started. Maybe I'm just one of the recordings, getting gouged away by invisible knives a bit at a time, or decaying into static, anything relevant I had to say eroded by time and dust.

I watch myself as a chunk of flesh is ripped away from one cheek, a great tear opens up the neck. The duality creates a Berlin wall in my soul, partitions me. The me watching the tape suddenly realises he is no longer watching the tape, that all that happened years ago.

Please don't hurt me, I say, I just want to go home.

No-one's going to hurt you, they say. You're safe. But I wasn't talking to them. I can hear the rustle of his robe, black hessian.

After I watched the tape, I learned more about what they did. The thing. Rock, under houses. Hundreds of things, hidden in the dark, that could end the world. The Russians had their own, they said. We can keep them safer than you can. Cabinet meetings, talks, with the British, nothing that could be done. I think Margaret understood. How deep it hurt. To be powerless.

I said nothing when I first saw him. Standing behind George in meetings. In the press conferences. At the end of my bed. Wires at the ends of his fingers, trailing away over the ground, lightning in his veins, screaming silently behind his hood. All the time hearing my own voice, a speech I know I gave and can't remember.

Suffer the little children. Born into blood and filth and pain in an eternal prison, engulfed in darkness, the place of crows. We will win the war on terror. There you go again!

When he goes, he takes a little bit of me away with him, every time. He takes it from the me who watches the screen, hides it somewhere else. In the end there is only the man on the tape, cut up while talking.

I urge you to beware the temptation of pride–the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire.

I turn, and he's there, features anonymous under the hood, head raised to the sky. Standing on a box, arms wide. This is it, he seems to be saying, this is your world.

We have it within our power to begin the world over again. We begin bombing in five minutes. Static, unending. Five minutes to midnight. I am weapons of mass destruction.

God help me, I scream, and the men around me drag at my gown, pulling at me, trying to calm me down.

There's a woman there, and I think it may be Nancy, but I can't remember. He's taken that too. He's taken me and given me to men I do not know and whose words I cannot countenance.

This is my world.

God help me! God help America!

Cygnus

“I was hoping this could wait, gentlemen,” O5-1 said, sitting back in his chair and sighing heavily.

“I was afraid that was what this was…” replied Eleven, running her fingers over her ear, pushing her hair back. “Are we sure we want to do this? There’s a good chance that the ramifications could be far further stretching than we originally considered.”

“Perhaps, but then, we’d also run the risk of something worse. Stagnation is always better than deterioration. I wake up, look at the notes, and realize that I’ve got new memories… New things that I’ve done that I couldn’t have. I just… couldn’t.”

Three glanced up, his face ashen. “I… Do any of you remember me… being Hitler?” he asked.

Seven raised his hand, nodding a little bit to the ashen faced man, then slowly lowered it. “Just as much as I remember recruiting Thirteen,” he said, jerking his head toward the other end of the table.

One glanced up at the room, his assembled friends and family, everyone who had meant anything to him for the past century. “We’re in agreement then?” he asked. “In spite of the consequences?”

Everyone sat silently.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s update our records…”

Additional Information On Protocol ZK-001-Alpha

MEMETIC KILL AGENT ENGAGED. THAUMIEL INITIATIVE ACTIVATED.

Tales D

D-2000

From: Foundation Global Administration, Requisitions Division
To: Researcher Byzant
Subject: Approval of D-Class request for SCP-4932

Researcher Byzant,
Your request for 1,250 D-Class personnel for use in testing with SCP-4932 has been approved. The aforementioned quantity of D-Class personnel will be imported from Site 18 to Bio-Site 84 immediately. You will be notified when the requested quantity has arrived at Alice Springs, Australia.

F.G.A Requisitions Division

Howard Byzant leaned back in his chair once he had finished reading the e-mail.

“What?” he muttered to himself. He had needed the D-Classes and the approval would make it considerably easier to learn how the anomaly in question functioned – break some eggs to make an omelette and all that. What stunned Howard was that the *number* of D-Classes he had asked for had been approved, were being flown or shipped over from some foreign country like morbid livestock, and that he had sent the request for them just the previous day.

Howard remained motionless in his seat as the superficial absurdity of this response sunk in. He would soon have a small army of expendable prisoners at his beck and call, all to be sent to what would almost definitely be their death for no higher purpose than to record how they died, and how long it took. One and a quarter thousand souls – more people than there were in Australia with a sentence of life imprisonment – who would have their idea of normalcy shattered briefly before their bones followed suit.

It was then that Researcher Byzant leaned forward again and began typing up a group e-mail to his colleagues assigned to SCP-4932. They had to prepare for the arrival of the D-Classes, finalise their brief accommodation and obtain other research materials that they needed to get before testing begun. Though he felt a brief empathy for them, Researcher Byzant first and foremost had an allegiance to the Foundation and by extension would be expected to do whatever was needed to gain the information they sought.

Besides, they were D-Classes. D-Classes were only taken from death row, so they were screwed anyway. The only exception was when Protocol 12 was enacted, and the Foundation hadn't been that desperate for expendables since the early eighteen-hundreds; every single one of the 1,250 humans Researcher Byzant was about to receive had obviously done some horrendous things during their lifetime to end up where they were. They would deserve whatever fate they got.

"Good morning, D-53682. My name is Dr. Amanda Clarke, and I will be conducting your psychological evaluation today." Her voice was warm and welcoming, but conveyed a false sense of empathy. She'd spoken to hundreds of thousands of D-Classes, all with relatively similar stories of breaking the law repeatedly or severely and ending up here, and with each subsequent interview she became more and more jaded to them. Dr. Clarke didn't really care about any of the men and women she spoke to anymore. She'd already predicted the response of the downbeat looking man before her, before he had even entered the room.

"My name is Jesse Ball." He was unhappy with the soulless number that had become his new identity. Amanda briefly looked down at the sheet on the clipboard she held, and ticked the box confirming he was still attached to his former name. It was always the first to be ticked.

"Very well then Jesse. How has your day been?" She ignored the majority of his response, paying heed to only the small packets of information that she needed and drowning out the rest with how she felt about her own day. She had already spoken to over a dozen D-Classes today, all with the same story of innocence and pleas for

help. D-53682 was no different. Dr. Clarke ticked the box designating that he was uncomfortable with his new life. She ticked the box designating him as insistent upon their innocence. She ticked the box denoting he – rightfully – had no control of his life anymore.

The assessment only went for an hour, but for Dr. Clarke it took an eternity. Several years had surely passed as this man cried and sobbed and begged to be let free, or be sent back to Site 18 in the states. Australia was so far from his home, too far he claimed.

“Can I at least send a letter to my mother? She lives back at the farm, she would be worried about where I’d gone…” he begged.

“Of course. We’ll do our best to make sure that she gets your letter, Jesse.” Accepting the handwritten note from the man, she stood and escorted him to the door of the room and into the care of a guard waiting outside. Returning to her seat, Dr. Clarke dropped the note into the nearby garbage chute as she pulled the filled form from the clipboard, filing it into a tray marked ‘completed’. The letter would never reach anyone – none of them ever did. Anyone who cared about these criminals had already been told what they needed to think, that they had been killed in a prison fight and disfigured beyond recognition. In desperation and grief, families and friends wouldn’t even notice that the few stray limbs they were burying in a coffin weren’t human, just animal meat and bones moulded into vaguely humanoid shapes.

Taking a brief drink from her glass of water, Dr. Clarke pressed the button on her desk that signalled for the next to enter as she attached a blank form to her clipboard. The next to walk in was a woman with a downbeat vibe about them. Dr. Clarke didn’t bother trying to identify their race or ancestry; she hardly even registered the woman had dark skin. As thoughtlessly as before, she spoke.

“Good morning, D-53683,” she spoke as she filled the designation into the form. “My name is Dr. Amanda Clarke, and I will be conducting your psychological evaluation today.” Again, the empathy and warmth in her voice was fake, perfected over the countless evaluations she had conducted. As before, she had already predicted the response, and only paid heed to their first

name.

“My name is Jesse Ball,” she responded, pathetically trying to resist the impeding numerical designation being forced upon her. Dr. Clarke knew that just like all those before her, and all those to follow, D-53683 would fail.

“Very well then Jesse. How has your day been?” A vague sense of déjà vu washed over Amanda, but was quickly overlooked as little more than the consequence of this line of work as she ticked the first box. Amanda’s mind wandered elsewhere as her interviewee spoke, planning the small remainder of her day outside of her job. *What’ll I have for dinner?* she wondered as the woman before her babbled on.

Just like all the other D-Classes, D-53683 was just another expendable, death-row criminal. People didn’t end up on death row for minor crimes, so if she was here, she deserved whatever she got. Any attention paid to her was attention wasted.

And just like the previous interview, D-53683’s handwritten letter to their worrying, farm-life mother was discarded thoughtlessly into the trash as Dr. Clarke filed the form away and fetched another.

With a muffled thud and a pair of clicks, the next D-Class was buckled and chained to their seat. With no further action being needed to restrain them, Agent Don Blake marched back up the carpeted aisle past the forty-odd others similarly restrained to their seat, and fetched the next one. Unfortunately today was one of the hotter days that the region experienced, and even though the trip over the tarmac back to the plane was short, the scorching heat from below was unbearable.

Unlike the last one, this chained prisoner was fully compliant to the leading arm of Agent Blake. The mildly beefy man had visibly been broken in spirit long before he had arrived at this airstrip in Wyoming, the only sound confirming his existence being the clinking of chains and the thuds of his footsteps. Up the stairs they went, past the other restrained prisoners, all the way to a vacant seat. The man, already knowing what was wanted of him, preemptively moved

forward and positioned himself into the seat to ease the act of padlocking the chains to the seat, and similarly locking the seat buckle around their waist. Agent Burke turned and once again exited the plane, returning to the group of waiting deportees outside.

Don didn't know much about the flight itself, just what he needed to know. The hundred-strong D-Classes had arrived at Jackson, Wyoming from some vague site north of the town, and were bound for Alice Springs, Australia to disappear off to another vague site. Don chuckled. *From nothing, to nothing,* he thought to himself as he grabbed the scrawny arm of the next to be seated. For this part of their journey, the passengers were as close to nought as a human could reasonably get within this digital age - nobody knew where they came from, nobody knew where they were going, nobody knew who they were. Here and now, they didn't even have their D-Class designations. Here, they were little more than 'male' and 'female'.

Well, except this one. Agent Burke tightened his grip on the prisoner he was escorting, feeling the tug of their repeated attempts to walk off in another direction. This one in particular seemed insistent on being an annoyance to staff, but not quite annoying enough to need disciplining. Feeling the tug of the man's divergent path again, Agent Burke yanked him roughly back into the right direction. There was always the odd one out, the one who persisted in rebelling any way they could. They probably kept going even when they arrived at their destination - Don couldn't help but wonder how many got themselves killed ignoring orders. He wondered how long this one would last.

There was a brief, strong pull in the direction of the prisoner, followed by nothing. Burke must've softened his grip as he idled in his thought, and the escapee had taken the opportunity to break free and make a run for it. He was running down the airstrip as fast as his feet could carry him, away from the plane and the guards. Agent Burke barked a command to stop before he gave chase, but tired quickly - the heat belted him from above, from below, and the thick security gear he wore made it even less bearable.

"Fuck it," he mumbled to himself, pulling his handgun out of its holster and steadying his aim. The sound of three small explosions pierced the silence, followed by the fleeing prisoner stumbling and

hitting the ground. Satisfied, Agent Burke turned away from the plane and back to the group of shocked prisoners as he holstered his gun.

"Any more of you expendable fucks want to die here?" he barked, angered by the brief event that had just transpired. He wasn't angry that he'd been forced to shoot the man, no - that would imply Agent Burke felt empathy for the death-row convicts. No, he was angry because now they were one passenger short. He'd have to get ahold of a replacement at some point, which would mean finding out where these lot came from, which means lots of red tape…

Don rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration. *Fucking inmates. Why can't they just listen…* He thought, grabbing the arm of the next in line, and escorting them to the plane.

The sound of whirring machinery and liquids flowing through pipes finally died down, the sources of such sounds finally turning off after being left running for several days. Readings on gauges subsided to normal levels, lights turned on or off on consoles, and to signal that everything had successfully switched back to standby mode a collection of synchronized alarm bells briefly sounded.

Sitting in one of several control rooms scattered throughout the complex, a particularly stout man relaxed in his seat. Taking a drag from his lit cigarette, the man looked up at the multiple screens positioned around his seat, glancing at them for a few moments each before moving to the next. He watched as thousands of naked, dazed adults stumbled out of pods in countless rooms spread throughout the facility, being collected up by a small legion of men and herded into waiting vehicles.

“Poor sods,” he mumbled to himself, “no idea what’s goin’ on, no control about what’ll happen.” He was referring to the fact that every single one of these humans were mentally idle, their lack of free thought making them easy to handle. Some of them collapsed where they stood, unable to survive with the malformed organs they had. They were simply thrown onto a separate vehicle and counted; twenty-seven had died. In front of the man, a screen lit up with the portrait of a human silhouette.

"Report." O5-11 spoke with an ambiguous, synthesised voice. The seated man was obliged to respond.

"Monthly production has concluded. One hundred thousand produced today, with a loss of twenty-seven immediately post-production. Remaining ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and seventy-three are sufficient to fulfil monthly requirement, and are being transported to the surface for dissemination." His voice was rough and wheezy, years of constant smoking having damaged his throat and lungs beyond repair. Whether he would suffocate or die from cancer he didn't know, but neither did he care.

"Were the fixes implemented?" asked O5-11, overlooking the abhorrently bad health of the project manager.

"Yes. Personality components should be more randomised now, and the Haemophilia glitch should be fixed now." Feeling an imminent coughing fit, the seated man whipped out a handkerchief and held it to his face as the fit struck. After a minute it subsided and, ignoring the new splotch of blood and phlegm, the handkerchief was returned to its pocket.

"Sorry. There were no losses in staff this month, so no replacements were required. We've noticed some of the machines are in need of replacement, which we'll be doing before production resumes next month."

"You should stop smoking," said O5-11, apparently ignoring the report in favour of the stout man's health. The latter in turn took another drag from his cigarette before continuing.

"What's the worst it could do, kill me?" His laughter was quickly interrupted by a coughing fit, his body struggling to process enough air. Once it subsided, he answered less humorously. "The carcinogens will make the products more authentic. In this day and age, it's pretty tough to grow up without being exposed to something lethal. It'll be distributed when I die." A brief silence ensued before O5-11 responded.

"Very well. Continue." And with that, the screen went blank once more. The seated man returned his attention to the screens in time

to see the first group of products depart on a freight elevator bound for the surface.

He was glad he was who he was. Others might find it miserable, stuck watching everything that occurred in a five hundred thousand tonne machine hidden beneath Yellowstone, spending only an hour or two at the surface each week. But from the day he had been birthed by the machine, he had no choice in the matter - it was either this, or be given a false history and be conditioned into a convict, like those on the screen. He was much happier repairing and maintaining the most important machine ever forged by mankind, the same machine which birthed him, than being doomed to die within a month and get blended back into the biological soup he had been made from.

He had necessarily been conditioned to an extent, though. The Overseers had to be sure that he wouldn't defect to an enemy or go on some mad rampage, and so they had conditioned him with a strong sense of duty to protect his iron mother, as well as an undying loyalty to the Foundation. But some aspects of his personality had developed on their own, filling the vacuum around the conditioning; the most notable of this was his choice of name, Tukay Dee. Not particularly original considering he was a fourth-model worker, but it was enough to set him apart from the disposables he exported.

The toxic yet soothing smoke of the cigarette once again entered his lungs. The name signified his higher purpose, to protect and help rather than simply die. It showed he had earned any empathy he received - not for what he was, but *who* he was. He expected no different from his creations, and so they were given their phantom lives of villainy and crime. To avoid the misguided empathy of a researcher falling upon them simply for where they came from, causing hesitation at whether they truly deserved the imminent death before them. The chains of ethics would hold the Foundation back, constricting and killing it.

So a necessary evil was added, justified by placing it in the control of Tukay Dee. Rather than use the finite quantity of death row inmates to try fill the infinite requirement the Foundation had only to fail within a month, an endless supply of recycled convicts were

made, bound to the caste of persecution and death they bore in their previous life, unable to ever escape from the cycle to nirvana.

Well, no cycle was ever perfect and the reuse of the Foundation's D-classes was no different. Tukay Dee turned his attention to a monitor showing one of the lifts, from which a dump truck piled high with purportedly uncontaminated human corpses was emerging. The Foundation had dangerous, anomalous biohazards within its care, some of which needed sacrifices to understand. In a warped way the ones killed by these diseases were the lucky ones, the ones whose bodies broke free from the cycle and could truly be at rest. Decontaminating a decaying corpse was expensive and difficult, so they were incinerated rather than sent back to the phantom "Site 18."

The machine had a critical purpose which it had to be prepared to fulfil at any time. It had to be able to resurrect the human race from extinction, reset the clock in the wake of the rapture. Regardless of what contaminant was floating within the biological soup, the machine could fulfil its purpose - but the entirety of humanity would be infected as a consequence, and a lot of the biohazards the Foundation studied would severely stint, if not exterminate the human race, if such were to happen. Tukay Dee hadn't been made paranoid, but he had developed it as a trait. Even though it wasn't supposed to be his job, he made sure to check every single corpse that came in. Just to be sure.

Leaning back in his seat, Tukay Dee watched the workers go to work as he smoked his cigarette.

At the same time, Tukay Dee hefted a rotting corpse from the mountainous pile, glad he had developed the bulging muscles that came with his arduous, physical work. He briefly paused as he watched himself escorting a batch of fresh humans onto an empty freight elevator.

Elsewhere in the factory, Tukay Dee retrieved a wrench from his toolbox as he set about unfastening the bolts connecting a faulty Bokanovsky divider to the rest of **his mother**.

D-5111

Day 1

D-5111 woke with a sudden jolt, and a splitting headache. As she rapidly blinked, her eyes adjusting to the low light of her environment, she took the time to look around. She was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. She was lying on the bottom bunk in what appeared to be some kind of dorm, the room packed with bunks and about 20 other terrified looking women. Already the room was filling with panicked voices, shouting, and crying. The noise made D-5111 realize she had no idea who or where she was.

D-5111 bolted upright, her eyes wide as she began to hyperventilate.

Ohfuckohfuckohfuckohfuck…

D-5111's mind scrambled as she tried to get her bearings.

Thinkthinkthinkthinkthink

Then, as if a switch had been flipped, a foothold appeared.

Patricia Walker…

She blinked and her breathing slowed.

I'm Patricia Walker…

From that mental starting block several more pieces fell in place.

I'm… 38. I was born in… Eugene… no… Corvallis, Oregon. I've been a Registered Nurse for… 15… 16 years…

Like water cooling to ice, her identity solidified within her mindscape.

I've been married for 18 years… my husband's a pediatrician… I

have two children… A teenage son and a young daughter… their names… what are their names…

Patricia closed her eyes and concentrated. Name after name flew past her, but none seemed to fit.

Jason, Johnathan, June, Marco, Emily, Taylor, Billy, Cecil, Darren, Michele, Derek, Eric, Sasha, Jacob, Daniel, Troy…

The PA in the room pinged, ripping Patricia from the stream of names flowing through her mind.

“Attention!” A masculine voice called over the PA. “All D-Class personnel, please report to your dormitory common rooms for orientation.”

In the corner of the room, a door hissed open. One by one, the various women around Patricia cautiously filed out into the adjoining room. Patricia got to her feet, and shuffled along with the herd, ending up in a large room packed with men and women in similar orange jumpsuits.

“Ah, yes,” a voice called from the front of the room, over the din of close to 50 confused people mumbling to one another. Patricia’s eyes turned to the front of the room. Standing between two stoic guards was a slender woman with short blond hair. Next to her was a pudgy man in a lab coat, his eyes obscured by thick glasses.

“Your attention, please,” the woman called again, but the murmuring continued to fill the room. Eventually the woman sighed and pulled a small remote like object out of her pocket, and pressed a button.

The room was filled with a high pitched squeal, all eyes turning to the woman, and all falling silent as they covered their ears. The woman gave another sigh.

“That’s better,” she said. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I’m Morrison, the D-Class warden for this unit. This gentleman beside me is Dr. Tanner, our unit physician. By now you probably all have a lot of concerns and questions. Where am I? How did I get here? What happens next? Bear with me for the next half an hour or so,

and I can promise you answers. This is your D-Class orientation."

Morrison gave a small unenthused smile before she continued.

"Let's start with the simple stuff. Where are you? Right now you are about two kilometers underground in a facility run by a large international research organization dedicated to the preservation of humanity. The research and field work done by this group has saved countless lives the world over, and expanded our understanding in every scientific field. Which brings me to answer why you are here."

"On occasion, the research done by this organization requires human test subjects, and human interaction with our objects of study. As such, through an impartial lottery, you were all selected and brought here. For the next month each of you will be participating in one or more experiments. At the end of your time, your memory is to be wiped and you'll be returned to where ever we found you. During that time, you will live here under my watch."

Morrison scanned the crowd before her.

"I run a tight ship in my D-Class unit, but I think you'll find me to be more than accommodating. Together we'll get you through your time, get you out, and get you back to your lives. Am I clear?"

The crowd responded with a choir of yelled questions and shouted demands. Morrison rolled her eyes and pressed the button on her small remote yet again. The crowd fell silent in the face of the high pitched squeal.

"Yeah, we're going to be a little more organized than that, folks," Morrison replied. "Right now you will each report back to your bunk where you will wait for Dr. Tanner and his aides to perform your orientation physical. After that, my associates will be here to answer your questions in an *ORGANIZED* fashion, first come first served."

"And what if I fucking don't!" A man stepped forward from the crowd. He was bald and easily stood two feet taller than Morrison. "You can't keep us here! We're not prisoners, you have no right to…"

One of the guards quickly closed the distance to the man and

silenced him with a stun baton. The room fell silent as the guard quickly threw the man over his shoulder and took him away.

“Alright then,” Morrison replied. “Now that we are all on the same page, let’s get started.”

The various men and woman, or D-class, as Morrison called them, began to head back to their bunks. Along the way, Patricia turned to look back at Morrison and Dr. Tanner. She was shocked to find the two of them already watching her. Morrison smiled and gave a nod of familiarity.

"Humanity thanks you for your service," Dr. Tanner said, and injected her with small syringe…

A brief mental image flashed across Patricia's consciousness. She blinked, and shook her head. Dr. Tanner and Morrison still were staring. Patricia quickly turned away and hurried back to her bunk.

Day 5:

Patricia sat in the dormitory common room at a table, along with two of her fellow D-Class. The first was a young man in his early twenties with long red hair and a mark on his left eyebrow where there had once been a piercing. His jumpsuit was labeled D-2960, he spoke with lisp, and his name was Derek. The second was a short, stocky woman in her late forties with dark skin, and a shaved head. Her name was Annette, though her jumpsuit was labeled D-3106, and she remained silent, nodding occasionally as if to grant her approval of everything.

On the table before Patricia was a sheet of paper with a string of names written upon it:

> ***Husband:*** *Sid, Sebastian, Sean, Dean, Derek, Rick, Rich, Ray, Roy, Roland,* ***Nolan***
>
> ***Son:*** *Jeff, Jason, Jacob, Jake, Jack, Mack, Michele, Mitch, Morgan*
> *Bradly, Brice, Blake, Bobby, Robby, Ron, Tom, Tucker*

Daughter: *Cecil, Cierra, Sarah, Sasha, Sandra, Sam, Sally, Sydney*
Kaitlyn, Katie, Kara, Lara, Lisa, Lilly, Lana, Leslie
Diane, Anne, Anna, Alana, Alison, Elise, Erica

Patricia chewed on the end of her pen and sighed.

“Still having memory problems, dear?” Annette asked, looking over Patricia’s list.

“I just…” Patricia sighed again, “I’ve finally got my husband’s name back, and am narrowing down on my son’s… but I just can’t zero in on my daughter…”

She put the pen down with a defeated chuckle.

“If she knew I forgot her name she’d never forgive me…”

“You’ll get it in time,” Annette replied. “I know you will. Besides, not like you have much else to do in here.”

“Yeah…”

Patricia frowned as she looked at her list. Her memory was like a half finished puzzle. She could tell what the image was, but a lot of the detail was still missing. She could remember how much Nolan loved his job, that putting smiles on the faces of children always put a smile on his, but drew a blank as to what his face looked like. She recalled how he’d call her by pet names, but couldn’t remember what those names were. She remembered that her son was in high school, but not the grade he was in. That he was a theatre techie, but not the most recent show he was in. She knew her daughter loved video games, but not her favorite one, that she was into music but not what her favorite band was. Patricia knew that she was a floor nurse, but not the name of the hospital she care gave at.

Her head slid down to rest in her arms. There it remained for close to ten minutes, hiding the fact that tears were forming in her eyes.

The door to the common room then opened, and all eyes turning to watch as three D-class who entered. The one at the front looked rather shell shocked, while the one at the back avoided all eye

contact and heading straight to her bunk room. The group that had left for testing that morning had originally consisted of four individuals.

“Oh shit…” Derek whispered. “Jane isn’t back… that makes three so far… What the hell are they doing…”

“I’m sure they are fine, sweetie,” Annette replied. “Probably just a few bumps and bruises. Science can be dangerous, I’ve been told.”

“We’re all going to die down here!” Derek returned. “You don’t kidnap people and force them to help you if it’s just baking soda volcanoes. One by one, we’re all dead.”

All eyes in the common room were now on Derek. A guard was approaching to end the disturbance, but stopped when Derek held up a hand to indicate that he would cool it.

“You might as well say goodbye to everyone now, because when your name comes up on the test list you’re gone,” Derek whispered and then walked off.

Patricia watched him go with a frown, then looked over to the large testing schedule posted on the far wall. Her and five others were scheduled to participate in two days. Patricia looked back at her notepad.

"Any luck so far?" A security guard asked, a warm smile on his face. Patricia shook her head in reply.

"Shame," the guard said with a shrug. "Keep at it though, I'm sure you'll get there."

Another image flashed through Patricia's mind and vanished. She cringed slightly then opened her eyes. She sighed, picked up her pen, and continued to work on the names.

Day 7:

Patricia sat in a metal folding chair in what could best be described as a special kind of shooting range. Along the length of the range

were a series of ten alcoves, in six of these were D-class sitting in chairs. At the far end of the range, out of her sight, was a target. A man in a security officer's uniform was at the other end of the range. Two revolvers and a set of eighteen bullets were spread on the table in front of them. Patricia gave a weak smile and wave to the D-class in the alcove in front of her, a teenage boy, around her son's age.

"It's going to be okay…" she said softly to him. The boy gave a sharp nod. "Whats your name?"

"B-blake," he stuttered. Patrica nodded.

"Call me Pat," she replied and then chuckled. "Heh, you know, Blake is my son's name."

The boy gave a soft smile.

"We'll be fine, okay?" Patricia continued. "Understand?"

"Agent Wilson," a male voice said over the intercom. "Please load the object with the first set of ammunition, and fire at the target."

Silence filled the room for a few brief minutes, and was then interrupted by six shots fired in slow succession. Patricia opened her eyes and let out an unsteady breath. The boy across the aisle was keeping his eyes tightly closed, and was shaking nervously.

"Agent Wilson," the voice called again a few minutes later. "Please read the imprints on the second set of ammunition, and load the non-anomalous revolver."

"Gabriel, Sarah, Theodore, Emily, Blake, and Patricia," Agent Wilson called out.

Once again the room filled with silence, followed by another six shots in slow succession. Patricia gasped. The boy across the range was crying.

"It's going to be okay." Patricia mouthed through her shaking. "It's going to be okay!"

"Agent Wilson," the intercom blared a third time. "Please read the

imprints on the third set of ammunition, and load the object. Fire at the target again."

"Gabriel, Sarah, Theodore, Emily, Blake, and Patricia," Agent Wilson called out yet again.

Patricia and the boy locked eyes in the silence. Then the revolver fired.

Bang.

A muffled yell.

Bang.

A scream.

Bang.

A dull thud.

Bang.

A sharp yelp.

Bang.

Patricia watched as the boy across from here flew backwards, a large hole in his head. His chair tipped over with a loud clatter. Her mouth hung open.

"Oh god…"

Bang.

Patricia felt like a truck had run into her shoulder, and she too was knocked out of her chair. While the pain was immense, she couldn't make a sound. Instead she stared at the ceiling, wondering what exactly it was that had happened.

Before long, medical personnel were carrying her and three other D-class away in stretchers. Several men and woman in lab coats inspected the contents of the other alcoves, mixed expressions of

regret and unease upon their faces. Blood seeped into the main aisle.

"You're going to be alright," a medic said as a team carried Patricia away. "Just a scratch, we'll get you patched up.

This thought lingered on Patricia's mind for awhile. She couldn't hear what the medics around her were saying, though it seemed comforting. Eventually she closed her eyes. Then began to scream from the pain.

Day 13:

Patricia finished her recovery quickly, and had been returned to the D-class quarters as soon as she was deemed medically fit to resume testing. Upon her return she found that the initial crew of 60 was now down to 52. Annette had undergone some test that left her catatonic on her bunk, leaving Patricia and Derek alone at a table as she looked over her list of names.

> ***Husband:*** *Sid, Sebastian, Sean, Dean, Derek, Rick, Rich, Ray, Roy, Roland,* ***Nolan***
>
> ***Son:*** *Jeff, Jason, Jacob, Jake, Jack, Mack, Michele, Mitch, Morgan*
> *Bradly, Brice,* ***Blake****, Bobby, Robby, Ron, Tom, Tucker*
>
> ***Daughter:*** *Cecil, Cierra, Sarah, Sasha, Sandra, Sam, Sally, Sydney*
> *Kaitlyn, Katie, Kara, Lara, Lisa, Lilly, Lana, Leslie*
> *Diane, Anne, Anna, Alana, Alison, Elise, Erica*
> *Jane, Jill, Jesse, Jenifer, June, Juniper, Lilly, Lavender*
> *Maggie, Megan, Margaret, Melissa, Maria, Mary*
> *Sophie, Cindy, Candy, Lilly*

She drummed on the pad and paper with a small smile. Two down, one to go.

Bang!

The vision of the D-class boy's head exploding from a gunshot

wound blasted its way to the surface of her consciousness, then just as quickly vanished.

Patricia shook violently, one hand nearly snapping her pen in two, the other clinging to the edge of the table for life. She slowly opened her eyes and relaxed as the thought faded, realizing that Derek had been talking to her the whole time.

“I’m a goner…” Derek finished.

“How’s that?” She asked.

“One way or another, we’re all dead. The experiment they had you help on was a glorified execution. They melted the skin off Haley’s face, and I think Donna said that Annette was basically sucked molecule by molecule into a hole in the wall, then reassembled across the room. You don’t kidnap sixty people, lock them up 2 miles underground, and just let them go…”

Patricia grabbed Derek’s hand and squeezed.

“We’re going to be alright,” she said. “Its just going to take a little luck. We’ll get out.”

Derek scoffed.

“Maybe for you…”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Six of us go into an experiment and all but one of them receive serious, if not fatal, gunshot wounds. Your luck is a step above mine.”

Derek looked at her with tired eyes.

“Can you just… do me a favor?”

Patricia nodded. Derek handed her a folded piece of paper.

“If you do make it out… can you give that to my boyfriend… just some closure…”

“Of course.”

“Thanks,” he replied with a weak smile. He then stood, stretched and walked away. Patricia watched him go with a sad frown and turned back to her list of names. She wearily scanned them and scanned them again. After a while she smiled. At last she remembered her daughter’s name.

"Finally get it?" Dr. Tanner asked with a small grin, they were completing their weekly counseling session.

"I did," she replied excitedly, showing him the name Lilly, circled on her list. "I finally did."

"Oh…" Patricia mumbled as this most recent flash danced out of her mind. She blinked and quietly looked around. Dr. Tanner was approaching the table.

"Afternoon, D-5111," he said. "Care to join me for your counseling session?"

Day 19:

Patricia stood in a largely empty testing chamber with two other D-class. As of two days prior, the last of the pieces had fallen into place within her mindscape, and she recalled who she was, and what it meant to be her.

She recalled her husband, Dr. Nolan Walker, the pediatrician who would sometimes affectionately call her Patty-cakes. She remembered her son, Blake, the theatre technician who had recently been made stage manager. She thought of her daughter, Lilly, and how she’d spend hours in the park near their house playing games on her Gameboy. The puzzle was complete, and she was terrified that it may fall to pieces again.

“All D-class, please pick up one of the candies on the table.”

A feminine voice over the intercom shattered Patricia’s self-reflection, and brought her attention back to the matter at hand. On the table at the center of the room were three bright pink and red

hard candies. Patricia looked to the others. One was the tall bald man who had been shocked by a guard on the first day of their confinement. The other was a slender androgynous person with short blond hair. Patricia shrugged and took a candy. The others followed in kind.

“Please consume the candy. Make sure to suck on it, and not bite it or swallow it whole.” The voice instructed over the intercom. The three D-class reluctantly complied. The candy itself tasted alright. Some kind of berry flavor that eluded certain description. Patricia ran it around the inside of her mouth, only stopping when the entire lozenge was gone. From the confused expressions on the faces of her peers, the other D-class had finished their candy as well.

“I mean… is that it?” The man asked. He looked toward the mirror along the far wall of the room. “Hello? What now?”

“Oh shit…”

Patricia turned to the androgynous D-class to see them looking at their hands, their eyes wide in fear. Red bumps had begun to rapidly cover their body. Her years of nursing and being married to a pediatrician allowed Patricia recognized it at once. Varicella. She looked to the bald man to see that he too had begun to break out.

“Oh fuck! Jesus Christ!” The man began to scratch at himself furiously, dancing around the room like a marionette. The androgynous D-class was viciously picking at themselves in a corner, screams of pain mixing with screams of terror. Patricia looked down at her hands. She had yet to break out.

“Why not you?” The man shouted and began to cross the room toward her. “What did you do? Why not you?”

The man threw her to the ground before she could say “I don’t know.”

Guards entered the room and quickly subdued the man, escorting both him and the androgynous d-class out of the testing chamber, presumably to quarantine. A woman in a lab coat entered, still writing on her clipboard as she looked Patricia over.

“Immune?” The woman asked as a guard helped Patricia to her feet.

“Vaccinated, y-yes.” Patricia mumbled.

“Interesting…” The woman furiously scribbled on her clipboard. Then looked to the guard. “Take her back to Tanner and tell him we need to have a physical done.”

The guard nodded, and gestured for Patricia to follow him out of the room.

"You've got some luck, I'll give you that," the guard said, leading her back to the D-class dorms. She was covered in a thick paste, the remnants of the previous experiment.

"Guess if you hadn't been standing where you were, you'd have suffocated as well."

Patricia cringed, her hand brushing off a thick paste that was not there. When she opened her eyes she found herself standing in front of an exam room door. The guard gave her a small nod as he watched her pass the threshold.

Day 24:

Patricia and Derek stood within an enclosed clear plastic cage within a grassy field on the surface, along with nine other D-class. This was the final testing of the month for most of them. It was the first time any of them had seen the sun or plant life that entire month. Before them was a fenced in field. A similar cage of clear plastic sat open on the far side.

“Attention All D-Class,” a masculine voice called from an intercom within the cage. “In three minutes the doors to your enclosure will open. At that time, cross the field and enter the enclosure on the other side.”

Patricia felt Derek squeeze her hand.

“We’ll be alright…. Right?”

Patricia nodded. “Yeah… we’ll be alright.”

The door slid down and the D-class began to walk across the field, the enclosure door snapping up behind them. There was a slight breeze and the sun felt warm on their skin. A small, cautious smile came to Patricia’s face.

“So far, so good.”

When they crossed the halfway point of the field, a loud pinging became audible, followed by the sound of a circular saw running. Eleven sets of eyes turned to the source, a hovering disk with a rotating blade around its circumference. A small green eye could be seen watching them from the devices surface. A faded emblem of a **falcon** was printed below this eye.

“HALT,” the device said in a computerized voice. “RETURN ALONG YOUR PREVIOUS COURSE.”

The D-class looked to one another nervously, then back to the device. One of them, a slender girl no older than twenty, took a step backwards, crossing into the far half of the field. The devices eye turned red and flew forward with a high pitched whine. Patricia blinked. There was a sharp gasp and a splatter of blood. The girl’s upper and lower halves rested in two different locations. The disk flew upwards, taking off a man’s head along the way. The crowd quickly became a mob of yelling, flailing people, each scattering and sprinting towards the open cage at the end of the field.

Patricia and Derek zigged and zagged across the field, the two sticking together and occasionally looking back. The disk took out a man’s legs from under him, sending his upper body sailing backwards. A woman near him tripped on the blood, the device severing her in length wise upon the grass. Patricia snapped her head forward and wheezed as she felt herself losing speed. They were closing in on their destination.

She and Derek then slid to a stop, a young man in front of them who nearly made it into the cage was struck from behind and carried for several yards before splitting in twain. The device then turned and appeared to gaze at the five remaining D-class that stood before it.

“Fuck off man…” Derek nervously laughed.

The disk sprang forward again and the D-class resumed their scattered sprint.

Patricia’s breath was ragged as she closed in on the cage. The sound of screams behind her indicated at least one of her peers was rather unlucky. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Derek sprinting in from the other direction. The whirling of the disk grew louder. Patricia gave one last push with her legs and jumped toward the cage. Derek did the same. She hit the ground with a heavy thud, and turned to see Derek had fallen just short, and was crawling forward as fast as he could. Patricia reached out a hand, grabbing his and began to pull him toward her.

A heavy metallic whine, and a loud bang.

Patricia fell backwards into the cage with Derek’s forearms in her grip, the young man toppling inside with her, the disk colliding outside with the ground.The disk eyed them for several moments, hovering in front of the elevator entrance. Its eye then turned green and it gently floated away.

Derek and her crawled to the back of the cage where the looked out over the nine corpses left behind in the afternoon sun. Eventually Derek began laughing. A shrill nervous laugh. Patricia turned to him to see tears in his eyes, as he gestured to the carnage before them. A few moments later, she began laughing as well. The elevator whined as it carried them back down into the earth.

Upon their arrival in the facility, Derek and Patricia were swarmed by medics. While the two of them could tell that they were being spoken to, their laughing drowned out any incoming stimuli. The two of them were placed on stretchers and carried away, passing a group of horrified looking scientists, some pale with fear, one crying, and a last one being yelled at by a furious man in a suit. Patricia could make out the words "slaughter" and "ethics" between bouts of laughter.

The laughter eventually turned to tears, as Derek and Patricia were carried away to separate exam rooms.

Day 31:

Patricia sat in an exam room, having just finished her exit physical. Her eyes were slightly glazed over as she stared at the floor. Of the 60 D-class that had started in her cohort, only 40 remained to see the final day. Of those, at least 20 had sustained serious physical or mental damage.

Hidden in her shoe was Derek's note. He maintained that she should hold on to it in the event that something should happen to him on the way out. She doubted it would survive whatever it was that these people did once they wiped her memory, but she promised her friend she would deliver it, and so she had to try. On her lap was the notepad with the list of names.

Dr. Tanner returned to the room, looking at a large folder on his clipboard. There were several small vials held tightly in his other hand. Patricia watched him tiredly. Eventually he placed the clipboard down on a side table and gave her a soft smile.

"Congratulations D-5111," he said. "You made it. As we discussed during orientation, we are going to inject you with a chemical compound called an amnestic. It will remove any memory of this month from your mind. Then you'll be free to go."

Patricia nodded.

"Powerful stuff."

"Very," Tanner replied. "It's not even the most powerful variety."

He then handed her the folder. Patricia eyed it curiously.

"Whats this?"

"Debriefing," Tanner said with a sigh. "For however brief a time it will be, at the end of each month we present the D-class with summaries of the outcomes of the experiments they participated in. Its a little watered down, and obviously we won't tell you everything. Still, you deserve to know what the sacrifice was for."

Patricia looked through the the folder's contents. A fair amount of it went over her head, she was no scientist, but she managed to get the gist of what was being said. Important discoveries made in such areas as "Anomalous projectile trajectory," "Spontaneous virogenisis," and the capabilities of the "Lanner Series Security Drone."

"Got plans on your release?" Tanner eventually asked when she put the folder down.

“Return to my family…” Patricia said softly. “Hope that I never remember this horrible month again.”

“I can assure you that you will not,” said Tanner as he collected the notepad off her lap. “I’m afraid I’ll need to confiscate this, though.”

Patricia remained silent as she watched Tanner prepare the syringe and clean a spot on her arm. A few seconds later, the various shots had been injected, and Tanner had bandaged the wound.

“So how does this work?” Patricia asked as she rubbed the injection site gently with a finger.

“In about one to five minutes you’ll fall asleep. When you wake up your memories of the past month will be gone. Pretty simple.”

“Can I ask you a question then?”

“Shoot.”

“I’m not really going back to my family, am I?”

Dr. Tanner remained silent, he kept his attention on the clipboard on which he was writing.

“I figured as much…” Patricia sighed and laid herself down on the table.

“Humanity thanks you for your service,” Tanner finally answered as Patricia felt her eyelids become heavy.

“Fuck off…” Patricia mumbled, and finally fell asleep.

Dr. Tanner returned to the office he and Morrison shared. Under his arm was a basket of all the items the guards had confiscated from the surviving D-class. He sighed as he sat down at his desk, and began to sort the various paraphernalia. Morrison watched him from her desk across the room.

“Another month, another cohort,” she commented with a sigh. “How’d the recycling go?”

“Survivors are on their cots, awaiting orientation in the morning,” Tanner replied. He placed D-2960’s note in a small Ziploc bag and that was labeled “Notes to D-5111.” An additional 6 such notes rested in the bag.

“This is, what, 12 consecutive months for 5111?”

“Thirteen…”

Tanner placed Patricia’s notepad into a separate Ziploc labeled “D-5111 lists.”

“I’ve asked the other D-class Wardens,” Morrison continued, “She’s got the old record beat by about five months, its truly amazing. One of the Ethic’s reps is going to be swinging by later. They don’t actually have a protocol in place for when the D-class hit the one-year mark. Its… pretty impressive. Barely a scratch on her.”

Tanner paused and then nodded

“Do you still have Kerrigan’s extension?”

Morrison froze and rose an eyebrow.

“Yeah… why?”

“Thirteen months as a D-class, barely a scratch on her. I think that warrants an inquiry by someone in Ana-Hums.”

"That still doesn't answer the question," Morrison snickered. "We've had plenty of D's with obscene luck before, you never had Kerrigan's crew look at them until now."

"Well, chances are that D-5111's going to be a little D-class energizer bunny, and keep going and going until the end of time. Its inhumane to keep on trying to feed someone to wolves this long… let alone a mother of two. If she's made into a skip at least, then she's not being prodded into the mouth of an eldritch horror every few days."

"D-5111 has children?" Morrison chuckled. "Huh…"

"Christ, do you even read the D-class files?" Tanner's brow furrowed in disgust.

"Do you?"

"Every last one," Tanner replied sharply. "Those people deserve to have at least one person know their story. Guess that's not you."

Morrison's expression became flat and she sank back into her chair.

"Save me the lecture," she eventually replied. "I've been doing this job for fifteen years. I've seen over two thousand D's come through here. Lots of sob stories. Lots of innocents. Lots of orphaned kids. Lots of widowers and lots of widows. You want to know each one, be my guest. I'll tell you this, though, thats a fine way burn out."

Tanner and Morrison locked eyes for several seconds before Tanner finally shook his head and shrugged.

"Kerrigan's extension?" he asked.

Morrison read the digits out loud and shrugged.

"Its your time to waste, I suppose."

Day 1

D-5111 woke with a sudden jolt, and a splitting headache. As she rapidly blinked, her eyes adjusting to the low light of her environment, she took the time to look around. She was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. She was lying on the bottom bunk in what appeared to be some kind of dorm, the room packed with bunks and

about 20 other terrified looking women. Already the room was filling with panicked voices, shouting, and crying. The noise made D-5111 realize she had no idea who or where she was…

D-Class Orientation

Excuse me, please. If you would all just turn your attention… Okay, settle down now, I need to… If I could just have your-quiet! I said quiet! I said-will you all just please-I said-SHUT THE **FUCK UP!**

Ahem. Now that I have your attention, we may begin. I am Junior Assistant Researcher Doc-I SAID SHUT THE HELL UP! Okay, like I was saying, I will be leading your orientation today. Now, you may all be wondering where you are. That's classified. You may be wondering who we are. That is also classified. However, I *can* tell you that we are a form of a research facility.

As you may remember, one of our agents approached each and every one of you and gave you an offer. You could either wait out your term on death row, or you could volunteer to participate in our testing facilities for the span of one month. Obviously, you agreed to cooperate. This entails-what? What do you mean you didn't agree? We told you that if you participate, you're free to go at the end of the month, who wouldn't take a deal like-guard, excuse me, guard, please take him-yeah, that one-to the, yeah, the third door on the left-thank you. Like I said, if you can make it through the testing procedures, we-no, I don't hear any screaming. If you can make it through the testing procedures, we let you go at the end of the month. You know, provided you cooperate fully. Sounds like a good deal, right? Was there anyone else who didn't agree? Okay then, moving on.

Like I said, provided you can survive the entire month, you get to go free. No, of course it's not a death sentence. I-no, see, when I said "survive" I meant it like, "cooperate with us" you know? I mean, *yeah*, it's dangerous stuff, that's why we're using death row inmates. No, no, most of the stuff here is pretty harmless, I meant dangerous like, you know, the way a bomb is dangerous if you fuck around with it. I mean, you *will* be fucking around with it, but you should be pretty safe if you just do what we tell you. Worst thing that'll happen is your

toes will tingle a few minutes afterwards. Last batch of D-Class? Not a single one died, all got to go free at the end of the month. I was there, too. Watched'em scamper back into the wilderness myself. Like a bunch of adorable, homicidal kittens. Just do what we tell you and you'll get to go home to see your loving wife and kids. Well, not you. Says here you killed your wife and kids. Must have been awkward to explain to the in-laws, eh? Heh, no, I really don't want you to tell us how you did it, I can guess.

Right. At the end of this orientation you will be directed down the hall where you will get your numerical designation tattooed on your wrist and chest. This will be mostly painless, and once you-Hmm? Why your chest? Well, in the event of an explosion, it's most likely that it'll be the largest intact chunk of meat left.

Hahahaha! I'm joking! Of course I'm joking! Yes I'm sure! That is very, *very* unlikely to happen. We haven't had an explosion for the past two months! Ha, look at him! He thought I was serious! Heh heh, but, ah, no. You will actually be getting your designation tattooed on your chest. I was not joking about that. Well, if you want, you can get it removed at the end of the month. No, no charge at all. It's a pretty painless procedure, actually.

Okay, once you get your new tattoo, you will be escorted to D-Block Alpha-6. This will be your new dormitory; you will eat, sleep, and bathe there. No, you were spoiled in prison, you will not be getting your own cell. I don't even have my own office, and you want your own cell? Anyways, you will be under constant video surveillance to ensure no shenanigans. We don't want any of that funny jail-time business here; you shank someone, you will be escorted behind the chemical… back to death row. Pretty much, if you piss us off, you get sent back to death row. Yeah. Seriously. A month of testing, and you go free. Don't screw it up.

Okay, that pretty much wraps it up. Any questions? You, with the-good LORD, man, did you take a round of buckshot to the face? Yeah, your question. Sure, we have a fantastic team of doctors here, best in the world. Don't worry about your medical insurance here, it won't matter anyways. Next?

Uh… you, second to the back. No, it's too late to choose death row

over here, I don't know why you would want to in the first place. Well, you've got a giant swastika carved into your face, so I don't think you're the best at making life decisions.

One more… ahh… yes, you, the one missing the ear. That's not really a question. No, phrasing it to ask how many she can fit doesn't count as a question. You-my mother was a saint, if you say one more word-guard, please, if you could-there we go… No no, it's fine, I'll send the janitor down later. See? Just stay in line and cooperate. One month, and you're gone. Never have to see this place again. Really, that simple. Alright, the next batch of D's are coming down now, guards, if you could escort them out please. That's right, Alpha-6. Okay, thank you very much. Really, I don't care what he said, she was a saint. Yeah, let me know when this batch gets released this month, I want to watch.

Ahem. Welcome! I am Junior Assistant-really now, please, quiet down…

Da Capo al Fine

On her fifth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir looked down at the cake that her foster mother had baked for her and wished that her real parents had never died.

She blinked her eyes and found herself in a strange house, with a man and woman whom she had never met before in her life. The man was shouting at the woman, who wept and hugged herself tightly. There was a bruise high on her cheek, and she was rocking back and forth like a child as the man heaped abuses upon abuses on her, ranting and raving angrily.

On her sixth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir whimpered and covered her ears as she heard her mother scream and wished that she had never made the wish that she had made last year.

She blinked her eyes again, and found herself back at the foster home. It was her fifth birthday again, and her foster mother was waiting for her to blow out the candles.

She did so. This time, she decided to wish for a pony instead.

On her (second) sixth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir hugged her favorite stuffed pony and wished that she had ten thousand friends.

She blinked, and suddenly realized just how many people "ten thousand" really was. She wondered how she was going to find a cake big enough to feed them all.

Then she did have a cake big enough to feed all of her friends, but there were angry people outside her house trying to break down the walls and get a piece of her cake, because it was the only cake in the world and everyone else was hungry.

She blinked again, and she found herself back in her foster home,

looking down at the small, normal cake, and surrounded by her usual six so-called friends who really weren't.

She blew out the candles a second time, and this time, decided to wish for a fairy princess dress-up set.

On her seventh birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir wore her favorite princess tiara and blew out the candles. (Her favorite stuffed pony sat on top of her dresser, in a place of honor, but she'd outgrown carrying a stuffed animal everywhere she went.)

She didn't know what to wish for this time, so she didn't.

It was then that she saw the old man sitting at the foot of the table, where no one should have been. He had thinning, grey hair, and he smiled as he got to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane.

"Come with me," he said. "I think you're ready for your first lesson now."

She took his hand, and he took her away from the foster home and into a different world.

On her eighth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir learned about the Ways.

"They're the Places Between Places," Teacher explained. "They are how you get from the Places That Are to the Places That Could Have Been."

When he said that, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir realized exactly what he meant. She brushed her hand over the manhole in the middle of the Los Angeles intersection, and climbed through into a place filled with books and learning.

"Happy Birthday," the Teacher said. "Now it's time to get you your Library card."

On her ninth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir met The Fox.

Everyone always spoke of The Fox in all capitals. She wasn't sure how or why this was, or even how one could even convey capitals in normal speech, but they did.

The Fox was a tall, beautiful woman with eyes like daggers and teeth like knives. She smiled at Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir and licked her lips with a cruel, carnal hunger.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir wasn't afraid, though. No one could harm her while they were in the Library. The Docents wouldn't let them.

That wasn't true everywhere, though. Later, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir heard that The Fox had been shot by some people while she was trying to skin and eat people who, for some reason, liked to dress up as animals. Some people were very sad when they heard this had happened. "You see," Miss Midnight explained patiently, "even though she wasn't a very nice person, she was the Last Fox. It's always sad when something disappears from this world."

On her tenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir learned about mistakes.

She had been looking up at the sky and wondered what it would look like if it were pink instead of blue. And then it was.

In a panic, she tried to change it back to blue, but she could never get the color quite right. It was either too dark or too light, or it was too green or too purple, or too bright or too dark. She was in tears by the time The Teacher set things right again.

She expected to get scolded for nearly messing up the sky forever, but the Teacher was sympathetic. "We all do things like that sometimes," he explained. "The important thing is to learn how to set things right again."

Some men in black suits came a few days later, and they talked to The Teacher at length. The Teacher seemed upset by those visits, and he muttered to himself a lot. But in the end, it seemed that things worked out.

On her eleventh birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir met the Ukelele Man.

He came to the Library with a briefcase and some papers, and although everyone else in the Library didn't seem to like him, they left him alone. He sat down with her in one of the side rooms, and he asked many questions, and did many strange things, like asking her to pick up a pencil that he had knocked off the table himself, or asking her, very suddenly, how many friends she had.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir followed her Teacher's advice, and told the truth every time. She also picked up the pencil herself, because the Teacher had taught her that one should always try to be as ordinary as possible, whenever possible, because that caused less trouble for other people.

The Ukelele Man seemed pleased by this. He had a talk with the Teacher afterwards, and told her that she was a "Phase Two, Transitioning into Three with little chance of a Four." Whatever that meant. He also claimed that she had been designated "Response Level 1," and he patted her head and told her Happy Birthday.

The Teacher seemed very relieved once the Ukelele Man had left, and he gave her a hug and then they had cake with all her friends.

On her twelfth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir kissed a boy.

On her thirteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir decided to try being a boy and kissing a girl.

On his fourteenth birthday, Stefán Sigurrósson decided that he preferred being a girl, all things considered.

On her fifteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir started to wonder if this "sex" thing people talked about was really worth it.

Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir and the

very nice boy she'd kissed four years ago finally figured out the whole "sex" thing.

By her seventeenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had grown bored of this "sex" thing and decided to try all of the other deadly sins in order to see if they were really as fun as people seemed to think. She started with Pride.

Just before her eighteenth birthday, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had tried absolutely every single sin known to humanity (and a few that had not yet been discovered) and had grown bored of them all. She decided to try the virtues next, starting with Charity.

By the time she was nineteen, even virtue had grown boring for her, especially since it turned out to be a lot harder than expected. She could have waved her hand and done it easily, but her Teacher's lessons had driven home to her that something like that often caused more problems for the people who weren't like her than it was worth. So she decided to give up both virtue and vice and decided to try wisdom instead.

At around twenty years of age, Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir had learned everything that was possible to know, and started on the things that were Impossible.

She figured out the Impossible shortly before she turned twenty one. She toasted the beginnings of her research into the Things That Were Not with her first drink as a legal adult.

She was still wrestling with the Things That Were Not when she turned twenty two, and twenty three, and twenty five, and fifty, and seventy, and nine hundred, and twenty thousand, and four billion, and finally when time itself had ceased to hold meaning for her and a year was about as significant to her as the blink of an eye.

It was only as the last proton in the universe decayed, and nothing existed any more but an endless expanse of nothingness, that Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir finally reached the end of her searching and felt at peace.

It was both the next instant and an endless number of eternities later that Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir got bored. What was the point of knowing everything and nothing if there was nothing to do with it any more?

She searched around the infinite nothingness until she found a place that was a little less nothing than everything else. Here, she decided, she would start creating new everythings and new nothings to experience and learn about.

She clapped her nonexistent hands, and brought reality back into existence. Time, which had long since stood still like a stopped clock, began once more. Symmetry was broken, dividing what had been Pure Balance into What Is and What Is Not for a second-third-millionth-infinitive time.

She closed her metaphorical eyes and opened them after a trillion aeons, plus one year, to find herself being pulled from warmth and darkness into a world of cold light.

And that was how Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir spent her first birthday.

To my staff

portrait of your father

ATTENTION

THE **FOLLOWING PAGE** HAS BEEN LOCKED
PENDING INVESTIGATION

ACTIVITIES ON THIS PAGE ARE BEING TRACKED
AND RECORDED

Dr. Kondraki researching SCP-

Name: Dr. Kondraki

Security Clearance: Level 4, Special Permissions

Occupation: Administrator, Director

Site of Operations: Site 17

SCP Files Authored:
SCP-396 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Roget**)
SCP-408 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-250 (Current Project Head: **Researcher Voct**)
SCP-295 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-330 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-336 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Vang**),
SCP-515-ARC Pending declassification per Acting Director Escobar
SCP-252-ARC Pending forced reassignment
SCP-122 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Roget**)
SCP-208 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-266 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-276 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-570 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Roget**)
SCP-460 Pending forced reassignment

SCP-375 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Roget**)
SCP-625 (Current Project Head: **Dr. Vang**)
SCP-705 Pending forced reassignment
SCP-577 Pending forced reassignment

Log Files: FILE LISTING LOCKED. SEEK ASSISTANCE TO CONTINUE.

Dr. Kondraki's Work Log FILE LISTING LOCKED. SEEK ASSISTANCE TO CONTINUE.

Profile: FILE LISTING LOCKED. SEEK ASSISTANCE TO CONTINUE.

History: FILE LISTING LOCKED. SEEK ASSISTANCE TO CONTINUE.

THE FOLLOWING WRITTEN TO BE RELEASED ON ACCOUNT OF DEATH

DATED SEPTEMBER 28TH, 2006

RELEASED DECEMBER 8TH, 2017

To my staff:

If you're reading this, it means I'm dead, either by my own hand or some inexplicable luck of the draw. Shit sucks. You win some, you loose some, I guess.

I know a few directors who left everything written out for everyone. Like Ghost, you know, when he died, he left just binders of shit detailing everything to be carried out on-site in a single 24 hour period for us to look through. It freaked me the fuck out when they appointed me to this position and I saw it, maybe 18 binders that he neatly laid out on his desk when I walked in. That's what he did before he offed himself. He left stacks upon stacks of data and paperwork and meticulous instructions behind.

I know a lot of the older people on site will remember that night well, and I'm sorry as fuck you had to go through

two directors in one lifetime if you're living to see my night come, too. It's a rough job. You know how it is, but anyway, it turns out that the binder thing is a pretty common thing that Directors and Senior Staff do before they die if they know they're gonna go out. Like, they get ready and shit, leave all the crucial information the site needs to run behind, and before you guys get excited I want to let you know that no, I didn't compile death binders, because I've never heard of anything more morbidly capitalistic and depressing then higher staff at an organization preparing for their deaths by *doing unnecessary paperwork*. You should be out doing shit! If someone told me I had three days to live, I sure as hell wouldn't spend it writing down every single thing I do everyday for my staff to find! If I ever decide to kill myself, I'm not gonna spend extra time telling you how to run my site the way I ran it. If I'm dead it's not mine anymore. It doesn't need to be run like I'm still there.

You guys are your own people. All of you. You'll figure out a better way, I know you will, and it'll be better than anything I could have done.

Also, I never read those binders anyway. There comes a point in a man's life when you just have to bullshit until you make it, and that's what they did when they handed me the keys and told me to get shit together for tomorrow morning because our director killed himself. My colleague, like literally, my *friend* and *mentor*, who I'd worked under for years, who treated me with the most compassion I'd ever seen out of anyone. They told me he died and that I had to get the site's shit together. How fucked up is that? Are you kidding me? Like, don't get me wrong, I did it and it somehow all came together right by the next morning, but the worst part about the idea of dying to me is that someone else is gonna get handed my keys at 1am[1] and told that they have until 8am to figure it out. Whoever that ends up being, I'm sorry I put that on you, but I'm not sorry enough that I'm gonna make you a sad death scrapbook of how to carry on my

legacy in B45 files. I have faith in you, you young, unexperienced Level 4 that just got handed my shit and became a Director. You're probably terrified. Your friends are suddenly looking up to you. You meet with 05 for the first time on video chat and they probably tell you something along the lines of 'good luck, buddy'[2]. You have over a thousand personnel and around 500 anomalous entities shoved into a facility the size of a small city and have to break it to them that the person that they looked to for direction for decades just offed himself and you're the new bitch in charge. People will hate you. The transition will be rough. You poor, poor bastard you, you thought that your life was hard before and it's about to get a whole lot harder. I've had a cot installed for you in my office. Use it well.

Speaking of poor bastards, my Senior Staff. You guys are amazing, completely incredible. Not only do we work together in a somewhat coherent manner, but it's been how many years now and the site is still standing and you make it seem like I know what I'm doing usually when I really don't. I give to you the gratitude of one million death binders for putting up with my shit.

One of you will be chosen over the course of the next couple of weeks to take my place. It's like *The Bachelor* but with the worst job you will ever experience in your life. The 05 counsel makes the final decision after reviewing all of you carefully, so no, I don't really have a say in this case[3]. They will learn everything about you. A background check is an understatement, because they'll give you a frontground and a sideground and an assground check, too. This isn't a Director position at a tiny backwoods site in the middle of nowhere; this is a Director position at one of the largest backwoods sites in the middle of nowhere in the *world*, damnit! You are all vying to become dictator of what is legally nothing, but physically *everything*. If you do your job well, then it will remain that way. In the meantime this job will push you past your limits every day of the week. It ruined my

marriage, my health, my faith, my sense of self preservation, and my ability to give a fuck, but I lived, bitch, I *lived*. What would I do if I didn't do this? Who would I be? *Where* would I be? It's a weird question to think about. Any job in the Foundation changes you, though, but you all know that already.

Let me back up for a second: I'm writing this in the September of 2006. I realized that I didn't really have anything in the case that I died inexplicably, and with this job how it is it's just one of those things that needs attending to. Maybe I'll live to be 87 and still working this same job, and maybe by then I'll decide to take the death binder route, but for the time being something I wrote while eating Hot Pockets at 3am perfectly embodies the raw essence of my human experience. My son is sleeping in the other room. He's 14 years old. He's probably reading this right now sometime in the future, so for him: I know I've picked up some habits in the past few years that you don't like to see in me, and I don't like you seeing in me. I'll get better, okay? I promise.

My son's pretty damn amazing, honestly. He loves reading, and *The X Files*, and music that I'm not completely into but I'm not about to tell him that. Pretty sure he's gay, too, or at least not straight. I think he knows and is nervous to tell me. I think it might be a while before he's ready to tell me that, and that's fine. Whenever you're ready, Draven, it's okay. If you're reading this, I love you. I always have and I always will.[4]

It's occurred to me that you guys might be sad about this. I'm bad at comforting people experiencing emotions, so I'm not gonna try and do it here. Some of you might have had me as a mentor, or worked closely with me, or maybe even had more of a life with me (Senior Staffers and Draven[5], I'm looking at you). Some of you might have only seen me around or met me in passing. I'm grateful for all of you. Grief can be a bitch, but that's out of my hands.

Anyway. The reason we're here.

The fact that this site stumbles through even one day of operation is a fucking miracle. You have no idea how many moving parts make up a Foundation Site, forget about a large humanoid research and containment site. There's a line in Jurassic Park that's always really stuck with me: "We have all the problems of a major theme park and a major zoo and the computers aren't even on their feet yet,"[6] and I think that's a pretty solid representation of what we're up against here. See, at Site-17 we have all the problems of a zoo, a prison, a university-scale research facility, a military base, multiple apartment complexes, a local government, a corporation[7], a small city, a secure facility, an intelligence operation and a theme park[8] *and* we have our computers up and running and **causing problems all of their own**! Who the fuck decided this was a good idea? This was a terrible idea, but here we are. There are hundreds of other sites on Earth doing the same thing *right now*. Hell, Site-19 is bigger than us and does the same thing in Siberia at 40 below! It takes a special collection of people to run this big of a shitshow, so thanks to all of you. You guys are the best.

The Foundation has been running at some capacity 24/7, 365 days a year since the beginning of the 20th century, and it's 2006 and we're still going, *despite* the danger, *despite* the millions of stupid problems that happen on a daily basis, and *despite* me dying, it's gonna be okay. You don't need me to tell you that. There's 1,000 of you people; the way I see it, even if every single thing on site was to breach, that's still a 2 to 1 ratio. Find a breach buddy! Get a blunt object! You'll be fine.

Oh, and have fun with it.

Yours[9],

Director Kondraki

Footnotes

1. There's always been a thing in the Foundation with people dying at night. There's probably something poetic about that, but superficially it seems so weird. Why can't people die in the day? Why can't it wait until morning, so I don't have to have that awkward midnight brood around my apartment to force myself through the five stages of grief before work? Like, maybe they need to get in the mood or something. I'll let you guys know if I find out.
2. You will find over the course of your career that 05 presents many nuggets of wisdom not unlike this one. I would say that out of the 13, about 4 of them on average have had experience as a Site Director. Yes, it's important to listen to them, but as you will promise when they swear you in to this position, your first priority is your site; not to the Foundation andcertainlynot to them. Be smart about it. If you feel like you could make a better decision but it's not what they want you to do, do it your way. They might have to actually step foot on your site to know things as well as you do, and god forbidthathappen.
3. If you're having trouble picking up on a pattern here, 05 has many similarities in knowledge and expertise to those on the boards of large companies and capitalist governments. Take this information how you will.
4. It would be awkward if I die and you're not actually gay. That would be really awkward. I love you and shit anyway though, like, that's the same.
5. Honorary Senior Staffer through proxy, paid with pizza and fatherly knowledge (including such gems as 'don't put metal in the microwave unless you want to see something cool' and 'vodka goes bad if you don't drink it all at once')
6. I have no idea who says that and don't care enough to look. Suck it and fuck it, nerds.
7. Side note, you may wonder how much money I make doing this shit. Ironically not much, but I'm a simple guy. I live in a two bedroom apartment. It's the same one I've been living in for twenty years. I have enough for coffee at the end of the day. Therealupside to my job is that I get my utilities paid for, which isn't half bad; the downside is that my son needs to order pizza for me to keep our address off the public record. It's a life.
8. Anything is possible if you put your mind to it.
9. See you all in Jewish hell

Daddy

Dear Diary,

Hello! My name is Lucy Campbell and I am 8 years old. When I grow up I want to be an actress like Emma Watson because she is very pretty! My mummy is also very pretty and very clever and helps me with my homework (I am not very good at it). My daddy works at a big white house called a sykiatric psychiatric hospital where he makes sad people feel better. When he came home today he was very happy and said that he was getting a promotion which means he is working for the guvermint government. I think he is going to meet the prime minister!

Dear Diary,

School was really good today! Mummy made me a choclate chocolate sandwich for my lunch and miss Young gave me a smiley face on my maths homework! Daddy did not come back home today because mummy got an e mail from daddy that said that he would not come home for a while. But mummy said that it was all right and daddy would be home soon and then she bought me an ice cream! Mummy said that I couldn't have any sweets tomorrow because my teeth would fall out, but I think she just wants them for herself. Grrr!

Dear Diary,

Yay! Daddy sent me an e mail today! He told me that he was writing a lot of stories and he was going to send them to me so I do not get bored. Daddy's stories are the best! I asked daddy if he had met the prime minister but he said that no, he hadn't seen him. I think he did meet the prime minister but he was told that it was a top secret meeting and he couldn't tell anyone… or else!
School was OK, except Cindy kept throwing rubbers at me when miss Young wasn't looking. When I'm a witch the first thing I will do is turn her into a slug!

Dear Diary,

Miss Young teached taught us about pirates today! I like pirates, but I don't think they could beat a wizard in a fight because wizards have magic and pirates don't. At break, me and Justin had a swordfight with some long sticks and I won! But then he started crying and I had to give him some of my chocolate bar to get him to shut up (boys can be such big babies sometimes!).
Daddy sent me a story today! It was about a big man that had to stand still when you looked at him. I think he would be good to play tag with because you could look at him and then he could not move! I think mummy would like the story but daddy said that the stories were secret stories.

Dear Diary,

I hate Cindy! Today at lunch she called me a big ugly pig and she made oink noises, so I punched her in the arm. It wasn't very hard but she started crying and told miss Young and miss Young made me say sorry to her! I hope Cindy turns into a maggot and is eaten by birds!
Daddy sent me another story! It was about a big dragon that was really angry and really hard to beat. Maybe it would eat Cindy? I think daddy forgot about the knight in shining armour that slays the big dragon though!

Dear Diary,

Ha ha, Cindy got in trouble today! She made a face at me during art time, but miss Young saw her and told her off! Miss Young liked my painting too – it was a big mean dragon like the one in daddy's story, and there was a handsom handsome knight and some birds and a big shiny sun! I really like art.
Daddy sent me a funny story today! It was about a man that has a necklace that turns him into a monkey. I asked daddy if he could get me that necklace so I could be a monkey but he did not send me an e mail so I guess he can't. Oh well.

1417h - Level 1 Buzzphrase “ ” detected in outgoing transmission; Code Alpha information breach confirmed.

1419h - Buzzphrase traced to Dr. ; Dr. terminated.

1420h – Request sent for deployment of MTF- to [DATA EXPUNGED]. Request approved; MTF- mobilised.

1428h – Total containment of information breach confirmed by MTF- .

Daddy Long Legs

It is, upon reflection, the legs that were the problem.

Certainly, my eyesight hasn't been strong enough for a long time to distinguish those loathsome features. That disturbing thorax, jointed into those long legs, casting a greater shadow than they have any right to. Yes, it must be the legs. I'm almost *certain*. It's in the name after all-Daddy Long Legs. Such a peculiarly affectionate title for such a twisted creature.

As a boy, when my eyes were stronger and my knowledge of the world less, I thought them demons. Nightmares come to drag me to some terrible shadowland. I would run, howling and shaking with fright, to beg my mother to take it away. It rather disgusted my father, a big bully of a man, whose definitions of manliness and fortitude were hard to reach for a grown man such as himself, let alone a young boy. He would sneak into my room at night, and release them, leaving me to wake up surrounded.

I'm sorry, but I need you to keep still. Here. Let's try this. Let me know if you feel any tingling.

In a sense, I suppose this shock treatment did have a positive effect. I first struck back at them on one of those hateful mornings, wrapping my hand in a sock to crush the life out of one crawling on my arm. Terrified of letting it touch my bare skin, I held it at a distance, watching those legs thrash in their death throes. I had fantasized about killing them before, but their unsettling speed always made such actions seem foolish and unlikely to succeed. An up close and personal action was unprecedented, and empowering.

After that, it wasn't long before I began hunting them, extinguishing those vile souls one by one. A pogrom starting in my back yard and working out into the forests. The sock was exchanged for a pair of gloves, which worked well enough for a time. It was on one of these excursions that I noticed it first. One of the freshly slain was moving-

its leg twitching erratically. With a growing horror, I wondered if it was coming back to life. I panicked, the image of my former victims pursuing me like some fearsome legion flooding my mind. I fled the woods, hiding in my room. It was then that I determined that the gloves were not enough, my brain rationalizing the fact that a stronger impact must be needed. My father's heavy yellow handled claw hammer served this purpose well.

I'm afraid I will need you to pray quietly, in your head. You're rather distracting me. Quite rude.

Soon my excursions began anew, and at this point, now a young man of eighteen, I began to see them lurking on people. Nausea struck me as I saw them crawling along the arm of a bus driver in the street, as he went about his pre-set path, unperturbed by the small forms scaling him with those long legs. My vision went grey, as I realized one day, that the pastor in front of me had a pair of tiny legs edging over his clerical collar.

My mind boggled until it occurred to me that they must have realized I'd been hunting them and began to take precautionary measures. I had seen spectators, watching and muttering to themselves as I smashed carapace after carapace. At the time I thought them simply enjoying my good works, but in the light of this new revelation, I realized what they were. Sentries. An attempt to follow my patterns. Learn my strategies. Horrified. I fled home.

It was late that night when a solution occurred. Slowly crawling forward in my mind, ponderous and inevitable. If they were truly being used by these arachnids, then they were worse than dead. I had already learned well. Dealt with their masters. I had to handle the servants. It would be mercy. Freeing them. Letting them onward to whatever reward awaited them. Burdened with new purpose, I went out that very night.

You may be wondering why I am telling you all of this. You've seen me on the street, giving you a startled look. You see, though you may not know it…they have you too. Shhhhh. Shhhhhhh. Don't cry. It's not your fault. It's simply the facts. But you have no need to worry about my qualifications for the task of freeing you. It's been a long time since that bus driver. And I've since learned that a

hammer will work just as well on a man as it does on monsters…

Daffodils

Agent Ben Green's endured a quiet life. A routine - up, work, home, maybe unwind. Bed. Up. Repeat. A step above a recluse - not a hermit, or a miser. But somebody who found contentment in solitary.

Field Agents don't talk much about love or relationships. Even when they're attached, they don't talk about it. Nobody wants to jinx their happiness. The lucky go and retire and move on with their lives. But not everyone is lucky to enjoy that; most end up haunted in one way or another.

He found himself lucky, though. Not haunted, or aching for other. He never yearned for a companion in his youth, but now he found his centre. His home.

And tonight Agent Ben Green laid by himself, the moonlight filtering through his blinds. It was a full moon, bright and clear. His favourite sort of scene. Serene, lonesome. Maybe peaceful. Outside, the squeak as a rabbit was snapped by an owl. Quiet. The breeze carried the squeak away.

Idle thoughts and worries passed through his mind in the dark. Thoughts of his life, the Foundation, the future… Where *could* he go from here? Of course, once he found contentment and happiness, something was going to drive a wedge in it. Of fucking course that's how it has to be. That's how it usually is in this Foundation.

He put that out of his mind. More important things were happening.

"… tonight's a good night," he sighed.

"Yeah."

"… I hope we can have a few more like this."

Green looked across his bedroom, to the chest of drawers, to the

mirror hung behind it. He looked into his eyes, then over to his own, their fingers winding together.

They fell at first sight. A true spark. A connection, that nobody else could ever have. Or ever would, really.

“… the world is ending, you know,” his voice mused, squeezing tight.

“… Is it really though?” his own voice answered.

Green nestled into himself, and tried to forget the outside.

Dai-tō-a

There is something in my mouth, underneath the tongue. It's nothing relatively uncommon. Of late, my urine is black and I have excreted strips of paper. Ever since I opened **a letter** from Robinson Tou Liz and then quarantined by the Foundation, this has been the new norm. So much for uneventful retirement in New Zealand.

My tongue twirls around my mouth, feeling for the mysterious thing that is still inside. It feels soft. Probably another piece of paper.

Eventually, I spit it out. A squarish shape appears on the otherwise stale floor, coated in my saliva. Despite its condition, I can make out the yen symbol on that shape.

Ah yes, so that is the compensation – as they have mentioned a few days ago – in the form of a postal stamp.

But the stamp consists more than the denomination. The image of the banana tree. The words "Dai-tō-a – Malai Baru".

"That is…"

"Stop, Miyafuji." Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto ordered.

I still remembered that day clearly. Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto invited me for a stroll in a park, even when the Americans' bombardment were increasingly common in the cities. Our feet trod upon stone pavements, islands in the sea of grass. In front, two paths lied ahead – left and right.

"Yes sir." I obeyed the Lieutenant Colonel's orders.

"Look at the paths. Which one will you take?"

"I will follow the path you take, sir."

Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto was silent, shaking his head grimly. Perhaps he did not desire that answer.

"Sir, I express only loyalty toward-" I was cut off by him.

"I did not ask you for elaboration. But it appears I must guide you again."

"My apologies, sir." I bowed at Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto.

"This crossroad is the fifth we've crossed within this park, the outcome of the paths we have chosen. Here, we are to make another choice." Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto explained, "Choices are important, Miyafuji. They defined the present moment and guide us to the future. Most importantly, choices require actions. Do you understand all of that?"

"Yes sir."

"So, what will be your choice?"

I stared long and hard at the two paths. Both looked so similar to the other that they felt like the same path, regardless of what I chose.

"Corporal, we are at war. The Americans will bomb us any minute! We do not have the luxury to contemplate!" I exited my deep thought.

"That way!" I cried, my finger pointing out to somewhere. It was on neither paths, but out into the grass and another divergent stone path.

"Yes. The current situation is not preferable, yes? The empire is in dire situation." Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto mused to himself, "We desire for a better present. But to do so, we must redo the choices already made. So Miyafuji, how can you reach the direction you pointed at?"

"Walk there directly."

Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto smiled, and stepped upon the grass. He then rummaged his pocket, and produced a bank note. The

image of a banana plant was printed onto said bank note.

"A souvenir during my previous assignment in Malaya." He explained, handing the bank note to me, "I will be away for some time, to find a better situation wherein the choices made resulted in the empire's continuation. And the Anomaly Agency hopes that we can seek help from those situations."

"Yes." I paused briefly, "Sir, may I help you in your mission?"

"No. I need you here. You have to protect your mother. I heard the Americans enjoy the taste of the women of defeated nations." Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto cautioned.

"Do not worry. No one will ever harm the Lieutenant Colonel's sister."

"Good. Then, farewell."

"Did he even find it in the end?" I pick up the stamp and clean my saliva off of it, "Unlikely. What is the likelihood?"

I pocket the stamp away, continuing my cloistered existence under the Foundation's internment.

Some days later, I while my time at the library in the internment area. After all, there is little to do beyond reading up on English. At least I can improve my grasp in that language.

While flipping through a book on English grammar, an unusual thought pierces through.

> *Dear Miyafuji,*

"Very few people whom I know would call me that."

And before I know it, the next thought manifests.

> *Sincerely*
> *Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto*

"Uncle?"

And like a river, more thoughts stream in.

> *Found appropriate reality. There, empire exists.*

"I can tell." I recalled that stamp, which I surrendered to the Foundation nurse when they asked for it. After all, they have power over me entirely. It is unwise to oppose them.

> *Sent the stamp as validation. I planned the design.*

"Seriously? What about the world you're in now?"

> *Empire still exists. Humans there possess stronger digestion. Can dissolve even cellulose. History and culture is similar to ours. Society mostly disinterested in inter-dimensional travel.*

"That explains their unusual methods… Uncle, how is your mission?"

> *Travelled long to find appropriate reality. Only Robinson Toυ Liz interested in inter-dimensional travel. But can only transmit words and small objects.*

"Like that stamp."

> *Sent the stamp as validation. I planned the design.*

"I know that already." My voice pierces the silence of the library; those around stare at me. I then bury my head into my book, pretending to be reading it.

"But how do you know to reach out to me?"

> *So I worked for Robinson Toυ Liz. Saw client list. Your name and address are on it.*

"So you sent a letter to me. Thank you, Uncle."

> *Sincerely*

Lieutenant Colonel Sakamoto

"I know. About mum… wait, I'm not actually speaking to him." I sigh.

I have placed myself in client list too. If you intend to contact me, my address is…

"No. I'm effectively a prisoner here. I have to get by the Foundation if I want a letter to be sent, and they will know something's off from the address alone. How?"

Amidst my thoughts, I feel the urge of nature's calling, specifically of the ink and paper processing inside of me. I left my book for medical assistance, wherein I continue pondering for a solution.

In the end, I think that there may be a way.

The following day, I'm once again in the Foundation's interrogation room – by my request. The Foundation doctor – Dr. Cohen – is my interrogator.

"So Mr. Miyafuji, you have requested for me. What is the issue?"

"My uncle wrote to me. He's **IJAMEA** Lieutenant Colonel Ryusei Sakamoto."

"IJAMEA?! But that group is…"

"It's not dead, or at least parts of it. That stamp is evidence. They have found a world where the Axis won the war instead."

"What do you know about that world?" Dr. Cohen's face stiffens.

"Not much, but here's an inference." I reply, "If they are willing to send in trivial things like stamps and letters, what else are they willing to send across?"

"And you're telling us this because…" Dr. Cohen pauses, waiting for my response.

"I want to help you. Allow me to have correspondence with my

uncle, and I will feed you the information you need."

"And why should we trust you?"

"I requested to meet you, instead of running off."

Dr. Cohen stares at me briefly, perhaps pondering over my words.

"I will bring this matter to my superiors first. This conversation is over until further notice." Dr. Cohen left the room.

"At best, maybe we'll have a few last exchanges before my ruse falls apart."

Damnatio Memoriae

I once knew Aaron Siegel — a mathematician, a physicist, so many more in his brief flare of a lifespan — and yet at the end of it all he was a teacher, a man attempting to spread the fire he stole among the branches before he burnt out. He was the man who found the first loose thread in the laws of physics and we were left behind to pull at the tear, revealing an entirely new cosmos of gears and levers behind the patchwork tapestry we'd held sacrosanct for so many years.

His gift was an endless appetite for exploration, for experimentation. Other men might have found the path and reserved it as a curiosity, blamed it on a trick of the imagination, turned it into a cheap novelty for cash: instead, he experimented. He took it apart with pendulums and compasses and theodolites, akin to conducting surgery with a flint knife and a burning fire. Yet at the end of it all, he came away with equations and observations and a mind unparalleled until its **`death`**.

A match can start a fire, and I will admit there was no other man who could have bootstrapped the Foundation around himself as he did. But it burns out too fast to sustain, and years before he died we found ourselves loose and adrift, the kind of absent wandering that too many resources and too much time breeds. We'd started with goals to reshape normality and had settled for mundanity, taking our wonders and horrors and hiding them away, afraid of the public eye.

I was surrounded by people with the power to sculpt destinies, yet they had grown so enamoured with the clay that they forgot what they were constructing. So I created goals for us. It was blindingly simple – you always start with small goals. We were an unstoppable force only so long as we preserved our monopoly on this information, and the root of the anomie I detested so much was this omnipotence.

So I created an aggressor for us to fight. In the summer of 1915, I

went to Detroit and gave Aaron's papers to a young man named William Boeing.

In retrospect, perhaps it was a bad idea to let the group know about him so early – Boeing had neither the time nor the resources we possessed, and his own research was limited. Still, there was a kind of genius to his work that James and I came to admire, a single-minded devotion to his work and his cause – a cause we lacked in our flighty pursuits.

By the time the rest of the group took him seriously, James and Carlos had started to doubt their allegiance to the group, and were this close to joining Flyboy (or Prometheus, really, a matter of semantics). On the other hand, Thomas was furious that we'd allowed an outsider to not only take our research, but profit off it. We convened in New York. Me, James and Carlos voted against the plan Thomas had set out. The rest sided with Carter, and our first motion as the Overseer Council passed 9-3.

I watched from Staten Island when we sent him **hurtling into purgatory, New York**.

From then, I knew what my goal was — to provide one for the others. Thomas had grown embittered with his fortunes as Boeing prospered, and it was a simple matter to engineer his defection with Jeremy as they formed their old boys' club. Carlos wanted more from our group, wanted to return to the old aspirations of happiness and scientific progress, and I wholeheartedly (and perhaps sincerely, though I no longer deserve to use that word) supported him in his venture. He died in **Laascaanood** a happy man, with James by his side at his last moments.

Caldmann grew shaken in the wake of his friend's death and began sinking his research into what lay after that — he dug up Boeing's old cryonics tanks, began mounting expeditions to recover fragments of holy artifacts from Gods mechanical or otherwise, and found himself at the center of an Initiative a decade later. Stimson retreated to America with a **briefcase full of papers and amnestics**, his life in the FBI spent chasing after spirits he couldn't convince anyone else to believe in.

The Foundation continued, even as it fell apart from the inside. Redundancies were there for a reason, and ready employees filled the places of the ones that came before, Lights and Manns and Masipags alike cycling through the great machine. But I remained – I had bodyguards to take care of the outside, 500 to fix my body's failings and 006 to ward off time.

Years passed, as they do, and I find myself once more at Aaron's laboratory in Essex. As I look back on my career as the Administrator, I find that there is only one redundancy in this machine: namely, me. The Foundation believes it has a purpose, as does the Insurgency, as did Prometheus, and as the **Arcology** will, yet I've grown disillusioned over the years maintaining this very illusion.

So this is my final letter to myself. When I found Aaron's body on the path, lying somewhere between the n and the (n+1)th rotation up the hill, I found his last words. He claimed that everything required a sacrifice, and maybe he was right: his life for the amnestics, mine for the Foundation.

But sometimes there's nothing to receive the sacrifice, no god up in the clouds – there's only ever been nothing, nothing we haven't created. And I intend to change that today.

You gave up your life, Aaron, and now I give up my control over it all. Let's hope something out there's willing to take it.

Damnation

Note: This is part twelve in a multi-part story based around the events leading up to the containment of **SCP-2982**. It is recommended that you read the previous entry Deliverance first, or start from the beginning At the Library. You can take a look at **Golan** too, for a tale based on one of the tests of the SCP object.

Official SCP-2982 documentation. Level 4 access required.

- **Date:** 2015-02-17
- **From:** Site Director David Runeberg
- **To:** Subsite 23-Delta-K6 Chief Security Officer Frank Onegra
- **CC:** Site 23 Affiliated Field Operations Controller Sandra Chaperone
- **Subject:** Alexander Lazarus

Frank

Some bad news. *Chief Global Suppression Manager* Alexander Lazarus will be joining us on 2015-02-19 for two days. Be careful. He is both absolutely loyal to the Foundation and entirely dispassionate towards the humanity it protects.

He is to be given unhindered, solo access to both SCP-2982 and SCP-2982-02 (the former Agent Paris). Yes I know. I'll send you the full approval documentation tomorrow. Orders come from the O5 council. They're very very skittish about what she knows and what might

> get out. [REDACTED]
>
> SD David Runeberg

On 2015-02-19, at the insistence of CGSM Lazarus, all testing on SCP-2982 was discontinued, and further testing, research or evaluation was prohibited.

On 2015-02-23, Site Director Runeberg committed suicide. An encrypted email sent from his personal account to the Foundation SCO work email account read,

> [REDACTED]
>
> *Thank you for the breach report. It's not proven but I think we both know Lazarus has the phone now - he interviewed Carol for six hours. He had sole access to both. I am truly sorry, Frank. You're blameless, at least. Just following orders. Under the circumstances I won't bother with an official response.*
>
> [REDACTED]

Current Situation: Current location of SCP-2982 and Alexander Lazarus is unknown. Locating same is of paramount importance and Operation Blank Cheque is in place to facilitate this.

- On 2015-03-03, O5 council member 07 received a 43-second anomalous video message which showed her sleeping in bed, with Lazarus standing naked over her. This is proof positive that Lazarus is now actively using SCP-2982, reasons unknown.
- SCP-2982 was misappropriated with only 37% of Core 1/ contact tests completed, and 0% of Core 2/Structure tests complete. Conclusions: The Foundation cannot confirm the full extent of the anomalous properties of SCP-2982.

- [REDACTED]

+

Alexander Lazarus picked his way through the gravestones and found his way at last to the crying tramp. The last few days, though productive in their own way, had been somewhat lacking in closure. Today would help. Today, all wrongs would be righted, all previous injustices would be cleansed from the sleeping, oblivious world.

"Excuse me," he said. "I need a moment of your time."

The tramp looked up from his graveside vigil and blinked into the sunlight. He tried to look into the man's face but it was silhouetted and impenetrable. He turned his gaze downwards instead; a business suit, very new and probably expensive. Tailored, maybe. Trousers with a razor sharp crease. Unscuffed, virgin shoes. No traces of dirt or mud or water stains. The body the clothes adorned worked out; the man was lean and tall, mid-fifties with a military bearing. Precise, efficient.

Lazarus nodded towards the gravestone. "Who was it?"

"Robert Francis Catterson," the tramp replied. "A good man."

"You knew him?"

"He was a good man," the man repeated. "Died of a stroke. Did lots of work for local folks. Fought against the KKK in his time. Died of a stroke. His funeral - still hurts to remember it. Seventy nine years old. Grand children were distraught."

"You knew him? You were at the funeral?"

The man nodded at last. "He was a good friend."

Lazarus squatted down on his haunches and studied the gravestone. "Your good friend died 30th March, 1913. He died one hundred and two years ago."

"I know what you're thinking," replied the tramp. "And I don't care. I know everyone who's died. How and when, too."

"True," said Lazarus. He massaged his chin, stroking it with forefinger and thumb. "Hope you don't mind me saying, but you look hungry." He opened up a wallet - it was uncreased and smelt new, as if it had not been opened before - and brought out two crisp ten dollar bills. He held them out; the tramp accepted them quietly. "What's your name?"

"I don't know," said the tramp.

"*I* know," confided Lazarus. The tramp raised his eyebrows. "I know who did this to you - this whole "*I know how everyone died*" thing - and why. You're part of a bigger picture." He looked down, noticed a speck of dirt on his shoe, and wiped it off with his handkerchief. "How about we help each other out? You walk away with your name, and the name of the man who did this to you."

"You can do that?"

"I have contacts," said Lazarus. "Although if you want revenge, you'll be too late. The lowlife responsible is no more."

"Dead?"

Lazarus nodded. "Yes," he said. "Died earlier this month. Help me and I'll give you his name and you can go piss on his grave or something." He shrugged and pulled a packet of cigarettes from his jacket. "Smoke?"

"I don't," the tramp said.

"Me neither," said Lazarus, putting the box away. "Handy to have though, just in case. Listen; I know the name of a dead man isn't much closure for you, but it's something."

"Okay," the tramp said. "What help do you want? You want to find someone who's dead? I need their names - and dates of birth or death if possible."

"Small price to pay," Lazarus noted. There was a pause, and then

he stood up again, his shadow casting a long thin shadow against the grave. "Angela Knowledge Gwandoya. Can't be too many of *them*. Lived in Beacon Hill."

The tramp immediately started to sob.

"You okay?"

"She was so little," said the tramp. "She was such a beautiful little thing," he said. "Why is there such evil in the world?"

"To balance out the good, otherwise it's all grey." Lazarus handed the tramp a tissue. "Come on, don't cry. You have the chance to make everything all right. Do you know where she's buried?"

The tramp nodded through tears and wiped his nose on his hand. "Small place on the outskirts of town," he said. "Quiet place."

"Here." Lazarus offered his hand to the tramp and helped him up. "I'll drive. Show me."

+

They stood, perspiring in the sullen March sunshine, over the relatively fresh grave of Angela Knowledge Gwandoya. "Bigger than I expected," said the tramp.

"I believe there's a reason for that," said Lazarus. "Still, she's in heaven now."

The two reflected in silence. Lazarus glanced around. They had not been followed, and the cemetery was empty. The tramp turned to him suddenly. "Why are we here?" he asked.

"Long story. I'm not really here for the girl. I'm here for her mother. Final respects, so to speak."

"So why not just ask me for her mother?"

"Good question. Wouldn't work," said Lazarus. "Her final resting place is unmarked. My organisation has the location, but I can't

access it - can't even Google it - without all kinds of flags and alerts getting raised. I'm pushing the envelope of good fortune just being here talking to you, truth be told. I'm currently undergoing a *transitional period of strategic realignment and allegiance re-prioritisation*, you might say."

"Doesn't make sense," said the tramp. "And how'd you know it wouldn't work?"

"Trust me," said Lazarus. "I've done my homework. There's a file on you. You can remember the death of everyone who ever lived. You even know where they're buried, but only if their final resting place is known to the authorities." He handed the tramp another tissue; he had started crying again. "Before you were like this, someone you loved disappeared. You obsessed about it. Pissed a certain man off with your constant depression, so he did *this* to you as punishment. Thought it would be amusing if you knew every single death except the one that mattered to you the most. Thought it would be funny if you couldn't remember a single thing about your own life, but knew everything about the dead. The fact that you informed on his somewhat shady business ventures certainly didn't help."

Lazarus looked at the tramp. "I apologise if that hurts," he offered. "Thought you at least deserved some insight into your condition. Guy that did this, did the same thing to a lot of innocent folk. Enjoyed hurting them. People think I'm dispassionate, but I've come to realise there's no point sugar-coating shit."

The tramp didn't answer. Lazarus continued. "The organisation I work - *worked* - for, face unimaginable horrors every day. Have to do horrible things in the name of humanity. So when they can, they perform tiny acts of kindness." He paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. "This little girl buried here, she was raped and murdered by a freak by the name of Aidan Brown. Broke the mother's heart, she never really recovered. So when the mother died, they broke from procedure a little. Took her for tests, yes, then disposed of her, yes, even made an empty grave for her with her name so everything was squared with the authorities. But I think they secretly buried her with her daughter *here*, so they would be together again at last."

"Jesus," said the tramp.

Lazarus continued. "Mother died in a car accident on the third of this month." He caught the tramp's quizzical expression. "They were fleeing the police," he explained. "Driver - man by the name of Geoff Mansani - lost control and drove off a bridge straight into the San Antonio river. Drowned. Her and Mansani both. Think Aidan Brown was in the car too, but he's never been found… Listen. I promised you the name of the man who made you the way you are. But I need one more bit of information from you. I need to know *exactly* how Helen Gwandoya died. Was it an accident or did that paedophile bastard Aidan Brown kill her too?"

"It wasn't an accident," said the tramp. "It was murder."

"Murder?" Lazarus turned back to the other man. "Do you know what happened?"

"It's… confused. But it was murder. Premeditated, definitely… Like you say - car crash. Helen Gwandoya in the front with Mancini - Mansani? Halfway over the bridge, something in the back seat. Like a lobster but man sized - pulls a taser on the driver. He loses control. They go into the river. Helen Gwandoya drowns - she can't open the doors." Then, by way of explanation: "She had poorly hands."

"*Post-natal phocomelia*," Lazarus said. He saw the tramp's blank expression. "Thalidomide-impaired is the PC term - like those babies in the sixties and seventies. I've read a lot of medical dictionaries since this business started."

"Mansani died too," the tramp said. "The locks had been tampered with, even if he hadn't been zapped. Sorry, no offence."

"And the lobster man?"

The tramp shrugged. "Got out. Didn't drown."

"Goddamn bastard could breathe underwater," said Lazarus. "So Aidan Brown just swam away like the fucking freak he is and left them to die. He must have planned it like that from day one."

The tramp chewed his upper lip in thought. Lazarus turned away

from him and scanned the cemetery for mourners or ground workers. There were none. He said, "Wish I could find that evil son of a bitch."

The tramp rolled his eyes, then nodded. "Guy was a fucking paedophile? Shit. Good riddance. Anyhow you're too late… Looks like neither of us get closure today."

"What do you mean?"

"He's dead. Drowned."

Lazarus wheeled around. "In the car crash? You don't think he got out?"

The tramp sucked the corner of his top lip into his mouth. "No. Aidan Brown drowned in a toilet," he said. "Jammed face down in a toilet."

"You're getting confused," said Lazarus. He looked around again.

"I ain't confused," said the tramp. "And he died *before* the car crash. He drowned in a toilet."

"Where?"

"In an apartment. Beacon Hill."

"Who's apartment?"

"Guy called Harold Augustus Maine."

"Harold Maine's dead. *He's* the one who drowned in the toilet."

The tramp shook his head. "No," he said. "He isn't dead."

Lazarus looked long into the other man's eyes. "You're very informative," he said.

"Thank you."

"No," said Lazarus. "That isn't a good thing. You can't help but tell the truth, can you?"

"A man has to eat," said the tramp.

Lazarus nodded silently in agreement. "A man has to eat," he sighed. He brought out a small black and white photograph, folded over. He unfurled it and held it up to the tramp. "You've been a great help to me today," he said. "But I think we're done here."

He tapped the photograph with his free hand. "What do you see?"

The tramp scanned the picture briefly. "It's just a coupla kittens in a basket," he said. "Why'm I looking at this?"

"Why do you think?"

"Because.. " the tramp looked confused. "The kittens are me. They're me… I… never knew. They're in the shadows. Crusting over." The tramp shook his head. "Eyes like buttons."

Lazarus grunted. "What's the photo of *now*?"

"A… burning wish." The tramp was struggling to come up with the words. "Given another cloud."

"Sit down," Lazarus ordered, putting the photograph away, careful not to look at it. The tramp obeyed sluggishly, as if even this was a task that was rapidly overtaking his ability to perform it. Lazarus guided the man downwards until he was almost prone. "They'll come for you. They've already done it once, but you don't remember. Don't believe me?" He brushed off the tramp's finger marks from his suit with a silk handkerchief. "Orange black black yellow titanium blue yellow yellow vilifier seventy eight Ferdinand."

The tramp's eyes widened with lucidity. "Jesus," he gasped. "Charcoal school… grown-up."

"See? You remember. The Foundation will come for you and they'll ask you the self same questions I just did and you'll fucking tell them *everything*. Can't have that, Carl."

"Carl… ?"

"Your name's Carl Fierri. Can't have you informing on me twice in

one fucking lifetime."

"Futile shop," the tramp slurred. "Maria."

Lazarus took something else from his pocket; a small, black cellphone. He swiped the touchscreen and typed for maybe five minutes, no longer concerned about the tramp slouched against a gravestone behind him. He turned his head back and said, "Even if I didn't know where *she* was buried, if I knew where her *kid* was buried, that would be enough. Knew you'd come through like the blabber mouth you are."

"Trains," whispered the tramp. A trickle of blood emerged from his nostrils. It smelt of fish and bleach. "Trains under water, breathing with music… Customer facing."

Lazarus squatted down and touched the grass covering the grave tenderly. "I was wrong to give you a choice," he mused softly. "I know where I went wrong. Won't make that mistake this time. *Willing slave*. We have such a future ahead of us."

Behind him, the tramp tried to get up but failed, his arms and legs no longer submissive to his will. "Tape measure," he said. He was aware that his mouth was filling up with spit; he had forgotten he needed to swallow. "Bottle lift. Bottle entry. Timeout."

"Hush now," said Lazarus. "Show some respect."

The tramp gurgled through the phlegm but became quiet almost immediately. His hands clutched lumps of soil.

Lazarus dismissed him with a wave. "It's been a long road," he said. "Come a long way. Still, we're here now. Nearly at the end, nearly at the end… " He put the phone back in his pocket. "People always said I was dumb," he said. "Lacked ambition, lacked imagination. Well where the *fuck* are *they*?"

The tramp was twitching, his skin mottling and darkening, his limbs twisting in on themselves.

"You know, I hope this works," Lazarus said. "Otherwise I get to look real stupid." He turned to the tramp again. "You just lie there and

don't try to fight it. You were going to die anyway. Now you get a chance to live on. In a way."

The tramp was losing consciousness, his exposed flesh bruising like overripe fruit. "I'm sorry for the deceit," said Lazarus. "But you need to be close to each other. Otherwise believe me, I would never risk this." He straightened the tramp's arms and legs and tipped his head back so that he could breathe more easily. "There might be better ways of doing this but I'll stick with what I know. Anyhow I don't have all day to dig."

"Please…" the tramp said. Lazarus mopped the man's brow with his handkerchief and started to loosen his clothes. "Apologies," he said. "But you stink. Not your fault. But you stink. I can't have you smelling or looking like this."

Having unbuttoned the other man's trousers and shirt, he started the long task of undressing him completely.

+

Lazarus waited nervously. The tramp had expired unceremoniously half an hour previously in a glut of vomit and formaldehyde, his skin darkened to the point of brownish purple. But even now, as he worried whether he had done the right thing, and looked around again for witnesses, he saw the love of his life take shape in the corpse's ruined features and knew that all was well.

He took his suit jacket off and wrapped it silently and tenderly around the elongating, blossoming form of Helen Gwandoya as her body subsumed that of the tramp, the purple darkening into ebony and the limbs unfurling into graceful, balletic elegance. The eyes were open but glassy, dull, unseeing; her chest still, her breathing nonexistent. She was here, at last, but she was dead.

Really, most sincerely dead, he thought.

Lazarus took the phone from his pocket and swiped the screen. "Nearly fucking forgot," he said, and, having navigated to the contacts, typed a single word into Helen Gwandoya's details.

Resurrected.

He sat back against the gravestone and waited, like a child on Christmas Eve, for The Future Mrs Lazarus' first faltering breath.

Prev

Dance The Danse

> Halloween is a special time in Sloth's Pit. It is the time that creatures of the night walk in the day, and the legends of the world dance.

The Eight Rings was the biggest- and the only- night club in the town of Sloth's Pit. It was named after the grove it was built on, which got the name due to the fact that eight fairy rings dotted the grove, forming an almost perfect circle, or rather, an octogram. Now, the Eight Rings was famous for three things: their mozzarella sticks, the abundant amounts of ecstasy, and their Halloween parties.

It was for this reason that the man clad in black was going here. He sucked on his tobacco pipe, his fedora concealing his features, and his long, black coat trailing down to his feet. This, however, was not his costume; the man in black had decided to go as himself, and would be meeting with several others who were doing the same. It was time for the yearly Dance.

A loud hum rang in the man's ears as he pushed through the door of the nightclub, the pseudo-techno beat of the music pounding in his ears. He took off his coat, revealing a rather classy-looking black suit, with a red shirt and black bowtie. Taking off his hat, the stranger revealed the mask that was his face: the head of a goat, with short horns and yellow eyes with hourglass pupils.

The Goatman had arrived.

> Halloween is the time of year that the legends are strongest. It's not for the reason you think; it's not because of some witch's sabbath or the worlds of magic and reality coming together. It's because that, at Halloween, the most stories are told, and the imagination of the town is the most active.

The Eight Rings was full of costumed patrons. Most of them were generic; crappy vampire fangs, a bad witch's hat, a werewolf mask that one could barely breathe through, or an ironically immature "adult" costume. A few people had actually bothered, though; a Harry Potter was there with a Ginny Weasley, both wearing handmade robes and custom-crafted wands. In the corner, Slenderman towered over the crowd, lifting up his face occasionally so he could eat some fried cheese. There was even a woman there dressed as a satyr, which made the Goatman smile; not the same species, but close enough.

"All right, Humbug," said the Goatman, walking through the club and apparently talking to himself, "Where is everyone?"

Hooky is near the bar along with The Lizardman, said the Hum, a phantom noise that, at the moment, only he could hear. *Sinning Jessie is with one of the Gallows Ghosts in one of the booths. And the King of Knives is…*

"Boo." The Goatman spun around to face a man wearing a rather nasty Chelsea grin, revealing decaying teeth, his body adorned with several bandoliers and knives, all spattered in blood. The King of Knives had been the favored boogieman in Sloth's Pit since the 1890's, when the murderer Joseph Macek was hung. The King was the Legend of Macek given form, and would slaughter children in their sleep if they were naughty. He was now largely a campfire story, like most of the Legends of Sloth's Pit.

"Hello, Joseph. Staying out of trouble, I hope?" The Goatman continued chewing on his pipe; like everywhere else in this town nowadays, the Eight Rings was non-smoking, excepting a room in the back.

"Yes, yes, yes. Ol' Joe is behavin'. Not killed in a while." He nodded furiously, and took the Goatman's arm. "Comeon. Sebastian and Lovebird are waitin'." He dragged the Goatman over to the bar.

"Hey, Goats!" Sebastian, the Hook-handed man, raised his stump of a hand towards him; said stump was currently covered by a fake pirate hook. "I read about you in the papers a few months back! I

thought the Plastic Fanatics woulda caught ya for sure!"

The Goatman snorted. "The Fanatics couldn't catch a Hodag with its feet tied in an empty room." He pulled himself up the the bar, sitting next to Lovebird, one of the few lizardmen that still inhabited this town. "How're you holding up, then, L.B.?"

"It'sssss difficult," hissed the reptile being. "Jussst look at me. I look more man than lizard now." And indeed, he did; he looked like a human that was simply covered in scales, as if he had some kind of bizarre medical condition or was wearing full-body makeup that made it look like he had one.

"How many are here?" asked Macek, toying with one of his rather anachronistic combat knives, which earned him a look of disdain from Dracula the Bartender. "All of us is four…"

"Jessie and one of the ghosts are here, according to Humbug," the Goatman pointed at thin air. "So that's six. The Hum makes seven…" He frowned. "We need one more."

"Where are we going to *get* one more?" asked Sebastian, fiddling with his hook. "Eight of us have to dance, and last I checked, the only viable candidate is the Melonheads. They aren't allowed in because they look like kids!"

"They're older than me," grumbled the Goatman, with an almost bitter note to his voice. "We'll worry about it in a bit. For now… I'm thirsty. Bartender, a mojito please." Dracula the Bartender didn't even bother to card the Goatman, and mixed him the drink.

We could always ask Mary, chimed the Hum, which caused all the assembled legends to groan. *What? She's one of us.*

"Bloody Mary is *not* an option," Sebastian stated firmly, tapping his hook against the bar. "Unless you're talking about the drink, in which case, I'm all for it."

Lovebird nodded in assent. "Sssshe tried to break into one of the sssschools in town. Sssssome dumb third grader sssssaid her name in the bathroom."

"Really?" said the Goatman, looking up from his drink. "What happened?"

"The Fanaticssss had to be called in," said Lovebird. "A kid wasss maimed, but they're all right now. Mary'sss back in the mirrors." The lizard shook his head. "Sssso, no. Mary is a last resssort, at bessst. We ssstill have a while until midnight, anyway…"

> The shadow in the alley could be the King of Knives about to jump out at you just as easily as it could be a stray cat. The people in the town's square in period garb could be real, or they could be one of the several Gallows Ghosts. Is that really the TV you heard in the bathroom, or was Bloody Mary whispering at you to let her out of your mirror?

The Goatman eventually wandered away from the bar, over to the booth where Jessie and the Ghost were. The ghost, he saw, was that of a woman, probably hung for theft; she waved at the Goatman silently, getting up to join the rest of the Legends at the bar. He sat down next to Sinning- or was it Singing?- Jessie. "Jessica."

"Capricorn." The Goatman frowned; he really did hate that nickname. "How goes it?" Jessie sounded almost… bitter. The Goatman couldn't blame her; having your legend decay was a painful experience.

"It goes, it goes." He shook his head. "Humbug told me about your… dilemma. You have my condolences."

Jessie turned away, brushing a lock of hair out of her face. She was supposed to be wearing a costume that made her look like a lady of the night circa 1880 or so, but now, she looked… bland. She was wearing a costume that made her look like a simple, generic ghost; blood around the mouth, a tattered wedding dress, and hair that looked like it was billowing in the breeze.

"*Singing* Jessie. *Singing*." She sniffed. "I'm not a god-damn banshee, Goats. That's what they're reimagining me as, you know.

A forebearer of death. I used to be the fear of sex itself; bed me and you would get your dick eaten." She rubbed her face. "Now I'm just another spook in the night." The Goatman put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Legends change, Jessica. You, Joseph and Sebastian should consider yourselves lucky; at least you still have your stories told."

Jessica sighed, rubbing an eye."I want my old legend back. Sebastian is at least published, and Macek is based on an actual person. Me? I'm a story conjured up try and get people to stop buying sex." She leaned against the Goatman and sighed dramatically. "I just hope I remember when I was like that after… after I've changed."

"Jessica… I truly am sorry." He awkwardly wrapped his arms around Jessica in a hug, which she returned, before pulling away. "…have you picked out a dance partner for tonight?"

> At midnight on Halloween, the monsters of the town assemble at the Grove of the Eight Rings and each stand in one of the rings. Then, they start their dance. They say you can find them all dancing in peace in the grove, their differences forgotten. If a human is to enter the grove, then they will be freely admitted into the dance, and awake in the middle of the woods, reborn as a monster.

"For the last time," said the Goatman to the Hum, "we are not calling Bloody Mary." The Goatman had withdrawn into the bathroom of the Eight Rings, which was empty except for the "werewolf" in the corner, who was probably tripping balls.

It'll even it out, though, mumbled the Hum. *I'm genderless, Jessica and the Ghost are both women… and the dance starts in 15 minutes! We don't have a choice.*

"What about the werefrogs?" asked the Goatman. "Or-or the Queen of the Hoop Snakes? She's in town, right?"

Left yesterday, sighed the Hum. *Come on. I'll get rid of the day tripper over there, and you call her.* With that, the Hum started talking to the fake werewolf, and the Goatman shut off the lights in the bathroom, looking in one of the cracked mirrors.

"Bloody Mary," he intoned once. "Bloody Mary." Twice. "Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary!" A ghost leaped from the mirror, screaming at the Goatman, all covered in dripping blood, her hair ragged and ruffled. She couldn't have been more than 16 when she died in front of her mirror, but here she was… Bloody Mary Thompson.

"Oh ho ho. The Goatman of Sloth's Pit." Bloody Mary stepped out of the mirror and onto the tile floor, grinning. "What is it you want, hmm? Do you finally want to overthrow the influence of the Plasti-"

"The Dance is tonight, Mary." The Goatman stamped his hoof. "We need an eighth. You're the only one we can contact. So cut the spooky nonsense for one night and dance."

The ghostly girl grinned. "Very well then. For the sake of your silly tradition, I shall dance. Tell me, whom will I be dancing with?"

The Goatman thought for a moment, before deciding.

"The King of Knives is in need of a partner. I daresay the two of you suit each other quite well. Just… don't get any blood on the dance floor." As he said this, Bloody Mary seemed to transform; she was now wearing a bright red witch's outfit, complete with stereotypical hat and a broomstick. "…what an appropriate choice… but I would replace the "w" with a "b"."

Bloody Mary stuck her tongue out at him. "Happy Halloween, Goatman." She cackled, and walked out of the restroom, the Goatman following after.

The monsters dance their dance until dawn. Nobody knows why the monsters and myths dance, only the monsters know. It happens every year; maybe you, too, will see the Monsters dance in the woods of Wisconsin.

It was midnight. The DJ, who had dressed himself to look like a zombie, put on *Danse Macabre*. It was a cliche song choice, but rather appropriate. With that, as with every year, the dance floor cleared. Nobody knew why the dance floor was cleared at midnight, and why only seven people were ever on it during this time; it was just club tradition.

Seven people that were visible, and an eighth that wasn't but was omnipresent, partnered up and began waltzing. The witch with the psychopath, the goat with the girl, the hook-handed man with the ghost, and the lizard man seemingly danced alone. Halfway through the song, they began speaking.

"Now we dance the dance of tales," said the males, looking at their partners, or in Lovebird's case, at thin air.

"So we may be told again," replied the females, as well as the hum, who was audible to all. The newcomers in the audience looked around, confused at the origin of the humming voice.

"For our beings to survive…"

"Our stories must never end."

"Wonder-born by word of mouth-"

"As the ageless stars do soar-"

"May you stand the tides of time-"

"And remain forevermore," said all of the Legends in unison, turning towards the entrance of the Eight Rings. The raised their hands, hooked their arms, and exited with their partners in a precession, the audience applauding, some of them confused.

Outside the club, the Legends all looked at each other, and bowed. Bloody Mary, her purpose spent, disappeared to the space behind mirrors from whence she came. Sebastian, the Hook-handed man, and Joseph, King of Knives, went off into the woods. The Goatman walked with Sinning/Singing Jessie, while Lovebird the Lizardman dove into the sewer grate near the nightclub. The Gallows Ghost

simply vanished, while the Hum kept humming.

"Capricorn," Jessica looked at the Goatman. "Do you think the dance really does anything?"

"I don't know," the Goatman admitted. "My father always said that the dance was vital to our survival. He did it every year with some of the other Legends that were around back then. Just like grandad did before him." He shook his head mournfully, and then looked at Jessie, a smile crossing his face. "It at least raises morale. I mean, just look at yourself."

Sinning Jessie looked down at her clothing; they had gone from being tattered, ethereal rags to a rather scandalous dress. Well, scandalous if you lived back in the 1800s. Bright red, with a purple sash around the middle, and a corset visible underneath the ensemble. She gasped. "…how long will it last?"

The Goatman shrugged. "Probably a night or two. Enjoy it the best you can." He shook his head, patting Jessica on the shoulder. "Happy Halloween, Sinning Jessie."

"Happy Halloween to you, Goatman." The Goatman turned, lighting his pipe and walking off into the woods.

"See you next year?"

"Sooner, if I can help it!" The Goatman disappeared into the darkness of the morning of All Hallow's Day.

|Hub|

Of Multiverses and Dandelion Wine

> *The problem is, one of the first things you do when you make dandelion wine is throw away the flowers.*

Seventeen minutes. That's how long the world lasts this time.

The crucifixes with their screaming human sacrifices flayed and nailed to the i-beam crosses vanish, replaced by a bucolic pastoral scene, the serenity of the gold-flecked, rolling hills ruined only by the presence of a thirty foot tall Albertosaurus biting the head off a three-headed sheep. He hits the stopwatch, resets the timer. 00:00:01 and counting.

He decides to head south, pushing through the fields of waist-high dandelions and away from the predator messily devouring its meal. A throbbing scar on his leg, angry and red, serves as a reminder that a few minutes are long enough to be maimed or killed. He takes a moment, once he is far enough from the gory scene, to tear the leaves off of one of the plants and cram them into his mouth. They taste bitter, and tough, but they are edible, and he has not eaten in a long time.

> *They told him that he would be safe. They told him that he needed to carry the information across the universes. Somewhere out there, they said, there would be a universe where the Foundation still existed. Find them, tell them what happened. Maybe they can fix it.*

He tears the stem off of one of the oversized dandelions and sucks on the milky sap, then starts to pull off the dinner-plate sized flowers and stuff them into his battered rucksack. Maybe on the next jaunt, he can find a bottle and some sugar. Make some dandelion wine.

The shift hits him between zipping his rucksack up and hefting it to his shoulder: he is now standing in the middle of a four-way intersection at rush hour. A yellow cab nearly runs him over: the

man behind the wheel is shouting at him, waving a wide-fingered hand as his ruddy face roars, twisted in rage. His eyes are empty, and his passengers are only corpses.

He steps aside and looks up into a vermillion sky: the noonday sun is crimson, the color of blood. It is bloated, too large, taking up nearly half the sky, and the light is dim enough to gaze into, to see the wide, blotchy, diseased patches that dot the surface of that shining orb.

> *All we can do is place one person outside it. An Outside Observer, unaffected by the shifts. We drew straws. We chose you.*

Twenty-one minutes. That was how long the world lasted. He hits the stopwatch, resets the counter.

There is a supermarket on the corner. The plate-glass window is shattered, and a man, now long dead, has been hurled through it. He steps over the glass and into the empty, deserted aisles. He is hungry. He is always hungry.

He ignores the rotting displays of fruit, buzzing with flies, or the greenish, molding displays of meat in the butcher's aisle, and heads straight for the canned goods. On the way, he passes by the dried goods. Something makes him pause. It's a box of instant stuffing. The front shows a typical Thanksgiving scene in the style of Norman Rockwell. The father is carving into a screaming human head. The apple-cheeked children are passing around plates of body parts.

He takes down a can from the shelf, a thin rectangular can in the style of a sardine tin, and opens it up with the twist key. Seventeen baby blue eyeballs packed in oil stare back up at him.

He grabs as many cans as possible. He can't afford to be picky.

> *We know what caused this, but it's too late. We can't stop it. Reality, as we know it, will vanish into the sea of chaos. Into the seafoam of the What-Could-Have-Been.*

This time, the world lasts a full half-hour before the shift. He hits the

stopwatch, resets the counter. The world is filled with fog. From out of the fog come men, or creatures very much like men. His machete is drawn before the first one reaches him, its broad mouth open impossibly wide, revealing a maw filled with jagged, sharklike teeth.

> *The nature of Reality is that of a multiverse. Choice causes new universes to branch out. Possibility creates new realities. Always before, however, those parallel universes have been separate, distinct. That is changing.*

The next few minutes are difficult. He kills many, but they are legion. He is thrown to the ground. They tear open his pack like a bloated corpse and scatter the contents. They grab hold of the cans and slam them against rocks and broken bricks, bursting them open and devouring the eyes, fingers, and tongues within. Then they turn on him.

> *This is a visual representation of the CK-Class Restructuring, they told him. The spirals represent the universes. They are converging.*

He is lucky. The world only lasts nine minutes, but that is long enough for one of the shark-faced creatures to take a bite out of his arm. He emerges into a new world. It is raining, and the rain is made of shit and blood.

> *When they woke him from his bed in the middle of the night, he knew it would be bad. But then, he had been ready. His years in the Army had taught him no fear, had taught him how to survive against all odds. He was ready to face whatever they needed him to face, kill whatever they needed him to kill.*
>
> *He didn't expect that they would take him into a room and show him a movie: a false color representation of a mathematical reality. It looked beautiful: a sea of blue foam with bubbles forming and popping, with brilliant yellow spirals floating among them. The spirals, he noticed, were getting closer together, and their colors were fading.*

It reminded him of back on the farm, in his childhood, when his grandfather used to make dandelion wine with the flowers his grandmother and sister would pick from the rolling green fields. The old man would put the flowers into a big pyrex cooking pot and fill it with water, some sugar, and lemon juice, and he would watch, spellbound, as the yellow flowers rose and fall in that boiling liquid, turning slowly in the bubbling water, changing color from bright yellow to dull brown.

He hits the stopwatch and resets the counter.

You Ain't No Family

Dreaming of her past…

The as-of-yet unnamed girl insulated herself from the cold in a thick hoodie, having no idea what to expect from the game. Silent Hill 3*. A fascinating name for a game. There wasn't much she could go off of beyond what the disc looked like in the banged-up plastic sleeve her friend at school packed it in (where was she gonna hide it in her closet of a room?) and what he told her.*

"You should play this! It's violent, but that's fine since the main character is a girl. She rules. You'd probably appreciate that," he said. And it was true. She did *appreciate that. Somehow, she appreciated it despite it being horror.* Violent *horror.*

At the crack of dawn, long after finishing the game, she still couldn't figure out what had enthralled her about it. Was it that she was playing a game she could hide from her parents? Maybe it was that it was more than just a violent game, in some way. It was surprisingly fun. Perhaps it was the perfect form of escapism; a game where you could fight (religious) monsters and kill (a) god while being a badass teenage lady up against evil adults. That was the main thing she had kept coming back to as she tossed and turned in bed, fidgeting with her secret hair bow.

Heather Mason. Heather Mason. What a gorgeous name. Heather Mason was only three years older than her. It was the first time she could recall playing as a cool *female lead character, rather than just a cute one. And she won on her own strength. That was the most important part.*

Heather Mason. She was everything she had wanted to be. In a way, if she could manage to be more feminine, they'd probably even look alike. Maybe cosplaying her in the future wouldn't be out of the question. Heather Mason. Heather Mason…

That would make for a nice name*, she thought.*

From then on, she fully shed her internal identity as a boy. Now she would be, forevermore, ***Heather Mason****.*

"Nnnn…" Heather woke up, groggy from a rough night of sleep. It took her a few seconds to realize that the two figures in her room were, in fact, Dahlia and Andressa, mom and mommy. They both held multiple numerous presents for her. "Wh —"

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!"

"Aaah!" She jumped out of bed in shock. She never heard them yell that loud. She never heard *anyone* yell that loud — not in a positive way. It was disorienting. "O-Oh, right, June 4th. You remembered!"

"Of course we did, Mags!" Dahlia beamed. She was always proud of that nickname. "We obviously weren't gonna forget it for the world. All of us pooled money together to get you some neat shit."

"You didn't have —" Before she could speak anymore, the both of them leaned in to kiss what was approximately her forehead.

"No way we weren't going to get you stuff," Andressa reassured. "Me, Dahlia, all our friends, we wanted to treat you to something special. You can look forward to this every year." They smiled. It was a feeling she still hadn't gotten used to, even after all this time.

"Thank you both!" A radiant, blushing ASCII face popped up. "I'm really thankful and happy, but uh… if you don't mind, I still need a half-hour to get myself out of bed. Even on my birthday." Heather added a heart alongside the face. It was too overwhelming to take in at that moment; she might need a whole hour this time.

"Sure thing. We'll be making breakfast, so feel free to join us whenever you want. Do you want us to leave your presents here?" Andressa asked.

"Oh! Probably just in the living room. I'll open them later, I think?"

"Will do, Mags." With that, the both of them had left the room. It was

tempting to fall back asleep right then and there; she already felt a lot of energy gone.

She collapsed and turned towards the window. The sun wasn't as bright today as it usually felt. Did that mean anything in particular? Probably not, though she could probably go outside without needing to turn down her brightness settings. If she had that desire. No clouds was good, though that was more expected. There was humming drifting in from the kitchen, and sizzling; Andressa was most likely making eggs. The sound of guns meant Dahlia was getting mad at first-person shooters, most likely. It seemed like any other day. Nothing to prepare for, or to steel against.

Since Dahlia was actually home from college for however long, on her birthday no less, it was tempting to ask if she could go out somewhere. Two months in, and she still had no idea about even the immediate area and where a nice place to go would be. Surely either mom would have an idea of where to go. The conversation was already playing out in her head:

> "Mommy, is there anywhere here we can go to have fun? It's my birthday after all."
>
> "It might be a bit tricky to swing that with your head, Heather…"
>
> "Is there really no way to disguise it?"
>
> "Ah, I'm sure we can think of something, but —"
>
> "If you have any ideas, Dahlia, they better be super inconspicuous. I really don't want to risk anything, especially today."
>
> "But mommy…"

"Ughhh." She rolled around, thinking. They might not have any ideas, or even want to risk any ideas. Was there really nothing? She got up and looked out the window. It was nice that their rooms were entirely on the second floor; the view was pretty good. Birthday views out the window seemed to be more magnificent, but they

could only be so pretty each and every day.

Out in the distance was where Heather spotted it. There were a bunch of people at some kind of establishment. An arcade? Pizzeria? Some kind of combination. And all the kids and teenagers, for whatever reason, were dressed up in ridiculous costumes. It took ten seconds for her to burst out of her bedroom door and shout, digital voice cracking at the excitement of it.

"I KNOW WHAT TO DO FOR MY BIRTHDAY!" Andressa and Dahlia blinked, taken aback.

…

Andressa Santos dressed up as Lisa Lisa. Dahlia Price dressed up as Winry Rockbell. Heather Mason dressed up as the Arcade Hare.

Dreaming of hurt…

There was only one person in outside of the internet that Heather entrusted with knowledge of her true self. He seemed trustworthy enough. His name… it was always out of reach. Nothing but garbled unicode characters and corrupted data.

She had told him two weeks after he gifted her Silent Hill 3. That was a scene she could never forget.

"H… Hey, ɾɑƴєɾɕɬ๏ɳ?" He turned around to look at her. "I need to tell you something. Can you keep it a secret between us?"

And so he did, and she felt the safest she ever had up to that point. At least around one person, she felt that she could be herself more often. That was all she really needed. They only knew each other since 7th Grade, but they hung out enough and were close enough that she felt she could at least tell him most things. She had even seen him defend social justice stuff before, so he had to be fine.

"Check out this game that หรเɛ๏ɾђɾภย gave me during lunch today!" It was two months later when she successfully begged her parents to let him spend the night at his house. He held the copy of Grand Theft Auto V triumphantly in the air, like he had pulled off the biggest heist of all time.

"Oh… how did she manage to get it anyway?"

"Well, let's say she knew a guy who knew a gal who doesn't give a shit about GameStop policy. Only took two months but it's here. Apparently this is mine to keep. Sick, huh?"

"Ah…" Heather fidgeted with her hair bow. She couldn't even pretend to be enthused about the game, but so long as her friend was happy, it made her feel happy. "You just can't let your parents find out, or you'll probably be grounded until college." He got panicky at the thought; she couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah, well! They won't! I'm super good at hiding my M-rated games, so they'll never find — oh, wait! This is for you to play as well." He rolled over to his backpack and started rummaging through it. "She also managed to get the new Mario game. I know how much you wanted that; it should be here somewhere…" She had to resist tearing up in front of him.

"Are you sure? You know I won't be able to take it home."

"Yeah, yeah, I can keep it here. I can also keep it safe from my parents. You can play it however much you want!"

While the rest of the night was hard to fill in from memory, she did stay up almost the whole night on his Wii U playing it, long after he had gone to bed. So this is what safety felt like. It felt like gaming far away from the trappings of regular life. If only รภץɛɾคɬ๏เ∂ was a girl.

A few days later, Heather's friend had gotten in trouble. So that's why he hasn't been at school*, she thought. Later, news had spread through the grapevine of every clique in their minuscule class. Someone had their hands on stolen copies of games, and it didn't take long to follow the trail. Around the same time, Heather's life*

became even more of a trial to endure. It was months later that she had realized that the hair bow she lost might have also been found at his house. Of course that's how the secret got spilled; it's better to confess to being a thief than to be a tranny.

The rat bastard modern-day Judas Iscariot had sold her out, never to look her way again even as school became her second Hell.

"I have something I want added to me."

That was how these conversations usually started. Whenever Heather wanted some new ability, she would bug Andressa and Dahlia about it. It didn't happen often, but there was no reason to fight off the temptation.

She cheated death once already, and now had both looks and abilities no other human could achieve, so what would be the trouble with anything new? Usually, both moms were fine with it. She never really gave much consideration to that; if they were both okay with it, then why wouldn't it be fine?

So far, Heather had requested pretty minor things. The ability to make graphics look nicer in games. An icon of her in games that she could control and talk through. The ability to have it automate certain tasks (reminders not to play for too long, for example). Nothing big, certainly nothing that could hurt anyone. There wasn't much else that she could think of. Except for…

"Hmm?" Andressa replied, distracted as she programmed. "What do you want us to add?"

"Something that lets me modify games to —"

"No." They shook their head. "You never seemed like the kind of girl who wants to cheat, so I figure you have another reason for it. My answer will still be no."

"I don't think it'd be a step too far though. I can already make graphics look better, so wouldn't something like removing blood or making skipping forced cutscenes be a natural next step?"

"Would those be the only changes you'd want to make?"

"Even if I said yes, you would still say no…" A frowning face made out of question marks appeared on her screen. It was the first time she got turned down; she had no idea how to proceed from there.

"Doesn't Danganronpa have pink blood anyway?"

"Yeah, but it's… too much for me even then."

"Hah, you must really like dating sims, Miss Mason." Heather couldn't help but laugh a little. "It's just a matter of principle. That could break games, or glitch things out too hard. And it might actually tempt you into wanting to cheat. No go."

"Buuuut…"

"You can learn how to mod and program. Dahlia has a pretty powerful laptop she almost never uses for those purposes that we can give you."

"If that was the only reason, you wouldn't be so immediately firm about it on every level." Andressa paused. They seemed unsure on how to react. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then thirty. It was the first time Heather experienced an awkward silence with either mom, so she didn't know what to do. The screen was replaced with an exclamation mark and teardrops. "U-Uh, I'm sorry if I touched on a nerve! I didn't mean to, if I did anything wrong I can apologize for that! Um, I-I'm sorry m —"

Andressa reached out a hand to stop her from spiraling into a neverending apology loop. She had gotten better about not doing that, and she was only able to catch herself when someone snapped her out of it. She felt her mother's arms wrapped around her. Warm and secure.

"You're fine. I just don't want anything wonky to happen to you," Andressa quietly spoke. They tried to be as calm as they could for Heather. "I don't know if having something like that can accidentally fuck you up if we're not super careful about it. The more we add, the greater a chance something might go wrong. Maybe it'll be better if I

ask Dahlia and we can see what she says, alright?" She looked up at them and nodded, feeling a little more relaxed. There were probably more unspoken reasons, but she had come to understand that they weren't the best at being communicative. Fitting of a friend.

…

"Hell yeah."

"You didn't even think about it!"

"Look Andy, it shouldn't be a big deal. We're both smart enough to try and figure out ways it can go wrong and prevent it. It shouldn't hurt Mags at all." Heather shrunk a bit into the couch. She never had the heart to tell Dahlia that it always embarrassed her a little to hear that nickname. "We can spend weeks working on it, and it shouldn't be an issue, alright?"

"I… guess. You sound supremely overconfident, love." Dahlia grinned, and Heather couldn't help but smile seeing her mom beam with pride.

Dreaming of an end…

Heather ran away from home at the age of 16.

She woke up in a panic, body shaking. She didn't like to think about it. She didn't like to dream about it.

WIN A FREE NINTENDO SWITCH!

This November 12th, get first in a video game tournament at participating GameStops in Las Vegas, Nevada (game announced the day of the tournament), and GameStop will ship a free Nintendo Switch to your

residence on launch day. Foods and drinks provided, costumes and cosplay welcome. Power up at GameStop.

* Terms and conditions apply. Please check in with participating GameStops to find out more.

"Can we?"

"Mags… that's so far away from where you and Andy live. Jesus. Why?"

"It's the Switch! It'll be so fun to play, and it's free, and I should be good at whatever game they announce! It's no big deal, right?"

"She has a point though. That's pretty far away. Are you willing to travel and stay at a hotel overnight?" A buffering symbol appeared on her screen. "We can only do so much. We can stay over there for one night, and we'd have to travel by car if you wanted to go, so it'd be pretty difficult."

"That… should be fine. I think." Heather wasn't sure; the journey seemed grueling, and maybe there was someone who'd be better than her. But then again, the prize was so tantalizing… how could she refuse? She felt more bothered by their reactions; she was worried they were annoyed, even if that was less likely than surprise and fatigue. That anxiety always stuck with her now.

"Heather, you'd have to take this seriously if you wanted to go. Once we make the plans, we can't afford to back out, especially since Dahlia will come as well." They sighed. "At least they can afford to miss classes for a bit."

"Yeah. I wouldn't mind, I'd just have to rearrange some stuff and suck up to some professors. My grades are good enough now that it'll be fine. Really, it's whether you two can handle it, especially Mags."

Heather looked down at the floor, twirling around a non-existent object. There was the possibility of being overwhelmed, but they've been better at dealing with sensory overloads at home. Going to the arcade for her birthday went well enough. And it was only a GameStop. There shouldn't be much of an issue. The tournament

wouldn't last too long as well if she could be quick enough and good enough to beat everyone. And they seemed to be on-board now, at least.

"I can do it, no problem."

"Then I should be fine as well. Can you come down two days before we head there, dear?"

"Yeah, should be no problem. I'll have to send you all my weed as an extra safety precaution since I just bought some, but that's not gonna be an issue for you I hope."

Heather grinned. Now she was pumped. She never felt so excited in her life.

…

Dreaming of birth…

Heather didn't remember how long she had spent in nothingness. There was no reason to keep track of time at that point. Maybe there was something, but whatever called her from the living world had wiped the memory of it. Maybe it was because she was destined to come back that she spent her time in nothingness.

"*…ink this could work?"*

"I dunno, Armand said it'd be fine like this."

Her existence pulsated, and the two ladies immediately went on alert.

"Hey, anyone there?" Heather didn't know how to respond in this state. All her thoughts could do was pulsate, with no meaning carried along. "Shit, Andy, do you know what to do?"

"I'm thinking Dahlia… Hey, whoever you are. Keep… keep pulsing your thoughts. Until you can form words with them! It shouldn't be too hard. We have all night anyway."

Night? Right. It was night. The opposite of day. Day was the period of time roughly defined as 'the sun being up'. Night was the period of time roughly defined as 'the sun being down'. And the sun was a giant star that radiated light and heat. Alright. What were they doing talking to her at night? How were they talking to her? What sort of state was she in?

"Don't worry. Take your time to figure it out," the other lady reassured.

She pulsated. Her energy and soul and being pulsated as she worked out universal concepts when she was a human being. There were four seasons. The planet she lived on was Earth. People had ages. She was 16 years and some months old. There were games. Digital games. Video games. People had names. She was a girl. Heather. Heather Mason.

"H.. eat… her…"

"Is that your name?" one of the ladies (Andressa) replied.

"Y… Yes. Heather. Heather. Heather M… ason."

"Oh, like the Silent Hill Chick!" The other lady (Dahlia) seemed excited at that prospect. A warmness ran through the words spoken, and the warmth reached her being, as it were.

"How do you feel right now?"

"Feel?"

"It's hard to explain… what are your feelings right now?"

"That might be too abstract for her, Andy. Let's see. Do you know where you are right now?" Heather thought. They were in night. So they weren't in nothingness, like her. So if they were alive…

"Hell?"

"Fuck no. We just reached out to your soul, that's all." Dahlia sounded like an adult, and swore like one, but she didn't sound… angry. "We're still pretty new to this thing. It's, uh… have you ever seen Fullmetal Alchemist?"

"No…"

"I'm out of ways to explain it already. I might just get some coffee. Do you want some, sugar?" Pause after some, before sugar. Sugar… that goes in coffee. But there was a pause. So she called Andressa "sugar". Were they…?

"I'm good, but you can't be out of the room for too long. Please be back in less than five minutes. Or we may lose Heather." Lose… they didn't want to lose her. Heather couldn't hear anything but words, but the pause in speaking probably meant that Dahlia had left the room that they were in. She tried to catch up on concepts again. Math. History. Alan Turing, Paris Is Burning, Fox News, pool cues, climate —

She experienced what she could only think of as a 'twang' in the area where her thoughts had gathered.

"It's alright, Heather. You can relax. You should be fine. Listen… I don't know what happened to you, but I can't imagine it was anything good."

"No." A pause. "How are you talking to me?"

"We… that's a long story. Um… my girlfriend and I work on this project with friends. And we decided that we wanted to contribute to it. But everyone else's project is like… Hmm." Pause. "For this thing our friend group works on, we bring back lost souls. People that life just screwed over. And we put them into fitting bodies that other souls no longer are able to inhabit. Um, that's a long story. Jeez Dahlia, you'd explain this so much better."

"Am I lost?"

"I don't know. Do you feel lost?" Heather couldn't answer that. Possibly…?

"Did you pick me on purpose?"

"Not really. We just sort of. It's like when you go fishing, and you throw some bait out into a crowded lake, hoping to catch some fish. Like that, but less dangerous. So we do that, and configurate their souls and bodies to do cool shit." Configurate? Oh, configure. Like a computer? Or was it magic? It felt magic. "We want them to feel useful when they didn't feel useful in life. This is only one way to do it, but it's the easiest and most consistent way. But…"

"But?"

"Stuff keeps going wrong, and they get lost all over again. I always feel the worst about it. I think my bitching in chat has finally gotten to them, I hope."

"Huh?"

"Human souls are still human. They don't stop being human because they no longer have a body. It's hard for us to think of it like that while we're alive but it's morally grey. We just didn't realize it until a certain point. But we still wanna help. And Dahlia and I… it wouldn't really be a bad idea to be a mother, right?" Heather didn't know how to respond. She would have disagreed in her lifetime. "So… if you want to come back, we can find a way. It's not alchemy, so I don't think any laws of natures are going to be broken. We just care a lot, I guess. Maybe too much," Andressa's voice cracked. Heather could tell how serious she was.

"I…"

"Hey, I'm back! See? Turbo quick."

"Hey!" Heather could hear a kiss; she pulsated as much as she could without realizing. "Hey, Heather, is everything okay?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, yeah! Yeah… I think so. Family would uh… would be nice. It just sounds too convenient. I've never really had a family… I want to be cool, and cared for, I just want a family. A real one…"

"Hey, you're talking to us, so we must already be doing something right!" Dahlia giggled. Heather could have sworn she heard

Andressa smile. Their radiance warmed her. So that's what safety felt like after all.

She wasn't sure where it started to go wrong.

Maybe it was her fault.

When Heather won, she realized it was partly due to all of the other contenders acting weird. She didn’t fully grasp the situation. The employees were suspicious and wanted a picture of her without her "costume". The reasoning still eludes her. Something to do with a photo for the store, whatever that meant. She didn't have a script prepared to head off the situation before it became an issue. She was too bewildered to give a good answer, and awkwardly declined to do so.

If she only prepared for this situation, maybe things wouldn't have been so confusing. All it took was an impatient 12-year old to try take off her head before confusion took place. When she panicked and took it off herself, chaos set in.

Maybe it was bad timing that both of her mothers left early.

Dahlia wanted to get some groceries for the hotel that night as well as snacks for the way back, and Andressa had to check in with the hotel to see if they could check out super early. Plus, their old dealer was right next to the hotel too, so it would be a super quick and lucky break for weed.

If they had left 20 minutes earlier, maybe they would have been back in time to help her. If they had left 20 minutes later, maybe all of them could have left by the end of the tournament. Maybe things would have played out differently. But she said it was okay for her moms to go, so she was to blame there.

Maybe it was her fault.

If she never went in the first place, things wouldn't have turned out to be a mess. If she threw or did poorly on purpose, maybe she would have never been asked to take a picture. If she knew what

exactly was affecting everyone, maybe she could help them instead of being so engrossed in the game. If she hadn't experienced massive sensory overload during the tournament, no one would have even been affected in the first place. If she knew beforehand that her anomalies were likely to cause an issue, maybe her mothers could have solved everything beforehand. If she wasn't into games, maybe none of this wouldn't have happened.

And now she's stuck, locked outside of a GameStop waiting for the police to come, no way to contact her mothers. The sign that she made on her own and a reminder of what she is, tucked away in her sweatshirt for the police to find, are all she has now.

It's like sweet sixteen all over again.

…

Dreaming of family…

The first thing Heather had asked for before coming back to life was a TV head. "I think it would be cool" was the only reason she gave, and no real other reason was needed.

Over the course of the next week, there was a lot of information she had to absorb from her new mothers. Not like she didn't expect it; if she could be brought back to life, anything was possible. It just didn't occur to her the scope of the information she had to learn. After many questions and conversations, she learned some important things.

1. *Going outside with a TV head would be bad unless it was to costume parties, conventions, meetups where cosplay was allowed, or on Halloween. Heather realized this when asking for it, which was fine, but still a problem at times. Neither mom could figure out a workaround for now, but they'd try.*

    - *If she goes outside, she had to be careful no one tried to "take off" her head. Nothing good would come of that. They felt very protective on this matter, enough to not even tell her what this was protecting her from.*

3. *Homeschooling would be a thing, but the both of them would be lax about it. They understood how stressful high school was.*
4. *Dahlia Price used she/her pronouns. Andressa Santos used they/them, though she/her wasn't out of the question for Heather if she ever forgot.*
5. *She was anomalous by the very nature of her existence now. That meant if she wanted anything cool, she could ask either of them. They'd just have to approve it.*

    - *There were other anomalous things out there, but they wanted to be careful about what she got exposed to. Just in case.*

7. *She had to stay with Andressa in New Mexico. Dahlia would be at college most of the time, and aside from any occasional visits to leave Ohio that she could score, she'd talk to the both of them over video calls. In a year, they'd have to see what the living arrangements would look like since Andressa would be coming back from her year off.*
8. *Neither mother would let her smoke weed. The logistics of that were hard to figure out, so really, she just shouldn't get high from any method, period. There was a room in Andressa's apartment where they'd smoke away from her, and outside as well. This was fine with Heather; she had no plans to do so regardless, but she appreciated this rule being there in the first place.*
9. *They'd let her know about anything else important.*

It felt sturdy. There was stability and a structure of some sort, reliable housing and food and water, and most of all, her two parents loved each other. It felt nice. They were kind and lovely. They were her parents, her mothers, her best friends. New Mexico didn't seem bad. Apparently, heat wasn't an issue because her head could cool herself off. Everything seemed fine.

And yet, she could never get a nagging thought out of the back of her head. She felt guilty every time she felt it. After all, she couldn't really pick her parents. And why should she doubt herself with such a nice family when her last one was, in hindsight, horrible?

Still, it never really left her. Andressa and Dahlia… they felt more like her friends than her parents. They weren't that much older than her. Andressa was only 21. Dahlia was 20. She was still technically 16 (does her body even age? Does she mentally age? How does that work?), but even accounting for a difference in maturity and experience, they almost always felt like older sisters rather than parents. It was disorienting sometimes. She always felt ashamed to see it that way, but it's not like she couldn't.

It didn't quite feel like family.

…

Heather found herself outside on the pavement.

Right. She remembers now. It wasn't some bizarre dream after all… she went through her own punishment time at the jailers' place. (Not too far off from the police, really.) And yet she ended up back here. At this cursed GameStop.

It took a little bit before she realized the full scope of the situation.

"R-Right… shit… it's night. Las Vegas… GameStop… so I'm free. So what do I… do… I guess I just should sleep behind the store. Yeah. I guess…" It was nighttime, and yet this part of the city was surprisingly empty. She always assumed Las Vegas was another one of those Cities That Never Sleep. Thankfully, everyone got some shuteye for her. She got up and walked behind the GameStop, body aching and head spinning, a dizzy face plastering the screen.

As she sat down next to a garbage can to better hide herself, she at least felt thankful nothing actually broke. Her head was intact. Body was okay. No bones broken. Now she had to wait. Wait for… what?

"I don't know. I don't know." *What a horrible night to have a curse, huh*, she thought to herself, and she giggled even if it was pained laughter, because she could at least find some solace in the situation. "Suffering is a fact of life. You deal with that or you go under, Heather. Don't go under like you did today. Don't go under like you did long ago. Just… stay intact. They'll find you soon enough, right? Soon."

…

The sound of feet running at her snapped her out of dreamless sleep. Two pairs of feet. Four feet. Cleats and flip-flops. In the winter. Someone was wearing cleats to run, but flip-flops in winter. Her mommy told her a joke about how she was fine wearing nothing in even the coldest weather because of her Brazilian blood, so that would mean —

"HEATHER!"

She barely had time to process it before arms linked around her, tears running down her clothes and screen.

"M — M —"

"H-Hey, hey, i-i-it's okay, we found you, y… you're safe, hoooly fuuuck." Dahlia was the closest to losing it. Heather never asked for the ability to cry, if that was even possible. She'd done enough of that. But she almost wanted that back now.

"We got you. We need to take you home. I'm sorry. We're sorry. We shouldn't have been so irresponsible."

Irresponsible.

Irresponsible was the word pinging around in her head as they picked her up and carried her to the car like a queen, as they started to drive home, as Dahlia put on Megadeth to get herself to stop crying, as Andressa played Have a Nice Life to calm themself down, as they switched seats so Dahlia could sleep. Irresponsible.

She wanted to agree. She wanted to tell them that wasn't true. Which of the two was it?

"Heather. I'm sorry. The both of us are." Some hours later, enough that the sun started to breach the landscape, and mommy brought her back down to Earth. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to be mad, or disappointed, or relieved. Andressa's tone felt like a kid apologizing to their mother. Her mothers didn't feel that different from her after all.

"It's okay." Maybe half-truths would help. Andressa sighed, and nodded. They probably felt the same. "I think… right now, I just want sleep."

"That's alright, sweetie. Sleep as much as you want."

Heather leaned onto the window and closed her eyes. It was hard to power down with a road so inconsistently bumpy as the one they were traveling on. It was an hour before she got to overhear a brief conversation her mothers had, presumably thinking she had fallen asleep.

"Hey… Andy."

"Hmm?"

"We have no idea what the fuck we're doing."

"Yeah."

"Let's stop fucking acting like kids."

"Right…"

"Yeah…" Dahlia sniffled.

"We're raising a kid. We can't be her friend. We need to be mothers."

"Mmhmm… love you, hun."

"Love you too, darling."

It was the best rest she got in months.

…

For her (technically) 18th birthday, Heather got a Nintendo Switch. She let herself believe that she earned it this time.

« **A Scip Or A Star?** | **`Dread & Circuses Hub`** | **City of Wonder™** »

“And last but certainly not least on your VIP tour is the Kaleidoscope!” Lolly announced as she led Victor and Iris into the final tent. “Designed by Herman Fuller himself sometime in the late 19th century, handcrafted from Ravelwoods’ lumber and beryllium-bronze clockwork salvaged from the ruins of a Colossus slain during the First Occult War -”

“You mean Fuller didn’t kill it himself, with a butter knife and one hand tied behind his back?” Iris asked dryly, having had well past her fill of the Circus’s penchant for hyperbole.

“Please hold all questions until the end of the presentation,” Lolly replied with an uncharacteristic tinge of irritation. She cleared her throat and looked back down at her cue card. “As I was saying, the Kaleidoscope has been an essential fixture of The Circus of the Disquieting since our inception. The wood is both magic and immortal, and so produces EVE, which is amplified into aspect radiation, which is then channelled into clockwork casting circles of near-infinite configurability, allowing us to open Ways to any unprotected door we choose and even apportate the whole Circus if we have too. I love the word apportate; it makes me think of Harry Potter.
“And that concludes our tour. Questions?”

“Can we go through it now?” Iris asked impatiently.

“Oh no, we have to wait for Icky. I’m not supposed to dial the Kaleidoscope by myself,” Lolly replied. “There…may have been an incident or two.”

“Well, the Wandsman is expecting us. Would you please find The

Ringmaster and tell her we're ready to depart."

"No worries. I'm here, I'm here," Icky said as she ran into the tent. "Sorry, I was planning on being here first but Eugene, one of our Clowns, something triggered his PTSD and long story short if those kids weren't scared of Clowns before they are now. Victor, great to see you again, and…Iris, we've met before, right? I've lost count of how many private shows we've done for Emcee D but you were there for at least one of them, weren't you?"

"I've seen you before, yes, though I don't believe we were ever formally introduced," Iris said, extending her right hand out in greeting. Instead of shaking it, Icky took off her top hat, bowed, and kissed Iris's hand.

"Mmm. You are a marked improvement over Darke's last proxy," Icky told her. "I'm loving the turtleneck by the way; you're really rocking the sexy little nerd look."

"Let go of my hand," Iris ordered through her teeth. With a reluctant groan, Icky obliged. Victor handed Iris a wet-one for her to wipe the Clown saliva off her hand.

"I'm sorry about that. Icky can be a bit 'presidential' sometimes," Lolly apologized.

"I'm just being friendly, darling. She's practically family after all. Iris, did Darke ever tell you he thought the Fuller might have been a descendant of his?"

"He…may have mentioned it, yes," she replied as she handed Victor the used wet wipe. She sniffed her hand and muttered that it still smelt strangely sweet.

"Really? I don't see the resemblance," Lolly remarked.

"Oh, I've noticed a few similarities between Fuller and the Darks over the years," Icky said. "But I'm sure Iris doesn't want to hear about that. Lolly gave you a tour, right? She loves giving tours. See anything that tickled your fancy?"

"She spent twenty minutes looking at Gary's phonebox of all things,"

Lolly replied. “She asked him all sorts of questions about it, and took some pictures with this half smartphone, half tricorder thing.”

“I found it **`interesting`**,” Iris shrugged.

“Percy mentioned you were a whiz with paratech in his letter,” Icky said. “Seems to run in the family. I hope he’s been telling you equally flattering things about us.”

“Don’t call him Percy. I don’t even call him that,” Iris objected. “But you’ll be pleased to know he does retain a fondness for your little travelling show. He told me to give his regards to the Man with the Upside-Down Face, but oddly enough I couldn’t see him anywhere.”

The two Clowns’ faces went sour at her tone.

“Manny’s off-site today, scouting for talent,” Icky said briskly.

“How unfortunate,” Iris said, unable to suppress a smug little smile. “Hopefully we get a chance to meet soon. Grandsire was quite eager to see how he and I got along.”

“I’ll bet,” Icky murmured. “Well, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Just give me a minute to spin up the Kaleidoscope and you’ll be on your way.”

As Icky dialled in the coordinates for Kul-Manas, Lolly was literally jumping up in down with excitement.

“This is so amazing. We’re going to meet bird people!”

“Please try to conduct yourself with some restraint. It would be unwise to offend our hosts -”

“You mean ruffle their feathers?”

“…Yes. I don’t know this for a fact, but I doubt they’ll appreciate bird puns.”

“You mean they’d find them *unpheasant*?”

“Oh, this is going to work out great,” Iris sighed. One of the Doors to

the Kaleidoscope opened before them, revealing its smoky white portal. “Victor, you have the merchandise, correct?”

“Yes Ms. Dark,” Victor nodded, holding up his carrying case.

“Good. Do not set it down until we’ve received payment.”

“There you are, a one-way Way to the city of Kul-Manas,” Icky announced. “Lolly, sweetie, I’m still a little gun-shy after what happened at the Bazaar, so be extra careful. I want you to come back home at the first sign of trouble. If you lose your keys make for the Library -”

“When do I ever lose my keys?”

“You don’t, I know, I just…”

“I’ll be fine. I know how to take care of myself. I promise I’ll be back as soon as we’re done.” Lollipop leaned in and kissed Icky goodbye. “Love you Icky.”

“I love you too Little Lollipop,” Icky smiled. “Dark, I’m holding you responsible if anything happens to her.”

“Good luck with that,” Iris replied flippantly. “Victor, Lolly, stay behind me at all times and do not speak unless spoken too.”

“Yeah, good luck with *that*!” Lolly snorted. Rolling her eyes, Iris marched through the Door with her two escorts.

The Door the Wanderers emerged from was but one of countless others, built into the bark of a colossal tree that stretched hundreds of meters across and up into the sky seemingly without end. Before them was the city of Kul-Manas, comprised of wicker buildings that superficially resembled enormous and ostentatious bird’s nests. The sky was a deep violet, and instead of a sun or moon, it was lit by many shining silver orbs which the Wanderer’s initially mistook as stars until they saw they were gently falling below the horizon like snowflakes.

Standing before them was a humanoid crow or raven, all jet black

and covered in feathers. He was clad in a hooded cloak of crimson and gold and held a great bronze staff in his scaly, clawed talons.

“Most auspicious greetings, fellow Wanderers,” he said with a bow. “I am Ickis the Wayward, Wandsman of Kul-Manas; Sailor of the Celestial Sea, Walker of the Astral Plane, Spelunker of the Dimensional -”

“Oh my god you’re a bird person!” Lolly screamed, jumping in front of him. “I’m Lolly! Can you fly? Is your poop all white and runny? Do you celebrate your birthday when your egg was laid or when it hatched?”

The Wandsman stared at her in stunned silenced for a moment.

“No I cannot fly, that's not your concern, and both events are marked as sacred occasions. Laying an egg is considered an accomplishment of the mother, while hatching is the accomplishment of the hatchling,” he replied.

“That’s so fascinating, plus you basically get double birthdays, though the first one kind of sounds more like Mother’s day. Oh, do your people hate cats, because I love puss -”

“Lolly, behind me now!” Iris ordered. “Your Waywardness, I apologize for the impertinence of my associate.”

“It is quite all right. She is not the first Bozomorph to cross my path. Her people are well known for their exuberance.”

“I’d say that’s racist, but everything I’ve said to you was racist so I guess we’re cool,” Lolly said.

Iris shot her an ominous glance, demanding her silence.

“Great Wandsman, I have come to you on behalf of the Deathless Merchant of London so that we might exchange our equally priceless wares for our mutual benefit.”

“On his behalf?” the Wandsman asked with a curious tilt of his head. “I can see your True Name in your aura. You are Dark.”

“I am Iris Dark; proxy, apprentice, descendant and heir of Percival Darke.”

“But Dark is his True Name, a True Name bound to him and him alone through unspeakable black magic, anchoring his essence to the Mortal Plane and affording him untold occult powers. How could there be another with the True Name Dark?”

“He spells it with an ‘e’. I don’t,” she replied nonchalantly. The Wandsman squinted at her, seemingly unconvinced.

“I am…pleased to learn that there is another such as Darke,” he said, though the cawing sound he made sounded like it was a sign of distress. “And who is this mere mortal so brave or so foolish to enter the City of Kul-Manas?”

“Victor Chan, pleased to make your acquaintance,” Victor said, shaking his hand. “I’m just here to carry stuff and fill out the paperwork.”

“Now that we are formally introduced, may we please to be shown to the Guildhall of Gorok?” Iris asked.

“Of course. I am happy and eager to serve as your guide during your visit. Please, follow me,” the Wandsman bowed, extending his hand towards a rickshaw. The driver, a shorter being with the head of a sparrow, opened the door and gestured for them to board. Once they were inside, the Sparrow lifted the rickshaw up by its hand-grips and hauled it through the twisting and winding streets of the ancient city.

A city peopled by anthropomorphic birds was a curious sight, even to Lolly who had travelled extensively across worlds. Most of the common folk they saw bustling about were songbirds; sparrows, finches, warblers and the like, but there was the occasional more exotic avian. They spied a sensuous swan, a flamboyant flamingo, and even a preening peacock all proudly displaying their plumage as they strutted down the street. The lack of any obvious self-segregating among the many different species suggested that they viewed each other as a single kin. The sighting of a meadowlark and an oriole courting each other prompted the question of interspecies

breeding, but that hardly seemed like an appropriate subject of conversation.

“So how do your people have se -”

“Hey, where exactly is Kul-Manas anyway?” Victor asked, cutting Lolly off.

“As with all such Nexuses, we are everywhere and nowhere,” the Wandsman replied. “We are outside the continuum of time and space, and thus untethered by its laws. Wanderers from opposite ends of Creation could travel here with a single stride."

"That enormous tree we came out of was quite extraordinary. What is it?" Iris asked.

"It it nothing less than the World Tree itself," the Wandsman answered. "It was made incarnate here long ago by the spellcraft of our ancestors, and we have benefited greatly from its presence. Around its trunk we made our city, crafting our homes from the detritus it let fall. We drank its sacred sap and were granted both clairvoyance and gnosis. We carved Janus Doors into its bark, and with only the most basic of tools and methodologies we set out to explore the multiverse, just as the Pacific peoples of your world once sailed the vast ocean with only Stone Age technology."

“Wow, you’re a much better tour guide than I am. I need cue cards to stop from going off on tangents,” Lolly said. “Anyway, do your guys have penises, and if they do are they like those crazy corkscrew duck penises or do -”

Lolly was quickly muffled by Iris’s cold, metallic left hand covering her mouth.

“Lolly, that is not an appropriate question. When I take my hand away you are going to apologize to the Wandsman for your vulgarity. Is that understood?” she asked. Lolly nodded, and Iris lowered her hand.

“Oh my god you have a robot hand!” Lolly squeed, examining it with glee. Iris squinted her eyes at her incredulously.

“Did you seriously just now notice that?”

“Uh-huh. My attention is kind of all over the place most of the time.”

“So I’ve observed.”

“It is an interesting prosthetic, if I may say so,” the Wandsman chirped. “Where did you acquire it?”

“It’s custom made,” she replied, her expression making it clear she wasn’t taking any follow-up questions.

The Wandsman cleared his throat and awkwardly ruffled his feathers.

“Ah, we’re here: The Great Gilded Guildhall of Gorok, headquarters of the Merchant’s Guild of Kul-Manas,” he said as they rolled in front a squat spire, woven from branches that had been gilded in 24 carat gold leaf. Strange runes (that could both insultingly and accurately be described as chicken scratch) encircled the structure, and by the entrance was a marble fountain depicting a humanoid seagull regurgitating food into the mouths of its chicks, which was presumably meant to be symbolic of prosperity…or something.

There was a gentle thud as the driver set the rickshaw down and hurried around to open the door for them.

“Guildmaster Vixis and his council patiently await your arrival, Ms. Dark.”

“Kindly lead the way,” Iris said. “Victor, by my side. Lolly, behind me and quiet. I mean it.”

Lolly nodded and mimed zipping her mouth shut and tossing away the key, unaware that a passerby passerine would later recover the imaginary item and use it to unlock a Way leading to a plane comprised solely of thought-forms.

The Wandsman led the way into the hall, followed by Iris, Victor and Lolly. The interior of the hall was also gilded, as well as being decorated with velvet rugs, jade statues and enormous portraits. Lighting came from the same smokeless spectral flames the

Percival Darke used in his sanctum.

The Guildmaster and his council sat on a dais that elevated them a full fathom off the ground and forced whoever was before them into the submissive position of staring up at them. The Guildmaster himself looked to be a kingfisher of some kind, with the other councillors consisting of an ibis, a blue heron, a white crane, a cassowary, a barn owl, and a kiwi.

“Ickis, you honour us with your presence yet again,” the Guildmaster declared, his deep voice resonating throughout the hall. “And once again you delight us by bringing more Wanderers with you to trade. The Deathless Merchant of London said his proxy was one who bore his name, and yet even now I hesitate to believe my own eyes. Nonetheless, we are happy to receive you, Dark, as well as your guests. I’d introduce the council but if you are anything like your namesake I assume you wish to get straight to business.”

“You would be correct Guildmaster,” Iris nodded. She snapped at Victor to open the carrying case and take out her merchandise. “As discussed in your correspondence with Esquire Darke, I present to you three-dimensional wards, designed by both Esquire Darke and myself. Using common holography, we have created talismans inscribed with wards drawn in three dimensions, allowing them to be six times more complex than traditional wards without taking up any additional space. There are seven talismans, one for each of you, and each talisman contains two wards, one on each side.”

Victor stepped up to the dais and handed a talisman to each councillor so that they could inspect them.

“If you are satisfied with the quality of those samples, we are willing to sell you more at a price 1 kg of Morgana Silver per talisman. Those fourteen wards are the only ones designed at the moment, however we are willing to take custom orders for double the price. All payment must be upfront, no refunds, and before we go any further I will require proof that you actually possess Morgana Silver so that I know you’re not wasting my time.”

The ibis nodded and tossed her a coin purse. She poured the contents into her hands, revealing bright silver coins depicting a fairy

queen on one side and a seven-pointed star encircled by runes on the other.

“What are those?” Lolly asked, before quickly re-zipping her mouth and pocketing the key (much to the council’s disappointment).

“It’s yttrium silver from the Fey city of **Fata Morgana**,” Iris replied. She squeezed them in her right palm and smiled as she felt the EVE flow through them. “For all intents and purposes, it’s mithril. It’s thaumically conductive, and if we can get a steady supply of it we can use it in all kinds of paratech.
“Gentlemen and/or Ladies, I am satisfied with the quality of your product as I hope you are satisfied with mine. Shall we discuss bulk discounts?”

The Guildmaster chuckled cruelly, and would have sneered if he had lips.

“I have a better idea,” he snapped his talons and metal grates clamped down on every exit.

“Vixis, what in the name of Xitheus are you doing?” the Wandsman demanded, the rest of the council squawking in agreement.

“I’m stopping us from being robbed blind is what I’m doing,” the Guildmaster replied. “I was none too pleased when I received a letter from the Deathless Merchant of London, making us an offer we couldn’t refuse. A kilo of the most valuable thaumic alloy in the known worlds in exchange for these cracker jack toys!”

He threw his talisman straight at Iris, only for her to catch it effortlessly.

“I found the Merchant’s tone to be less than respectful, how he took it for granted that I would not dare to refuse his offer. Well, I dare. In fact, I’ve decided it’s time to let the Merchant know exactly where we stand. Darke may be top chicken in his backwater reality, but he has no power over us! We are the Ascendant Avians of Kul-Manas! The blood of Dinosaurs flows through our veins. Dinosaurs I tell you! The Merchant was a fool to send you Dark, and you were a fool to come. A partner of the most powerful anomalous firm on your Earth, their

chief paratechnologist, and Darke's own blood no less? To say you were worth a King's ransom would be a monstrous understatement. "The Clown and the salesman are free to go, just be sure you deliver my message to Darke; Kul-Manas is an unassailable fortress, he cannot touch us here! If he ever wants this little tinkerer of his back I will accept nothing less than majority control of his fancy little flea market. Until then Dark, you will have the privilege of being my prisoner."

The Guildmaster glared down mockingly at her, expecting the young woman to be trembling in fear.

Instead, she just looked annoyed.

"Alright then. I wasn't planning on adding 'killed a giant kookaburra' to my CV, but why the hell not?" she asked rhetorically.

Taking a deep breath and sharpening her will, she focused the Mekhane part of her being into her metal hand while channelling the Yaldabaoth portions into her flesh hand. She raised each hand up and then dragged them downwards, producing two twin serpents as she did so; one of quicksilver ichor, the other of jaundiced miasma. The two Dragons immediately attacked each other, twisting around one another in a double helix, each consuming the other's tail in a type of Ouroboros. Each Serpent feeding off the other, the Ouroboros grew in size and rose to the ceiling of the Guildhall, creating a vortex that pinned the council to the floor, unable to escape as it slowly descended towards them.

The Wandsman squawked in horror and leapt to the dais. He held up his great staff and began shouting incantations at the abomination. It held it back, but only just, and it was still growing stronger.

"Well, we got some Morgana Silver, so this wasn't a complete bust," Iris said as she casually pocketed the coin purse. "If we're lucky we could figure out how to transmute it from other metals. Lolly, would you be so kind as to open a Door back to your Circus please?"

Lolly didn't respond immediately, being transfixed by the sight of a bird wizard battling self-cannibalizing ethereal snakes.

“Iris, you can’t kill them,” she objected vehemently.

“I beg your pardon? I’m in charge here, *little lollipop*, and I don’t much care for someone trying to take me hostage. Now make a Door out of here before those two Dragons get so big they devour the whole guildhall.”

Lolly furrowed her brow resolutely and leapt up onto the dais.

“Lolly! What the hell are you doing?”

She grabbed hold of the Wandsman staff and channelled her own magic into it, strengthening his counterspell and pushing the Serpents back ever so slightly.

“Lolly get down here this instant!”

“Undo this!”

“I will leave you to die if you do not immediately come back here!”

“If I die, Icky will never let you use the Kaleidoscope again!”

Iris's face contorted in rage. Knowing Lolly was right, she climbed up onto the dais and snatched the staff away from them. Pointing it at her creation, she screamed something in the Chaos Tongue. Two bolts of lightning, one silver and one yellow, shot forth from the staff and struck the opposite coloured Dragon, reducing each of them to mist in a spectacular but ultimately harmless explosion.

“Thank you,” the Wandsman whispered to Lolly. Iris pulled Lolly off the ground and slammed her up against the wall.

“Never again, do you hear me? You are a goddamn circus act! You do not command me, you do not undermine me, you do not disobey me! You pull a stunt like this again I swear I will conjure a beast that will make that Ouroboros look like a garden snake, do you understand me?”

A short chuckle escaped from Lolly’s lips.

“You know, I see it now.”

“See what?”

“The resemblance to Fuller.”

After having managed to recover, five of the councillors rose to their feet and gathered around the Guildmaster, who was still cowering on the floor.

“Guildmaster Vixis, not only have you once again acted unilaterally and broken our laws by threatening a foreign emissary, but you endangered this council and possibly all of Kul-Manas by committing an act of war against no one less than the Deathless Merchant of London!” the barn owl screeched at him, the outrage in her voice barely contained. “For these unforgivable crimes, the council condemns you to death.”

The other four councillors savagely and repeatedly impaled the Guildmaster with their long beaks, tearing off flesh and organs as he screamed for mercy.

Lolly covered her eyes and turned away, while Iris just curiously arched an eyebrow.

“No trial or due process? Efficient,” she commented. The ibis councillor approached her, his head bowed in humility.

“Dark, I beg you to believe me when I tell you that none of us knew what Vixis was planning,” he said, his voice heavy with fear and contrition. “If you could bring yourself to overlook his treachery, Kul-Manas will gladly still do business with you. As a show of good faith, we will purchase your entire current stock of three-dimensional wards and happily pay double, triple -”

“Tenfold, plus some of that sacred sap I heard mentioned earlier,” she replied.

“Yes, yes of course. Anything.”

“Well that’s good, isn’t it Iris?” Lolly asked hopefully. “It’s a heck of a lot better than one little coin purse. You’re not still mad at me, are you?”

“She threw herself in mortal danger against my direct orders, threatening to strand us in a hostile city and permanently ruin relations between our two businesses while ordering me to stop my own Ouroboros spell!”

In the Ringmaster’s tent, Lolly once again sat on Icky’s lap while they sat across from a partner of Marshall, Carter & Dark lividly accusing them of gross misconduct.

“And before that, she was asking the Wandsman about his penis and his feces and how his people reproduce!”

“The Wandsman liked me! He said I could come back anytime and learn all about Kul-Manas!” Lolly countered, sticking her tongue out at her. Icky gently pulled her back and calmly addressed Iris.

“Dark, I understand that Lolly’s behavior may have been less than professional, but given that you attempted to murder an entire council of people -”

“Bird people,” Iris interjected.

“Racist!”

“I hardly think you have any right to accuse her of improper conduct,” Icky said. “You got your business deal, nobody innocent got hurt, can’t we agree to just let this go?”

“Listen, her crass behavior jeopardized the success of this deal from the minute we stepped through the Door, and she actively subverted my authority by forcing me to destroy the Ouroboros,” Iris replied. “That is unacceptable and it cannot happen on future expeditions. I am going to have to insist that she be disciplined for this.”

“Oh, you can watch Icky spank me if you want. That’s always fun.”

Icky snickered, but gestured for her to remain silent.

“Iris, I understand and I agree. I’ll be sure to write her up for this.”

“You’ll write her up?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“I…I guess that will do. I can’t deal with any more bullocks today. Come on Victor, let’s get back to London.”

With only a polite wave goodbye from Victor, he and Dark left the Ringmaster’s tent. Once they were gone, Icky reached into her desk and pulled out a document which, unbeknownst to her, was not dissimilar to a document kept by the SCP Foundation.

The Things Lollipop Is Not Allowed To Do At The Circus Of The Disquieting

Please note: This list is not a joke. Each entry is something Lollipop either did, attempted to do, or at the very least expressed an interest in doing.

1. Attempt to break her record of drinking 5 7 8 pints of Clown's Milk in one sitting.
2. Attempt to break her record of *producing* 3 1/2 5 1/2 6 1/2 pints of Clown's Milk in one sitting.
3. Call a Circus wide emergency conference to decide whether Quincy's butterflies pollinating Yume's flowers counts as sex.
4. Debate customers on the validity of the Fifthist Church's teachings.
5. Stretch Meaty the Meat Worm into a Mobius strip.
6. Attempt to guess Manny's actual name.
7. Change the gravity in the bounce house from 'Moon' to 'Sun'.
8. Order any Wondertainment product that is living, explosive, radioactive, poisonous, autonomous, expensive or requires adult supervision without Icky's permission.
9. Create anatomically correct, animate balloon animals. (not even for educational purposes)
10. Challenge Motormouth to a pie eating contest.
11. Crawl inside Motormouth's stomach while he's sleeping in order to retrieve said pies.
12. Ask the Amazing Zoltan if he knows why kids love the great

taste of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, how many licks to the center of a Tootsie Pop, etc.
13. Consult the Amazing Zoltan on anything other than Alchemy.
14. Cite the Scarlet King mythos as a 'patriarchal yet functional' example of polyamory.
15. Attempt to harvest silk from Library Pages.
16. Attempt to hack the Essie P database to change every 'good freak's' special containment procedures to "set them free you assholes".
17. Claim she is the first openly LGBT individual to literally ride a rainbow. (It's part of the midway. I've ridden it, and I'm sure lots of other LGBT+s have too)
18. Incorporate Miles the Bonecat into her Pussy Lovers routine. (the boner pun was hilarious though)
19. Re-purpose Dicksy's old reprogenetic equipment into a DIY bio-lab. (It doesn't matter how easy Professor Abnormal made it look, self-replicating cotton candy is a disaster waiting to happen)
20. Arrange play-dates for Ragamuffin with other possessed dolls.
21. Ask Ed & Al if they stock Tartarean Brimstone. (I do not want Ragamuffin summoning play-dates for herself either)
22. Place Eliza inside of a custom made hamster ball.
23. Ask any of our Sur-prizers to create extropic bouncy balls. We're lucky that thing bounced off into space before it killed anyone.
24. Ask any of our Carnival Confectionarians to create extropic jumping jelly beans. Please see above.
25. Ride the Ferris Wheel on top of, outside of, or underneath the cars. (I know she's not in any danger, but it sets a bad example for the younger guests)
26. Use Cotton Candy and Calliope music recreationally during work hours.
27. Ride the go-carts while under the influence of the above.
28. Introduce wooden ponies from the Carousel to real ponies from the Petting Zoo. The experience is existentially horrifying for both of them.
29. Utter the phrase 'Circus Time Procedures' within earshot of Eugene.

30. Tell the children of guests that running away from home can turn out great.
31. Claim that her self-appointed position as the Circus's Princess entitles her to an adult-sized play castle. (In all fairness this turned out be a great attraction for the midway, but it still isn't hers)
32. Complain to The Masked Lords, The Ambassador, The Hanged King or that guy selling olive oil that Alagadda isn't colourful enough.
33. Attempt to weaponize Waldorf's old cannon as a defense against Essie P raids.
34. Ask the Shark Punching Center if they've ever fought a Sharknado.
35. Ride her unicyle at supersonic speeds.
36. Commission Anderson Robotics to create "Five Nights at Freddy's" knock off animatronics.
37. Attempt to spay and/or neuter any of the attractions in the Menagerie of Mayhem.
38. Claim that napping during work hours are 'business calls to the Oneiroi Collective'. (I don't care if she actually is talking with it, there's no reason she can't do it at night)
39. Make any sort of marking on an Inkling note.
40. Use the Kaleidoscope to harvest helium from Jupiter. (Yes, I know it's a dwindling resource. Let Elon Musk expose his ass to that much radiation to get it)
41. Ask any members of the Cogwork Orthodoxy how the constant ticking doesn't drive them insane.
42. Conduct 'sensitivity workshops'. (I know she meant well, but it ended up being far more offensive than the inciting incident)
43. Ask Gary to help her make crank calls to any reality's President Trump, President Clinton, President Sanders, President Ryan, President-for-life Obama, you know what, just revoke her use of Gary's phone box altogether.
44. Take Victor any VIP guest on a tour of the Funhouse without any accompanying children.
45. Order a second Obama Llama to see if they'll bite each other's testicles off.
46. Direct guests looking for the restrooms to the Milking tent.
47. Let Quincy anyone drive our Porsche!

48. Let any of Ripley's sea-monsters out of the Fun-house because 'they needed some fresh-air'.
49. Offer Clown's Milk to non-clowns she doesn't like as a covert attempt at assassination.
50. Secretly administer Antabuse any medication to Bubblegum anyone.
51. Tell Nixie that she is not allowed in her tank within an hour after eating.
52. Attempt to locate the City of Adytum on Google Maps.
53. Play 'Bloody Mary' with Pepper's mirror.
54. Hide all the Clown Impulse Suppressant because 'Clowns are supposed to be impulsive'.
55. Troll GAW chat rooms by claiming to be a gamer unironically opposed to marijuana.
56. Bring a 'dune worm' through the Kaleidoscope.
57. Ask Sandstorm to make a giant desert terrarium for said dune worm.
58. Call Iris Dark for tech support.
59. Call Percival Darke for tech support. (He doesn't have a phone, I don't know how she actually did this)
60. Upload nightcore remixes of Virtuoso's arias on Youtube.

Reaching over the standard blue pens that Manny used and grabbing her distinctive purple pen, she added a new entry.

61. Ask the Wandsman of Kul-Manas questions about his reproductive or digestive biology while on business calls with Iris Dark.

“Sorry Icky.”

“It’s alright darling. I forgive you.”

« **A Scip Or A Star?** | **`Dread & Circuses Hub`** | **City of Wonder™** »

Dark Arts and Crafts

I used to see abstracts, nonsense, but somehow I understood. It was an instinct, an intuition; less like the bird knowing to build a nest, more like the twigs knowing how to become one. There was something magical to the way I interfaced with it. Each piece was a tiny fragment of the universe, and some of them hinted about it, or had a vignette from its history. A shattered mirror, twinkling in impossible hues. These things were intentional and accidental and incidental and absolute, and sometimes I found some occult wisdom lying around in the street.

Have you heard of the elephant that did abstract paintings? I went to visit it at the zoo because I thought that was interesting. I surprised myself. I'm cynical and I usually pass those things off, but I went and watched the elephant paint. I thought it was clever. The paintings gave me happy feelings, so much so that I bought one.

I hung new paintings up facing my bed. It helped me absorb them since they were the last and first thing I saw every day. I liked to think they influenced my dreams. I had a single dream during this painting's stint on the back wall. This dream was mostly colour. Colour, memory, and a strong taste of copper. There were no words, or sound, or touch, simply being… or, perhaps, simply not. This dream was different. I woke up excited.

I **experienced**. Trillions of people converging, dancing across vast distances, finally disappearing into a vanishing point. In the end I opened my eyes to see the elephant’s painting past the foot of my bed. In that context, the painting made sense. The elephant, I thought, must have had the same dream.

Other things made weird sense to me. I saw a broken mirror in a restroom. I felt that if I stayed long enough the person on the other side might start talking to me. Of course that didn’t happen, but when I fell asleep I could see Earth through a looking glass;

tumbling evermore down an endless rabbit hole.

The girl next-door. Every day she left the building with a mischievous smile on her face. I can't describe what I saw that night; but I woke in the morning with pins and needles down my throat. I felt like we saw it together.

One day I saw her leave with a man who smiled the same smile, and I thought I wouldn't see her for a long time after that.

I saw holes in a tightly stretched canvas. On the pavement there were spots of light where moths had eaten away. In my dreams I heard beams of light twisting through space; I saw screaming echoes of glorious tulips. My eyelids parted to taste the sun.

I wondered about the girl I saw earlier; Did the sun's gaze flow into her apartment, too?

I looked for answers.

Her room was completely furnished, knick knacks and all. Was she whisked away? Did she die? All that was left there were her memories and my approximation of them. I could see from her textbooks that she was studying economics, and that she went to the local college. A framed photo of a man who certainly wasn't the man I saw her with before. Who was the other man? The man in the photo looked like it was her boyfriend. I figured it was so.

I didn't dream that night. I saw nothing like a singularity, or a single pillar of light, or a broken reflection. I expected that I was on some sort of trail, and that was where the next clue would be. What I thought was magic turned out to be a day trip in my head, and here I was trespassing on someone else's life.

No more dreams. I got tired of the little bits of *stellar history* lying around my studio apartment. I got cynical again. I resented the elephant painting and the cosmic mystery I imagined.

Then the girl was back. I just glimpsed her turning a corner one day, and I could hear her arguing on the floor below me. When I left yesterday morning, she was screaming at someone in the hallway.

This isn’t the same!

It was the man in the photo. She turned around and started crying. The man seemed frustrated and scared. He looked a lot like her.

Why isn't this the same?

The man she left with long ago turned the corner with a middle aged woman.

She's not smiling.

The pair kissed at the foot of the stairs.

Why isn't she smiling?

The girl screamed at her brother, then seized and kissed him.

This is not her world.

Endorphins swam around in my head. I began to grin. I cried and laughed and I didn’t care about the looks they gave me. This was an accident. A masterpiece. I performed a miracle.

I understood how we exist in *their* memory… and other people exist in ours. My memories of her were wrong, but now they are absolute.

That night I could hardly sleep, but I dreamed. I dreamed of the things *escaping* into a distant spot. I saw them funnel out of the other end. They were screaming, crude reflections of what they were. I woke up and lay staring at the ceiling, lightheaded.

I disposed of some garbage; my room was empty but for the paintings. Happy little elephant scribblings all over the walls and roof and floor. I went to the zoo and I purchased every single painting they had and the brilliant splashes of colour were everything.

It is a fine thing to be a patron of the arts.

I went to sleep and I woke up and between the two was everything. The girl lived with her brother and the man had moved away. She cried and he cried and they cried because the world was not their

own and they knew it.

I started to make art of my own. I bought some paint and some horsehair paintbrushes and some gloriously beautiful white paper and I started to apply some colour, but they didn't mix the right way and it all came out wrong.

I went to sleep and I woke up and the green light of the sun flowed through every window. Meanwhile the universe tried to make sense of my art, so the girl next door and the boyfriend that was the brother sat and giggled and looked into each other's eyes and saw nothing but each others' retinas. The elephant paintings covered the roof and the floor and the walls and the sink and the lights and my clothes and my flesh and the world.

I wish I could paint like the elephant did.

I went to sleep and I woke up and my dreams were pyrite and sulphur. The boyfriend and his sister smiled and grinned and skipped in tune. I picked up the horsehair paintbrush with my trunk and flayed the flesh of the rough-hewn canvas with whips laced with black and blue and red and a shade of being that words are not enough for.

I went to sleep and I woke up and my paintings were not enough and so I took a brush to myself and painted my grey skin and the blue light of the sun on my indigo paint mixed with the red of the coupling next door and it all mixed into a single hue and had the consistency of vomit twice removed.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep.

Uncountable infinities of light swam into impossible oneness. An errant thought: wouldn't it be nice to dance among the fairies? The lights cackled and shone and whispered foreign words down my throat and the words became mine and the world felt like nothing.

I disappeared into the distance and never woke up.

Database error?

FROM: Jr. Researcher Will Jameson
TO: Technical Researcher David Rosen
RE: Database error?

Hello, Researcher Rosen. Jr. Researcher Will Jameson here. Writing to report possible error in the database. According to RAISA, I am granted Level 2 access to **SCP-2140** despite me being a Level 1 personnel. Furthermore, I have no prior or current project tied to SCP-2140. I suspect a system compromise. Can you please look into the matter?

Sincerely
W. Jameson

Rosen looked at the new e-mail in his inbox, and groaned. His eyes shifted to an adjacent monitor, with the tab "SCP-2140: Access".

Hu, Zhi	2	2/2140
Hyde, Shane	2	2/2140
Jab, Mimi	0	2/2140
Jake, Christian H.	3	2/2140
Jameson, Will	1	2/2140
Jane, Augustine Maria	2	2/2140
Jem, Emerald	4	2/2140
Diamond		
Job, Raphael Tobias	4	2/2140
Jong, Im-soon	2	2/2140

"Geez, what's with all these people asking me about 2140 clearance?" Rosen switched to another tab labelled "Templates for Known Issues" and scrolled down to the relevant issue.

Issue: SCP-2140 (Level 2/2140 clearance)

> Hi, [INSERT NAME OF PERSONNEL]. I have checked with RAISA and find no irregularity with the system. You are cleared for Level 2 access regarding SCP-2140. For certain SCP objects, personnel can be granted higher levels of access compared to their actual security clearance. It is mentioned in the Employee Guide, so I would suggest reviewing that again.

Rosen copied and pasted the template as part of his response, editing only the necessary. The end result was:

> FROM: Technical Researcher David Rosen
> TO: Jr. Researcher Will Jameson
> RE: RE: Database error?
>
> Hi, Jr. Researcher Jameson. I have checked with RAISA and find no irregularity with the system. You are cleared for Level 2 access regarding SCP-2140. For certain SCP objects, personnel can be granted higher levels of access compared to their actual security clearance. It is mentioned in the Employee Guide, so I would suggest reviewing that again.
>
> Rosen

Quickly, Rosen clicked "Send" and moved to other similar e-mails.

Will Jameson was inside a courtroom, standing behind the bars of the accused's stand. He looked out at the judge, who read out the sentence.

"And you, Will Jameson, are hereby declared guilty of the murder of Cronus Jameson…" announced the judge.

"Ah!!!" Will Jameson sprung up from his bed, with cold sweat down his face.

He was inside his bedroom in the staff dorm at Site-742. It was nighttime, 0330 local time precisely. Jameson grabbed his head and shook it.

"That dream again…" he muttered, as his free hand switched on the lamp.

With the slightest bit of illumination in his room, Jameson regained his composure and opened up the drawer. Inside were snippets of newspapers, encased in plastic wraps. On top of the small pile was a newspaper clipping stating:

> **PHANTOM STABBING!**
>
> Cronus Jameson (62) was found murdered in his home, stabbed by an unknown attacker. No traces indicative of the attacker are found at the scene of the crime. There is no indication of breaking and entering.

"What do I got to do with Dad's death?" he wondered.

The next morning, Jr. Researcher Jameson prepared another work day at Foundation Site-742. Located in Sarawak, Malaysia, Jameson ultimately felt isolated as a foreigner in this country and as a newcomer in this Site (or the Foundation, in general). He approached his desk, and set up his desktop. While his hands moved about to clear his desk, his mind was fixated at the dreams that haunted him so.

"Maybe it's guilt, that I could not prevent Dad's death. Yeah, definitely guilt. Dreams are rarely literal." he thought.

"Morning Will!" someone greeted Jameson.

Taken aback, Jameson snapped back into reality and was greeted by Researcher Nurul, his colleague and senior in the Foundation by nine months.

"Hey Nurul…" Jameson replied, as Nurul took her seat in a cubicle next to Jameson.

"You look kinda shellshocked," Nurul enquired. "You still thinking of the locals at Kuching who gave you the weird looks on Friday? Don't be! Those guys were just jealous that you can travel and work

abroad and see other cultures, know?"

"Thanks Nurul, but I won't let some complete strangers ruin my day."

"Sure, if you got any problems, don't be afraid. Help is in the desk beside you." Nurul winked at her recently-arrived colleague, pointing at herself.

As their conversation ended, Jameson's desktop was ready. He accessed the intranet and ran through the e-mail. There was a new message, a reply to one he had sent a few days ago.

> FROM: Technical Researcher David Rosen
> TO: Jr. Researcher Will Jameson
> RE: RE: Database error?
>
> Hi, Jr. Researcher Jameson. I have checked with RAISA and find no irregularity with the system. You are cleared for Level 2 access regarding SCP-2140. For certain SCP objects, personnel can be granted higher levels of access compared to their actual security clearance. It is mentioned in the Employee Guide, so I would suggest reviewing that again.
>
> Rosen

Looking at the e-mail, Jameson gave out a sigh of relief that all was normal. But the question remained – what was so special about SCP-2140 that he could access it?

"Must be one of those General Reading files like ***`Able`*** *or* ***`those chairs`****,"* Jameson thought, as he changed tabs to access RAISA. He continued to type in his password and access clearance, gaining access to SCP-2140. His eyes skimmed through the document.

> **Description:** SCP-2140 is an image derived through Project Kallinikos from SCP-2140-1-D. SCP-2140-1 instances are alternative versions of the image. All instances depict glyphs in the [REDACTED] script.

> 100% of persons who view a complete SCP-2140 (regardless of medium) are loyal Foundation personnel with 2/2140 clearance or higher.

> supports the hypothesis that this is a retroactive alteration to personal history

> located at the [REDACTED] dig site km west of [REDACTED], Uzbekistan.

"Some primitive artwork from Uzbekistan…" Jameson summarised, his eyes turning to the attached image files and their captions.

The first of the files attached was the image itself, SCP-2140 itself. It was a set of symbols that is all Greek to him, with the Foundation logo at its centre. While this should be the first time he saw the symbol, Jameson just kept staring at it.

"This is…"

"Oh, got problem I see." Nurul peered from behind Jameson.

"Nurul, please stop creeping me up from behind!" Jameson insisted, his gaze switched to his colleague.

"You're checking out 2140, I see," Nurul quickly deduced. "No biggie. I'm cleared for it too, and so are our other colleagues here. 2/2140, right?"

"Yeah… must be those under General Reading," Jameson reasoned, causing Nurul to make a X mark sign with her fingers.

"Incorrect, rookie! General Reading is denoted by the SCP number, followed by the letter "G" in caps and square brackets. 2140 is not under General Reading," Nurul explained. "Read the Employee Guide again, smart boy!"

"Say Nurul, do you think we are what we are?" Jameson asked, "I mean, as loyal Foundation employees."

"Huh, don't tell me you're creeped out by 2140." Nurul rolled her eyes. "Look, that attitude won't get you far in the Foundation.

Besides, let's take a look at the document here."

Nurul leaned forward, and pointed at certain passages on the screen.

> No record exists of any experimental test subjects (such as D-Class personnel) or any other person lacking appropriate background and clearance viewing the complete image.

"See, no inappropriate person was tested this SCP before," she explained, "and the personal history thing is only a hypothesis, as stated there. Go read the academic journals; Dr. Vang wrote his own theory of it being a memetic kill agent for spies and double agents."

"Yeah… maybe I'm having an existential crisis," Jameson admitted.

"Comes with the job. Get used to it, mister loyal employee." Nurul smiled, as she walked off while humming to a song from her childhood.

On the hand, Jameson continued looking at SCP-2140's documentation and his eyes browsed through the captions.

> Area-313 Deep Storage

"Area-313?! Oh yeah, I was there for orientation," he realised.

As the day ended and most matters settled, Jameson went to sleep for the night. Like previous nights since his employment with the Foundation, he dreamt…

Jameson was seated in an auditorium. It was full of other people, all of them wearing orange jumpsuits with numbers on them. He too was wearing the same orange jumpsuit. Guards armed with truncheons were stationed at the doors of the auditorium.

On the stage, a stern elderly lady in uniform stood at the podium. On the breast pocket of her uniform was the emblem of the Foundation.

"Good afternoon boys, welcome to Area-313. Rejoice, for you will be

offering your time and selves in service to all humanity-" she spoke.

Date Night

Alvarez knocked on the open door and stepped into the office.

“You asked for me, sir?”

Dr. Gears looked up from the files on his desk, fixing his gaze on the young security guard. “Yes, I’ve been trying to contact Dr. Clef all evening, but he’s not answering his phone. I’d like you to locate him to make sure he’s all right, and tell him I have something urgent to discuss with him.”

“But sir, it’s Friday night,” Alvarez said, suddenly uncomfortable. “If you’ll recall…”

“Oh, I see. It’s his…”

“…yes.”

“And he can’t…”

“He’s left instructions that he’s not to be disturbed under any circumstances, that’s right, sir.”

“Well, I suppose things can wait until tomorrow morning, then.”

“Very well, sir.”

Alvarez left the office.

Dr. Alto Clef sat in the dining room of his Site-19 suite. The place was lavish, by any standards – gold-embossed wallpaper, ornate oak paneling, 18th century furniture, the table set with priceless china and the finest silver. An antique Ming vase sat on a pedestal nearby, gleaming in the warm glow of the crystal chandelier; an original Caravaggio hung on one wall, a Vermeer on the other. Barry White played softly in the background.

“Mmmh!” Clef exclaimed, setting down his spoon and wiping his mouth with his napkin. “The fennel soup was exquisite. D-12130 really outdid himself tonight.” He gestured to one of the several D-class personnel in attendance. “More wine, D-23897.”

“Right away, Dr. Clef,” the man in the orange jumpsuit said, nervously stepping up to the table and refilling his glass with a particularly crisp Chardonnay.

Clef lifted the glass to his mouth, took a sip, and sighed with satisfaction. “This is nice,” he said, smiling at his guest. “We should do this more often, don’t you agree?”

Across the table, SCP-173 stared back at him, unmoving, silent.

Five D-class personnel were positioned around the living statue, their eyes fixed on it, cold sweat dripping down their faces as they struggled not to blink, not to break eye contact, not even for a second; a sixth man stood directly next to 173, trembling with terror as he lifted spoonfuls of fennel soup up to its face, smearing the contents where its mouth should have been.

“May I just say how lovely you look tonight, darling,” Clef said, his eyes moving appreciatively over the black evening dress covering the statue’s curves, the blonde, lustrous hair of the wig on its head, its rouged stone cheeks… “I was going to wait until later, but seeing you like this, I just, I… Heh, look at me, you have me babbling like a schoolboy. I don’t know what it is about you. You’ve always had that effect on me.”

SCP-173 looked on, its stone features blank, impassive.

“Anyway,” Clef said, “I got you a little something to show you how much I appreciate you being here, sharing this evening with me.” Clef reached into his pocket and took out a small flat box, handing it to D-23897, who was standing nearby; the man took the box and went around to the other side of the table, his heart rate rising as he approached 173.

“Open it, darling,” Clef said. D-23897 opened the box, revealing a gold necklace inlaid with dozens of small diamonds. “It should be the

right size, I had it made especially for you. Go ahead, put it on," Clef smiled. D-23897 removed the necklace from the box and reluctantly tied it around 173's neck, wincing as his fingers brushed against the cold, hard cement surface. Clef was momentarily at a loss for words. "It suits you to perfection," he said at last. "God, you're beautiful. I feel like I never want to take my eyes off you."

At that precise moment, *Can't Get Enough of Your Love, Babe* began to play; Clef felt his heart flutter. *"It's our song,"* he breathed. As Barry White's rumbling voice filled the air, Clef found himself staring into 173's alien, painted-on eyes, losing himself in their depths. "You know," he said after a moment, his voice now little more than a husky whisper, "I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. What do you say we…*retire*…for the night?"

Clef was lying in his ample bed, 173 at his side, the lush satin sheets in disarray around them. The D-class personnel were standing in a circle around the bed, ten pairs of eyes that had not left the statue for the last two hours.

"I can't tell you how much these little trysts of ours mean to me," Clef was murmuring in 173's ear. "Running Site-19, all that responsibility, all those lives depending on me, it gets so exhausting. You're a miracle worker, you know. You really–" His train of thought was interrupted by a series of hushed whispers – two of the D-class personnel seemed to be having an argument. Clef cleared his throat loudly. "Do you *mind*?"

D-23897 snapped to attention. "I'm sorry, sir. It's D-45931, he hasn't slept in a couple of days, and he was starting to nod off. I told him he had to keep his eyes open."

"Oh, I see. Well, actually, that's not necessary."

D-23897 frowned, confused. "But, sir, the statue…"

"I won't deny she can be a feisty one, what with those *fiesta states* of hers, but as long as I'm around she won't try anything."

"So…there's no danger?" D-23897 asked.

“That’s right, no need to worry.”

“…”

“Now, if that’s all,” Clef said, “I’d like to get back t–”

“Then why are we here?” D-23897 nearly shouted in disbelief. *“Why did you make us stay?”*

Clef gave the man a strange look, the hint of an unhinged smile playing on his features.

“I just like it when people watch.”

Le Fou d'Avril

WARNING!!!

Notice from the department of Rancid And Idiotic Sexual Antics:

The following is a CESSPIT-class infohazard, containing Consensual Eldritch Sexual Squickercourse Poor In Taste and is not to be read by anyone at work, anyone at home from work, or anyone. (But mainly anyone at work.)

`The Lizard` rose from the smoldering rubble of a McDonald's, located at the smoldering rubble of Adams and Wabash in the smoldering rubble of Chicago, Illinois. Still-warm shards of the skull of the last human in existence fell from its dribbling mouth.

And after a great roar of primeval hatred and victory, it occurred to the lizard how damnably *quiet* everything had become. For well over a year, long after the smoke had cleared and flowers began to bloom in the carcasses, the Lizard sat and waited for something - anything - to happen.

You got what you wanted, Sherman, said the Lizard to itself[1]. *Why aren't you happy?*

Do I… miss *them?*

Sherman retched at the thought, regurgitating a fragment of a particularly spicy nuclear bomb.

There's more than one life form I can destroy. …fuck's sake, Sherman, don't kid yourself, it's not the same. You need a challenge.

There was one more such opponent to destroy. The impossible one. The final boss. Even when it died, nobody won.

Sherman cracked its knuckles. It raised its right claw. It plunged its hand into its chest. It felt its veins snap one by one. It felt around for the prize.

"FUUUUUUCK!"

One final pull.

Squarlch!

And just as the word "squarlch" was used to describe a sound for the first and last time in existence, Sherman ripped its own heart from its chest and threw it into the rusted remains of the deep fryer.

Darkness.

Sherman's heart regenerated, as it always had. It awoke an hour later to find another, identical Lizard, grown from its disembodied heart.

"My own clone!" bellowed Sherman.

"Now neither of us will be virgins!" bellowed Herman.

+ Infohazardous Portion

As if on instinct, Herman tore the meter-thick leather membrane from its own abdomen, releasing its 7,000 prehensile, spaghetti-like breasts. The venomous blue nipples on the end of each pale tendril wheezed from their throat analogs, reminding Sherman of a poorly-tuned woodwind section.

Sherman's new, stronger heart skipped a beat, and it dove its snout into Herman's pulsating tit linguine. The toxic nipple barbs filled Sherman's veins with acidic pheromones, causing its great sequoia of a love sausage to quiver in its chastity gland. A few hundred tits flossed

Sherman's teeth and detached themselves to display submission.

Sherman's face rose from the slithertits and a smirk crossed its lips. It gazed upon Herman's gorgeous face, ripe with all the fully-erect Mating Tumors™ that had unsheathed from its eyelids. So magnificently moist were these Eyedicks that no human could look upon them without having their brain atrophy.

Sherman was hopelessly, helplessly in love, and struggled to find the right words to express it.

"BEND OVER YOU FECULENT SNOT WAD, IT'S SAUSAGE TIME!"

Herman snarled and raised its tail, exposing all seven of its bridal cloacae and their nineteen layers of razor-sharp teeth. ***"STICK YOUR CHORIZO IN MY TEETH PITS, DO IT OR I'LL EAT YOUR EYES!"*** growled Herman.

"YOU HAVE SUCH A WAY WITH WORDS! DO YOU WRITE POETRY?"

"I WRITE CHILDREN'S NIGHTMARES WITH MY TEETH!"

"ME TOO! HOLY SHIT!"

"I KNOW RIGHT? WE'RE LIKE SOULMATES!"

Crack! On cue, Sherman's chastity gland exploded, pouring 19 gallons of blood onto the concrete below. Out came Yggdrasil, the magnificent world-tree that bound the nine realms. That's totes what Odin would say if he saw Sherman's seven-headed mile-long trouser hydra.

As Sherman spread its wings and flew into the sky to gain enough distance to fully thrust into Herman, it let out its mighty mating-cry, heard throughout all the Multiverse, screaming in the minds of every soul who dwelled in the light…

"FROM HELL'S HEART, I STICK IT IN THE POOPER!"

…Happy Arbor Day!

Footnotes
1. The Lizard's name is Sherman McGillicuddy Junior. I saw its birth certificate.

Daydreamin

Daydreams

That's all there is anymore. That's all I can have. I'm an all powerful demigod, locked in the chamber of little boy. Do you know where the power goes? It flows out our fingers and out soggy clothes into broken men. They seek forgiveness, so here I go. Our mother was there, and the fridge flew out of the way. Mommy's pretty neck, gone in a flash, bursting blood onto my our poor hands, and dripping onto the floor. We're all broken now.

The monsters, the jailers, they hold me now and they won't let me go. They need me whole. They make me fight grammie, but she knows we've already won. This doesn't make any sense. What am I talking about? None of that shit actually happened. I need to get a hold of myself, before I start spouting some more goddamn nonsense. Deep breaths. How many fingers do I have… ten? Ten seems like a good number. One, two, ten. Okay, back.

My name is Andrew, and there's something really wrong with me. I don't know what it is, or how it even started happening… all I can say is that when I was 17, I started to be able to destroy things, just… make them disappear when I touched them. There's no way to control it, because as soon as I try something else gets atomized and somebody else dies.

God… if this… not a jail, but a prison, if they hadn't gotten to me, I don't know how many more people would've died. How many are dead in here, right now? They say I've killed thirty people, but that's probably an exaggeration. Something to get into my head. I know I killed… I killed mom, but that was an accident. I didn't know what I was doing.

But actually, that's not how it happened at all.

My name is Damien, and I'm pretty amazing. Actually, amazing is an

understatement. I can do incredible, mind-blowing shit that none of you pussies reading this could even dream of. Look, dude, when you can fuckin' blow shit out of the sky with a touch, you turn some heads. Sure, before I came to this joint, I had a lot of fun with mayhem, but it's cool in here. Where else are we gonna ignite some old hustler and kick back with a Yoo-Hoo?

It's cold in here, but we're still sharp. The instrument sharpens the blade on every whetstone it uncovers, breaking new ground by breaking the bonds in front of him. Every shape it grasps, sees, tastes and touches in one million new ways. Godspeed.

No, you're remembering it wrong. You need to answer us. What is your name?

… I don't have one. I don't know.

Where did you come from?

California. I just… let me get some headspace, okay? This is too much, this is too gone…

Just try to stay with us, okay? Who are you?

I said I don't know! Fuck, can you give me just one goddamn minute?

Please, calm down. You're safe here.

No, but… it's out there. it's… coming out, coming up, and ripping people to pieces.

You're safe now… it's over.

No. It never ends. No matter how many times I fucking want to go back to square one, to crawl into a little hole inside myself and let this thing take over, it never happens. Something always pulls back from the edge. Memories fail me, and like so many other days, the sun is rising in the west, and the clock counts down from zero.

They keep making me change. Every time death is coming close, I'm changed to suit the world better. My mind breaks and molds to fit

their new sculpt, the *pièce de résistance* of their new exhibition. Memories and histories rewritten, until nothing remains of where they started but a name. And I don't know what my name is.

Daylight Come

"Hey Mista Tallyman, tally me banana. Daylight come, and me wan' go home. Day, me say day, me say day, me say day, me say day, me say day-ay-o. Daylight come, and me wan' go home."

The little girl shivered and drew her blankets closer to her. Singing sometimes helped, but today it just made her feel even more lonely than usual.

She missed the sun. In fact, she kind of missed everything. Mom, dad, her brother…

"I never shoulda let him dare me to go up the stairs," she murmured to herself.

Maybe she could try again to find the exit today…

The little girl shook her head. It was a silly thought, especially today. Her last flashlight had finally run out of batteries a little while ago. She was out of food and everything, and it didn't seem like she would find any more anytime soon. It's not like she ever got anywhere when she tried, anyways. There was always just more and more stairs, stairs up, stairs down, stairs where the door used to be…

"Yeah, um, it's just a dirty, concrete wall. There's like nothing on it. No, wait. It's a little bit sticky right here."

The girl's head snapped up, even though she knew she wouldn't see anything. Someone was coming in! Oh yes, yes! A grin as wide as the platform she sat on stretched across her face.

"Hey! Please, please help me! I'm scared, come get me! Hurry!"

She screamed and pleaded at the top of her lungs, quickly degrading down into incoherent sobbing. With every growing

moment, she felt the darkness getting heavier and heavier. In between cries, the girl heard slow but steady footsteps echoing through the stairwell.

After hours and hours of this, a piercing scream halted her sobbing.

He found her.

The even rhythm of the footsteps became a frantic cascade of thumping and yelling. The child started crying and begging once again as she heard the form get gradually closer. A bouncing light, illuminating random patches of stairs preceded the fleeing woman. She was trying to look over her shoulder when she finally made it down to the crying girl.

The girl reached out with a single bladed finger and cleanly sliced the woman's head off. The featureless creature caught it in his hands and stared at it while the child picked up the flood lamp, and examined the prey. Nice and plump. She nodded towards him, and he smashed the equipment.

"Thank you so much, mister. I don't know how I'd survive without you."

The face appeared to nod, then slunk back into the darkness. The little girl's eye was still adjusting to the light, but she was so hungry that she started using one of her right hands to haphazardly slice the body into sections though her vision was obscured. First, the arms. Then, the legs. Then the rest. As she prepared her food for the next few weeks, the child continued singing the song she had learned from that one little human that came down here oh so long ago.

"Six foot, seven foot, eight foot bunch."

Prelude: First Bell

« | **HUB** | **Part One** »

Dead End

Arkady knew this was the end. He was tired of running and he could recognize a metaphorical dead end when he smacked his metaphorical head into it. Minutes from now, they'd catch up with him. At first they'd be polite and ask him to open the door. He'd refuse and they'd make demands. Eventually they'd break down the door and then… then this all would end.

He sat down in the one black leather armchair this ancient office provided. He felt it settle into the once lush but now threadbare red carpet as he leaned back. This room had heard its share of dark secrets, unmentionable pacts, and hollow promises of loyalty. It was only fitting that they should all be stripped away soon, a final cleansing of a filthy history.

With trembling fingers he produced a battered cigarette from his back pocket and lit it. His thoughts went back to the spring of '81, when he was just one more destitute student at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. Like many in his generation, he'd been brought up to believe in the evils of Western decadence, and in the superiority of his Soviet motherland. When they approached him, he was awed by the fact that they'd even noticed him at all.

"And you say the Americans have these … strange things locked up?" he asked.

"They are trying to. But Americans, they are not … efficient. We *are*," his mysterious date answered.

"And you need my help? What can I do?"

"You have a gift, Arkady," she said.

He barked a laugh, "Hah! I wonder what that is then. Definitely not the gift to complete my research project."

"Oh, you have one, Arkady Potyomkin, *we know*. Besides, we have just the thing to inspire you to finish that thesis of yours."

She leaned in closer, breathing against his ear.

"How would you like to work with a fully operational black hole generator?" she whispered, sending shivers down his spine.

When he'd shaken the icicles from his brain, he responded.

"Impossible. The laws of physics do not allow for it."

When she smiled in response, Arkady couldn't figure out if she was being friendly or condescending.

"I do not think we consulted with them when we accidentally created it, Arkady. Regardless, it needs work. We need it to be portable, we need it to be controllable. We need your research and your brilliant mind."

Arkady closed his eyes. A beautiful woman was making promises involving things that could not be and it all felt like something straight of a Yulian Semyonov novel.

"And how did you end up watching me? I'm nobody."

"Come come, you must understand that we have made it our mission to know everything about exceptional talents such as yourself."

It occurred to him that if she indeed represented who she said she represented, they would know the color of his underwear and what flavor ice cream he preferred. He'd only heard them referenced in whispered conversations on campus. That in itself made it all the more impressive they were now here, trying to get him to work for them.

"And if I agree to work for you, I will never see my family again?"

"No. You will be dead to your mother and father. We will make sure of that."

Arkady smiled. His father, a man so deeply buried in the bottle he might as well live in it, and his mother, a woman bereft of personality or backbone. No, he would not miss them. There was his brother, Alexei, but he had left as soon as he'd been able to, choosing the navy over a life of beatings and verbal abuse. He had not seen or heard from Alexei in seven years.

"I think I accept your proposition. What do I do now?"

She smiled and batted her emerald green eyes at him.

"You do nothing. We will contact you again when we need you."

Then she turned abruptly and walked away, leaving Arkady sitting alone on the bench in Khlebnekovskiy park. His sandwiches had not been touched, and the excitement of getting to develop technology that defied nature for GRU Division "P" had left him without hunger. He tossed them to the pigeons and got up to walk back to campus.

As he took the final drag of his cigarette, Arkady realized that he'd never learned the name of his recruiter, even though he'd spent years in service of the Division. Shuffling outside the door pulled him from his pensive mood.

"Arkady Potyemkin, this is Agent Fiorecci. I have been tasked with your retrieval and I know you're in there. We can do this two ways. Either you come out with your hands behind your head, or I'm going to count to ten and then I'll come in," sounded a female voice.

So, no politeness. Heh, Americans. He allowed himself a little smirk. Anyway, it was fitting. Brought into this game by a woman, and taken out by one; the symmetry brought a smile to his face.

"10."

Arkady reached into his coat pocket and produced a small cylindrical device, the culmination of his research for GRU Division "P". An old prototype he'd kept without authorization of course, the real thing was never developed further after the '86 incident. The last he'd heard, they'd filled the cellars at the Lubyanka with cement.

"9."

In a way, it was a total anticlimax. A simple metal tube, no longer than a bottle of Coca Cola. He screwed off its top and put his finger down on the small black button underneath. It felt unreal to finally do it.

"8."

He closed his eyes and thought of the way he and Alexei used to fight.
He felt the hum building.

"7."

His father's belt as it whipped through the air, eerily whistling before hitting his young skin.

"6."

His mother's rare moments of loving attention.

"5."

His last kiss and the look in Anna's eyes when he walked out on her, for good.
His ears were starting to hurt.

"4."

The things he'd seen…things that should not have existed, but did. Abominations. Too much flesh, too little life. Too much blood. Too much.

"3."

Sixty men dead when it malfunctioned. Limbs being stretched, and stretched, and stretched into infinite directions, heads folding in on themselves.
He could feel a small trickle of blood running down the side of his head.

"2."

He closed his eyes and sighed. There would be peace.

"1."

They had a hard time explaining. Yes, a part of Bucharest's historic center had been destroyed. Yes, lives had been lost. Obviously, it was a terrorist act. Blame flew, and claims were made. After all, what was a nice big silent implosion if not a good excuse to send in rambling, deranged letters proclaiming yourself the next big thing in terrorism?

At Site-193, Saint-Petersburg, Northwestern Federal District, Russia, Site Director Valentin Gavrilenkov faced a videoscreen showing a small, balding man. He looked worried, and rightfully so.

"Tell me again how this is the outcome of a simple detainment mission for a lowly ex-GRU Division "P" operative, Dušan."

Dušan Bogoescu, regional coordinator of the Foundation Covert Intelligence Division for Romania, cleared his throat.

"Well, sir…the American MTF that flew in was apparently not briefed on Potyomkin's history. Also, we did not know he'd liberated a prototype of one of their failed projects."

"I would guess not, no. And whose job was it to brief our American colleagues? Remind me, Dušan."

The answer came hesitantly.

"That would be me, sir."

"Right you are. Well, I have it on good authority you may expect a trip abroad soon, Dušan. The O5 council would like a word with you."

Valentin pressed the disconnect button on his phone and folded his hands behind his head. They still weren't working together, even when they were on the same team.

Deadalive Deadalive

Old soul, new soul
Key in your pocket
Look out for the Laughing Man
On your path home.
1
2
3
4
…

It had been five months.

Five months of nothing but searching. Of nothing but requests for aid. Of nothing but being refused.

And so, our travelers continued to work their way through Tepur-zin-Umhed's journal. In some cases, she had already sought out the help of those she had found, and been turned away. In other cases, she had only heard of a name or location in passing. In still others, she had found out where a survivor had carved out a new home without ever finding out who they were. It was one of these cases that our travelers were investigating, and this is what brought them to the forest.

It was not an ordinary forest by any means. Abandoned tracks, carts, and rides were scattered everywhere, overgrown with leaves and rust. It had been a human carnival of sorts before being closed down years ago. Rumors were whispered throughout nearby towns that it was haunted with the ghosts of those who had died there in accidents. Others claimed that the accidents themselves had been the result of a haunting. Of course, Quarseta had heard none of these rumors. The fog hung low and grey and thick, making very hard to see anything. The faint sound of a pipe organ could be heard in the distance.

Quarseta took in her new surroundings. "Would it be alright if I looked around by myself for a bit? I want to try to find where that music's coming from."

"…Alright, but call for us if you find anything."

She nodded, then set off, weaving over and between the maze of metal and wood. No matter how far she traveled, the music never seemed to get any closer or further away, always staying just on the edge of hearing. Eventually, she reached a structure that was still standing and had an open door. Though it certainly wasn't in a good condition, it looked stable enough to explore. And so, she entered. Inside, she discovered a labyrinth of twisting halls, All lined with mirrors. Many of them twisted her reflection in odd ways, though oddly enough very few of them were broken, in contrast to the rest of the park. The pipe music continued to sit at the edge of her ears.

And then the laughing began.

Laughter that echoed through the halls and drilled into Quarseta's skull. She began running on instinct, further and further into the maze, calling for Atanti time and time again. It seemed to be coming from many places at once, so that she could never be sure if she was running towards the laughter or away from it. Shadows toyed at the edge of her vision, whispering secrets and doubts into her ear. "A lost behemoth dies in the desert, a pale mask haunts the night in vengeance. We are afraid." "Or maybe we foresee a stunning light that makes the ground boil. Salvation comes with a price." "Change the channel, he is very educational."

She kept running, on and on, turning this way and that, until she rounded a corner and came face-to-face with a clown. He had curly orange hair under a blue cap, and wore a blue and green suit. Despite the darkness, he appeared in an array of pastel colors. A smile was plastered over his cackling face.

She turned and kept running. She tried to get away from the whispers and from the clown, but it was no use. The whispers followed her, and the clown kept showing up in the mirrors, always right behind her. The more she ran, the warmer and more disoriented she felt.

She ran into a dead-end room, bare and tattered, but thankfully with a door. She slammed it shut behind her and retreated to the far end of the room. For a brief moment silence filled the air.

She heard laughter right behind her. She spun around to see the pastel clown staring out at her from the reflection in a mirror. She backed away, the heat and dizziness returning, and the reflection lunged out of the mirror. She looked down at the knife embedded in her abdomen.

The world began to fade. She remembered Atanti and tsa-Fanu bursting into the room and attacking the clown, though she couldn't remember what they shouted. The burning pain spread out from the knife, and the laughing filled her mind.

And then she felt it, in her pocket. The cold. The ticking. The egg. She pulled it out and looked at it, then smashed it into the ground. In those last few moments, she saw the bits of scattered glass and clockwork pulling themselves together into something new.

Quarseta wasn't quite sure where she woke up. It seemed like a large, white room, but it was so large that she wasn't sure that it had an end. It was cool here, and there was a sound of ticking surrounding her.

"Ah, we're awake again."

Quarseta sat up to see the two people in this place with her. One was someone who looked like a young lady about her age, but her face seemed almost ageless. She seemed to be made up mostly of wings and robes, all in muted but still vibrant colors. She sat next to a large bed, in which slept a small girl. The more Quarseta looked at the girl, the more she realized something.

"She's… she's me. Younger, but… me."

"Yes. Or more accurately, you're her. Just like you're me."

"…What?"

"We rode the storm that cast us out of our world, just like

Atanti and Edrisek did. But, we were dying at the time, or did die. Our life merged with that of this girl. And so, you were born as her, but with my nature."

"…So I'm both of you, then."

"Yes. I think that's the best way to put it."

Quarseta walked over to the bed and looked at the sleeping girl. "We were dying. What happened?"

"I suspect that egg bought us a few extra moments. I'm not quite sure why."

"I do. I needed to see this."

"Why?"

"Because I needed to know who I was."

"A lot of good it does us now."

"You forget," a smirk spread across Quarseta's face, "I'm you. We don't die that easily."

The woman squinted at her. **"…Well. It seems that I haven't changed much."**

Quarseta gave a determined nod. "Alright, so, I have your nature and her life, but right now we're talking, which means… how much of your life do you remember?"

"All of it, but why… oh, that's clever."

"Alright, so I have your nature, her life, and now I have your memories too. Now, let's see if we can't wake her up. Won't do much good for me asleep." She began to gently shake the child awake.

"Mmmmmph. Time to wake up already?"

"Yeah. Yeah, time to get up. We need your help. A big girl like you

isn't afraid of clowns, is she."

"No, I don't think we are."

"Good, now," she looked between her two halves, "am I ready?"

The two of them looked to each other, then back to her. **"We are."**

"Good." She took a deep breath, and gathered herself together. "I am Sarai-ur-Ebaou. I am Abby Johnson. And my name is Quarseta-ql-Paneu. And I am *not* about to die."

Quarseta woke up.

She carefully pulled the knife out of her stomach. She could still feel the pain, but she was able to move beyond it to the point that it did nothing to stop her. The wound began to close almost immediately. One of the clown's reflections took notice of her and tried to charge her. It dissipated into a satisfying cloud of pastel particles of color as the knife slashed through it. Atanti and Edrisek seemed shocked by her return, but their attention was quickly drawn back to the fight. The reflections continued to fall under their claws and whips and blade. Eventually, the clown took notice of her.

And he saw her. And he saw her for what she was.

And Bobble felt fear.

The fight raged on, the reflections fading in and out and falling under the trio's blows. Eventually, only one clown remained.

Quarseta turned to her companions, **HE'S MINE,** then turned back to the clown. **I REMEMBER THE STORIES ABOUT YOU. YOU'RE ADRAVOSS. BACK HOME, YOU WERE A KILLER. THE BOOGEYMAN WE SCARED OUR CHILDREN WITH. I'D SAY IT'S TIME WE LET THE CHILDREN HAVE SOME PEACE OF MIND, WOULDN'T YOU?**

Quarseta collected her strength. All that old fire and memory spinning around inside her. The power that had been forgotten. The brave child, born of this world. All the small, old, angry spirits

whispering at the edge of her vision.

And she *sang*.

You must understand that singing, when done properly, is very strong and magical stuff. I don't doubt for a moment that you have herd a song before that made you want to dance, or cry, or break out laughing, or fall in love. You may have even heard a song that filled you with some nameless fire, and made you feel ready to leap out of your seat at the drop of a hat and go change the world.

And so she sang, and all the whispers joined in the chorus. The clown was forced into a quickly-shattering mirror by the sheer power of it all. As the song ended, the anger faded from her face, but the fire, fire that was somehow old but fresh all at once, continued to burn in her eyes. She turned to face her companions.

The both stood there, staring at her in awe and shock and confusion. "…What just happened?"

She tucked the knife into her belt. "A lot. I'll explain on the way back to the cave."

Episode Title	Contents
'All Tied Up at the Moment'	Setting appears to be an abandoned and overgrown carnival. The episode consisted of approximately 15 minutes of footage of a bound, gagged, and seemingly unconscious SCP-993 suspended upside-down by a rope tied around its ankles. Of note is the fact that this episode appears to lack the cognitohazardous properties of all other recorded episodes to date.

…
3
2

The Laughing Man is gone now
And your heart's unlocked
So let's go walking hand-in-hand
All the way home.

« **Intermission: Audience of Crowns** | **HUB** | **This is How the World Ends** »

Deals with the Devil

When the call came, she'd figured out enough that she'd been expecting it for a while. There had been an air of distance — rather than quiet interference — from her superiors. Like her actions were being watched. Radio silence.

Were they going to ask Dr. Sophia Light about Site 41, her pride and joy buried in the freezing wilderness? About one of her projects? About Erdenet, even?

The meeting was arranged in a small, well-lit antechamber in the depths of the Svalbard Site, with Light's assistant Vaux watching and taking notes. The Council member — Seven — was a tall woman with deep brown skin and a fishtail braid. She also wore a teal skirt suit that looked like it was bought at a Value Village in the 80's. Light had to adjust her understanding of reality to account for this fact. *If she can't wear that, who else can?*

"Thank you for meeting with me, Dr. Light."

"Likewise. I wouldn't refuse."

Seven smiled a lot, and it was nothing but teeth. "I've come on behalf of the Council to ask for your thoughts on some recent matters. You've had a storied career thus far. More objects under your care reclassified as 'Explained' than any other research director, if I recall."

"Not by me directly, but yes, I've heard I hold the record."

"Nobody else has really focused on that. Haven't you said something to the effect that the ultimate goal of the Foundation should be to explain everything?"

Light grimaced. "Not quite. Even I don't believe that every single anomaly has a reasonable explanation. I've just said that while the

main priority of researchers is necessarily aiding containment, we also have a responsibility to the Foundation and the world to increase our overall ability to explain reality. Raise the scientific waterline, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. That's much less ambitious."

Light shrugged. "Anomalies are part of reality. Most research seems to ignore the fact that any effort to make them go away and conform to 'normal science' is fundamentally flawed — the anomalies are already here."

"Interesting."

Several seconds ticked by. Light asked, "What did you want my thoughts on?"

“Well. You’ve seen the documentation. You were around for some of it. What did you think of Mobile Task Force Omega-7?”

This was not the tack she was expecting. Light considered. “Kind of a clusterfuck.”

“It was a bad idea.”

“Extremely.”

“They say hindsight is twenty-twenty.”

“Hindsight bias is a factor. I still wouldn’t have planned it that way.”

“What would you have done?”

“Gotten rid of Able.”

“What else?” Seven smiled.

“Um. Decentralize them — having to travel as a unit reduced response times. Reduce the burnout rate from training, and move leadership into a hierarchy within the unit. Flexibility is more important than strict order —”

She paused. She'd never been good at reading people, but saw Vaux's service dog bark and jump into his lap, reacting to some sign of his anxiety. This alerted Light third-hand that something was wrong. Seven was really smiling.

"Vaux," said Light, "If you need to leave, go ahead."

"It's fine," said Vaux.

"Keep going," said Seven. "Excellent points."

"What do you want?" asked Light.

"Director, we're re-opening Pandora's Box. A similar task force: Alpha-9, 'Last Hope.' We'd like you to be the director."

Permission to get some of whatever Command was on when they made that decision. "…That doesn't sound at all controversial."

"It is. It will be. But it is proceeding. When possible leaders were discussed, your name came up."

Time seemed to slow down. Light's eyes went a little distant. She started thinking very, *very* quickly. "Who else?"

"We asked Lament first. Another senior operative with an impressive track record."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was the worst idea he'd ever heard and told Four to fuck off."

Light snorted. *That's my boy!* "Who else?"

"After you, we'd ask Dr. Gears. Past that, we're looking at options."

Gears? He would absolutely do it. He'd probably do it very well. He'd fulfill High Command's goals precisely. A person like that was dangerous.

On the other hand, if the Council didn't have a fourth lined up, they'd

be looking at someone less competent. That was *very* dangerous. Still…

"I've never led a task force. My plate is full."

"We expect you to leave your post as Site Director in any meaningful capacity. We're confident you'll do fine."

"When you're in a car with no brakes, it doesn't matter how skilled of a driver you are. I don't want to be your figurehead when you crash."

"We don't intend to crash. We're changing things up. You'll have autonomy, resources, whatever you need. Traditional methods are failing to keep up with the influx of anomalies worldwide. Things are getting worse, Director, and we don't want to lose the progress we've made. The world needs Alpha-9."

"Excuse me," said Vaux. He stood up and unsteadily left the room, with Mango in tow.

Light looked at Seven. "You're serious."

"As the bodies in the wake of a containment breach."

"Are you my O5?"

Seven blinked. "What?"

"Well —" Light searched for the words. "I've learned that most senior staff were promoted because, well, because some overseer thought they had potential and followed them along the way. I never found out who mine was."

"Oh, no. I'm Clef's."

"Ah."

"Yours… is more hands-off. But they're also recommending you for this position."

Light considered the evidence. Weighed the options. "I'll take it."

"Good." Seven nodded. "I thought it would take more convincing than that."

"As you said. I don't want someone less competent than me in charge of this. Lives are at risk. I think this is a mistake, but I believe I have a track record at averting disaster."

"Not quite the attitude I was hoping for. But as they say, any port in a storm. We'll be in touch, Director."

Any port in a storm. *Yeah. Huh.*

Afterward, Light sat down next to Vaux in the atrium. Wordlessly, Vaux handed her a cup of coffee. She took a sip.

"Did that woman really look me in the eyes and say 'we're re-opening Pandora's Box'?"

"Yep."

Light groaned. "I don't know how they take themselves seriously."

Three days later, the most urgent administrative duties were reassigned. The suitcases were packed and the office cleared out. One of the more familiar-looking suited Council representatives had been hanging around the Svalbard Site and reviewing preliminary details about the task force. Seven herself flew off shortly after their meeting.

The fluorescent bulb in the meeting room flickered, barely perceptibly. Sophia Light tried to ignore it. Closed her eyes. She'd be out of here soon enough.

"Protection," she said. "I don't want my name attached anywhere to this. Don't want to be traceable, don't want anyone connecting my file to this. In the Foundation, or outside it."

"That's not going to work, Director."

"Every Group of Interest out there with a gun is going to be out for

blood once this goes live. I *need* protection."

"You do," agreed the suited Council representative. "But Alpha-9 won't be seen as a hopeful act within the Foundation. People need to know that someone they've heard of and respect is in charge. They do actually have to see you doing it."

"Fuck. Can you at least keep my name out of it until it goes live?"

"That seems doable."

"Alright. Guards, then. Well-trained, diverse skillset, highly loyal. Maybe a popemobile? If I have to be a target, I'd prefer not to be an easy one. I find dying sub-optimal, personally."

The representative, to their credit, kept a straight face. "You will have access to our resources. Guards, absolutely."

"And anomaly-derived personal defenses. I know Command has their own. You're their representative, you probably have them. Well, I want some too. New designs."

"I assume you have ideas already."

"Yes."

"So did your predecessor. You'll find more in the file."

Light frowned, running her fingers over the yellowed folder and its peeling label. *"GENERAL BOWE".* "Is he my predecessor? Technically?"

The representative shrugged. "Matter of definitions. Symbolically, maybe. With naming the task force Alpha rather than Omega, he's not anyone's predecessor."

“Hm. Lastly…” She thought. She wasn't commonly sentimental, but power is just the ability to make uncommon things happen. “I want a layover."

They groaned. "Right now? Command doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"The task force has been shelved for nine years. They can wait another six hours."

"Where?"

"Site 14. Have a few last goodbyes before I drop off the radar indefinitely."

"Hrm. They won't be happy about this."

"If I had to be happy about everything I did, I'd never get anything done. Work with me here."

"I'll see what I can do. That all?"

"For now. Thanks, Jay. See you around."

She met Vaux on the surface, waiting with their bags by the runway. He was bundled in a parka and throwing tennis balls for Mango. She warned him the flight had an unexpected layover, told him that he could keep himself busy.

Then she fished out her cell phone and dialed an old contact. The other end picked up before the first ring finished.

Light drummed her feet on the ground. "Hey Troy, it's Sophie. Still kicking. You? Yeah. Listen, I know it's last-minute, but I have a flight that's stopping in 14 for a few hours. I wondered if you could free some time up —"

(Vaux mouthed to Mango, *"Sophie"*?)

"Yes, that sounds great. Yes. Plane's on the way, I can't talk for long. I'll call you once I'm there." Light smiled. "You too."

She hung up.

"It's a nice day," said Vaux.

It was, as far as days go in Svalbard. Chilly, but sun bright on the tundra meadows and rolling rock hills. She supposed she'd add the

cold and quiet site to the list of places to miss.

Vaux was still watching her.

"What?" she asked.

"Why did you take it? The position. It's, um. It's strange that they offered it to you."

“They say that in the entire universe, not one unusual thing has ever happened.”

“Liiiight. That's bullshit.”

Light cracked a grin. "Arguably. In this instance, I know that High Command has had some kind of interest in me since very early in my career. Used to think I only got promotions because people thought I was either with the Olympia Project or related to Bright. But that's not true. There's something else.”

“Is this why you're not worried that they're going to shoot us if this plan fails?”

“They'd only shoot me.” She sighed. “Vaux — When she offered it, I wasn't sure. Imagine you believe in nuclear power. You can't support it outright, because it's politically taboo. For… inane bureaucratic reasons. But you've seen that it can supply humanity with cheap energy, pure water, food, health, opportunity."

"But it's dangerous," ventured Vaux.

"Of course it's dangerous. But you strongly suspect it's less dangerous than the alternative- not using it. You just can't convince anyone to try it."

"Then," she continued, "Imagine the government puts you in charge of its nuclear weapons program."

"…Oh."

"What else could I do?" She leaned back, staring out at the tundra.

Vaux nodded. "You sure nobody's going to try to kill you?"

"Someone will, almost assuredly, but not Command. Like I said, they like me, although I have no idea why."

"Ah." Above them, a whining engine indicated that their ride was inbound. Vaux whistled Mango back to him, clipped on her leash.

"But," said Light, "I intend to find out. And then I intend to make use of it."

Dear Cavalier

Mobile Task Force Pi-1 (aka City Slickers) Incident Recording (START)

22:30 - 900 seconds prior to engagement

OP-Sigma-5: MTF we have tactical confirmation, mission is a go. The target is 50 feet to the northeast, within a large residence disguised as a charity. Initial recon suggests the target is located in the basement or another interior structure. There should be eight to thirteen occupants, all of which are to be considered hostile, and based on transaction records up to four could be armed. A memetic or psychic effect is involved, so you should turn on your sub-optical filters. Your objective is to get in and destroy any evidence of the suspect SCP, capture it and bring it back to extraction point . This should be a clean breach-and-clear mission, with traditional combat rules, minimize civilian casualties, but deaths are acceptable. Command has authorized the use of kill-agent 'Nyx' in case of contingency level 3 and above. Good luck.

> Dear Cavalier
>
> I have long been aware of your SCP foundation, and your protocol when it comes to entities such as myself. I can only feel pity for the great creatures and gentle giants which you chain beneath the ground, above the sky and under the sea. All of them lost to the minds of the world so that mankind does not have to deal with the fact that there are things which transcend mortality. Despite your reprehensible goal, I chose to not take from you what you take from others, because at the time you seemed benign to me, unable to inflict the same horrors which you refer to as 'containment' to those I hold dear.

22:44 - 20 seconds prior to engagement

OP-Sigma-5: Callsign, prepare to breach.

MTF-Pi-1-1: Alpha.

MTF-Pi-1-2: Beta.

MTF-Pi-1-3: Gamma.

MTF-Pi-1-4: Delta.

MTF-Pi-1-5: Epsilon.

MTF-Pi-1-6: Zeta, preparing to breach.

[sound of door being breached]

> Now I know. They may be just faceless numbers and nameless people to you, but to me they are all I hold dear, I love them with a love greater than any other's. You call them a cult, you think of them as dark, wretched things which should be put down so that you may rise above them like a ship set sail on a sea of shattered hearts. No, they were only the trodden of society, the ignored, those who had been stepped on so many times by people just like you that they could never get up again, not without the help that you would never give.

22:45 - Engagement

MTF-Pi-1-1: No contact, sweep and clear.

[110 seconds pass]

MTF-Pi-1-3: Front entrance clear.

MTF-Pi-1-4: I'm outside of a staircase to the basement, there's lights on.

MTF-Pi-1-1: Delta hold position outside basement staircase, Gamma join up with Delta. MTF members finish your sweeps, if you find no contacts rendezvous with Delta at the basement staircase.

[250 seconds pass]

MTF-Pi-1-2: East side clear, found what appears to be ingredients for explosives.

MTF-Pi-1-5: Storage has blood everywhere, damn that gave me the fucking freaks.

MTF-Pi-1-6: West side clear.

MTF-Pi-1-4: Movement in the basement, repeat we have movement.

MTF-Pi-1-1: Northern room clear, all MTF members rendezvous with Delta. This is going to get hot.

> Through their great suffering came their prayers for salvation, and through their prayers comes me. From my birth I started - healing, helping them to grow to what they should be, into the people that they could be. I was an emblem of sanctum, I was the remedy to all of the woes of those who chose to take the leap and follow me. I emblazoned my face into their palms so that I could watch over them, I imbued forgotten archaic images of hope so that they could prosper from them, I inverted the symbol of death so that they would have eternal life. But you undid all of that.

22:51 - 360 seconds post engagement

MTF-Pi-1-2: Throwing a flashbang.

[sounds of gunfire, sound of flashbang detonating]

MTF-Pi-1-3: Multiple hostiles, I took ou

OP-Sigma-5: Gamma has flatlined. Continue assault.

MTF-Pi-1-4: They killed ! Motherfuckers!

[multiple flashbang detonations, yelling]

MTF-Pi-1-1: Four hostiles dead, show extensive self-mutilation of

their palms. Moving nort-

[loud screaming, analysis shows it extends above human vocal range]

MTF-Pi-1-2: Jesus Christ, what the hell is that noise?

MTF-Pi-1-5: Fuck, what the fuck? There in the shado- Fuck! I can't see! What [REDACTED]

MTF-Pi-1-4: Get behind the wall!

MTF-Pi-1-1: We're taking fire from multiple directions from cultists and a number of unknown entities. I'm deploying Nyx.

OP-Sigma-5: Epsilon has flatlined. Operator confirms deployment.

MTF-Pi-1-1: Get the fuck away from the canister! ! Fuck!

> You and your technology and hatred for the weak and unknown. You seek to maintain the status quo, to keep the lowest the lowest and the highest the highest. I gave love to the forgotten and now you strike them back down, you strike them to their death so that they are lost forever. I feel their deaths, their loss. You used your hateful cloud to burn my markings from their flesh, to burn their life away. You scorched my face from everything you found, because you did not know who I was, you only knew that those who once suffered no longer suffer, and you you must make them suffer once again again. They are all dying.

22:53 - 442 seconds post engagement

MTF-Pi-1-1: We have multiple casualties, Delta was killed in crossfire, Beta by shrapnel from the canister. All hostiles have been terminated. Whatever those things were that killed Epsilon, they're gone now.

OP-Sigma-5: Commence search of the premises. Look for suspect SCP.

[low sobbing can be heard over the radio for the next 420 seconds, both remaining MTF members deny that it is coming from either of them]

MTF-Pi-1-1: Numerous symbols on posters, clothing, the walls, their skin, all emit energy in the high EM bandwidth.

OP-Sigma-5: Alpha, retrieve two articles of clothing and one poster. We have Intel that local residents are reporting a disturbance at your location, you may be compromised. Zeta prepare contingency plan 540-CHARLIE-BURNOUT. We don't want any more exposure, so Alpha sweep the East side and retrieve any possible explosives, otherwise the fire may cause detonation. We expect you to be at the extraction point in fifteen minutes.

MTF-Pi-1-1: Roger, underway.

[remainder of recording follows protocol]

Mobile Task Force Pi-1 (aka City Slickers) Incident Recording (END)

> All of them. You killed all of them. I can feel them drifting away. Dozens of men women children souls, all of them lost, hurting, alone. I loved them. I love them them all so much and you you you take them away from me. I cared for them. I help loved them. Now they are dead dead all dead, to what ends? You call me a monster a dark monster a horrible monster? No, you are the monster. You killed them. You you are the ONE WHO slaughters SLAUGHTERS to build a fortress from bodies of INNOCENCE innocence only the innocent you killed them. you killed all of them they are dead now they are gone only gone forever gone. you took their lives away, you kill undo all the good UNDO kill what i tried to accomplish undo so now i undo you

Addendum-Sigma-5: Shortly after operation Sigma-5 a file entitled 'Dear Cavalier' was discovered by researcher within Site 's database. Video recording of researcher shows her

opening the file, and upon viewing the contents experiencing massive external haemorrhaging [DATA EXPUNGED], expulsion of bodily fluids from open wounds in the chest cavity, followed by [DATA EXPUNGED]. Off-duty Site personnel report that a "blue-white silhouette [REDACTED] before disappearing". Due to the response of Dr. there were no additional casualties. Dr. externally manipulated and transferred the file into a 500MB CD-ROM, which is now stored in Site-46. Testing concludes that copies of the file do not have the same lethal properties, however research into a possible memetic effect is ongoing.

Dear Diary

Dear Diary
……

Click click tap click tap tap tap

Alright, Videira. Here's the script you were wondering about. This thing was a sort of dramatization of a little research disaster that happened in July four years back. It was meant to illustrate to some of our less cautious researchers the value of emotional detachment during the job, or some BS like that. Never really got produced, and no, I don't know why not. It's missing the a bit of narration that was meant to go in before and after the thing played. If I remember correctly, just details about the event. I think that it was something about this being written from live video feed, with creative liberty taken only when necessary. I found what I could about the incident, and it seems to match pretty well. Apparently the SCP was destroyed by the girl afterward, which is one reason they got worked up about it enough to start making this thing… I guess someone wanted to use it for questioning the dead or something. Since the research was never completed and the thing got burned, there's no official entry in the database on it. The guy's name matches the other stuff I've found, but the girl's name is only here - I guess they didn't want anyone to find out what happened to her. Seeing as she destroyed a potentially useful SCP after making a rather serious mistake in studying it, I can see why they might not want that to appear in a human resources type video. I can keep digging for more, if you'd like, but I can't make any promises.
- J.N.

p.s. - Dinner, Saturday.

Click click click tap
Beep

-*-*-*-*-*

ACT I

FADE IN
INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

A small room with a medium-sized bed and two chairs. There are two doors, on either side of the room (One leads to a small bathroom, the other to a hallway). Everything is white and sanitary.

A MAN is sitting on the bed. He is holding tightly on to a book. He is in mid teen years, and is wearing clean white hospital clothes.

Two researchers are standing in the hall. One is MASON, an early middle-aged man, the other is HOLLY, a woman also in early middle age. Both wear lab coats.

ANGLE ON HALLWAY.

HOLLY
Well, Mason, you got the tickets?

MASON
Of course I do, Hol. Vacation in Vienna. Two months. I promised, didn't I?

HOLLY
God, I'll be glad to see the back of this place. When do we leave?

MASON
Friday. We just need to finish the interview, see what makes him tick. And he's a safe class, so we can take it easy.

HOLLY
I don't think I've ever had this much go right before, honey.

MASON and HOLLY grip each other's hands briefly, then open the door to the MAN's room.

ANGLE ON MAN, looking up.

MAN
Please, why am I here? Why won't anyone tell me?

MASON
Sir, we just need to ask you a few questions. After that you can go home.

MAN
Why?

WIDER ANGLE ON ALL CHARACTERS

HOLLY
We think you may have some knowledge about a recent accident, and we just need to know a few things about you.

MAN
What do you mean, accident?

HOLLY
Sir, just answer the questions. Then, you can go home and just forget about all of this. Now, what's your name?

MAN
How can you have me here if you don't even know my name?

MASON
Please, sir, this is just protocol. Now, answer the question.

MAN
My name is Esteban Tetson.

MASON takes out a notepad and begins writing in it.

ANGLE ON MAN

MAN (CONT.)
My parents were migrant workers from Chiapas, Mexico. They changed their last names when they acquired US citizenship. Esteban means crown, and has etymological connections to English names such as Steven and Stephen.

MASON stops writing, and both HOLLY and MASON look at the MAN.

MASON
Sir, where did you receive your education?

MAN
I didn’t. My parents were very poor. I learned English mostly from the other boys my age. I didn't learn to read and write until I was a teenager.

MASON
You don't seem to be having any difficulties. You don't even have an accent.

MAN
I wouldn't know.

MASON shrugs, and starts writing again.

HOLLY
Why don't you tell us about that book?

MAN
This is my diary. I've kept it ever since I was a kid.

HOLLY
I thought you said that you didn't learn to write until you were a teenager.

MAN
I didn't.

HOLLY
But then how did you keep a diary?

MAN
You're wasting my time with this. Please, just let me go home now.

MASON
Sir, please just tell us how you kept a diary before you learned how to write.

MAN
Why won't you believe me? Have you never heard of someone

keeping a diary before?

HOLLY AND MASON share a glance.

MASON
Sir, those are all the questions we needed to ask for now. I suggest you get some sleep. We'll be back tomorrow.

MAN
But…

ANGLE ON HOLLY AND MASON leaving. CLOSE ON THE MAN sitting briefly, then lying back, gripping the diary to his chest.

FADE OUT

END ACT I

-*-*-*-*-*

ACT II

FADE IN

Resume. OVERHEAD SHOT OF MAN lying down, asleep, still gripping the book. HOLLY and MASON are out in the hall, talking. MASON has a carrying case.

TWO SHOT ON HOLLY AND MASON

HOLLY
Think it's him or the book?

MASON
Dunno yet. I had the team pick up some memorabilia from Esteban Tetson's family, and ask whether he kept a diary. They didn't remember. I mean, it's been a while.

HOLLY
I hate this part.

MASON

Yeah.

HOLLY
Maybe, after this is done, we could just stay in Vienna. You know, forget this place. Move on. Find some safe and enjoyable employment in hard manual labor.

MASON
I wish that was still a joke. You know we can't.

HOLLY
Yeah.

TWO SHOT as they hug briefly, then walk over and OPEN the DOOR. At the SOUND OF IT OPENING, the MAN immediately sits up, fully awake.

WIDE ANGLE ON ALL CHARACTERS

MAN
Please, just tell me when you'll let me go. I have children.

MASON
Ah, good. That's the topic I wanted to start on.

MASON and HOLLY sit down. MASON takes out his writing utensils.

ANGLE ON MAN
MAN
What? Why do you need to know about them? Has something happened?

TWO SHOT ON MASON AND THE MAN

MASON
Nothing has happened, sir. This is just protocol. Now, please, just play along for a little bit longer.

MAN
Fine. Fine, I don't care, I just want this over quickly.

MASON

How many children do you have, and what are their names?

MAN
Two daughters. Celia and Chicha.

MASON
How old are they?

MAN
Celia is twenty, Chicha is fourteen.

MASON
And how old are you?

MAN
Forty-five. I was born in 1958, just after my parents immigrated. I was born at seven thirty-two in the afternoon on Wednesday, April twenty-seventh. There were no complications during birth, and I weighed exactly six pounds.

CLOSE ON MASON'S HAND when he stops writing. MASON and HOLLY look at the man.

MASON
Why do you do that?

MAN
Do what?

MASON
Tell us so much about yourself. You did it yesterday, when we asked for your name. And if you were poor, how do you know your exact time of birth and your weight at that time?

WIDE ANGLE OF ALL CHARACTERS, FAVORING THE MAN

MAN
Please, if you must ask me questions, don't make them like that. I'm being questioned, and I don't even know where I am. I don't feel like joking.

MASON

Can you please just answer the question?

MAN
Why should I answer the question, when it's so obvious and unnecessary?

MASON begins to speak again, but HOLLY puts a hand on his arm, and he stops.

HOLLY
We're sorry for upsetting you, but this is just protocol. We'll leave that question for later. I think that for now we have something to show you.

MASON begins unpacking the bag. He takes out a small photo album and a mirror.

MAN
How did you get that? Why do you have my photographs?

HOLLY takes the photo album from MASON, and opens it.

HOLLY
Sir, just answer our questions. After that, we'll answer yours. Now, where was this picture taken?

MAN
I was on vacation in Vienna with my family. It was hard, but I had saved enough to go. That was three years ago.

HOLLY quickly turns the page of the album, points randomly.

HOLLY
This one?

CLOSE ON PHOTOGRAPH OF UNFAMILIAR MAN, WOMAN, AND TWO GIRLS, IN FRONT OF A GARAGE.

MAN
That's us in front of the garage where I work. We took that two years ago.

HOLLY
This is you in the middle?

MAN
Yes, of course.

MASON holds up the mirror. WIDER ANGLE TO INCLUDE MIRROR. The MAN can be seen in the mirror. There is no similarity between the man in the photo and the man on the bed.

MAN
Why are you doing that?

HOLLY
Do you see any differences between the man in this photo and yourself?

MAN
No, of course not.

HOLLY
Of course.

ANGLE ON CHARACTERS

MASON
Sir, you are a teenager. Look at yourself. You are not forty-five. You are closer to fifteen. Your name is not Esteban Tetson, Esteban Tetson died while you were in elementary school. You are Jon Eois. You live with your parents, Kip and Janice. You have never been outside the United States.

MAN
I don't know why you have me here, and I will not answer any more questions until you explain what this is about. I know who I am. I know exactly who I am, and I am tired of these jokes.

MASON
I see.

TWO SHOT OF MASON AND HOLLY repacking the bag in silence, leaving the mirror. They walk to the door, but HOLLY stops and

turns.

HOLLY
Do you remember how you found that diary?

The MAN does not answer. POV of the MAN watching the researchers exit, then looking back at the mirror. It shows Esteban Tetson holding the diary. CLOSE ON MIRROR.

CUT TO HALLWAY

TWO SHOT OF HOLLY AND MASON, STANDING AT THE WALL ACROSS FROM THE ROOM.

HOLLY
I think it's the book. He's too fixated on it, too illogical about it.

MASON
Just be glad he's safe to work with. We'll grab the book tomorrow, run some tests. I just want to see this thing filed and gone.

A MEDICAL GURNEY ENTERS at the far end of the hallway, being rolled by another researcher. It is steadily rolled towards HOLLY, MASON, and the camera. HOLLY AND MASON watch it approach.

HOLLY
Mason?

MASON
Yeah?

HOLLY
Why'd I have to come here to meet someone?

THE GURNEY reaches HOLLY and MASON.

MASON
Because the universe has a really weird sense of humor.

THE MAN SCREAMS from OFF SCREEN. HOLLY AND MASON jump in surprise, and run for the door. The GURNEY WHEELER does not react, and continues to move.

ANGLE ON DOOR. HOLLY OPENS IT, but the view begins to fade as soon as she does.

FADE OUT

END ACT II

-*-*-*-*-*

ACT III

FADE IN

RESUME. TWO SHOT HOLLY AND MASON ENTERING THE HALLWAY. MASON is holding a CELL PHONE.

HOLLY
It figures, doesn't it? We finally get an easy subject, and this happens

HOLLY AND MASON stop walking outside the door.

MASON
We're just lucky, Hol. At least we're not on statue duty.

HOLLY shudders.

MASON (CONT.)
At least he died quickly.

HOLLY
That really isn't very comforting.

MASON
No, I guess not. But we have to figure out how his body affected our lovely little ticket to Vienna. It's procedure.

HOLLY
I know, honey. I'm just sick of this. Every day someone's careless and there's another body to deal with. It didn't use to bother me that much, but now…

HOLLY reaches for MASON'S hand.

HOLLY (CONT.)
Now, every day I think the body's going to be you.

MASON
I know. We shouldn't be here anymore.

HOLLY
No choice.

MASON
I know.

THE CELLPHONE BEEPS. MASON hits a button on it.

MASON (CONT.)
He's awake. Let's go.

HOLLY AND MASON kiss, then walk to the door.

ANGLE ON MAN, looking at the door as it opens and HOLLY AND MASON ENTER.

MAN
Finally. Holly, Mason, I'm fine. I have no idea how, but I'm fine. Now can I please go home and get some rest?

WIDEN ANGLE to show all characters.

MASON
We've told you before, sir. Once we're done asking you questions, you can go.

MAN
What on earth are you talking about?

MASON
What do you-

HOLLY
Mason, how did he know our names?

HOLLY AND MASON pause.

ANGLE ON MAN

MAN
We've worked together for five years. Now stop joking around.

MASON takes out his writing pad, and begins scribbling furiously. He does not look up when he talks.

MASON
What, if anything, do you know about the men Esteban Tetson and Jon Eois?

MAN
What? Why?

MASON
Just answer the question.

MAN
I've never heard the names before. Now can you please explain what's going on here?

MASON
What about that book you're holding?

MAN
My diary? I've kept it ever since I was a kid.

MASON
You bring it to work?

MAN
Of course I do.

MASON
In spite of the restrictions on personal belongings we may bring on site?

MAN
I don't see the relevance.

MASON
No, of course not. Holly, restrain him. I want to try something.

WIDEN ANGLE

THE MAN acts surprised and confused. He attempts to defend himself, but HOLLY easily overpowers him. MASON forcefully takes the diary from him. THE MAN begins to SCREAM.

MASON (CONT.)
Put him in the bathroom and lock the door.

CAMERA FOLLOWS as HOLLY drags THE MAN to the bathroom and pushes him in, then shuts the door and presses a button on it.

MASON (CONT.)
He, or they, displayed an obsession with the book, a fear of separation from it. If I'm right, the effect should end after a bit of time alone.

CAMERA CUT TO BATHROOM, with the MAN on one side of the screen and a mirror on the other. The mirror shows the reflection of another researcher.

THE MAN begins to cough, growing steadily louder throughout the conversation. MASON AND HOLLY can be heard talking as if they were in the room.

HOLLY
Honey, I don't like this. We shouldn't do tests without approval from higher up.

MASON
That takes too long. I want to leave tomorrow. Hell, I want to leave right now. I don't want to talk to someone who believes they're a dead friend of mine. That's just too much.

THE MAN begins to pound against the door, still coughing.

HOLLY
We can't afford to be careless, not now.

MASON
I'd rather take a risk than keep hearing that thing talk.

THE MAN GASPS AND COLLAPSES. HOLLY AND MASON notice the absence of noise.

MASON (CONT.)
There. Let's go check.

THE DOOR OPENS, HOLLY AND MASON STANDING in it. MASON is holding the diary. HOLLY rushes to THE MAN'S side. She puts her hand on his chest, and her ear to his mouth.

HOLLY
No heartbeat, no breathing. He's dead.

MASON looks down at the body.

MASON
Where am I?

HOLLY turns toward MASON. The mirror shows an exact copy of JON EOIS standing above his own body, in MASON'S place. He is gripping the diary.

CAMERA CUT TO BLACK

END ACT III

Decency

Let all of those who read this know that I have not failed my duties to the SCP Foundation. I have not broken under stress, nor have I gone crazy. What has happened is that I cannot allow the events around me to continue any longer.

I am going to die. After hours in solitary confinement, and the time in-between being almost unbearable, I've come to conclude that my actions after this writing will unquestionably lead to my demise. If you find this before I die, *do not* try to stop me. I've made my peace with God, and decided that what I am going to do is the right thing.

What I am about to do is break every single Special Personnel Requirement for the project I am assigned to. Normally, I wouldn't do this, but I just can't let her suffer any longer. Even though I will die trying, she will know that somebody cares for her.

It will only be for a moment, maybe less. I don't care. Just as long as she's out of her torment for one second, it will be enough for me. It will be enough knowing that for that brief instant, she will know that she is not a prisoner, that she is not a monster, that somebody cares enough about her to do something about it. For that brief instant, she'll be free.

I have passed all the psychological examinations. I have not broken down. I don't love her. I don't want an XK. All I want is for her to know, for the briefest instant, that somebody cares for her as a human being.

And I will make sure she knows.

-Agent Shields

Note: At 0900 hours, Agent Shields stripped off his concealing helmet and somehow entered the enclosure of **231-7**. *231-7 was awake at the time, but showed no reaction to Shields' presence. Armed guards were deployed as he approached the bedside, placed a single rose upon it, and left the containment chamber. Four minutes after the security breach, Agent Shields was shot to death by six guards, and 231-7's amnestic schedule was altered slightly to allow for a dose shortly afterward. Procedure 110-Montauk was put into effect minutes later.*

Decisions We Make

Sunday, May 9th, 2021

`Agent Sasha Merlo` sat within the office of Edgar Holman, Director of Foundation **`Site-64`** and a longtime friend. As she relaxed in one of the comfortable chairs he kept in front of his desk, she looked around the room at the various pieces of minor anomalous artwork that covered the walls. Her eyes snapped back to her host as Holman finished filling out some paperwork and cleared his throat.

“You’re probably wondering why I asked you to stop by,” he said, taking off his reading glasses.

“Well, you haven’t started yelling at me, so I assume I’m not in trouble, yet,” Merlo replied with a grin. “I figured you just liked my company.”

“Cute,” Holman chuckled. “I’m afraid it’s a little more important than that. You are aware that William Johnson, my Assistant Director of Task Forces is planning to retire in two months, yes?”

“I heard rumors…” Merlo furrowed her brow. “Why?”

Holman slid a small folder to her and gestured for her to read. Merlo’s eyes widened as she scanned the words on the pages therein.

> *As such, I am recommending Agent Sasha Merlo (Commanding Officer, MTF Gamma-13) to fill the position of Assistant Site Director of Task Forces following Johnson's retirement…*

“But… why?” she asked.

“Because you get results, messy as they are sometimes,” Holman

explained. “That, and you are an exceptional leader who has proven herself time and time again as part of the **Gamma-13**. If anyone is qualified to take over for Johnson once he leaves, it’s you.”

“Doesn’t Johnson get a say in this?”

“He agrees with me, and will be filing a similar recommendation.” Holman smiled. “Job’s basically yours already.”

Merlo rubbed her temple. She opened her mouth to speak, blinked, then closed it again. The process repeated itself twice more before she managed to get her thoughts in order.

“But what about the Lawbringers?” She asked. “If I climb the ladder, who takes their reins?”

“I was under the impression that Agent Shaw was a good candidate,” Holman answered. “Is that not the case?”

“No, Clarissa would easily be my top choice, I just…” Merlo gave a flustered sigh. “I guess I never saw myself ever being on the admin side of things.”

“We never do.” Holman shrugged. “But in the end, someone needs to step up to the plate and get the job done, and right now, you are the person I think will do the best in the position.”

Holman then swiveled in his chair, turning away from Merlo. He then chuckled as Merlo watched the top of his head shake.

“That also puts you in a position to take over as Site Director when I eventually retire,” he added.

“Wait, what?!” Merlo went pale. “Say that one more time, please?!”

“Oh, come on.” Holman swiveled his chair back to face her. “I’ve had this job for over two decades. At some point, I need to pass the torch. You’re the only person in this facility who I feel comfortable doing that with. You know the locale, you know the anomalous communities, you know Site-64.”

Merlo remained silent. Her eyes remained locked with Holman’s.

There she could see his absolute sincerity.

“I’m at the point in my career where I need to start thinking about my legacy, Sasha,” Holman went on. “Passing the torch to you, and knowing the site was in competent hands after I leave will be a positive part of that.”

“Will you give me a week to consider?” Merlo asked.

“Take all the time you need,” Holman replied.

Merlo gave a small smile and nodded. As she made her way to the exit, she turned to look back at her superior.

“I’m glad you think so highly of me, Ed,” she said. “It means a lot.”

2007 - Saturday, March 3rd

As the van came to a stop, the members of the mobile task force inside did their final preps. An anonymous tip from within Seattle’s anomalous community had informed them of a massive anart and paratech dump within a warehouse. Within half an hour, the raid would commence.

The rookie triple checked her gear. She had helped conduct raids for the FBI when she was a cyberoperations specialist, but this times things were different. She was fresh out of MTF training. Magic, ghosts, eldritch horrors, and all the wonderful things that go bump in the night had been shown to exist. How anyone could feel prepared in this situation, she did not know. She tied her brunette hair into a ponytail and let out a nervous sigh.

“First op?” the veteran agent sitting next to her asked. The rookie quietly nodded.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so,” he replied with a chuckle, and scratched the stubble on his chin. “All the newbies have a certain way about them. No worries, we’ve all been there before. Stick with me and I promise you’ll do fine. Guaranteed, or your body back.”

The rookie smiled and nodded, then fell silent as the task force lead cleared her throat and turned to them to remind them of the key points of their briefing.

Monday, May 10th, 2021

As Merlo finished telling Agent Clarissa Shaw about her pending decision, she watched her colleague think in silence for several moments. Shaw took off her glasses and chewed on the arm, the gears turning in her head. Eventually, Shaw sighed and shrugged.

“So, which way are you currently leaning?” Shaw asked.

“I have no idea…” Merlo sank into her office chair. “Field work is what makes me feel alive, you know? It’s all I’ve ever done and all I’ve ever wanted to do. Being a paper pusher seems… unnatural.”

“So, what’s the problem? If being in the field is so important to you, if it’s what you live for, your answer seems pretty cut and dry.”

“Yeah, but what about **Gabe and Jessie?**”

“What about them?” Shaw raised an eyebrow.

“I’m far less likely to get shot if I take the job.” Merlo explained. “Plus, I’ll be around them more. I’ve missed four out of five birthdays for Jessie. Can’t count how many times I’ve left Gabe high and dry…”

“They both seem fine with things the way they are now.” Shaw shrugged. “Listen, Sasha, in the end this is going to boil down to what you want. I’d think you’d make a really good MTF Director. I really do. Hell, you’d make a kickass Site Director. But at the same time being in an office day after day would just crush the life out of you. I feel like I’ve known you long enough that I can say that. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“Right…” Merlo sighed. “I guess part of me thinks that if I don’t take this, I’m letting tons of people down.”

“And if you do take it, you’ll let yourself down,” Shaw chuckled.

“Maybe even Gamma-13, too. I mean, who would they even get to replace you?”

Merlo smiled and gestured at her friend. Shaw’s grin immediately vanished.

“Noooooooooo…” Shaw said slowly, pointing an accusatory finger at Merlo. “Sasha, if you think we’re Asimov’s Fuckups now…”

“It’s what?” Merlo interrupted. “Going to get worse? And here I thought I was selling myself short. Shaw, none of our problems as a task force were ever leadership based and you know it. You’d excel as task force lead. Believe me, I’d know.”

The two agents looked at each other in silence for several seconds and then burst into laughter.

“You fucking hypocrite!” Shaw finally said between gasps for air. Her voice then took on an imitative tone. “I don’t think I should take this job, Clarissa, but here are all the reasons you could take mine.”

“Would you though?” Merlo asked as the laughter died down, “If I take the job, would you step up for the Lawbringers?”

“No one could lead this team as well as you do.” Shaw shook her head. “The thought of attempting terrifies me. But yeah. I’d do it. I hope you don’t make me though.”

2007 - Saturday, March 3rd

The rookie stood fourth in a line of her fellow task force members. The veteran stood in front of her, and looked back to give her a small nod of confidence. She nodded in return, then watched as the lead agent quickly took out what looked like a tube of red paint, and applied it to the handle of the nearby warehouse door. The lead agent gave them the signal to hold as the handle, then the entire door, became red hot and disintegrated before them. The dust from the door had not even settled by the time another agent threw a flashbang into the warehouse interior. The explosive went off, the interior of the warehouse filling with the sound of confused voices as

the team funneled in.

Armed thugs attempted to draw weapons, but were quickly taken down by bursts of rifle fire. The rookie watched a muscular woman topple as she discharged six of her rounds. She gave pause as she watched the woman's body limply slide down the side of a crate, but snapped back into focus as the veteran tapped her on the shoulder.

"Come on!" he shouted over the din, and pointed toward the interior of the warehouse where a cacophony of metallic sounds, confused shouting, and gunfire filled the air.

The rookie nodded and quickly fell in behind him, her weapon held tightly in her hands. She gave one last glance back at the woman she killed before snapping her head back to the matter at hand.

Wednesday, May 12th, 2021

Agent Merlo sat within a booth at the Secret Crest Pub, a brewpub in Portland's Pearl District that had become a popular spot among Site-64 personnel during their off time, mainly due to the fact that its original owner had once been a retired Site Director. Across from her was a lanky and stubble coated agent by the name of **Daniel Navarro**.

"How's the robo-hand treating you?" Merlo asked after taking a sip from her beer. "I'm still surprised you went ahead and had it installed."

The anart specialist sipped his drink with his left hand and then shrugged.

"It gives me phantom pain from time to time," he replied, "and I can't use my left arm to do magic anymore, but hey, at least I can do this again." Navarro then proceeded to extend his left middle finger.

"Classy as always." Merlo shook her head as she chuckled.

"I try." Navarro smiled. "So, what's all this Shaw told me about you getting a promotion?"

“Site-64’s Director of MTFs is retiring,” Merlo explained. “Holman wants me to take the job.”

“And you didn’t tell him no then and there?”

“You would have?”

“You bet, but keep in mind that the day I'm considered is the day Hell freezes over, so we'd have bigger problems on our hands,” Navarro replied. “Fuck that kind of responsibility. Being a field agent is far too much fun, plus my mistakes only affect a handful of people at most, usually. Last thing I want on my conscience is to be the guy who sent an entire task force on a mission and got them all banished to the deepest circle of Hell.”

Navarro paused as he noticed Merlo was staring intently into her half-finished pint.

“You’re still on the fence about it then?”

“Well I was,” Merlo frowned, “but now I’m not so sure. I don’t want to be the one who sends a task force to the ninth ring of Hell.”

“I mean, that’s just me. I’d doubt you’d ever get your people in that kind of situation to begin with. You think things through too well.” Navarro sighed. “Alternatively, if you take the job you wouldn’t be able to go on crazy magic adventures with me anymore.”

“True,” Merlo conceded, “but if I take the job, when your magic adventure backfires, like it always does, I’ll be in a position to help with your whole ‘not getting fired, amnesticized, and/or shot’ thing.

“Where’s the fun in that, though?” Navarro chuckled. “Listen, Sasha, in the end you do whatever you feel is best for you. Personally, I think your talents would be wasted as a paper pusher, but what do I know?”

Navarro then gestured to the server for another round.

2007 - Saturday, March 3rd

“What the hell is that thing?!” the rookie shouted over a continuous wave of incoming machinegun fire. Her and the veteran had hidden behind a forklift for cover. At the center of the nearby clearing what could best be described as an ***robotic sentry turret*** *opened fire at them.*

“Hell if I know!” the veteran replied, taking a series of quick potshots at the robot before returning to the safety of the rapidly deteriorating forklift. “But it’s pissed, whatever it is.”

The rookie peered over the forklift’s side to get a better look. The robot's main body resembled a large black vase standing on four thick spidery legs. A thin red line formed a ring around its middle, emitting a bright light that intensively glowed in their direction. Two gun barrels adorned each side. All four fired a stream of bullets rapidly in their direction. The rookie flipped her rifle into full auto and quickly took aim, shouting as she emptied the rest of her magazine into the mechanical beast. She watched it take multiple steps back from the force of the impact, however, the bullets only made small dents in its armor. The turret began a process of self-repair as it stepped forward to reclaim its lost ground, and begin its stream of fire once again.

“Shit!” the rookie shouted as she ducked back behind the forklift and reloaded. “Bullets aren’t cracking this thing. Got any other ideas?”

“Just one…” the veteran replied, and pulled out a knife.

“You brought a knife to a gunfight? Are you crazy!”

“Probably!” the veteran shouted, cutting his left hand with the blade.

The rookie’s eyes widened as she watched his hand immediately burst into flames. The veteran gave a shout as he shot to his feet and pointed his palm at the droid, a giant pillar of blue flames engulfing the automaton as it let out a horrifying shriek. The veteran then closed his fist, the flames immediately dying, leaving a smoldering pile of charred metal and melted plastic where the turret once stood.

“I’ll answer your questions later, provided they let you remember

them," the veteran told the rookie as he began to bandage the cut on his hand. "Preferably when all the bad guys are dead and bullets aren't trying to find a home within us."

Friday, May 14th, 2021

Merlo sat in Site-64's cafeteria, a cup of stale coffee in her hands as she looked over the notepad in front of her. Jotted down on it was a pro and con list regarding taking the assistant director position. Both columns were of equal length, and held equally compelling arguments. She signed, and looked at the clock on the far wall.

12:00 AM.

"Why the hell can't I make up my mind…" Merlo mumbled as she rubbed her eyes. "I can make split second decisions during an op, but I can't decide on this bullshit… Fuck me."

She sighed and rested her head on the table. She still hadn't told Gabe. Mainly because she already knew what he was going to say. Same as Shaw and Navarro. Follow her heart. The only problem was her heart wasn't keen on leading her anywhere. At least not this time.

"Well that is that and this is this.
Will you tell me what you saw and I'll tell you what you missed,
when the ocean met the sky. (You missed, you missed)
You missed when time and life shook hands and said goodbye. (You missed)
When the earth folded in on itself. (You missed)
And said "Good luck, for your sake I hope heaven and hell (You missed, you missed)
are really there, but I wouldn't hold my breath." (You missed, you missed)
You wasted life, why wouldn't you waste death? (You missed, you missed)
You wasted life, why wouldn't you waste death?"

Merlo raised her head as the sound of monotone singing became audible. Soon after, a slender man in a lab coat with messy blond

hair entered the cafeteria, a pair of earbuds visible within his ears as he made his way directly to the coffee machine. An amused smile came to Merlo's face as she recognized him as **Researcher Conwell**, primary investigator of the site's Anomalous Materials Lab. She listened to him continue to sing while preparing his coffee. Eventually he turned around, and upon seeing her, stopped mid-sentence. He blushed as he pulled his earbuds out.

"Uh, sorry," Conwell mumbled. "Normally no one is here around this time…"

"Oh, don't mind me." Merlo chuckled. "You keep doing your thing. I won't tell anyone, superstar."

Conwell gave a small smile and approached her table.

"What are you even doing here?" he asked. "I thought MTF members had normal hours when not on ops."

"I needed to think through a few things," Merlo answered. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Lab's running a reaction that needs round-the-clock surveillance and samples collected every hour or so. Tonight's my shift."

"Fun times," Merlo commented. "Hey, Jacob, mind if I pick your brain for a bit."

"I've got a bit of time, sure." Conwell shrugged. "What's up?"

"You're married, right?"

Conwell raised an eyebrow, then flicked the titanium wedding band on his finger.

"A little under six years now…"

"Kids?"

"Kate and I have a three-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter. Where're you going with this?"

“Just humor me for a few more questions,” Merlo sighed. “You don’t travel a lot for your position, right? Like, most nights you’re home to see your family?”

“Yeah, most of the time I am.” Conwell scratched the back of his head. “Exceptions being when I’m here for experiments or get called out to **Site-77** to help with some of their AMAT projects, but that’s mainly because I’m on good terms with their **Site Director.** I imagine its different if you’re on an MTF, though. The whole ‘mobile’ thing.”

“Bingo,” Merlo replied. “I have a chance to change that though, the Task Force director’s position is opening up, and Holman is offering it to me…”

“Well hey, congratulations!” Conwell exclaimed. “You should totally take it. You’d be great there.”

Merlo remained silent and looked at the pro and con list on the table before her.

“But you’re not so certain, are you?” Conwell observed.

“I have no idea why. Part of me knows I’d probably do fine there, and that it would be better for me and my family if I take the job, but at the same time I can’t stand the thought of wasting away over paperwork, sitting in meetings, and hobnobbing with the big wigs. It’s just not me.” Merlo sighed deeply. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, if it was me, I’d take the job,” Conwell said, sitting down across from Merlo and looking over her pro and con list. “Then again, I’m not a field agent who eats danger for breakfast. Have you asked your family what they think?”

Merlo shook her head.

“Gabe’s just going to say, ‘do whatever makes you happy.’” Merlo rubbed her temple. “But the problem with that is if I choose what makes me happy I’ll feel like shit. ‘Sorry sweetie, rather than take a better paying job that is safer, and allows me to be a bigger part of our daughter’s life I’m going to choose to keep on galivanting off into

the sunset on my merry adventures, cause it's what I want. See you later if I don't die.'"

Conwell chuckled and shook his head.

"What's so fucking funny?" Merlo snapped.

"You already know what decision you're going to make," Conwell commented, looking at his watch. He then stood and returned Merlo's pro and con list to her. "You're just afraid of the repercussions."

He then put his earbuds back in place and finished the rest of his coffee, chucking the paper cup into a nearby trashcan.

"If I was in your shoes, I'd take the job," Conwell continued. "Safer spot to be, you get to see your family more, and you would be good at it. But, hey, what do I know. I'm just a scientist. You take care."

Merlo listened as Conwell began singing to himself once more as he took his exit.

"As life gets longer, awful feels softer.
Well it feels pretty soft to me.
And if it takes shit to make bliss,
Then I feel pretty blissfully."

2007 - Saturday, March 3rd

The battle within the warehouse had begun to wind down. Most of the hostiles had been either apprehended or killed. Most of the anomalous art pieces and paratech had been secured. Only a few pockets of resistance remained for the MTF to mop up.

One such pocket, that the rookie and the veteran had been assigned to, was in the form of a lanky black **`android`** *that had fortified itself among multiple crates with its supposed owner. An MTF sniper had downed the owner, but the android's bullet resistance and impressive skills with small arms had prevented the rookie and the veteran from closing in to complete containment.*

“Can’t you just flash fry this guy too?” the rookie whispered from their cover behind a pile of crates.

“If I wanted to burn this whole place down, sure,” the veteran replied. “It’s surrounded by wooden crates. That’s not happening.”

“What good is being able to summon fire if you can be bested by a pile of wooden boxes?” the rookie asked, peering over their cover, only to duck to avoid a burst of bullets flying past her head. The force of the shots hitting a far stack of crates knocked a smaller crate off a larger one, and onto the floor. “I have an idea. Can you provide me covering fire?”

“Almost getting shot gave an idea?” the veteran asked. “If this idea boils down to shooting the guy, I’m docking you for no originality.”

“Humor me,” the rookie hissed back. “Can you provide covering fire? Get this guy focusing only on you?”

“Just tell me when…”

The rookie grinned and counted down on her fingers

Five.
Four.
Three.
Two.
One.

The second the final finger went down the rookie shot up and dashed towards the android’s fortress, the veteran letting loose a spray of bullets that kept the robot behind cover. Eventually the rookie vanished from the veteran’s view. He quickly ducked back behind cover to reload, the android sending a barrage of bullets toward his location. The veteran held his breath, and waited for the click of an empty magazine, before peering out from cover. Sure enough, the black droid was reloading, unaware of the rookie on top of the pile of crates behind it, forcing a crate off the top of the stack…

“That’s just stupid…” the veteran said to himself with a smirk as he

watched the crate fall, landing right on top of the android and flattening it under its weight. The rookie lost no time hopping down and quickly pinning the incapacitated droid beneath yet another crate.

"Going to dock me for originality?" the rookie asked with a smug smile as the veteran approached.

"I mean, you just knocked a box onto it. That's not exactly, well, thinking too far outside the box is it?"

"Everyone's a critic…" the rookie said as she rolled her eyes and quickly flagged down the rest of the containment team for assistance.

"I'm afraid so."

Saturday, May 15th, 2021

Agent Merlo sat in her living room, curled up in a blanket on her couch. As the credits to *Empire Strikes Back* ran across the TV screen, her husband was in the other room, putting their daughter to bed. By the time the credits had finished their crawl, Gabe had returned, lazily crawling under the blanket with her and pulling her close. She rested her head on his shoulder and then sighed.

"Got something I need to talk to you about," she said.

"Oh no, that can't be good." Gabe chuckled. "What's up?"

"You know how the Director of Task Forces is retiring?"

"Yeah…"

"Holman's offered me the job."

"That's fantastic," Gabe said with a smile. "You going to take it?"

"I don't know yet…" Merlo said after a pause.

"Do or don't, I'll support you either way."

“Do you think I should take it?” Merlo asked, turning her head to look at her husband’s stubble covered face. She could see her reflection in his glasses. She looked so tired.

“I think you should do what will make you happy,” Gabe replied. “If that means staying an MTF agent, go for it.”

Merlo shot up and put her head in her hands before she let out a deep breath.

“For once, Gabe, could you please lose the chill? Please?” She snapped. “Tell me what the fuck you want! Have a fucking opinion! Tell me you want me to take the job, that you and Jessie miss me and want me to be here more. Tell me that its selfish to continue being an MTF agent when such a better opportunity has come up. Get mad! Just… do something! Please! This is why I waited this long to tell you! You never have a fucking opinion.”

“Grr? Arg?” Gabe said with a frown, halfheartedly shaking his fists. “Sasha, I mean what I said. If you’re happy on the sales floor, there is absolutely no reason to bump up to management. Stay head of the Lawbringers if you want. I’m fine with it. Really. I knew what I signed up for when we got married, and Jessie seems to understand things in her own way.”

He then wrapped his arm back around her and pulled her into a hug.

“I take it you told others first? What did they say?”

“Shaw and Navarro think I should pass. Holman and Conwell said I should take it.”

“And what do you think?”

Merlo looked at Gabe. He smiled and gave her a kiss on her forehead.

“I don’t know…” she mumbled.

“When do you have to let Holman know?”

“I told him I’d have an answer by tomorrow.”

“Well, think on it tonight. I’ve told you what I think. Whatever decision you make, know that I’m proud of you, and will support you.”

Merlo gave him a small smile and rested her head back on his shoulder.

“Jedi?” she asked as she sank back into a comfortable spot.

“Love to,” said Gabe as he got up to change the disk in the Blu-ray player.

2007 - Saturday, March 3rd

Overall, the raid was a success. Minor personnel casualties, high anomalous object turnaround, and numerous apprehended persons of interest. Still, when the combat dust had settled, their job had only just started. By the time cleanup was done, amnestics distributed, and all hands evacuated for the disinformation guys to take over, the sun had become low in the sky. However, the work eventually came to an end, and the MTF members were loaded back into their vans for transport back to the site for debriefing.

“That was fun,” the veteran said to the rookie. “We should do this again sometime.”

“Do you want to bring the auto-turret, or should I?” she asked with a sheepish grin on her face.

The veteran chuckled and shook his head.

“Never caught your name, by the way,” he said, extending a handshake.

“Sasha Grimmer,” the rookie replied, accepting the gesture. Her grip was strong.

“Daniel Navarro,” the veteran said in return. “Not bad for your first raid. Holman should keep an eye on you. You’re going places.”

Sunday, May 16th, 2021

Merlo stood in front of the office door and hesitated, reading the entry plaque several times.

> **Edgar Holman, Site Director**

It was about the third readthrough that the words on the plaque began to change in her mind's eyes. By the time she had read the plaque for a fifth time she thought the engraving actually read:

> **Sasha Merlo, Site Director**

"In or out, Agent Merlo."

Merlo blinked as she snapped out of it, the voice of Holman's secretary breaking her train of thought.

"Right, sorry," Merlo apologized, and let out a final sigh as she opened the door. The Site Director peered at her from his desk and smiled.

"You wanted to speak to me, Merlo?" He asked.

"Yes sir," Merlo said. She moved across the room and took a seat in one of the chairs.

"Oh? Whatever about?" Holman chuckled, and neatly folded his hands.

"I've made my decision…"

> + I'm sorry, Ed, but I can't do this... It's just not me.
>
> Sasha Merlo knocked on the door of one of a handful of accounting offices in Site-64. A familiar voice informed her it was open, and with a deep breath she entered. Inside she found Gabe Merlo sitting at the room's only desk. He gave her a warm, but confused, smile.
>
> "Well this is a nice surprise," Gabe said. "What brings you to math land?"

"I turned down the job," Merlo answered as she gave a tired smile.

"I figured you would," Gabe chuckled. "Business as usual from here on out, then." He paused, his smile briefly vanishing as he raised an eyebrow. "Are you happy with your decision?"

"I am, but part of me wonders if I made a huge mistake," Merlo shrugged. "You know, the usual."

Gabe's smile returned instantly.

"Oh, you certainly made a huge mistake," Gabe replied sheepishly. "You married me."

He stood and wrapped his arms around her. Merlo held onto him tightly.

"Seriously, though," Gabe continued. "I'm glad you did what you wanted, and not what you thought you had to do." He then gave her a peck on the cheek. "Love you, sweetie."

Merlo gave a relaxed sigh and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Love you too."

+ Ask and you shall receive, Ed. I accept

Sasha Merlo knocked on the door of one of a handful of accounting offices in Site-64. A familiar voice informed her it was open, and with a deep breath she entered. Inside she found Gabe Merlo sitting at the room's only desk. He gave her a warm, but confused, smile.

"Well this is a nice surprise," Gabe said. "What brings you to math land?"

"I took the job," Merlo answered. She gave a tired smile in return.

Gabe blinked a few times as he processed the news, his smile widening to an ear to ear grin.

"Really?" he asked. "That's awesome! Didn't think you'd go for it"

"I didn't either," Merlo replied with a shrug. "But something just ended up convincing me this was the right move. That shooting Holman down would have been a huge mistake."

"And we both know I'm the only mistake you have room for in your life," Gabe said with chuckle. "Do I have to start calling you Director now?

"Only in the bedroom," Merlo answered impishly.

"Kinky."

Gabe then stood and wrapped his arms around Merlo, pulling her into a tight hug.

"In all seriousness," he continued, "I really am proud of you. This is what you want though, right? You're not doing this because you feel obligated…"

"This is what I want." Merlo nodded. "It just took me a while to figure out why."

"Wonderful," he said, then proceeded to give her a peck on the cheek. "Love you sweetie."

Merlo gave a relaxed sigh and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Love you too."

« No Good Deed | Anderson Robotics Hub | The Blackbird and The Falcon »

Decomm

Of all the soon-to-be-miserable individuals, why was it decided that a rookie was the best choice to get official signatures to formally close the Glieces program? On paper, it was the easiest job in the Foundation. You tell the poor sap the news he probably already knows, get him to sign a few pieces of paper, and you were on your merry way back to the bar. In practice, however, telling one of the most senior members of scientific staff that their only project was to be terminated and him summarily retired, might be a surefire way to flush future prospects down the drain. The man may have been unpopular among his equals, but since when did that have any effect on whose ear he could whisper into? Judging by his source (if you could call some meek unknown you bumped into by the water dispenser a source), Brophy considered "unreasonable pettiness" to be an oxymoron. Why couldn't the bastard have retired like any other sane individual? Struggling to remind himself there was no such thing as Keter Duty, Junior Agent Tennyson gripped the handle and proceeded into the observatory's main office.

A man with the most sunken face imaginable waited for him. His time at the observatory had aged him horribly, with his eyes trying to recede in the back of his head, while the bags under his eyes almost made him look like a turkey. By the looks of things, this was mostly self-inflicted. Papers and office utensils were strewn haphazardly across the room. The desk was littered with enough cups of coffee that, cumulatively, could probably kill an elephant. Maybe the whole circus. The junior agent eyed the date of the paper closest to him, nailed to the wall with a poorly thrown dart. Dated less than a week after he'd received the notice. The man was just doing everything he could to prove the universe wrong, and failed miserably.

Tennyson took a seat, having not received an invitation to and forced out the words he had recited in his head for hours in the car journey over, desperately trying not to stammer.

"Dr Brophy, my name is Junior Agent Tennyson, from the Department of Internal Affairs. As per Subsection 14 of the False Alarm Protocols, I am here to inform you of the actions being taken with regard to your designated project. The Ethics Committee has reviewed your case and has ultimately decided to proceed with a.. withdrawal action."

Dr Brophy had remained eerily still and non-emotive since Tennyson's entrance. The only indication that he was alive at all came from periodic blinking, which were rather relieving, albeit brief, respites from his glacial stare.

Tennyson solidified his stance and continued. "The time has come to face facts, sir. Your anomaly has yielded no anomalous activity for an unacceptable period of time. It has been determined that the message produced by Glieces-2554 could well have been an improbable coincidence-"

"So it's already lost its SCP designation, then" the interviewee interrupted in the most accusative tone he could conjure. This was followed by what could only be described as the halfway-point between a grumble and a growl. He was moving dangerously slowly, like a leopard analysing his options, judging whether to go for the neck, or the kidneys. Tennyson was in the nitty-gritty now. If he didn't tread careful, there would be an explosion on his hands, and he rather liked his way his hands looked at this moment in time.

"The anomalous message deciphered from the pulsar's radio waves has only ever been observed once. The costs of maintaining a facility to monitor further activity is becoming increasingly unfeasible. Surely, after all this time, you didn't think actions wouldn't have to be taken?" Glieces' message had been discovered when there was a lot more money and much fewer monsters to be locked up. A pulsar beaming "**THR RUSHINNS NOW UF US.. (21-minute pause) BRNGG NICCXON**" would've dropped down the priority list eventually. The doctor shifted his weight in a bored fashion. Whatever energy he had, had clearly been wasted in the development of this mess. That didn't stop the waves of impatience he seemed to be emitting.

"Don't mind me, young man" a severely drained voice croaked.

"Though if I could ask you to bring me my reading glasses from over there? I would, but-" a demonstrative shrug, "I don't think I'm in any state to go anywhere."

Could hardly argue with that. Tennyson dropped his papers and made his way to the cluttered cabinet Brophy had indicated. After a few seconds of rummaging, Tennyson decided to confront the fact of what he was doing.

He was stalling, and he knew it.

He was ashamed of himself, unbelievably so. He was an employee of an elite organization dedicated to the protection of normalcy, and he was procrastinating, no, cowering before an old man, who probably couldn't kill anyone if he tried, even if he was sufficiently motivated. And being a man famous for being proud of his work, debunking his entire life was alarmingly powerful motivation.

It was that pride that was responsible for Brophy's continued presence in the observatory. The man would be a great addition to any research team, provided he was kept behind soundproof glass and gagged. Sadly, he seldom was, and many a newbie cowered when his towering standards weren't met. But better a trainee than a partner, at least in the eyes of his associates. The observatory held a thinly-veiled reputation as a "jumping-board" facility, where astronomers could find their space legs, before they started charting the unknown. Brophy's own teaching talent was his downfall in this respect. Nobody could beat astronomy into the minds of students like he could. All he had was Glieces to keep him busy, and any other side-projects consisting of more than him were briskly shot down and swept under the rug.

"What is this, this part right here?" A puzzled Tennyson immediately wheeled around to find a significantly more agitated-looking Brophy, pointing to a sensitive area of the documents he had foolishly left unguarded on the desk. The agent's eyes widened, while his stomach decided to pop in and say hello to his intestines.

"Project Heimdall have certainly been busy, haven't they, -" his eyes now very visibly bloodshot, "letting access to their equipment very early on, I see. Uh-huh. Kind enough to send a bit of tech to Glieces

and found…. nothing. Not so much as a whisper of psychic potential."

Brophy let out a laugh that was dangerously close to a mad cackle.

"Why if I had known earlier, I might have taken a gander at it, it might have saved you and me a bit of time. Well, a couple of hours for you, and-" he glanced exaggeratingly at the papers " six years for me. Funny how they never thought to inform old Brophy about that little development, don't you think?

So much for breaking it to him softly.

Now feeling a lot less in control than he would have thought possible, the agent assessed the decaying remains of the situation. There was the "just-in-case" argument that was ever popular with this sort of dispute, and had the added benefit of being the truth, but somehow Tennyson doubted that telling a senior member of scientific staff about logical redundancy would do anything to avert a rampage. The "just-doing-your-job" speech he composed on the way over sounded more like consolation at this point, not a solution.

"Well, young man, I, for one, believe enough of our time has been wasted." At this point Brophy's might as well have been on a promotional poster for Bedlam. Reaching out for a pen, he began to sign every conceivable area his name could be plastered, regardless of whether it was required or not. "You've accomplished what you set out to do. You may leave me in bloody peace." A hand plagued by uncontrollable shaking indicated the exit. An out had been given. Tennyson weighed his options and the Coward gripped the door handle and promptly exited.

It had taken less than two seconds for Tennyson to regret his gutless decision. But what could one say to someone now convinced he had wasted countless years of his life, chasing a phantom? Not even a real one, the Foundation had plenty of those. A cruel trick of the universe, a heartless coincidence, had cheated Alister Brophy out of a meaningful existence. A young woman, an intern, maybe, eyed Tennyson as he descended down the concrete steps. He had seen the same look of apprehension on the receptionist when he had first arrived. "Did he take it well?" she

inquired.

Her answer arrived in the form of a mangled office chair, thrown with considerable (though not-too-considerable) might out the window above. The plastic and leather construct shattered on impact, shedding debris into the surrounding area. Tennyson got lucky. The innocent intern, on the other hand, was not favoured by the powers that be. It was only a slight gash, but it might as well have been an amputation wound in Tennyson's eyes.

The intern glared pressingly at him, hands pressed firmly on her newly minted wound, her eyes very plainly saying, "Please don't leave us to clear up this mess". Her message was wasted, though, as Tennyson was already making his way back up the steps. It was one thing when someone had a temper tantrum, it was entirely something else when someone else had to pay for it. The door flew open, and gone was the Coward, and in strode the Agent.

There were no screams. There were no thunderous cries. Nothing to suggest Brophy's legendary rage had ignited. Hell, the only two things out of place were a few shards of window glass and the absence of a chair. There was only Brophy lying collapsed in front of his desk, his head resting back on the front of his wooden desk. He had stared into the jaws of defeat, and the maw was closing fast. To the untrained eye, he might have appeared dead, his glazed expression certainly reeked of death, only the slight periodic rising of his chest gave any indication that he clung to the mortal realm at all. If Tennyson didn't do his job now, that might not stay that way.

So, Tennyson did what felt natural. He closed the door, walked to his left and stuck on the kettle.

Two minutes later, a freshly brewed cup of tea found its way into Brophy's decrepit fingers. "Drink."
No response. "Drink" he repeated, in a much more assertive tone than he thought capable of. At least it worked.

Colour began to flush back into Brophy's skin, his overworked heart going back to its regular scheduled pumping. Tentative sips slowly drained the fluid away, and while Brophy did look all the better for it, his eyes told a different dispiriting story. A few curious researchers

had gathered outside, and were subsequently shooed away.

"Jesus, look at me. What kind of a scientist would act this moronically?" That one would definitely be best left interpreted as a rhetorical question. For no particular reason, Junior Agent Tennyson let himself sit beside Brophy. The weight of the day seemed to lift right off his shoulders. It hadn't even been ten particularly stressful minutes since he entered the head office, and already the future agent was feeling the sting of hindsight. Maybe coming out of his parent's basement might not have been the best career choice. But you do what you can with what you're dealt.

Brophy reached into his shirt pocket, taking out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a lighter. After two failed attempts, Tennyson took control of the lighter and steadied it for the old man. When he exhaled, all the tension holding him together escaped and his body went as limp as a wet rag.

"So, this is what I have to look forward to in 50 years, eh" Tennyson started, desperate to ease whatever tensions lingered in the room.

"So long as you don't spend 'em like I did, you oughta be fine". The aged doctor's face slowly swerved to meet that of his temporary companion, and it that instant, there was an understanding between the two. Before his induction, Tennyson might have been too naïve to see the signs. But both men knew there was no happy ending to be found here. All Tennyson could do was do right by his paycheck and get the job that needed doing done.

In the end, he had achieved what he came here to do.. With the papers signed, the final chapter in Brophy's career of seeming productivity came to a close.

"1548 could always use someone else to watch it, sir." That got the tiniest chuckle and the hint of an empty smile. Tennyson wanted to tell Brophy that a Foundation scientist that lasted this long should be proud of himself for beating the frankly depressing odds. But this situation was no longer in his hands. It lay with Brophy and whatever god (or lack thereof) he held dearest. Maybe he would take this opportunity and make the most of it. Help a charity, volunteer, inspire the next generation of astronomers with whatever time he

had left. But would he take the one last step?

Two weeks later, the news would arrive from an offhand mention by a neighbouring agent in the break room. A part of him was thankful the ordeal was over for one of them, at least. Unfortunately, he doubted that this would be the last time that Brophy would come to mind. He would deal with those consequences in time, do his job and get on with life.

But still. Goddamn it.

Decomm Anon

The dim fluorescent lights buzzed softly above, as the nine individuals looked at one another uneasily. The clock on the wall ticked the time down, and there was the occasional nervous cough. The windowless room they were seated in didn't do anything to improve the mood, with its peeling, yellowed wallpaper or the stale donuts by the door. Finally, the man with the stitches on his neck who was seated at the front of the room spoke up.

"Hi, my name is Dyne, and I've been decomissioned."

"Hi Dyne."

Dyne stood up, cleared his throat nervously, and went on. "I have been decommissioned for about 2 years now, and my life has been one of continuous improvements. At first things were very hard, with many trials and tribulations. Nobody wanted to use the "super kawaii bonsai swordsman" in any of their fictional works. Things seemed like a dead end to me. But then I managed to obtain a position as a minor character in a tale, and that's been paying the bills. I've always been a little bit annoyed that I never got a tale that was worthy of my greatness like some of you did, but overall I have been living my life to its greatest potential."

There was a smattering of applause as he sat back in his seat.

The Moose Man clasped his hand to Dyne's shoulder and spoke. "Dyne, these last few weeks you have shown us the best way to behave as a -D. You have dignity, you respect the reasons why you were bumped off, and you're coming to terms with having gotten pneumatic bolts shoved into your balls and then being fired into the sun. We can learn from your experience."

He looked down at the list in front of him. "Alright, I believe that Dreamer was next?"

Dyne sat down, and the teenage kid sitting in the folding chair next to him stood up. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, and had a rough look about him, like he was seconds away from either going on a rampage or breaking down in tears.

"Hi, my name is Dreamer, and I was decommissioned."

"Hi Dreamer."

He wiped his eyes, and began speaking. "It's been really hard living as a decommissioned article. Lots of other guys will mock you for it, try and tell you that you aren't good enough. I guess that's part of life now and I accept that… but it's still hard sometimes."

The Moose Man put up his enormous hairy hand. "I'm going to stop you there, because I think this is an excellent time to go over the 5 steps of being decommissioned. Anyone care to read them?"

Ben the Cyborg spoke up. "No problem Moose, I can remember them from memory partition 45-B. Can I rattle 'em off?"

The Invincible D-Class nodded. "Go right ahead."

"Okay," said Ben. "The first step is to accept that we fall below -10, and we see that there is no rewrite forthcoming. We look at our own imminent destruction, and we accept it."

"Very good, please continue."

Ben nodded. "The second step is to accept the new author, and to work with, not against them as they write your decomm story.

"The third step is to accept the fact that you have been destroyed, and to appreciate any person who reads you to see what not to do.

"Fourthly, you must learn to deal with other articles harassing you. They compare themselves to you, say they're better, but we know that any article that does that must be insecure in its own quality if it needs to compare itself to a decomm to feel better."

Moose Man smiled, showing off his horrific and terrible dental work. "Very good. Now what is the last step?"

Ben's artificial lips spread wide into a smile. "To find other articles like us, and to help them go through their own decommissioning."

Moose Man patted Ben on the back, applying enough force to knock one of his simulated optical modules out of the artificial socket. "Very good. Does anybody want to volunteer to share their story next?"

The man closest to the door raised his hand. Moose Man pointed at him. "You may go next then."

The man seated by the door stood up. He wore unremarkable clothing, had jet black hair, and deep brown eyes. He smiled at the motley collection seated before him, showing of his sharpened teeth, and began speaking.

"Hey kids, I'm Duke. Yes, *the* Duke. In the flesh. I know many of you might be amazed by being in my presence, so I'll give you a minute to get it out of your systems."

The individuals seated before him let out a collection of sighs, groans, and sarcastic muttering. They had all heard Duke's egotistical posturing before. Duke waited a full minute before he began speaking again, in a boisterous tone.

"As all you peons know, I've been living life in the fast lane. I'm the most famous decommissioned SCP, so I always get all the best character spots when someone writes a tale about us. And of course, I have regular work with Duke till' Dawn. You could say that I'm the best decomm of them all."

"Peanuts is better," said the Invincible D-Class.

"Peanuts shmeanuts, you aren't even on the top rated page," sneered Duke, leering at the Invincible D-Class with a smirk on his face.

"He's right you know," said Joey, sitting in his chair with a cigar in his mouth. "Duke till' dawn is the stupidest, most lolfoundation story I've ever heard. You just like to go an' brag about it cos ya don't have anythin' else to go on, ya chump."

Before the argument could persist Moose Man stood up, his enormous hairy frame almost bringing him up to the room's ceiling.

"That is enough from you all. This is supposed to be a constructive meeting, not a contest of who has the best stories or is the least terrible. If you weren't terrible you wouldn't be here."

Grumbling, Duke sat back down in his seat. As his chair creaked from his weight, a wave of awkwardness washed over the room. For a few seconds, nobody spoke. Then The Moose Man coughed a little, and asked;

"Anybody want to go next?"

"I will," said the Palauan woman emitting thick, black viscous fluids from her body. "My name is Dolores, and I was -ARC'd."

There was a long silence.

"Hey, wait a minute here, ain't it supposed to be just decomms in this here support group?" asked Joey, turning his attention to The Moose Man. There was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the assembled cretins.

"Well yes," sighed The Moose Man, his odorous breath incinerating the nose hairs of all those around him. "That's nominally what we are here for, but I invited Dolores here because she's the most hated -ARC, and has it just as bad as you all do. Now show our guest some respect." He stomped his big sweaty, smelly feet on the floor, indicating the matter was closed.

Dolores sneezed a little, and began speaking. "My name is Dolores, and I am the sufferer of the world's sorrows. You might think that gets a person a very large amount of work in the fiction writing, but I am mistaken in that. Nobody wants to write the stories about me, all they do is look at me and say how awful I am."

"That's because you are awful." Duke sneered, leaned back in his chair and shot her the meanest look he could muster. "You're by far the worst -ARC."

"Duke!" admonished The Moose Man, his hideous nostril flares

indicating an imminent lecture. However, before he could proceed, the other -D's began to speak up.

The Invincible D-Class was the first to pipe up. "You can be quiet Duke, none of us want to hear it."

"Yeah." Joey sat up in his seat. "You can take all these comments of yours and shove 'em right up your ass. You just like to tear other people down."

Duke looked at him angrily. "So what if I do? You people have nowhere lower to go. All you do is wax about how you really aren't that bad, but you are. You suck. The only person who has produced anything worthwhile abouts this place is me!"

"Oh please," the Invincible D-Class scoffed. "You have the most ridiculous, over the top decomm on the database. Peanuts is much lower key, and is clearly more realisti-"

Ben the Cyborg cut him off. "My termination log helped build the character of Dr. Gears in a way no other tale had before it! Clearly my decommissioning log is the one which should be considered superior!"

The Moose Man raised his hideous wrinkled hands up in the air and spoke in a booming, spittle filled voice. "GENTLEMEN! This discussion will get us nowhere. And you're all wrong anyways. I have the best decomm log of any of us!"

A collective groan emanated from the assembled party.

"Bullshit you have the best one." Joey leaped to his hind legs. "Your log doesn't have one interesting thing happen!"

Dolores spoke up. "I agree with-"

"Shut up Dolores, this doesn't concern a mere -ARC," growled Duke, rising to his feet and grimacing. "The only thing that can make these boneheads see the truth is a beating!"

Scarcely had the words left Dukes lips before The Moose Man used one of his disgusting hairy hands to smack him upside his vampiric

cranium.

"Stop instigating violence! And admit that my story is best!"

"No mine is!"

"No, MINE!"

As the bickering dissolved into straight up arguing, and finally into fistfights, the coffee cup watched with its holy, judgmental eye. It saw that their mortal flaws would never let them work together towards a peaceful purpose. It saw their failures, and it did not approve.

And besides, it had the best decomm story of them all.

Decommissioned

Item #: SCP-13175

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: Total containment of SCP-13175 has been determined to be impractical at this point in time. Current protocols dictate monitoring of anomalous effects produced by SCP-13175 by on-site personnel. Monitoring of on-site personnel for symptoms analogous to any known anomalous effect caused by SCP-13175 is to be conducted by off-site personnel by means of remote viewing, analysis of documents produced by on-site staff, and psychiatric evaluation.

Addendum 04/14/2377: SCP-13175 is currently scheduled for permanent decommission on 08/01/2377 following unanimous vote by the O5 Council. Extraction protocols for personnel and civilians within the hypothesized effect vicinity of SCP-13175's decommission are under review pending…

Aiden Reichardt minimized the file before resting his head softly on the keyboard of his terminal. The computer sputtered several pings and pops at the repeated and faulty commands his forehead was transmitting before falling quiet, matching the deafening silence that was Reichardt's only companion in the otherwise empty office. He had returned from lunch several hours prior to an email from Silvers informing him of the addendum's appearance.

"Following unanimous vote by the O5 Council." Those fucks. What had begun as a dull ache behind Reichardt's left eye after opening the email was now a roaring engine of pain, slowly draining what little fight remained in the Senior Researcher. *Not a single goddamned pity vote, even.*

The flask was in his jacket pocket and was, as always, full. He had been terrified when he'd stolen the anomalous object from an incoming shipment of items cleared for designation and containment, but the fear had only made the drink taste better. The risk of termination, of *termination*, was minimal; the flask was assuredly just another anomalous object that would be locked up and forgotten within weeks, only seeing the light of day again during annual inventories. Reichardt was proud of himself for the relatively minor transgression. He'd made an honest-to-God decision and followed through. It was easy for him to imagine his father and grandfather, both long dead and former Foundation staff themselves, nodding in approval; he had been raised in a household that respected protocol but despised the Foundation's single-mindedness in containing every little thing. *They're sucking all the mystery outta life*, his grandfather would say. Reichardt commiserated with the thought as he tried to suck all the mystery out of his flask. He'd never been able to place the flavor but it vaguely reminded him of a whiskey he'd had on his first trip off of the station in his early twenties. Traveling off their artificial little satellite for vacation was still a new concept in those days and Reichardt had figured himself on that trip to be the first member of his family to touch the soil of any planet in well over a century.

His monitor faded to black before beginning its screensaver cycle; an old one he'd dug from an archive of software from the Earth days, its low-resolution twisting pipes were garish but offered him a nostalgic moment for a world and time that Reichardt never experienced himself. He stared at the colorful pipes as they wound their way across the void of his screen, slowly filling its blackness with vivid greens and pinks, thinking about Earth.

He'd never seen it in person and now he never would. The designation of an entire planet as an SCP object wasn't a new concept when they'd classified Earth as SCP-13175 but even still it had been a point of controversy. As interplanetary travel had become a more regular occurrence, one fact had become unavoidably obvious: anomalous activity existed everywhere to some degree but there was no place within humanity's reach that had anywhere near the quantity of anomalies as Earth. Reality was simply less stable there, as the science had proven. Reichardt had

been several years into his career with the Foundation at that point when the file went live. In the intervening three decades the O5 Council had never made any comment on the subject and quiet warnings were issued to those who began questioning the decision too loudly. Reichardt remembered it as the day his father resigned; moreso, he felt like he had watched a part of his father die that day. Following the intentional decolonization of Earth in the 2170s the planet had been used as a resource; within decades it was a ghost of its former self, a husk that had been thoroughly reaped and left to decay back into the soil it had once emerged from. Less than a million people were still on Earth. The number of stalwart populations who'd stayed behind, religious fanatics and survivalists and those who believed that mankind should stay where he came from, had dwindled to almost nothing and few were the researchers or industrialists who believed that the planet had anything more to give. There were still a few Foundation-controlled facilities even, or so the rumors went. Keter objects whose threats of global or galactic destruction the Foundation hadn't been willing to risk leaving behind to chance.

Why now, then? Reichardt's body ached from being in his cubicle chair for too long but the soreness was rapidly dulling behind the mask of his growing inebriation. He stood for the first time in hours and stretched, staring out the nearby window at the vast universe beyond. Earth wasn't visible from this station and Reichardt felt a twinge of regret. He'd never married or sired children and as an only child, he was the last in his line. No Reichardt would ever step foot on Earth again, and at his age he would likely not be approved for off-site travel until his retirement. Even then there was no guarantee. *What's changed?* The twisting pipes on his monitor had fully covered the screen and quickly blinked out of existence, the fresh blackness penetrated by red and white pipes this time.

Alone in the emptiness of space with tens of thousands of others, Aiden Reichardt felt more than a single planet slip through his grasp.

> Item Description: A flask of an unidentified alcoholic liquid which is constantly replenished as it is drained.
> Date of Recovery: 4/16/2377
> Location of Recovery: Recovered from the personal

effects of a deceased employee on Foundation Satellite Station - .
Current Status: In storage.

Decompression

“Wake up. We’re going to the beach.”

At the sound of his supervisor’s voice, Researcher Riven Mercer looked up from his stack of documents, a slightly-crazed look in his eyes. “…Is this an assignment?” he managed to croak out, after realizing he’d all but passed out at his desk during the usual end-of-the-month manic paperwork cram session.

Anomalous items processing, while routine and streamlined at its peak of efficiency, still managed to involve a mind-numbing amount of paperwork. As the second-in-command of Site-19’s Kiryu Labs and resident Foundation intern babysitter, Riven Mercer found himself devoting hours every month to supervisory documentation. He made sure that everyone who clocked hours for the Labs was credited appropriately, that any fire damage that occurred during test trials was repaired, and that the monthly caches of paranormal-but-effectively-harmless things were stored away in the proper skeleton-free closets.

Dr. Mark Kiryu regarded his assistant/right-hand research man/tea-drinking buddy with an air of long-suffering patience. “Rivs, how long have you been processing these cases?”

Riven remained quiet for a little while. He looked at the stack of paperwork to his right side, and then picked up his coffee mug sitting on the left. It was the goofy dinosaur-shaped one, he noted blearily. The Labs must have been *really* swamped this month if he resorted to drinking out of that sentimental souvenir garbage. “Three, four… a couple cups of green tea? I started sometime in the morning,” Riven answered vaguely. “I made a pretty big dent in the stack, but we did bring in a lot of other Level-2s from other departments for this month’s an-items cache, and different people take different notes and we still need to handle hours crediting…”

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach. Pack your sunglasses. Find

someone to feed your lizard…"

"I've been in the Labs since this morning. I've already notified three people that Crellan's bowl needs to be full by—"

"Beach. Now. Transport shuttle in fifteen."

"You decided on jeans?" Riven shielded his eyes from the sun as he stepped off the Foundation shuttle. A crew member deposited a box of "protocol essentials" nearby, and after Dr. Kiryu stepped off, the shuttle promptly departed.

"It gets cold when the sea breeze picks up. *You* went with cargo pants." Mark replied as he cheerfully shouldered the large beach umbrella and scoped out the scene in front of them.

Riven joined in the scoping. The beach was, well, he reasoned, a beach. The sky above was a sedate azure, scattered with picturesque, postcard-perfect white fluffy clouds. A few seagulls dotted the airspace. Below, pale-colored sand stretching along a coastline, bordered by rocky cliffs and purple sea fig flowers, with the ocean calmly lapping at the shore. It was a private beach, (*the* beach, not "a" beach, Riven remembered, Mark had said) and the sand and rocks and water were free of litter and human-generated debris. Apart from the cleanliness, the absolute feeling of *normal* the place exuded was rather unnerving, Riven thought.

"Cargo pants are practical. I might need to wrangle a rabid lizard. Can't hurt to be prepared." Riven examined the box, determined it had wheels and an extendable handle for pulling, and approved of the wonders of convenient luggage. By his guess, he could probably throw the box a good few meters in the air if he had to distract a giant rabid lizard.

"I'm really hoping you're joking, because if not, you're completely missing the whole concept of 'relaxing' you're supposed to—" Mark had picked a spot in the sand and was stabbing the umbrella into the ground, with limited success.

"I'm joking. I just like cargo pants. Are you *sure* I'm not missing

anything back at the Site?" Riven grimaced as the sun peeked through the clouds and into his eyes. He ran a hand through his shaggy hair (normally it was kind of spiky, according to Mark, but it seemed like today even his *hair* was tired). Squaring his shoulders, Riven started dragging the box across the sand. The wheels were useless.

"Yes, I'm sure." Mark scuttled around the umbrella, kicking up sand into a mountain at the base to hold the umbrella up. "Maintenance is taking advantage of our absence to move all your files and stuff into your new office." He scuttled some more, picking up a wayward rock and tossing it into the tide. "Now that you've finished your veterinary doctorate with the Foundation, you're entitled to your own office, your own hoard of snacks, and your own army of filing cabinets. Remember I told you to pack up your paperweights last week?"

Riven paused in his box-lugging. "Actually, no."

"This is why you need a beach day, Rivs."

"Look at this majestic seagull. I dub him the King of Seagulls. Observe his regal crown of feathery authority." Mark pointed. He was, at the same time, also hogging three lawn chairs: one for himself, one for his propped-up feet, one for his plate of snacks.

"I think he's just scruffy-looking." Riven had elected to sit in the sand.

"You're not very good at the whole 'beach day' thing, are you, Rivs."

"You have a pterodactyl costume and a ninja suit in your office storage. Can you blame me for wondering if there's some ulterior motive involved?" Riven grabbed Mark's plate of kettle chips from the lawn chair and made waving motions when the King of Seagulls came within foodstuff-theft range.

"I'm going to walk on the beach. Be courteous with the King of Seagulls." Mark abandoned his three lawn chairs, kicked off his sneakers and socks, and padded towards the darker sand of the shoreline.

Riven watched his supervisor leave, a retort on the tip of his tongue, but decided against calling out a reply. So he settled into one of the vacated lawn chairs, stretched out his legs in the sunny sand, felt the salty sea breeze waft over his face. It was nice, he concluded. It may have been routine, or protocol, or even a requirement based on HR reasons, but for a moment it was nice to be away from the piles of paperwork and the ever-present unknown, untrustworthiness of the anomalous. It was nice to remember what "normal" felt like… or at least was *supposed* to feel like. The researcher let that train of thought pass by and closed his eyes. This was peaceful.

The umbrella stuck in the sand promptly teetered two inches in the wind and collapsed into Riven's lap, sending the plate, kettle chips and all, into the path of the King of Seagulls and his royal entourage.

"Beach day. Right." Riven scrambled up from the wreckage of his food, cursing gravity and the wind in all their many forms.

Mark laughed discreetly from the shoreline. He'd been tracking footprints in the soft water-brushed sand, and watching the ocean wash them away when the tide came in.

"Are there ever times when the absence of anomaly is scarier than the presence of it? When we've spent so much time studying the paranormal, the normal is what becomes uncommon for us?" Riven was sprawled out in the sand again (this time with beach towel on Mark's insistence), the umbrella having being righted and held down by the lawn chairs, the box, and the extra-large bag of kettle chips (for what little support it could give).

"It's a risk all Foundation personnel run into," Mark replied evenly, moving some seashell fragments around on the pages of an open book. He snapped a picture of the arrangement with his phone. "That's one reason we have such a large Psych department." He tilted the book, slid the seashells into his hand. The fragments clinked pleasantly as he cradled them in his palm.

Mark stood up, walked a few steps, and tossed the seashells into the approaching tide. He turned and walked back to the umbrella. Riven raised an eyebrow.

“‘Take only pictures, leave only footprints’.” Mark shrugged, sitting cross-legged in the sand next to his assistant. “If this place *was* anomalous, and I’m not saying it is, what would you hope the effects would be?”

“Benign, of course.” Riven stuck an elbow in the sand to prop himself up, for a better view of the ocean.

“More than five words, please.”

“Something to do with the aesthetics.” Riven flopped back down. “Something with the flowers on the cliffsides, or those shells that get tossed in by the tides…” Riven stuck an arm out of the shade cast by the umbrella and picked up a flattened stone, well-worn at the edges and fitting nicely in the palm of his hand. “Or, hell, if the effect was that every stone I tossed into the waves would skip three times exactly, I’d be happy with that.”

“Didn’t skip stones often, when you were in England?”

“Lived in the city. No place *to* skip.” Riven grumbled, not particularly keen on revisiting memories of his childhood. He’d been such a dork.

“Well. Let’s test your hypothesis.” Mark picked up a stone.

Twenty-seven stones and five collective total water-skips later, with no conclusive results, Drs. Kiryu and Mercer looked for another anomaly.

“Isn’t it a little out of date, the violin?” Riven had taken down the umbrella, which, after being pointed in various directions respective to the wind, was declared not affected by a potential beach anomaly. The sun dipped on the horizon, casting shadows that hadn’t been there an hour before.

“Oh, never. Every box office hit needs a killer soundtrack. Musicals need pit orchestras. People like sensitive flesh-and-blood musicians. You can tell a computer to play like someone’s crying, but it won’t have a clue what to do unless it’s directed by a human who fucking

knows how to cry." Mark was lying on his chest on the box of beach essentials, arms draped over the sides, stomach cushioned with several towels.

Riven gaped.

"…yes, I swear here."

Riven shut his mouth. Mark barreled on.

"Ever played a duet with anyone? Ever seen two musicians sing or play together, totally in sync? There's something transcendent about that sort of moment." Mark scooted himself off the box he'd been lying on, did a quick about-face in the sand (it came off as more of an acrobatic twirl) and stretched out his arms, as if to embrace the sea winds blowing in from the waves. "It's as meaningful as a secret handshake between two old friends, or two lovers sharing a waltz. I played the flute. Lots of lovely duets for the flute." Mark, silhouetted against the fiery oranges and pinks of the setting sun, let the sound of the tides wash away his words. The night's approaching darkness painted the sky in muted rainbow hues, melting to the eventual dark blues and blacks in the distance.

Riven snorted. Mark turned around. "Hey, manly men play the flute. Shen and I can crank out a mean Mozart duet, I'll have you know." Riven sighed, and held up his hands in surrender.

"I'm not judging. I studied piano for several years, back in England," he admitted.

Mark grinned widely. "I'm forcing you to learn some chamber music. We're going to sweep the Site-19 talent show this year."

Riven shrugged and agreed, and the sun went down. The transport arrived just as they finished packing up the kettle chips.

It was dark outside when lab director and assistant arrived back at Site-19. No one in the facility's laboratory wings would know the color of the sky outside; the halls on this floor were always lit with the same standardized, clinical white lights.

“So was there actually anything anomalous about that place?” Riven put the dinosaur mug in the Kiryu Labs’ sitting room sink, along with his plethora of other backup tea mugs. He’d wash them all tomorrow.

“Nah, unless there’s something the first sweep team, the second exploration team, and the successive test teams didn’t pick up on. You’re not the only paranoid one, Rivs.” Mark stuffed the remains of the kettle chip bag into the food cabinet.

“Oh.”

“It’s nice to have a sanctioned beach close to the site, huh?”

“Yeah, it seems like something Site-19’s staff would make good use of.”

“It’s good to get out of the Site from time to time. Remember that there’s an outside.”

“Mark, if Crellan started rampaging around the lab, what would you do?”

“Speed-dial you. Your fat lizard, your responsibility. What are you going to do when you get back to your office?”

“Find out when someone fed Crellan today. He’s not fat.”

Mark sent his assistant a textbook-quality withering look.

“I’m kidding. I’m going to transfer all the beach pictures to my laptop. Probably print one out and stick it to my office door, to remind me to take a break when I can’t feel my eyes.”

A week later, Mark walked by Riven’s new office. He spotted something on the wall behind his assistant’s new desk and smiled.

Taped to the wall, next to Dr. Mercer’s official veterinary program completion certifications and small collection of framed Foundation accolades, was a glossy picture of the King of Seagulls.

Dr. Kiryu went back to his own office, and replied to the memo he had received that morning. It had contained an attached file, his assistant's quarterly psychological evaluation report: "everything looking okay", "some evidence of research-based stress", "subject has a a well-adjusted mindset", "best of luck with new duties, request vacation time as needed".

Kiryu breathed out as he signed the documentation confirming he had read and reviewed the file. One more year, four more psyc evals to sign off, and he'd no longer have an assistant, but a co-director.

Remember to take care of yourself, he thought.

The Battle of the Toys: The Defense Of Hive Skittles

"You know what, Em, working here isn't so bad," Junior Research Karly Gonzales noted.

Senior Researcher Emily Sze looked at her. "What makes you say that?"

Karly put together some of her Mega Blok figurines while having snacked away at the Skittles. "I mean, yeah, the work's hard, but the pay is good, the working conditions themselves aren't bad, and this break room is the best!" She crammed a few more Skittles into her mouth before continuing. "I mean, candy and Lego! This is the best!"

Emily stifled a giggle, watching Karly barely containing her easily excitable nature. "Karly, you realize those are Mega Bloks, right? They're not actual Lego, more of a ripoff series." Karly stuck her tongue out at her, before their watches began to beep.

"Ah, back to work, then!" Karly placed her figurines and her creations near the Skittle jars, and she hopped off with Emily back to her station.

Unknowingly, **SCP-387** was nearby, and Karly did not read the part about Mega Bloks.

Jack felt something was off in the air.

He has felt this feeling before, perhaps in a past life, but now the feeling is stronger. Like a temptation, an unrighteous urge, calling to him.

Something horrible was beyond the Great Crystal Tower of Rainbow Orbs. Something landed there with the force of a pouncing cat, and it was slowly beckoning to him, calling, no, RAGING *at him to come to complete his calling.*

His mind went blank as he began to go berserk.

The Fortress-Monastery of the Inward Halo chapter stood proud, in its corner of Hive Skittles, known to the locals as Blocksville. The Space Marines of the revered chapter regularly interacted with the town populace, a callback to their hallowed lineage to the Salamanders of old.

Terminator Chaplain Deonus sat at the fountain, preaching to the gathered children about the importance of faith, about the importance about their belief in the Emperor, when he heard a mother shriek in the distance, and a police motorcycle crashing into a pole. The children, all curious, began to wander towards the sound of that horrible noise. Deonus, the hundreds of wars having tempered him, immediately called for his brothers' aid, and powered his Crozius before marching over, the servos in his suit carrying his impressive form over to the crash site.

The gathered children and officers moved aside for the Chaplain, as he approached the site of the crash, expecting to find a woman merely hit by the out-of-control vehicle. Such was tragedy in a large hive, he assumed. His armored fist casually picked up the damage motorcycle, when he felt unholy limbs touch his armor.

The motorcycle carried the remnants of Jack, horrifically mutated by the powers of Chaos, attempting to lash out at him. With contemptuous ease, Deonus stomped down on the spawn's head, ending its pitiful life. Before he could look up, he saw the horrors of the Warp spewing its bastard creations all over Blocksville, the rampant signs of corruption making its way through the streets.

"WHO DARES DEFILE THE SANCTITY OF THIS HIVE?!" His ancient voice, magnified by his armor's vox-boosters, was enough to cause a few officers to fly. Hefting his Crozius and his storm bolter, he stood in front of the mewling wave of mutants, banging his fist against his chest. "FACE ME, WRETCHED SCUM, AND I MAY GRANT YOU YOUR ABSOLUTION IN DEATH!" The mutants screeched and rushed him as one, while Deonus rushed forward, his Crozius alight in a killing blaze.

"Karly, what did you do?!" Em looked in the break room in sheer horror at the Lego firefight taking place.

Karly, along with Researchers Harris, Jordans, and Jays, looked into the room with the same level of horror matching Emily's face. "I was just building with Mega Bloks! I didn't know THIS would happen!"

Harris laughed. "Guess someone didn't read all the paperwork." He watched a mess of a minifig hit the glass, its individual components shattering as if the person hit a forcefield at Mach 10. "Well, this isn't our mess, so you have to deal with it yourself."

Karly's face dropped. "Fine, fine… stupid seniors…" She donned her goggles, and grasped the knob handle, her clipboard ready to shield her from stray projectiles.

It was clean-up time.

"TASTE NOCTURNE'S DUST, CHAOS TRASH!" Terminator Chaplain Deonus lifted his Crozius overhead, and brought it down with the Emperor's righteous fury, utterly destroying the mutant's head. Beside him, Brother-Captain Adaris swung his hammer around, launching a nearby car at unholy speed and destroying a swatch of incoming mutants with the impromptu projectile.

As the civilians around them fled the battle, those two imposing marines alone held the main road leading to the Crystal Tower, where the mutants were coming from. Undeterred by the sheer numbers against them, they held their stance, awaiting the next tide of filth to come so that they may cleanse.

However, all became still, the mutants ceasing their motion, while Brother-Captain Adaris and Chaplain Deonus also frozen in time. "Chaplain, the Enemy has come upon us! The magicks of the Warp hold us still!"

However, Deonus felt something different. He looked at his Crozius, its holy field still alight. "No, Brother-Captain," he clarified, "the Enemy is not here. Instead, our Emperor has come, to protect that which is His."

As they were held still, holy hands began to descend from the heavens, taking the mutants up and utterly destroying them. Adaris and Deonus could only simply watch with undisguised awe as those hands took the mutants apart, like blinding beams of lightning, striking the Enemy wherever they stood and cleansing the Hive of their incorrigible corruption. As quick as the hands took the Enemy, it brought back those who were overcome, those who were unfortunate enough to have been overtaken and forcibly warped.

As the Hands finally stopped the grand cleansing, one of its fingers reached down, and gently stroked Deonus on the head. The hand finally withdrew, and as the overflowing presence left, both Space Marine officers felt the motion return to their bodies, their Power Armor spirits finally obeying their wills once more.

"Chaplain, praise be to the Emperor, for He forgives and protects!" Adaris hefted his hammer high, in praise to their Savior.

Deonus, however, was a bit more off-kilter, still mentally recovering from having been personally blessed by the God-Emperor… herself? "Surely the Empress *has more taste than those hot-pink nails, correct?"*

The five researchers finally put the Mega Bloks away, sealing it in its container.

Karly sighed. "That was such a pain in the ass, separating each piece!"

"You have to be sure, otherwise they would continue to act up," commented Harris.

Em looked at the bustling city once more, only to see… "Karly, look!"

All five looked, and Karly just about passed out from the sight.

The chaplain she touched had commissioned a giant golden brick statue of her, and the minifigs were giving it worship!

Emily sighed. "I think you won the office betting pool this month, Karly."

Delia

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS 11:00:00

You a doctor or something?

No, a student, actually.

Never had much business with doctors. Doris took sick once, went to the doctor. Jabbed her fulla holes, sent her home with some pills, didn't fix a goddamn thing.

Well, as I said, I'm not a doctor, at least not yet. I'm a research student, and I happened on your daughter's case in one of the university medical files.

Eh? You mean Delia? Goddamn, must have some long memories there.

**laughs* I suppose that's right. She was a unique case, and those sorts of things tend to stick with people. I just wanted to get a little more information.*

Don't know what I can tell you that I didn't already. Delia came back from the woodpile one day, said she didn't feel good. She's normally healthy as a horse, so I took it to heart. Let her lie down a bit, but it didn't do any good. Got paler and paler, sicker and sicker. Doris got more and more scared, by the fourth day she almost dragged me and her to town to see the doctor.

Did they give any diagnosis?

Well, they hemmed and hawed over her for a while, but didn't come up with anything, just bounced us to the university hospital, see if they could figure it out. Fat lot of good that did. She kept fadin' and fadin' each hour. She…she stopped breathin' for a while. Few hours, I think, the doctors were ready to give up, but then she sat up again,

finally. Gave us all a fright.

They say you removed her after that? The notes say they were concerned about a strain of rabies or something similar, weren't you concerned?

My baby girl was up and around again, and I didn't want those fellas pawin' over her anymore. They didn't know, and I didn't care to let them fiddle around until they did. Oh, hell, might as well let you hear it from the horses mouth, right? DORIS. DORIS! BRING DELIA DOWNSTAIRS!

Wait, your daughter's still here?

The hell else would she be? I know things are different in the city, but here, family is still important. She's my girl, and I love her. It's hard, some days. At first it was bad, she'd snap at anyone, but I think it was all the proddin' and pokin' she took. She gentled down after a few months, and we take care of her.

How…old is your daughter now?

Well, she's about forty now, and a little worse for wear, but she's still my girl. The hardest part was figurin' out what she needed after that. Took ages, and she got worse and worse, but old Parkins helped us figure it out, god rest his soul. Gotten harder lately, but…ah, here's my girl now.

What…oh my god.

It's been hard, yeah, but we get by. We always get by, always have. Now, boy, you settle down now, ease down, I don't wanna make this hard. Boy, you- BOY!

**inarticulate noises*
**three gunshots*

Goddammit boy, I told you to ease down. I wish it wasn't this way, but it is. She needs it, not sure why, but she's my girl. Family still means something here boy, means more then life or death itself. She gets dry like that now, doesn't get around much, but she's still my Delia. Her muscles have gotten all tight and such, so we gotta

chop everything up, like makin' pemmican, but raw. You ease down now boy, just let it take ya, it'll be over…

Harold, she's gettin' excited, might wanna move off a bit before she hurts you or herself

Alright, let her go Doris, she can't hurt him none now. Least she's still got her teeth.

**inarticulate, moist sounds*

recording and photograph recovered from small bundle of personal effects, believed to belong to missing research student Paul . Investigation is still ongoing.

Deliverance

> **Note:** This is part eleven in a multi-part story based around the events leading up to the containment of **SCP-2982**. It is recommended that you read the previous entry **Endings** first, or start from the beginning At the Library. You can take a look at **Golan** too, for a tale based on one of the tests of the SCP object.

Geoff Mansani almost ran past her, such was his desire to get away. Helen called his name and he stopped abruptly. "Come on," he hissed. "We have to get out of here."

He helped her to her feet. He looked ashen.

Helen saw the cold sweat seeping through his clothes. "What's happening? Where's Aidan?"

Mansani gestured back towards the stairs. "He's coming." He saw the next question forming on Helen's lips. "Maine's dead," he said.

"How - ?"

"You don't want to know. Christ." He pulled her towards the main entrance. She was about to protest, when she saw Aidan's bulk appear at the bottom of the stairs. He shambled towards them on his walking sticks, his folded lung palpitating in its ruined housing.

"You two… fucking idiots… still here?"

"Maine's dead?" Helen asked. She needed to hear it from Aidan, otherwise it wouldn't be real. Aidan nodded as he caught his breath. "Yes," he said. "Bastard fought, I'll give him that… We need to get out of here. Jesus, I think I'm hurt."

He pulled his coat aside; a blue and red patch was spreading outwards through his shirt. "Fuck knows what that is," he said.

"Heart? Brain? Balls? No idea what part of me that is. Like I said, the bastard fought." He grimaced and mopped his brow with his sleeve. Mansani walked out the main door and half ran to his car, parked just outside the entrance. He fumbled with the keys.

"Like I always said," Aidan wheezed, "the guy's a fucking idiot."

Mansani triumphantly unlocked and opened the car door and got in. " Okay - fucking go," said Aidan, and he started to herd Helen out - but she stopped suddenly and shook him off.

"I have to see for myself," she said. "I have to see him dead."

Aidan squared up to her. "We don't have time," he said. "And it would upset you. We have to go."

'You go," she countered. "I have to see. I have to know it isn't some trick." Aidan began to remonstrate, but she took no notice. She strode back up towards the stairs determined to be sure.

"Fuck," said Aidan.

Helen made her way back up to the fifth floor. The grille and door were shut but not locked. She opened them both, the metal grate swinging out resentfully, and the wooden door heaving inwards on its creaking hinges. The apartment was dark. She stepped inside and switched on the light. Eveything looked normal, more or less. No blood, no upturned furniture.

She walked through the living area. No sign of Harold Maine, living or dead. She felt fear rising up inside her. What if this *was* some trick? What if he had feigned death, and was even now contemplating his revenge?

Just as she turned to leave, her curiosity overwhelmed by dread, she caught sight of a shoe poking out from the bathroom. She drew nearer, morbid fascination holding its own against her terror, and pushed open the door.

The shoe was attached to a leg, which was itself attached to the motionless, slumped body of Harold Maine, his head stuck fast face downwards in the toilet. The room still stank of Aidan, who even now

was huffing and puffing into the apartment. "Very dead," he offered. "Really, most sincerely dead."

"I had to see it with my own eyes," Helen said.

"Yeah well, here isn't the place to be right now," Aidan said. The woman didn't respond. "*Helen*. It's no good being here. We have to go. It's over."

"What about my hands?" Tears welled up in her eyes. "Am I like this forever? I thought we'd change back once he was dead."

"We might do," said Aidan. "It might take time. I don't know."

"How did he do it?"

"Oh *Christ*, Helen. We have to go now. *Now*." Aidan wheezed back to the doorway. "Let's just get the fuck out of here. Whatever happens, happens." He extended a claw out to Helen. "We'll still have each other," he said. And then, with a snort: "Christ, that's so so depressing."

Helen sighed and followed him out of the room, down the stairs, out of the lobby and into Geoff Mansani's waiting car.

+

"Is it him?"

Dimitri pushed the bathroom door open. He stepped past the prone body and tried to lift the head up to see the face. "Jammed tight," he said. "Body matches the description though. What a way to go… I'm gonna run some DNA checks. Maybe see if I can't pull his head out. Wonder where F1/M2 are?"

"Long gone, if they were ever here," said Paris. She turned away and waved Agent Fielding over. "Okay, what do we have so far?"

"Two hundred and seventy three thousand, six hundred and sixty six dollars in cash in various bags and drawers scattered around the

apartment. One diary with two hundred or more entries detailing interactions with various associates and colleagues. Nothing else yet but we'll get everything catalogued."

"TEMPLAR readings?"

"Temperature within expected ranges. Uniform. Humidity is 23% higher than expected. Magnetics are normal. Pressure is 18% higher than expected range tolerances. Light levels down…"

Paris nodded silently, her eyes settling on a TV dinner table, white metal fold - up legs and stained scuffed surface. Next to the remote control sat a small, black object the size of a packet of cigarettes. It held her attention somehow; mundane yet mesmerising. She checked to see if Dimitri was watching, and then she picked it up.

There was a sucking noise from the bathroom as Dimitri finally lifted the jammed head out of the toilet."Positive ID," he said. "It's Maine."

Paris allowed herself the slightest feeling of relief. The worst was over. She would ring her father that night and give him the good news. As she imagined the conversation, she swiped the phone screen. *Televono Telefex Secrecy-8.* Not a make or model she'd ever heard of. Her fingers once again skipped over the smooth glossy surface; it asked her for a PIN, and she made one up.

Amazingly, it worked. She glanced up quickly to make sure Dimitri was still busy, and navigated to contacts.

She gasped as the most recently used contacts came up: *Paris, Sarah. Paris, Ellen*. Her daughters.

Agent Fielding looked up from his tagging. "Everything okay?"

She slipped the phone quickly into her pocket, her heart racing. Why did Harold Maine have her daughters' contact details? Fielding repeated his question. "I think so," she flustered. "I don't know. I need some fresh air."

"Could be a symptom of the TEMPLAR figures," Fielding suggested. He turned to the bathroom. "You feel okay, Delta?"

"Fine," came the response. "Apart from my hands are covered in you know what."

Paris shook her head. "I've been feeling off all day," she lied. "Can you guys handle this on your own? Text me on the usual if you find anything." More than anything else, she knew she had to be away from this mundane, malevolent place.

"Wait," said Fielding. "Just like that? You're going? You know we're not to operate just the two of us."

Paris headed for the apartment door. The phone was a solid presence against her thigh. Harold Maine had her daughters' details. She had to know why. She was starting to get a tension headache. "I'll send Kimura up," she said as she left.

Fielding looked at Dimitri and shrugged. "Pleasure's all mine," he said.

+

Exactly one week later, on Tuesday 10th February, Agent Carol Paris would hand in the cellphone from Harold Maine's apartment to her superiors. The phone would be given the designation SCP-2982. She would be suspended from her post and then be given her own SCP designation.

On Thursday 12th, her father Calvin Paris would undergo a medical examination by his own employers. He would pass with the highest possible fitness rating - A1. On Sunday 15th, he would die in his sleep, cause of death: advanced bronchioloalveolar carcinoma.

Commencing Thursday 19th February, Chief Global Suppression Manager Alexander Lazarus would spend two days at Site-23 trying to assess the implications of the phone's behaviour.

On Friday 20th, Lazarus would disappear, as would SCP-2982.

On Monday 23rd February, Agent Carol Paris would die of stress cardiomyopathy.

Neither Lazarus nor the phone would ever be recovered.

Prev

Next

Denton and McDowell Save Sixty Dollars

April 7, 2016 T-Minus two years from `The Incident`

Agent Sam Denton flipped through a *Sports Illustrated* in the back of the cramped coach bus to Portland, his partner Agent Jim McDowell seated in the overly padded and potentially anomalously uncomfortable seat next to him. His eyes scanned over the page, skipping over the text of an article about a rival team. "Fucking Patriots," Sam said, muttering over his bristling mustache.

Agent McDowell turned his head from the window, eyes glazed as they passed through flyover country. He raised an eyebrow. "Sam, that issue is like three years old. I swear I've seen you read it like ten times," McDowell said. He shifted in the seat to face towards his partner, tapping his fingers on his knee as he did. The heavy pewter ring on his third finger, right hand stood inert for once.

Sam didn't look up as he continued to scan the page, an identical ring on his own hand mercifully silent as well. "Yes, and every time, I still get pissed off. I swear to god, they should have been thrown out of the post season. Deflategate was *bullshit*. We could have won that game."

Jim rolled his eyes and turned his head to look out the window. "Yeah, sure. The fact they were eleven and five, and hadn't beat the Patriots in years had nothing to do with it." He turned his wrist slightly, checking the time.

Sam put the magazine down, and turned to look at Agent McDowell, "Oh bullshit. They could have won it, there's such a thing as an underdog, you know." He stowed the magazine in the backpack at his feet, withdrawing a protein bar as he did. He unwrapped the processed carbs and protein and wolfed it down in three bites.

"Uh huh, sure. The Colts could have won it, just like that powerbar stood any chance against you, eh?" Jim's face split into an easy grin

as he ribbed his partner.

Sam's hand shot out, smacking Jim in the stomach off-handedly as he finished the power bar. "Oh fuck off, I stress eat. Always have."

Jim shrugged, "Yes, but we're no longer young salty agents, running around, burning calories. We're on a bus for chrissakes, since someone didn't want to fly. Try dieting." He reached down to his own backpack, pulling out a small bag of baby carrots, crunching a few down.

"Listen, I'll start dieting when your sister stops hitting on me every time I see her on-site," Jim's face had distorted into the usual vague annoyance. For one, he didn't have a sister. For two, Sam was nothing special to look at, "She can't resist my charms. I'm telling you man, she's all over me every time—"

The bus rocked; a loud clanging shook the superstructure of the heavy vehicle. The bus skidded to one side, then the other, both agents snapping to attention and bracing themselves against the seats in front of them.

The other passengers let out various shouts and sounds of alarm as the tires made a tortured noise.

The bus careened off the road, and came to halt a few feet into the grass beside the lonely stretch of highway. Sam looked over at Jim, holding his breath momentarily. "You alright?"

Jim nodded, eyes scanning around the road for signs of trouble. A few tense moments passed, before he let out a breath, "Maybe it was just the serpentine belt snapping or some—" As one, both Agents' thaumic rings started to buzz. Something within a mile of them was anomalous. The buzz intensified until it came to a quiet hum, shaking their fingers. Whatever it was, it was strong, and it was practically on top of them. "Well. Fuck me sideways."

Agent Denton disgengaged the seatbelt and stood, walking towards the front of the bus. He stopped and asked each passenger if they were alright, tacitly passing his ring-hand closer to each one as he

'checked for injuries'.

Agent McDowell strode past Denton, and approached the bus driver. He flashed some fake credentials which listed them as FBI agents, "What happened?" he asked the bus driver.

The elderly bus driver wore a too-large set of pants and a white shirt. His eyes were practically the size of quarters from the stress, and his hands shook. "I have no idea, officer—"

Jim held up a hand, "FBI has agents. Police has officers."

The bus driver looked taken aback for a second, before adjusting himself and nodding. "Sorry uuhh… Agent. I uhh, I don't know, it just says somethings wrong with the engine, I was gonna take a look." He reached down, and pulled the door release for the main door of the bus.

Jim waved him back, and smiled, "Sir, let my partner and I take a look first, make sure nothing dangerous is out there, okay? Don't let anyone leave the bus."

The elderly man nodded, and sat back down, pulling out the small radio from the intercom. "Attention folks. These two men are with the FBI and are nice enough to check out the back of the bus for us. Everyone stay put for a minute, until they say, all right?"

A quiet murmur of assent went through the passengers, as Denton and McDowell dropped out of the bus and on to the slick grass that bordered the long stretch of road. Both agents drew service pistols from beneath their jackets, and Sam slipped in front of Jim, taking point position. Jim tapped him on the shoulder, and the two advanced towards the back of the bus.

Nothing jumped out at them as they approached the engine compartment, which was always good. The two circled wide around the side of the bus, and checked under the bus for potential threats. They approached the engine compartment cautiously. The back panel of the bus had been blown off around where the skid marks started from the road. A steady stream of components from the engine trailed to the slightly smoking ruins of the back of the vehicle.

Jim frowned, "I think it's broken."

Sam slapped his forehead with his palm, "You're an idiot, Jim. Of course it's broken. What happened?" He holstered his sidearm, and pulled out the multitool on his belt, snapping out the mini pry bar. He peeled off the last bits of plastic surrounding the engine cover, and took a step back. His eyes narrowed, and he grunted. "You recognize that?"

Jim nodded, holstering his own weapon. "That's a Scranton Reality Anchor. Or at least a close approximation of one, I've never seen one jerry rigged into a bus before." Jim's eyes raised up to the passenger compartment of the bus. "Sam, I think we should break out something a bit heavier than track suits."

Agent Denton turned and looked his partner up and down quickly, "Okay, only one of us is wearing a track suit. This is a *speedsuit*." He circled to the back luggage compartment, popping open the compartment they'd stored their suitcases in.

Agent McDowell hefted his suitcase on to the ground, his finger slipping under the handle to swipe on the biometric scanner. The top portion of the suitcase hinged open, revealing a small armory of various bits of gear the Agents could use. The suitcases could carry precisely two shirts and a toothbrush, but when you needed an assault weapon, you needed an assault weapon.

He lifted out the set of compact body armor, and peeled off the two films which covered the mid-chest and spine sections, "Whatever, Rusty Venture. Make sure you engage the hume-res." Both had multiple warning labels on them. Each strip would provide a low-level resistance to hume-fluctuations. It wasn't much and it didn't last long; but it could be all the difference between life and death.

He stood, the heavy web belt slipping comfortably under the small gut that had formed in the past couple of years. The boys over at Site-127 had created some of the devices on the belt, and one could never have enough high explosives. Lastly, he traded out his ring for a significantly heavier bracelet. It contained enough gear to figure out what was going on. Theoretically.

"Yes, dad," Sam said, peeling the cover off his own highlighter yellow hume-res strips. "You ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go figure out what's up," Jim said, trading out the smaller caliber pistol for a larger pistol which had been outfitted with ammunition for which possession of was a felony in this jurisdiction.

Sam boarded the bus, smiling easily as he did. The jacket of his tracksuit covered the body armor, not that muggles would even recognize the tech as armor to begin with. It looked like a particularly bulky t-shirt under his jacket. "Hey folks. So something looks to have gone pretty majorly wrong with the bus, and we'd like to have everyone get off, so we can be sure everyone's safe. If everyone could get off in an orderly fashion, and just line up outside the bus?"

A few murmurs went through the crowd as Sam stepped off the bus, waving the passengers by. As he did, he tried to get a feel for each person that passed by, glancing at the readings from the bracelet on his right hand. A few of them provoked a reaction as they went by, and Sam made a mental note to ask them questions later.

The passengers were restless as Jim walked over to join Sam, "Did you get a reading from the skinny kid?"

Sam nodded, "Yeah. His mom is setting off a couple of spikes too. Residual exposure maybe?" He shrugged, and turned to face the passengers. "Alright folks, we're gonna try and figure out if we can get any help. Does anyone have signal?" Denton pressed a button on the back of his belt, triggering the selective jammer.

No one's hand went up. Perfect. "Alright, I think I might be able to reach a nearby FBI office on the short-wave, if we're lucky. Everyone take a seat on the grass, or just relax. Is anyone hurt at all?" More murmurs of negatory, and he turned to his partner once more. "We should radio in."

Jim nodded, pulling out the compact radio from a compartment on the belt, swiping his finger across the biometric scanner on the top. It chirped to life, and a tinny voice came across, "Sigma 22, come back?"

Jim clicked the button on the side of the radio, "Sigma 22, copy. This is Rho and Delta reporting on leg 25. Request secure confirmation, over."

The voice clicked back, "Copy that. Rho and Delta, which grave lays empty on Lincoln's watch?"

Jim pressed his finger against the biometric scanner as he clicked the button once more, "**His secretary Bill, of course.**"

The voice clicked once more, "Confirmed secure agents. What's the situation?" Jim gave a cliff's notes version of what happened so far.

"Requesting permission for provisional interview and containment. Additionally, we're going to need amnestics and transportation for at least twenty. Potentially twenty two."

The voice at Foundation dispatch paused for several seconds, "Noted. The only MTF we've got in the area are the Oathkeepers. Will you require any special tools or objects?"

"Unknown. We'll contact with further details. Please get comsat as soon as possible, we're enabling throat mics." Jim lifted the microphone to his throat and closed his eyes as the shock of the embedded microphone alongside his ear bones activated. "Confirm connection."

The voice from Foundation dispatch came through as if it was right behind him, "Confirm." Sam's voice followed a moment later.

A few minutes of separating out the passengers into potentially anomalous and non-anomalous, Sam Denton sat across from a mother and her son. "So, where are you coming from, ma'am?"

She looked around for a second, before looking back at Agent Denton, "Why does that matter? I thought this whole thing was an accident or something?"

He smiled in a reassuring way and nodded. "Of course, I'm sorry. Force of habit, agent, and all that." He let out an easy chuckle. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself. You're the only one with a

child on board, I figured I'd check up on you is all."

She relaxed slightly, smiling back nervously, "We're coming from Tulsa, to live with his father. He moved up north for work, and we're following now that he's got a place up there."

Denton nodded, "That makes sense. My wife is out west a ways, I'm in Washington all the time, for business. I feel like I live on these buses." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out another power bar, offering it out, "Hungry?"

She took it from him, and unwrapped it, smiling a little more genuinely. She broke off a large piece, and handed it to the young child in her lap. He couldn't have been older than four, with slightly gangly arms and legs. Something was definitely off about the kid. In his head, he heard Jim's voice to dispatch, "Foundation HQ, incoming scan data. Please parse and return."

"Confirmed, parsing…" Several seconds passed, "confirmed anomalous readings. Subject is forward of non-anomalous female. She's only putting off exposure levels. Subject voice pattern indicates Janet Sinclair. Former foundation employee, presumed dead after an incident last year."

Sam's heart sank. The kid. Of course it was the kid, what else could it be. Jim grimaced, and subvocalized again, "ETA till Oathkeeper arrival with containment gear?"

Dispatch clicked into both of their heads, "One moment." Several tense seconds passed, "Level 4 override just came through. You need to find out where that SRA came from. Exposure is authorized."

"Lethal force?" Jim said, his tone hopeful.

"Do you have on-hand amnestics?"

"No," the hope fled from his voice.

"Authorized and recommended." The voice clicked out with finality. Jim wondered to himself who made that call. Twenty-odd lives just the cost of doing business to potentially bushwhack a four year old.

Sam sat still for a moment, before sighing, "Ma'am, can I ask your name?"

She smiled, her head tilting slightly, "Janet."

Sam's eyes grew heavy and regretful as he locked on to hers, "Janet, where did you get a Scranton Reality Anchor, and why are you escorting the anomaly?"

Janet froze, her eyes going wide. She backed up slightly, her back running into the legs of Agent McDowell. "I-I don't, what do you m-mean?"

Sam looked down at the information scrolling across his phone from dispatch, "Janet Sinclair. Level-2, dealing with the containment of several bio-weaponry SCP objects. Also presumed dead, along with the destruction of outpost-27-Gamma. That explains where you got the SRA. Now explain **it**," he gestured to the child in her arms.

Janet started to sob, lowering her head into her chest, "A-after the explosion at the outpost, there was no one left. Doctor Mayer was dead. We'd been experimenting on children. **Children** for christ sakes. I couldn't do it anymore. I took the little one, and ran. I've been keeping the SRA powered out of my apartment, but then…they found us."

Jim subvocalized, "Confirm the purpose of Outpost Gamma-27". Dispatch clicked back, "Apologies agent, above your clearance." Jim subvocalized something curt under his breath, not activating his mic.

Sam nodded, his demeanor caring, but tense. He was ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble, but until it happened she didn't need to be bullied. "Who was it?"

"The Sarkics. They want Tommy," she gestured to the child who had fallen asleep in her arms, "He was a creation of them, some kind of bio-engineering. The reality anchor helped to suppress his abilities, and we've tried to keep on the move…" Her face was heaving now, expressing twitches in time with the heavier sobs.

Jim squatted down next to her, and offered her a tissue. She blew

loudly into it, and clutched the child closer. "I w-won't let you take him. Not to be experimented on again." Her eye had begun to twitch, but her gaze was steadier.

Sam shook his head, "Look, I'm not trying to bring anyone in. A bus exploded. There was a freakin' Scranton Reality Anchor in the back. We're doing our jobs. Obviously the kid isn't dangerous, he's just a kid. I don't think they're gonna try and lock him up." Sam put his various equipment back on his belt, and leaned forward to place a reassuring hand on to her forearm, "I'm sorry your experience was so traumatic. I think it's time you come in, and we get tommy the help he needs."

She nodded, and a comfortable silence enveloped the three, as they waited for the containment team.
A half hour passed, as they spent the time commiserating over Foundation experience. Janet had grown quiet, but wasn't resisting. Mostly she'd stayed against the bus, occasionally letting out a shaky breath.

Jim cocked his head to one side, holding the soiled tissue in his hand still as he couldn't shake a feeling. "Dispatch, I'm sending a sample to you. Analyze and return, humanoid profile, confirmation of Identity. The works." He swiped the small swatch of mucus and a bit of blood along a small paper strip, which he slid into the bracelet.

Sixteen seconds later, a voice clicked in from their microphones, "Confirmed. Subject is **not** Janet Sinclair. Subject shows DNA comparable to Incidence Gamma-27 analysis."

Jim immediately clicked his microphone, "Elderberry."

Sam hesitated for a microsecond, before rolling backwards as fast and hard as his aging frame would let him. He took two sprinting steps before turning as he drew his pistol.

'Janet' looked confused for a half-moment before her face distorted into a snarling rictus. She bolted to her feet, her fingers melding together into a grotesque tentacle, leaping towards Denton. She screamed and flung her other arm forward, a chunk of flesh hurling off of it towards Agent Denton. He tried to dodge to the side, but the

wet chunk of ick tracked his movement, aimed directly towards his heart. The sticky glob of bloody skin slapped against the bright yellow hume-res on his vest, sizzled for a moment, then sloughed off. The section of hume-res burned to a smoky black powder and flaked off.

Agent Denton emptied his service pistol at the rapidly mutating creature in front of him, trying to brush off the ashes from his vest. "Janet" jinked out of the way of every shot, her limbs extending into impaling claws. She closed the distance between her and her quarry.

Agent Denton, to his credit, didn't flinch. His hand blurred down to his waist, drawing the long knife from the scabbard on the back of his belt. The blade was inset with various bits of circuitry and fitted with a heavy black guard and pommel.

Janet's razor sharp claw streaked towards Agent Denton's face, whistling as it parted the air, now only a couple of steps away from Denton's vulnerable flesh.

Agent Denton gripped the handle harder until it clicked, the crossguard of the heavy knife flipping open to reveal metal contacts. He sidestepped, and brought the blade of the knife straight up in to the joint of Janet's elbow, his fingers touching the two contacts under the guard. A jolt of electricity streaked from the handle in to the crossguard.

Janet's arm writhed for a moment, overwhelmed by the electric pulses streaming in to her brain. Agent Denton rushed forward two steps, his free hand gripping her wrist, which had become slick with both ichor and regular human blood. He turned his body, and forced her wrist back in to her pulsating chest. Denton yanked down on the bottom of the knife, pressed between her body and her arm. The knife sprouted two heavy steel prongs from the eye of the crossguard, trapping her flesh in a tight pretzel. "Any fucking time now, McDowell!" He yelled, as he kicked at one of her knees, forcing her down to one good leg.

Janet's body writhed with boneless grace, as her other arm reached over her own head, centimeters away from his face. The arm started

to lengthen, the bare bones from her flung hand arching towards Sam Denton's eye. He swallowed hard, muscles straining against the strength of the monster pressed against him. *I swear to god, if I survive this I'll start lifting again, just don't give out on me yet.* He thought to himself, praying to every deity he could think of, and several he made up on the spot.

From behind her, six bullets rang out in rapid succession, turning the rapidly shifting woman into something resembling paste, as the explosive rounds did their job. The small child she was escorting remaining motionless on the ground, several meters away.

Sam let out a shaky breath, as he clicked the various bits of the knife back in to place, wiping it off on his vest before replacing it in its scabbard. "By the mother of Las Chupacabras, could you have cut it any closer?"

Jim leveled his weapon at the passengers of the bus, waving diffidently at Sam, "I'm only going to say this once. Everyone stay put, and everything will be fine. No one else is going to be shot. But if you run, I will kill you."

The passengers, to their credit, either froze or sank to their asses in shock. Sam padded over to the small child, turning it over. With a closer look, he realized it wasn't a child at all, but a man with dwarfism. Sam reached into his belt, and administered the syrette of broad-spectrum stimulants to counteract whatever was in his system. He took a quick hair sample, and plugged it into the bracelet getting an immediate DNA read. "Doctor Mayer?"

The man blinked owlishly up at the agent, as he woke from the groggy haze he'd been put under, "Where am I?" his voice was tinged with a heavy German accent. "And who are you?"

Jim looked over at Sam, and shook his head, "I swear to god, Sam. You **had** to insist on saving sixty bucks with a bus ride."

Der Machandelbaum

Even in broad daylight, the forest was still a foreboding environment. The shadows of the trees made bright daylight dimmer. Apart from the wind and some occasional birds, it was quiet. Dr. Flora Davis had never liked the quiet, and so walking through the trees, she was secretly glad for her assistant's company. Though she could do without his whining.

"How much further?" David griped. "We've been walking forever."

"We've been walking for thirty minutes, Mr. Vadas," she said, turning around. "You weren't kidding when you said you were out of shape," she japed. He shot her a look of good-humored irritation, but said nothing. It was true, he had said those exact words prior to their departure.

"What are we even looking for, Flora?" He felt the task of finding a specific tree in a forest to be an exercise in futility. "Are we sure it even exists?"

"We aren't on a first name basis. Based on the descriptions we got, we're looking for 'the tree that's different.' Whatever that is. And given the five eyewitness reports and the nature of Nexus forty-three, I'm inclined to believe it exists. Unterbourg is a strange town."

"Oh great, a different tree. There are lots of trees here." He replied. He studied the dense foliage surrounding them. "Like, *lots* of species. How the hell are we supposed to know what it looks like?"

"Like a tree with different plants grafted on…" she said, stopping in her tracks as her assistant continued walking, oblivious to her discovery.

"Great. If I see that I'll let you know, but otherwise—"

"No, Vadas, look." David turned towards where Davis was pointing.

“…That’s prolly the one.”

The two walked over to the strange tree, trying to figure out what had caused the residents of Unterbourg to be so unsettled by it. They could already tell something was wrong with it. Though David felt unsettled by the tree, he found himself walking right towards it. He seemed unable to stop, until he was face to face with the low-hanging branches. The two spent the next few minutes observing the tree from all angles, hardly noticing they had both fallen silent.

“The main tree seems to be *Juniperus Communis*, the common juniper,” David explained, finally breaking the silence, “but it has almond seeds, suggesting a graft of *Prunus dulcis*. Additionally, it’s blooming flowers from the *Rosa* genus, which don’t even grow on trees.” He turned back to Davis’ dumbfounded look, suddenly embarrassed. “I like plants, ok? Isn't that why you brought me?”

“No, I had no idea,” she said, taken aback. She realized the two didn't know that much about each other. David opened his mouth, about to ask something, but was cut off. “Do you notice any other anomalous behavior?”

“Nothing specific. But something feels off,” he replied, plucking a rose from the tree. “Seeds and flowers plucked from the tree appear to be normal. I feel drawn to the tree. Like, I need to stay near it." He began climbing the lower branches. "That’s gotta be something right?”

“Maybe." She picked an almond off of the ground, wondering what was odd about the tree. She observed the almond as if it held all of the secrets of this tree. Not just of the tree, but of Nexus forty-three. For one moment, she wondered if the answers to all the world's mysteries could be contained in an almond. If all she had to do was take a bite…

"Davis?"

Suddenly, everything faded back into view. David looked concerned, but it was no matter. She had remembered their directive. "In any case, we’ve done what we were asked to do: we found the tree." She dropped the almond on the forest floor. "Let's report it to the

Foundation and get out of here, before something really dangerous happens.” She didn't trust the forest after dark.

“Alright," he replied, jumping down, "David and Davis getting the job done.”

“That’s not a thing. Don’t try to make that a thing.”

But David hadn’t heard her. “Davis… look.” Where he was pointing, a bird that had not been there before was perched. The feathers were vibrant, red and green, and in the sunlight its neck almost shone gold. “I don’t suppose you like birds enough to know what that is?”

“No… I don’t…” she said, taking out her phone. She hoped they could get some service out here as she tried to describe the bird in the search engine. A few seconds later, she had the answer. “According to the internet,” she showed her phone to the assistant, “it’s a European Bee-Eater. I don’t know if they’re common to this region.”

“Noted… I think we’ve got everything we— Dammit! Should we follow it?” He said, pointing to the bird in flight.

“Mark this tree. I’ll follow it.” Davis ran in the other direction as Vadas carefully marked the odd tree, hoping to make it recognizable amongst a sea of green. Somewhere in the direction Davis ran, he heard a noise. He heard a song that almost sounded human. “Davis?” He cautiously called out. The song was entrancing. “Davis why are you singing?” He felt inclined to follow it, to hear it more clearly, but he knew he had to stay by the tree. As the final notes of the song echoed through the foliage, his senses heightened. He cautiously walked a few steps in the direction Davis had run off in, when—

“Vadas!” Flora exclaimed, tapping his shoulder and causing him to jump.

“Dammit, Davis. You scared me!” He yelled.

“I thought I told you to stay by the tree.” Davis scolded.

“You didn’t," he said, indignant, "but I did, it’s right here—“ But when he turned around the tree was no longer there. He looked around for a few seconds in disbelief, wondering what had happened. When he finally spoke, he could only think to ask one thing. “We have to tell the Foundation, don’t we?”

But Davis said nothing. What was there to say? It was gone. And now they had to walk thirty minutes back to Site-99 to fill out the paperwork and deliver the news.

Flora felt like she had failed. It was her first notable assignment, working directly with an anomaly from Nexus-43 and she had lost it in the space of a few minutes. Her main lead was a bird that had also disappeared, and had apparently led her on a wild goose chase. *Or a wild European Bee-Eater chase*, she thought to herself. She was instantly glad she hadn't said the joke out loud. She had been told the previous day when she returned that missing anomalies were common around these parts and that she shouldn't be too worried. But something had unsettled her about it, and she felt obligated to find out all she could about it. She was concentrating on similar phenomena, anything that might tell her where the tree was, when a familiar voice caught her attention.

"*Von Dem Machandelbaum*." David interrupted, triumphant.

Flora Davis looked up from her research, bemused. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"*Von Dem Machandelbaum*," the assistant repeated, setting an old book down. "That's what we're dealing with here. I went to the library —"

"*You* went to the library?!" Davis teased.

"Don't patronize me." He smirked at her disbelief and sat down to join her. "And while you were doing anomalous research, I was doing folklore research. I got a copy of the Grimm Fairytales. Now, I can't read Low German very well, but there's a tale in here called *Von Dem Machandelbaum*, or 'From The Juniper Tree' in English. Folklore classification Aarne-Thompson-Uther type seven twenty."

"And what's it about?" she said, perusing the book to see if she understood the archaic words

"Tee-ell-dee-arr stepmother murders child, frames other child, feeds him to his ignorant father, child exacts his revenge as a bird. It's a gruesome story, I kind of love it, anyway, I think this is what we're dealing with. Not only that, but I think we may have learned something from it already."

"Hold up, what makes you so sure this is what we're dealing with? There must be other explanations…" Davis rummaged through her notes for some alternate theory that didn't sound so… bizarre.

"Well the tree we saw was juniper, for starters. The bird in the tale is described as having red and green feathers and a golden neck, just like the bird we saw today, and although I couldn't hear the song very well I think the song I heard in the forest is the one from the tale."

"*Mein Mutter, der mich schlacht', Mein Vater, der mich aß*…" Davis began muttering the words from the old book, surprised by the familiarity. "I heard the song only a little better than you, but I think you're right. I think this is it.

"I told you!" He gloated, pumping a fist in triumph.

"Ok, but what do you think we've learned from this?" Davis said, curious.

David's eyes lit up, excited to share his findings. "So you know there are two current theories on how Nexus forty-three works. The first is that the anomalous activity was seen by the citizens and passed throughout the country as folktales—"

"And the second is that the writings of Grimm created the anomalies."

"But we can't prove that theory because there are too many variables—"

"And we can't prove yours because most of the anomalies observed were only first written by the brothers Grimm."

"*Most* being the keyword there. I did some research, and it turns out Grimms' '*Von Dem Machandelbaum*' isn't the first written instance of that tale. They got the story from a romantic painter, Philip Otto Runge, who published the story sometime before they collected it."

"So they couldn't have created the juniper tree phenomenon…" Davis said, beginning to understand.

"Exactly! And get this: in his version, Runge called it an almond tree."

"…This is all interesting, but it's far from disproved the other theory. Maybe Runge wrote his version while in Unterbourg."

"I thought you might say that, so I did some more research. Remember that classification, ATU seven twenty? While it's not the most popular classification there are some other tales like the Juniper Tree. In fact, there's a tale almost exactly like it first recorded by Joseph Jacobs."

"What are you getting at?"

"Joseph Jacobs was English, so his version of the story is different in a few ways, such as the gender of the children and the method of decapitation—"

"Decapitation? Just how dark is this fairy tale?"

"Very, it's fantastic. But the difference that we should be concerned with is the tree. He called it a *Rose-tree*. And tell me, Dr. Davis, when was the last time you saw roses on a tree?"

"…You're right. The anomaly came before the story. It doesn't mean all of them are like that, but it does set a baseline. We need to include this in our report."

"Davis and David: solving the mysteries of Nexus forty-three one anomaly at a time."

She smirked. "That's still not a thing."

"What? I put you first this time!"

Davis fell silent, deep in thought.

"Davis? You ok?"

"I'm realizing the ramifications of what we saw. The tree was there, and then it wasn't. And since Joseph Jacobs wrote about it in England…"

"…Oh shit, it could be anywhere. And the bird… is the story repeating itself?"

Davis looked up, determined. "We need to find that tree."

Deranged Ditties

Jack "PoorYoric" Duckins walked past the containment cell of SCP-Eleventy-Six, nodded to the empty air, and continued on his way. Precisely three-point-four seconds later, he zipped back, his eyes stretching out and his beak opening wide in alarm. "Containment breach!" he quacked. "Emergency! Alarums and excursions! HALP!"

Instantly, Dmitri Arkadeyevich Strelnicock and a squad of Russian bears ran down the hallway. And up the hallway. And partway up the stairway, before they remembered why they ran there in the first place, and returned to the door. Strelnicock pulled out a spatula and scraped Yoric from the floor. "Comrade! Where is there being fire?"

Yoric placed his thumb-feather into his mouth and re-inflated himself, popping back out. "SCP-Eleventy-Six has escaped!"

"Eleventy-Six! Oh no! That's terrible! Sound alarm! Load weapons! Kill chickens!" the rooster crowed, then paused. "What is Eleventy-Six? Is that vending machine? Has vending machine escaped?"

"No," the duck replied. "Even worse. It's the whatsit!"

"Not whatsit!" Strelnicock said. "We must tell the administrator!"

"To the administrator's office," said Yoric.

They hurried up the stairs, barreling through the doors to the administrator's anteroom. A bored secretary snapped her gum, and said, "Appointment?"

"No time for appointments!" Strelnicock bellowed.

"Can't get in without an appointment," the secretary said.

"Break, Karrin, baby, is me! Is Strelnicock! You will be letting me in for see administrator, da?" the rooster pleaded.

"Can't do that," she said, not looking up from her issue of Guns and Ammo. "Rules."

"Then I will take matters into own wings!" He started to run past the desk, only to be stopped by two precisely-aimed bullets to his kneecaps. "Cock-a-doodle-dammit!" he cried.

"Sorry. Rules are rule." She snapped her gum again.

Yoric tore off his coat, revealing a set of janitor's overalls, emblazoned with the name "Jim." He pulled a mop and bucket out from under a seat, and whistled as he slowly mopped past the secretary.

Break dropped a small object into the bucket as he passed by. Several seconds later, there was a bang, a splash, and a quack. The drenched, burned, and battered duck limped back.

"You're despicable," he said.

Gerald walked by, his antennae twitching. “What’s going on?” the cockroach asked.

“SCP-Eleventy-Six has got loose,” said Yoric. “We have to tell the administrator, but Break says we can’t without an appointment.”

“Oh,” Gerald said. He glanced at Break. “Can we make an appointment to see the administrator?”

“Sure. Got an opening right now,” she said. “Head right in.”

“Thanks.” Gerald motioned for the other two to walk in with him.

“Sir!” Strelnicock said to the person behind the desk, “We are having grave situation. SCP-Eleventy-Six has escaped from being containment, and we must to be recapturing it.”

“SCP-Eleventy-Six, eh? Lemme see if I remember that one,” the other replied. “Was he about yea tall?” he asked, putting a hand over his head.

“Yes!” said Yoric.

“Did he wear big white gloves like these?” he asked, waving his hands.

“Da!” said Strelnicock.

“Did he have big, orange, hairy eyebrows like these?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“That’s him exactly!” said Yoric.

“Nope, don’t know him,” said the whatsit.

“Oh. Well, fair enough,” said Yoric.

“You are busy man. Cannot keep up with all SCP objects,” Strelnicock concurred.

“Uh, guys…” Gerald said. “I… I don’t think that’s the director.”

“But if he’s not the director, that means…” Yoric glanced across the desk.

“Is whatsit!” shouted Strelnicock.

“You ain’t just whistlin’ dixie, sister!” the whatsit said, throwing pies into the agents’ faces. “Wahahahahooo!” It bounced out of the office and down the hall.

“Custard?” Strelnicock said. “Custard is for Chickens!”

“Gentlemen,” Yoric said, “I have a plan.”

“Oh. Goody,” Gerald said.

Ten minutes later, Gerald was cunningly disguised as a female whatsit. This disguise consisted of red lipstick, a white dress, and false orange eyebrows on the ends of his antennae. “I’m not sure this is such a good idea,” he said nervously.

“Of course it is,” Yoric said. “I thought of it.”

“Quickly, comrades! We hide in wait for whatsit! Gerald, you are

being the sexy. Good luck with important mission." The rooster saluted, and then he and Yoric hid behind a garbage can.

"Wahahahahoo!" came the cry of Eleventy-six, echoing down the hallway. It bounced along down the hallway, when it espied the disguised cockroach. Its eyes bulged out past its jutting eyebrows, and its tongue rolled out of its mouth. "Baby!" it said. "Where you been all my life?"

"Um. Here?" Gerald said, uncertainly.

"Mi amore, you are the light at the end of my tunnel. You are the applesauce on my porkchop. You are the creamy center of my Twinkie. Let me take you away from all of this." The whatsit gestured grandly at the metal hallway.

"Take me where?" Gerald asked, increasingly nervous.

"To the kasbah. The Riviera. My place for kruellers. You name it, baby! You an' me!" The whatsit grabbed Gerald and pulled him close.

"Fresh!" Gerald said, trying to push Eleventy-Six away.

"Fiery vixen! Just how I likes 'em!" The whatstit suddenly sped off, Gerald in tow.

"Wait, weren't we supposed to grab him?" Yoric asked.

"Was your job. I was keeping watch," said Strelnicock.

"Me? You're the one built like a line-backer!" Yoric said.

"Whatsit is slippery, like Yorics. Therefore is your job," Strelnicock said.

"Slippery! Why I oughtta—" Yoric slammed a webbed foot down.

They argued for several moments. Neither seemed to notice the arrival of Gerald-dress torn, lipstick smeared-until the cockroach threw the fake eyebrows in their faces. "I quit!" he snarled.

“What are you meaning, quit?” Strelnicock demanded.

“I did not come here for the purpose of being humiliated! I don’t have to be here. I don’t have to take this. I don’t have to wear this dress!” Gerald shouted.

“But what about your contract?” Yoric asked.

“Contract? What about my contract?” Gerald asked.

“Section Three, Subjection A, Paragraph III,” Yoric said, handing a copy to the cockroach.

“‘Will appear in cartoon-based tale for the purpose of being humiliated.’ Huh. I must have missed that part.” The cockroach shrugged. “I guess I have to go on.”

“Looks that way.”

“Well, phooey.”

“So, comrades, we are now to formulate new plan of action that will be made up by me, Dmitri Arkadeyevich Strelnicock. And using my fabulous guns.” He smirked, flexing a wing. “Also firearms.”

“Oh, lordy,” Yoric said. “Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Is simplicity itself. Now, listen closely to me…”

Half an hour later, and they had it set up. It was a thing of beauty. It was a thing of grace. It was a thing of high explosives. Mostly the latter.

“Okay, so how does this work?”

“As I have been saying, it is simple. Firstly, beartrap will keep whatsit in place by biting down upon leg of annoyance. Beartrap has no spring, and is instead closed through tiny but powerful rockets.”

“Okay, what then?”

“Then off is set the automated machine guns. They will perforate the organs of whatsit with bullets. Many bullets. It will be having more holes than cheese from Switzerland.”

“Um, Strelnicock…” Gerald began.

“Wait, hold on, what happens after that? I’m curious.”

“Ah, that is when the platform above-weighted greatly and covered with spikes that are tipped with many poisons-will fall down, perforating any organs that were unperforated by bullets. Which there will be none, because of many bullets mentioned before.”

“Strel, pal, I really think—” Yoric started.

“Wait, wait. Is that it?”

“Is it it?” Strelnicock laughed. “Of course not! Next, there will be grand finale. I have placed many explosives. The many-holed, poisoned, trapped whatsit shall then be blown into smithereenies. Will be thing of beauty. I may shed single manly tear over worthy foe. Maybe not. I am very manly, tears, they do not come so easy.”

“And how’s it triggered?”

“When whatsit steps on plate,” Strelnicock said confidently.

“Which plate?”

“This plate,” Strelnicock said, tapping a plate with his foot. He stared for a second, then looked over to where the whatsit had Yoric and Gerald tied up. “Oh, you. You are not my friend.”

“Wahahahahoo!” the whatsit cried as it bounced away down the halls.

There was a hiss, a snap, and a scream from Strelnicock as the beartrap closed. Then the rattle of the machine guns.

“Not in the face! Not in the face!” Yoric screamed as they were perforated by what might be considered an overabundance of bullets.

A snap overhead signaled the release of the spiked platform, which crashed down over all three.

“Oh god! My previously unruptured organs!” Gerald cried.

Then there was a very loud explosion. In hindsight, that many explosives in an enclosed space might have been somewhat foolhardy.

Sometime later, they woke up to the smell of formaldehyde and mustache wax. “Ah, good, you’ve regained consciousness!” Dr. Mann said. “I’m so glad you’re no longer entirely dead.”

“Where are we, what are we doing here, and can I borrow five bucks?” Yoric asked.

“In my lab, recovering from gross physical damage, and certainly, if I can find my wallet. I haven’t seen it since… Hmm, not since the last time you were here, in fact. Anyway! I found you around the site, somewhat injured.”

“Around the site? Where around the site?” asked Gerald.

“All around the site,” said Doctor Mann. “But nothing beyond my skills.”

“So… We’re okay?” Yoric asked.

“Certainly, in perfect health! Um. Well, I couldn’t find all the pieces. So certain… substitutions had to be made.”

“I was wondering why beak was tasting like cardboard,” Strelnicock said.

“Do try not to salivate too much. It’s double corrugated, but even so…” Doctor Mann trailed off.

“Ah. Well, we are still to having Whatsit to catch. So, if we are being repaired to best extent possible, we must be off to be going!” Strelnicock stood.

“Toodles, Doc,” Yoric said.

“Um. Thanks?” Gerald said, before following the others.

“What peculiar fellows,” the anthropomorphic mustache said.

“Okay, so, we need a new plan,” Yoric said.

“I am having it!” Strelnicock said. “We will create a minefield, and in the center of minefield, we will place favorite food of whatsit!”

“No, no, no. That’s as bad as your last plan,” Yoric said. “No, what we do is, we paint a tunnel at the end of the hallway, then chase the whatsit right into it.”

“No, no, you are ignoring obvious flaws in your plan. It is obvious it is my plan that must be used.”

“No, my plan!” said the duck. “It’s ingenious, as I thought of it myself!”

“QUIET!” Gerald’s eyes… well, bugged out, and he stamped the floor for emphasis.

“Yes Gerald?” Strelnicock asked.

“Um. I’ve got it. A plan, that is. And it’s my turn now.” Gerald looked uncomfortable. “I mean, you both already tried.”

“He has a point,” Yoric said. “Anyway, while he tries that, I can come up with a plan that will really work.”

The rooster shrugged. “Okay, we try little cockroach’s plan. Then we will be trying my brilliant scheme which is as simple as it is unnecessarily complex.”

Gerald went over to the emergency phone on the wall, and dialed a number. He spoke into the receiver for a few minutes, and then hung up. He started filing the nails on his two left hands.

“What? Is that it?” asked Strelnicock.

“Wait for it,” Gerald said.

The whatsit ran down the hallways. “Quick! You gotta hide me!”

“Hide you?” Yoric asked.

“You don’t understand, man. I can’t let her find me. Not… Not her. Come on, be a pal. I’m begging you.” The whatsit knelt in front of Yoric and grasped his shirt.

Yoric and Strelnicock exchanged glances. “We… we can might to do this for you,” Strelnicock said slowly. “In fact, I am thinking that I know just the hideout.”

“Really? Oh, thanks man. Thanks. You’re a pal. Don’t let nobody tell you aren’t,” the whatsit said. “Where should I go?”

“Follow me,” Yoric said. “No one would ever think to look for you here…”

After they led the Whatsit back into containment, Yoric looked over at Gerald. “That was easy.”

“Yeah, well, you just have to know what strings to pull,” Gerald said nonchalantly.

“Whose strings is it that were pulled, Comrade Gerald?” asked Strelnicock.

“His ex-wife’s. It turns out he’s behind on child support,” said the cockroach.

“How’d you find that out?” asked Yoric.

“Well, while we were… I mean, with the disguise, and he…” The cockroach trailed off, a blush creeping up his carapace.

“Aha!” said Yoric. “So it was my plan that led to its capture! Victory, Yoric!”

“That is not counting,” said Strelnicock. “Besides, its wits were clearly dulled by ringing in ears from explosive. My victory, plainly.”

As the two bickered back and forth, Doctor Bright wandered down the hall. He watched them for a moment, and then turned to the camera. “Th-th-th-that’s pretty much all the shit we got for you today, folks.”

Descent

I haven't always been special.

I trained for it. I trained for years, following Them, studying Them from as close as I could safely get, learning what made Them tick even as the sight of those glorious beings drowned my mind in serotonin. There were a few nights where I wanted to kill myself over what I was planning on doing to Them. But I remembered the look on my mother's face on the day I left forever, and I hardened my resolve.

I found a new community where nobody knew me. I blended in easily enough. Even this close to the Out-lands, reality is still elastic enough that new neighbors with mysterious pasts go fairly uncommented on. Everyone around me played by Their rules, the rules They imposed just by existing. It made them pretty boring company sometimes, but I still managed to find some friends. They were always part of my plan, even in the early days when I didn't really get it.

I trained my body and my mind relentlessly, urged on by the vision of my mother in her bed on that last day. I started getting into "accidents" whenever I hung out with my friends. Falling off of a cliff and landing unscathed because I'd scouted the location tirelessly for the highest concentration of tree branches to break my fall. Diving out of the way of a loosened sign that was about to fall on me at the last second. *Jumping* over a car that was careening towards me. I brushed with death in front of witnesses over and over again, and they were duly impressed by my ability, but it *never got any easier.* I had thought that once I had established myself as "special," the universe would recognize me as a potential member and slot me into a path that would eventually take me to Their level. It wasn't too far fetched, if what the conspiracy theorists say about reality being thinner is true. It seemed like a failure, and I gave up was ready to give up.

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to.

I went back over my notes. I even risked studying Them in person again. It was so hard to watch Them at their ridiculous and deadly games, knowing what happened to all of the background characters that get in their way. I remembered waiting for my mother to come home with a gift from a city that had been nearly leveled in some twisted rodeo. I cried as I watched Them kill all of those innocent people. But I came away with valuable information. I was going about things all wrong. It wasn't a matter of strength. It was a matter of character.

I began a new training regimen. I started to develop quirks. Small ones, at first. Whenever I was with my friends, I would idly run a matchstick through my hair, until I eventually found myself doing it alone out of habit. I began eating a dozen clementines daily, and never wore sleeves if I could avoid it. Where before the community at large had largely ignored me, I now found myself getting a reputation. I started to stand out. The dynamic within my group of friends started changing too. They started looking to me for suggestions. I would usually decide what to do and dominate the conversation as we did it. One day, months after I had abandoned my physical training, my friend and I fell off of a bridge. I somehow managed to catch the edge of the bridge with my feet and my friend's ankles with my hands and I swung us both to safety.

It was impossible. But it had happened. I had done it.

From there things started moving quickly. I found myself getting into the same predicaments as before, but genuinely by accident, and sometimes in much more dangerous circumstances. Every time I made it out without a scratch, and I learned to laugh off the danger. I started acting superior around my friends, embracing the leadership role, and they all just folded up and fell into line. Even when they objected to my treatment of them, they never once seriously challenged me on it. This power was amazing. When I finally exhibited my first truly impossible ability, breathing gale force winds, I started laughing uncontrollably. I couldn't believe it was possible! I couldn't believe what a rush it was! I started to understand why They acted so happy all of the time, before the memory of my mother's blood splashing on my young face brought me back to Earth. I knew

then that it was important to never let my power turn me into a monster.

I apologized to my secondary characters for all of the things I said to them. Every single one of them reassured me that they loved me, and that they knew I just acted odd because my mother's death traumatized me. With my position secure, I continued to accumulate powers randomly, until finally my personal reality was stretched to its breaking point. I felt the complete knowledge of the universe flow through me, and learned how to bend it, change it, even erase it. And at that point I knew that it was time to move on the final phase of my plan to save the world avenge my mother's death.

To beat Them, I had to join Them. And I did. I have all the power of the Senior Staff now. I have all the power I need to take them down. And why shouldn't it be me? I have their damn tragic backstory, I have a driving reason! I have the pure heart to resist the siren call of this cursed power! The Senior Staff made an enemy the day they killed my mother right in front of me, and I intend to make them regret it.

.
.
.
.
.

My mother wasn't dead before

Detained

Agent Green walked down the street, a Styrofoam cup of tea in one hand and a glowing cigarette in the other. Endless crowds of people flowed around him, occasionally bumping his arms or legs. Green moved to the right, turning down a secluded alleyway. Go straight, go straight, turn left, go straight, turn right, turn right, turn left, go straight, turn left…

Agent Green found himself in front of Safehouse-53.

Safehouse-53, from the outside, appeared to be an abandoned tailor shop. The storefront windows showed a small room, dust coating mannequins wearing antiquated dresses and suits. Green sipped his tea and walked to the wooden door, rapping on it and hearing his impact echo. He heard a shout from inside, gradually louder footsteps, and then Agent Tangerine swung the door open from the inside. Tangerine was standing two steps down, wearing a blue and orange Hawaiian shirt; the door did not, in fact, lead into the abandoned tailor shop, but into a basement level below.

"Gotta give up the smokes, Green."

"Nothing keeps you warmer. And let's face it, something else is going to kill me before these do."

Tangerine shrugged half-heartedly, walking back down the stairwell; Green downed the last of his tea, threw his cup to the ground outside, clenched his cigarette in his jaw, then walked down just behind.

"How long have you been here?"

"Got here about ten minutes ago. They wipe you too?"

"Yup. I've got nothing after the horn went off."

"Same here. On the downside, no idea what happened last night. Upside, whatever it was, we grabbed some Artists to talk to."

"How many?"

"Eight all up, but three of them I know; you can take the other five."

"Sounds good. Standard truth serums?"

"Unfortunately not. We're all out of Class B hypnotics here; I'm pulling some more this afternoon."

"Ah. Back to the classics until then?"

"Yup. Just like old times."

Tangerine reached the end of the steps, leading Green into a dimly-lit, steel-lined room. A computer and printer sat in a far corner, a small gun cabinet stood to the left, and a door on the right led into a row of holding cells. Tangerine sat down at the computer, tapped some keys, and started printing off the first file.

"First up, The Builder. Part of The Critic's lot. He was the one making that big white marble thing."

"Do we know why?"

Tangerine shuffled the paper into a manila folder, passing it to Green, who leafed through the contents briefly.

"You ask him, he's in Cell 3."

"Restrained?"

Tangerine slapped his head mockingly.

"No, I completely forgot to do that. Of course he's restrained, go get him."

Green shook his head dismissively, entering the corridor of cells. One, two… three. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening

electronic lock. He opened the door and walked through. A short, brown-haired man sat with every limb chained to the steel seat beneath him. He was snoring softly, head hanging limp against his chest. Green slammed the door shut as loudly as he could, waking The Builder with a start.

"AH!"

"NAME! NOW!"

"BOB! Bob Utzon! Who the fuck are… fuck. Oh, goddamnit, you weren't supposed to know that."

Agent Green took out a pen and wrote 'BOB UTZON' on the cover of the manila folder, then sat in the seat opposite The Builder. Green placed the folder on the desk, plucked the cigarette from his mouth, and exhaled deeply into The Builder's face, who sputtered at the unexpected wave of smoke. Green grinned; it was cliche, but breathing into someone's face was effective. He was utterly dominating this little artist.

"Nice to meet you, Bob."

"Fuck you, I'm not saying shit."

"Oh, I think you will. Just breathed hypnotics into your face."

The Builder blanched; he had bought the lie.

"Fuck, man! I've got rights!"

"Ha! No, Bob, no you don't. You don't have rights, you don't get a call, or a lawyer, or any of that. If I want to, I can leave you here to rot until the day you die, and nobody will come to save you. You don't exist. You get me?"

The Builder remained silent.

"Now, Bob, the last thing you remember is a big honking sound, right?"

The Builder remained silent, the sides of his mouth betraying his

fear.

"Bob. Listen. You can tell me this now, or we can just wait until the muscle relaxant kicks in. But if we wait until then, maybe your body goes limp, or your jaw goes numb, or you bite your tongue off. And then I'll have to listen to you talk while blood's pouring out of your mouth, I might mishear you, it just makes it awkward. I'll get it out of you sooner or later, so you can save yourself the trouble, maybe save some dignity too, if you just answer my questions now. Got it?"

The Builder remained silent, motionless for a few seconds, then nodded wordlessly. Green internally celebrated his triumph; the waves of bravado and bullshitting had worked faster than he expected.

"Excellent. Question number one: big marble building last night. Why?"

"Artistic domination. Contain the other artists' pieces within a makeshift museum of my own design."

"We've destroyed your piece. Is it anomalous in any other way?"

The Builder sneered at the demolition of his work, but contained his anger.

"It shouldn't be, no. It's harmless."

"Fantastic. Next up: current location of The Critic."

"No idea. He messages us when there's a meeting; if you could give me my phone, I could…"

Agent Green scowled at The Builder.

"Don't play games with me, Bob."

The Builder remained silent.

"Next question: who's The Snipper?"

"Oh, that nutjob. No idea what his name is, got a body horror fetish

or something. Doesn't do much for me, but hell, whatever gets his rocks off is his business."

"Where is he?"

"No fucking clue. Wasn't going to be turning up last night."

"Alright. Last question for now: what do you know about Ruiz Duchamp?"

The Builder scoffed.

"He's a fucking hack. Mailed a bunch of us some stupid bullshit. Really annoyed Tim - 'The Sculptor', I mean."

"Location?"

"If we knew that, he'd be dead."

Green stood up and walked to the door.

"So, hey, agent guy, when do I get out of here?"

Green slid his ID through the slot, a beep releasing the lock.

"Hey. HEY! AGENT GUY, I'M TALKING TO-"

Green closed the door behind him, blocking all sound from behind.

Joey Tamlin awoke to find he had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

He attempted to move himself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"Fuuuuuuuuck."

He attempted to loosen the chains. Each time he thought he was free, they pulled into his flesh even more.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-"

Joey stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt. Agent Tangerine sat down opposite Joey, his face utterly neutral.

"Hey Tan."

Agent Tangerine remained silent.

"You want to help me out of these?"

Agent Tangerine remained silent.

"Come on, man, don't be a dick about it. You're a man in black, that's fine. Wasn't expecting it, but that's okay. I know how this works, you'll ask me a few questions, I give you a few answers, then a quick little pinprick and I forget this ever happened. I'm not in any position to do something about it. Ask me your questions, and we can both get out of here, and you and I can get back to making shitty art. You're with them, and I get that, that's fine, that's okay. But Tan, you're with us too. You make good stuff. You make stuff that looks good, you make stuff that makes people think. You're cool. You're one of us, Tan, you're part of our family no matter what, okay? We're brothers, man!"

Joey couldn't stop himself from shedding some tears. He felt a little betrayed, but that didn't matter. He just needed to loosen his bindings a little more, get on Tangerine's good side, just figure out some way to-

"This is the eighteenth time you've given me that spiel."

Joey looked up, confused. Tangerine looked straight ahead, devoid of all emotion.

"You always tell it the exact same way. The first time, you want to know what I did? Stupid, naive, trusting, young me? I untied you, we talked, and then you tried to beat me up. It didn't work, of course; I'm a trained agent, you're just an artist. I subdued you that time, and then we wiped you, and you went back and everything was back to normal. Then, later, you found a message in my phone that you shouldn't have. We pulled you in, you gave the same speech, that

time I didn't release you. We had a discussion, but then you'd somehow loosened the chains, and just as I was leaving, you tried to grab me from behind. I'd already fought you once, and you didn't remember the first time, so I had even more of an advantage. So that was the second time. After that we tightened the chains, and you didn't get out again. The third was after you and Overgang shot up some infohazardous fireworks. The fourth was when you started organising a raid on a Foundation site, so we put a stop to that. The fifth was… hell, I don't even remember. You've been in and out of here so many times, we ought to install a revolving door."

Joey struggled against his restraints.

"YOU STUPID FUCKING-"

"The seventeenth time was when your sister died."

Joey stopped.

"But I don't have… a sister."

Tangerine stared intensely down at his legs, no longer able to keep eye contact with Joey.

"Jessie Tamlin. Three years younger than you, apple of your eye, loved her more than you loved yourself. Beautiful, fun, brightened the day of anyone she met. She'd come along to exhibitions, she'd sit with all of us and hang out; she was living with you, even, before Molly moved in with you. And then she did something incredibly, incredibly stupid. She was working on something for you, something to say thanks for always being there, and then she messed up. She couldn't exploit the way that you can, Joey, she couldn't concentrate right. She lost control of the thing, and whatever it was, it made a hell of a bang. Best guess was that she was making fireworks."

Tangerine dropped tears into his lap.

"She died, Joey. Jessie died, and you weren't the same. You started drinking all the time, you'd do LSD with every meal, you buried yourself in the most complete escapism you could. And then you tried to kill yourself, and I realised you weren't going to get any

better. But you're right, Joey. I'm with the men in black, but no matter what, we're family. We're close as brothers. We're friends. I asked you, dazed and drugged as you were, why you were doing all of it. You said you were doing it to forget. You *needed* to forget."

Tangerine looked up, face still as neutral as he could keep it, tears still pouring down his cheeks. Joey noticed his own eyes had begun to leak.

"So I helped."

Agent Green waited outside the cell as Tangerine left, still wiping the tears from his eyes. Green patted the back of his long-time friend.

"Don't worry. By the time we're done, he won't remember any of it."

"He said he forgives me."

"That's good, Tan, that's good. Hell, I saw you drag him in last time. He'd be dead if you hadn't done it. You did the right thing."

"Still. I'm fraternising with the enemy."

"Fraternise long enough, they're not your enemies any more. Nothing on Duchamp, or this Snipper guy?"

"Nah, he… he knew as much as I did."

"That's fine. We had to make sure anyway. Go on, Tan, I've got the next two, already got their files here."

Tangerine looked up at Green, frowning.

"Wait, you're not going to…"

"Hey, we can't afford to wait until we get those drugs in. What these guys know might be useless in a few hours' time. May as well go two for one; already put them in the same room. Keep an eye on the cameras for me, right?"

"Right."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Six, seven… eight. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. He opened the door and walked through. The two girls in the room sat strapped to their seats facing the door. Green let it slowly close itself behind him. Both of them were sternly staring at him.

"Ladies."

Green took the wooden seat across from them, placing their files onto the table.

"First question. What are your names?"

The girls continued to stare, lips closed tightly.

"Really, I only asked that as a courtesy. Your names are, as we all know, Annie Cline and Candice Brahms. You play in the band… 'Futanari Titwhore Fiasco'. I'm still not sure if I'm pronouncing that first word correctly, no idea what it means. Just another reference I'm not getting, I suppose."

They remained silent.

"Next question: did you create those duplicates of yourselves?"

"Let them go!"

Candice looked over to Annie, frowning at the outburst. Her own lips remained closed.

"We can't let them go."

"You have to!"

"Allow me to clarify; we can't let them go because we don't have them detained. We're not certain where they are."

"Oh. Good!"

Annie looked to Candice while grinning, then realised what she had

done. Annie shut her mouth as her face turned a bright red.

"Ladies, we're willing to let a lot of things slide. Honestly, having weird copies of yourself running around is the least of our worries. Don't make loads of them, keep it to yourself, pretend you're twins or something, and we aren't going to have any problems. So, were you the ones who made them?"

They remained silent. Green massaged his temples, feigning exasperation. He had them exactly where he wanted them. The outburst had proved they had compassion. Compassion can be used. Compassionate people can be reasoned with. Green had his battle plan.

"Listen, ladies, we need to get something straight. You've likely heard a lot of stories about 'The Man' and what we'll do to you if we catch you. Most of the stories are nonsense, intended to make Artists like you hate us all the more. We're going to let you go, ladies; while you're a part of a problem, neither of you have done anything that goes especially against our agenda. You are reasonably 'underground', to use your jargon, you're quiet about the things you do. You maintain some semblance of normalcy, and really, that's all we give a damn about. Hell, if all Artists were like you, I'd have no problems at all. But they're not. You might not remember what happened, but a lot of people died last night because of the actions of some so-called 'Artists'. Now, you don't particularly strike me as uncaring monsters. Some of the people who died might have been your friends, your family, I don't know. They were someone's family. They were someone's friends."

Green paused for effect. Annie's expression had softened considerably; Candice's face, while still stoic, was no longer a frown. Green felt a wave of triumph. They were putty in his hands.

"Now, we're in a position to stop these people before they hurt anyone else. We have people who can take care of it. But we need to know where they are, and what they're doing, and where they're going. Anything you can tell us is useful. Okay?"

"Okay."

The both of them said the word in unison. Green had won.

"Okay. Cutting to the chase, I've got two really important questions for you, alright? First question: do you know a guy called The Snipper?"

Candice looked to Annie, who was pulling a face of confusion, then answered.

"Never heard of him. If he's got a 'The' at the beginning of his name, he's probably with The Critic's lot."

"Alright. Pretty much confirms what we already knew, but everything is useful. Second question: do you know anyone named Ruiz Duchamp?"

Candice shook her head, but Annie's face lit up with a spark of recognition.

"Oh! I do, yeah! He came to one of our concerts once, he was really nice. Invited me to an exhibition he was holding."

"Can you tell me anything about that exhibition?"

"It was just moving dioramas. Pretty simple, he was acting as though they were amazing. But, like, it was kind of weird… it was in an art gallery."

"Art in an art gallery is weird?"

"It is for most of us. The whole point is, like, breaking out of the system, you know? Not putting stuff on the wall for people to see. He was kind of odd."

Agent Green took down a note on his papers: 'SEARCH ART GALLERIES'.

"That's very useful. Thanks very much, ladies. Sorry about chaining you to chairs and everything."

Candice remained silent; Annie grinned back at him.

"No, no, it's fine! Actually… I'm kind of 'into' this."

Green blushed slightly as he made his way out of the room.

Overgang Dood awoke to find he had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

He attempted to move himself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"Fuuuuuuuuck."

He attempted to loosen the chains. Each time he thought he was free, they pulled into his flesh even more.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu…"

Overgang stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt. Agent Tangerine sat down opposite Overgang, his face utterly neutral.

"…uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck. I did not see that coming."

"You didn't see it the last time, either."

"Damn, Tan, how many times have I been in here?"

"This makes six."

"Shit, what did I do the other times?"

"Oh, all sorts of stuff. Mostly minor."

"And, just remind me… what did I do this time?"

Tangerine sighed.

"I'm not cleared to know, actually, and it's been wiped from all our minds. Downside of working for The Man. But I think you helped."

"That's good, at least. Hey, is this going to take long? I was going to

meet a girl, you know, plans and so forth."

"You'll be out as soon as we get amnestics in. Probably this afternoon."

"Alright, cool."

"You're taking this calmly."

Overgang shrugged.

"It's just the way it is. I get that it's nothing personal, it's your job, whatever. But we're still friends. I know I'm in good hands, Tan. I trust you."

Tangerine's stomach crawled with guilt.

Agent Green was waiting, again, outside of Tangerine's door.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, but like I said, wasn't expecting anything. I know as much as they do."

"Alright. Back on cameras, The Painter's up next."

"Got it."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Eleven, twelve… thirteen. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. The Painter sat and stared at the door.

"About bloody time, I've been sitting here for a fucking age. Ask me the questions and kick me out of here, bitch."

Agent Green formulated a plan immediately, and that plan composed of punching The Painter in the face until he learned some respect. He took that urge and repressed it, then wondered why he was repressing it. His subject was a pampered, impatient, spoilt

artist. He'd likely be very receptive to physical assault.

Time to put the Pain back in Painter.

Green pulled his fist back and drove it sharply into the side of The Painter's jaw. The Painter jerked in his restraints, unable to defend himself. He shook his head, then spat out a dislodged tooth, face contorted in incredulous anger.

"DIDJU JUST FUGGIN PUNCH ME?"

"Shut up, or I'll do it again."

"YOU FUGGIN-"

Green relished the feeling of his knuckles against The Painter's jaw. He spat out another tooth, then adopted the appearance of a scolded puppy, if a scolded puppy had been punched in the face twice and looked like a person.

"Shut. Up."

The Painter whimpered. Green raised his fist again, enjoying the response of further discomfort.

"Two questions. Question number one: what do you know about The Snipper?"

"Heesh a fuggin lunuhtic. Dunno more n' dat."

The Painter spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Two: what do you know about Ruiz Duchamp?"

"Fuggin ashole. Desherves whatsh comin' to him."

"Do you know where either of them are, or might be?"

"I dunno. I dunno."

Green raised his fist.

"I DUNNO! I SHWEAR, I DUNNO SHIT!"

The Painter sputtered blood all over the table. Green turned around to leave.

"…yeh, you walk away, ya bitsh."

Green turned in a fluid motion, whacked his fist against the side of The Painter's skull, and left him hanging limp in his restraints.

Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence awoke to find she had been chained to a metal chair.

"Fuck."

She attempted to move herself; the chair was screwed into the floor.

"FUCK! BITCH FUCKING FUCKBUSTING CUNTLASER FUUUUUUCK!"

She attempted to loosen the chains. Each time she thought she was free, they pulled into her flesh even more.

"COCKSUCKING BITCHTITS WHORE CUNTFUCKING TRANNYBANGING FUCK FUCK TITTYSLUT ANUSPARADE ASSHOLES!"

Arsehole stopped and looked up at the opening door, noticing a familiar hawaiian shirt.

"FUCKING FUCK! CUNTBITCHING CRACKSNIFFING DOGFUCKING MANWHORE! YOU SNAKESCREWING SARSAPARILLA SKULLING SCARABSUCKING SON-OF-A-SEAHORSE! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU, YOU CUNTSTABBING TINYDICK CISGENDERED AUTOMOBILE FUCKING BITCHLICKING SHIT EATING PISS GUZZLING CLOACA TONGUING-"

Agent Tangerine closed the door without entering.

"You didn't even go in that time!"

"We're getting nothing out of her until she's sedated, trust me."

"Alright, you'd know better than I would. Last one, then?"

"Last one, all yours."

Agent Green walked down the corridor as Tangerine returned to the main room. Twenty-one, Twenty-two… Twenty-three. Green pulled his ID card from his pocket, swiped it through the reader, and heard the buzz and click of the opening electronic lock. Rita Summers sat chained to the chair, her long black dress dangling over the chains. She was avidly staring into her lap. Green moved and sat down across from her.

"Miss Rita Summers."

"That's me."

"I'd like to ask you some questions."

"I'd not like to answer them."

Rita continued staring into her lap. Green tapped his fingers impatiently on the table.

"Miss Summers, I've read your file. Two years until you finish school, perfect scores in every test. You're smart; hell, under different circumstances we'd be offering you a job."

"I'd not accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because, Agent Green, I don't care for what you do. I'd not do it out of misguided obligation, and whatever you pay is below my paygrade."

Green realised she knew his name. She must have caught a glimpse of his ID as he came in. Green knew how to deal with 'geniuses' with the whole 'unfettered' thing going. Physical threats could help, but Green didn't want to punch a schoolgirl. He feigned shock.

"How did you know my name?"

Rita looked up from her skirt, sneering condescendingly.

"It was on your ID, idiot."

Green, continuing the charade, moved uncomfortably in his seat, brushing an errant itch on his neck.

"Ah. Well, very observant of you, Miss Summers. Now, I'm hoping you might reconsider answering some questions for me. People could be in a lot of danger if you don't."

"Why should I care?"

"You should care, Miss Summers, because you are a subset of people."

"Oh, I'm so scared. Go ahead, torture me, do whatever."

"No, Miss Summers, there's no need for that. How would you like to wake up and have forgotten how to add? Or spell? Or tie your shoes?"

Rita cackled.

"Oh, that's great. Threats, yeah, that'll work. No, Agent Green, I don't think you're in any position to be making threats."

"You're tied to a chair, Miss Summers. My threats can be backed… up… with…"

Agent Green felt his throat tighten. He scratched his neck, feeling a growing bump.

"What… you…"

"Agent Green, you've officially lost control of the situation. Same thing's happening out there to your comrade Agent Tangerine."

Agent Green swore under his breath. He reached for his gun, and then his arms stopped moving. He tried to stand, but his muscles did

nothing. She wasn't just any artist, she could be a reality bender, something had been missed; his mind buzzed with hypotheticals and escape plans. Rita stood up, chains clinking loosely to the ground.

"Three words, Agent Green: invisible trained spiders. You've been injected with a paralytic. You should be able to move in a few hours, no long-term effects; I'm not a monster."

Rita reached into Green's pocket and pulled out his ID card.

"I could lock you and Agent Tangerine in here, if I wanted. No ID, nobody knowing this happened. You'd slowly starve to death. But I won't do that, because hell, imprisoning people against their will? Kind of a dick move. What kind of person would do something like that?"

Rita walked to the door, buzzing the lock open and leaving it ajar.

"I'll be taking my leave now."

Rita walked down the corridor confidently, brushing down her crumpled black dress. She slid the card through every reader as she passed, flinging the doors open one by one and checking inside. The first person she saw was

"PANDA-KILLING FUCK SUCKING-"

"Oi, I'm here to get you out."

"Oh. Rita. Hurry up then."

Invisible spiders gnawed the chains off with acidic venom.

"Alright, where the fuck is Tan, I've gotta beat the shit out of that backstabbing asshole."

"No beating the shit out of anyone, A-hole. They've been taken care of."

The next door had The Painter sitting behind it, still unconscious with a bloody mouth. Rita looked to Arsehole. They knew what he'd

been planning. They knew what he was a part of. They weren't happy. Arsehole grinned, Rita sighed.

"Well, okay. One punch, that's it."

Arsehole ran towards The Painter, driving her fist into his face and breaking his jaw. He woke up screaming from the pain. Arsehole walked out happily and locked the door behind her.

The next person they found was Overgang. Rita grinned, Overgang tilted his head.

"Wait, are we breaking out? Is this a thing we're doing?"

"Yup!"

"Well, no complaints here."

The restraints fell; Overgang rubbed his wrists with his hands. They moved as a group to the next door; Annie and Candice were chattering behind. Annie turned to the door as it swung open.

"Oh. Hey guys, what's up?"

"I'm breaking everyone out. Wanna come?"

"May as well, it's a bit cramped in here anyway."

Their chains clanked down, they moved past the table and joined the group. They continued opening doors until the found cell number five.

"Joey! What's wrong? What did they do?"

Joey Tamlin looked up at the group, tears slowly drying.

"Did I have a sister?"

The group of them shared looks of confusion, then apprehension. Overgang walked to the front.

"Yeah, Joey. Yeah, you did. Tan brought you home one day and told us all to drop the subject. Doesn't take a genius to figure out what

happened, now we know who he is. Now's not the time to talk about this, though, we're getting out, and you're coming with us."

Arsehole shouted from the back.

"Don't worry, we're gonna beat the shit out of him!"

"Don't listen to her, Joey. Beating the shit out of him is up to you."

Joey felt the chains loosen and shook them off.

"No. Tan helped me. I don't remember, but by the sounds of it, it's better that way."

"You gonna be okay, man?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Let's get out of here."

Joey walked out the door and joined the small crowd; the corridor was getting somewhat cramped. Rita walked to the next door, swinging it open to see an empty room, and then the next door, finding The Builder squirming against his restraints. He looked up at them, hopeful. The group turned to one another, sharing frowns. The Builder shouted in fear.

"NO, WAIT!"

Rita slammed the door shut, shaking her head in disbelief. The group walked out into the main room. Arsehole walked over to the gun cabinet, pulling it open and filling the pockets of her jeans with five pistols each. Overgang walked over to the computer; Tangerine was still sitting immobile at the desk.

"Sorry Tan, you're in the way."

Overgang moved Tangerine's body to the ground carefully, then sat down and cracked his fingers.

"Let's see what we're running with… standard DOS running, here… hah! Hey, Joey, you know that game I had messing up last night?"

"Yeah?"

"They've got it in here! Still stuck on your name, dunno why… should be funny when they find the antipiracy, though. Alright, let's wipe some stuff from their database…"

Overgang continued clacking the keyboard; Arsehole had already run up the stairwell with Rita, Candice, and Annie. Joey walked over to Tangerine's body, sitting it up against a wall. His eyes were open, but whether he was still conscious inside his brain, Joey couldn't tell.

"Sorry about this, Tan. I know you did it for the right reasons, and… you're a good friend. But you're still a spy, man! You've been spying on all of us. That's just not cool, you know?"

Tangerine remained silent, having no choice in the matter.

"We're going to have to move away, now, Molly and me. We'll be telling everyone about you. Everyone's going to know your face, Tan, and when they see it they'll keep their lips shut and walk away. I thought you were one of us, but… you aren't. There's no half-assing it. My sister, man, I don't even remember her existing. I don't remember a damn thing."

Joey pushed Tangerine's body to the side carelessly.

"You fucked us over, Tan, and you fucked me over."

Joey kicked Tangerine in the stomach.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE ONE OF US!"

Joey kicked again.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE AN ARTIST!"

Joey kicked higher, expelling the breath from his lungs.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE COOL!"

Joey went to kick again, but Overgang grabbed his arm.

"We're done here, Joey. Everything they've got on us is gone, everything's deleted."

"The records, yeah. But he remembers."

They looked at Tangerine's immobile body, hawaiian shirt crumpled from the impacts.

"Fuck it, it doesn't matter. Let's get out of here, Joey. We're done."

Overgang walked Joey to the stairwell, leaving the body lying still in the dimly lit room.

Tangerine cried a single tear before passing out from pain.

the second of first starts at the end
The second of second trifurcates.
The Above Is Split In Seven
LESSERS LIKE THE WHOLE

« **Empty Unmarked Grave** | **Hub** | **Disposal And Discourse** »

Deus Vult

The full moon shone brightly upon the dense canopy of the virgin forest, faint beams of moonlight reaching through to the earth below. A gentle summer's breeze raked the treetops, warming the creatures that had gathered in the clearing by the lake. Hundreds of animals had formed a semi-circle around the great rock which ancient paws had carved. The air was full of the chatter of countless species, producing a din the likes of which were seldom heard in those empty lands. Wolves and bears rubbed shoulders with deer and horses while rats and weasels scurried underfoot. In the trees, the creatures of the air perched attentively—eagles and pigeons, hawks and gulls, falcons and crows, owls and bluejays. A few of those animals that could do so carried torches, for the benefit of those animals whose night vision was not as keen as the rest. A silence fell over the assembled beasts as a wolf, ancient and scarred yet almost regal in its disposition, approached the rock and began to howl and bark at the assembly. Any man who happened to pass through those woods would have heard nothing more than the cries of an animal—but courtesy of whatever miracle had brought these creatures together in ancient time, the animals who stood in that clearing understood every syllable from the wolf's maw.

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!" howled the wolf. "Bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciaries, foresters, sheriffs, stewards, servants, and to all bailiffs and liege subjects of the realm! It is my honor to present to you, his Royal Highness, by the Grace of God, King of the Forest, Lord of the Plains, Duke of the Grand Fir and the Undergrowth, Count of the Swamp, Margrave of the Hills, Warden of All the Streams and Rivers, and Lord Protector of the Cities of Man, Defender of the Faith, and so on, and so on, and so on, King Andrew the Fourth."

The animals assembled on the ground fell to their knees and laid their heads on the ground, and the birds tucked their heads into their breasts, as King Andrew IV trotted into sight atop the great rock. The

king was a young fox, having barely been a yearling when his father Eugenio VII was killed by barbarians the previous year. He wore no adornments but a simple crown upon his head, the same that had been passed down from king to king since the days of the Exodus. A moment passed in silence as Andrew surveyed the crowd before him, and gestured for his herald to come near. Those who dared to look upward at his majesty would have seen a look of awe and terror on the wolf's face as Andrew chuffled silently to him.

"And may I further present," the wolf cried hesitantly, "as his majesty's guest for the evening—His Holiness, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman province, Sovereign of the State of the Vatican City, Servant of the Servants of God, Pope Innocent the Twenty-Seventh."

The contrast between Andrew and Pope Innocent could not have been more obvious as the deer climbed to the top of the stone and stood beside the king. Unlike the simple crown Andrew wore, Innocent was covered head to toe in elaborate vestments, the finest that the raccoons and apes of the land could sew, and a miter nearly half a meter tall, bedecked with gold and jewels, rested between his antlers. The assembled animals rose to their feet with reverence as Andrew nodded, and Innocent touched his snout to his chest three times, making the sign of the cross as best he could.

"Our friends!" Andrew began, barking as loud as he could so that he could be heard by all the animals. "Knights, nobles, peers of the realm, and peasants and serfs alike—hear us this night, for a threat has come to our lands that imperils not only our nation, but all of Christendom itself! Not since the time of the Exodus have our people known such an enemy as the heathens which now return to this land to resume their ancient debaucheries—the vile forces of the nation of *man.*"

A commotion arose from the crowd at the mention of that last word. Cries of doubt and skepticism arose from the masses. "Who among you recall the tales you were taught as children?" Pope Innocent called out, silencing the crowd. "As surely as every word of the Holy Scripture is true, so are those stories true—for before the coming of

plagues and the scourging of the Earth, every corner of the world was ruled over by the kingdom of man. Though they claimed to follow Christ—for Christ Himself delivered His Gospel first to man before we of the forests came to know it—they had grown bold and arrogant, and knew not the true teachings of the church of their fathers. And believing that nothing existed that could not be seen, they enslaved your ancestors, the true followers of Christ, and kept them in their prisons while sinners and Protestants roamed free across these forests.

"But your ancestors kept the faith, and God rewarded them. For just as He scourged the Earth of wickedness and spared Noah, so He cleansed the Earth of mankind, and again we were free to sing the songs of the Lord and be fruitful."

"For six hundred years," King Andrew proclaimed, "no man has been seen in our forest. But not a fortnight ago, the Duke of the West Reach and his knights vanished while surveying the eastern reaches. Baron Simon and his eagles were dispatched to seek out any trace of them—and when they caught a whiff of roasted venison —" he paused as the animals reacted to the horror of imagining the good Duke roasted for food—"he spotted the men who had taken our knights and cut them limb from limb, to roast alive and feast upon, and the great heathen temple they have erected—forged from the wood of our own trees which they have felled, and built on the very spot of King Edward I's final victory over the Protestant horde!"

"The humble mice who scouted their shrine have witnessed the proof that even the divine wrath of God was insufficient to convince these men of their sinful nature," the Pope shouted. "They have built a thing of mockery, in the style of the ancient cathedrals men built before they lost their way—but this is not a place of God. They worship a man who they claim died and rose again, but this man was known to your ancestors during the Captivity as little more than a conjurer of cheap tricks, his only gifts coming from a simple trinket that no doubt was forged by the Devil himself! They have made idols out of their ancient books that they parrot without understanding, and wear the icons of the ancient despoilers upon their gowns! These men are no friends to Christ or to Christendom—and with our nation, there can be no hope of alliance."

"The east has fallen to these heretics already!" Andrew shouted. "They have already slain the good Duke and his knights. If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impunity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them! They will make this land their own! They will take from us that which we have for centuries tended and built! They will give no quarter for women and children, and nothing shall await you but the plow—or the spit! Whatever petty quarrels you have had amongst yourselves, this is the time to forget them—for now we face a greater foe!"

Pope Innocent lowered his voice as he exhorted the crowd. "Let those who have been accustomed unjustly to wage private warfare against the faithful now go against the infidels and end with victory this war which should have been begun long ago. Let those who for a long time, have been robbers, now become knights. Let those who have been fighting against their brothers and relatives now fight in a proper way against the barbarians. Let those who have been serving as mercenaries for small pay now obtain the eternal reward. In ancient time, the righteous among mankind waged wars of the cross against the heathens of their day. I, or rather the Lord, beseech you now—take up tooth and claw, and prepare for crusade! So your Church wills it!"

"So your king wills it!" cried Andrew.

"So *God* wills it!" responded Innocent.

"God wills it! God wills it! God wills it!" The cry of the crowd reached from treetop to treetop, echoing throughout the forest.

—-

The grass crackled under Brother Gareth's sandals as he trod down the overgrown trail that had, centures before, been a massive highway. His eyes darted constantly along the treeline, watching for any movement in the undergrowth. He was not accustomed to loneliness, for Overwatch was always teeming with hundreds of doctors and priests and D-Castes. Out here, loneliness was both a curse and a boon, for at least it meant he had thus far eluded the enemy's spies. The Holy Amulet, wrapped in a strip of hide for his protection, drummed against his chest under his thick brown robe.

He held his hand against his chest to steady it, tracing its patterns through the fabric as he said a quick prayer to the man within.

It had been nine days since Cardinal Andrews had told him to leave Overwatch Cathedral alone and take the Amulet east to Shyton for safekeeping. Thanks to the Neutralizationist zealots who had breached the Peace of Westmont when they attacked and reclaimed the Seventy-Third chapel, the tensions between the Holy Foundation and "the kingdom of Romania Nova", as the "liberated" men whose homes had fallen under its rule called it, had erupted into the sixth crusade in thirty years against the animals and their strange religion that honored neither the Lord Bright nor His saints and prophets. The animal forces had gained ground and had been within a day's march of Overwatch itself when he left. That the Holy Foundation would win the day, he had no doubt; but the Amulet was not safe so close to those creatures that regarded it as no better than the rest of the demons that haunted the world.

Gareth paused a moment and sat on a log to drink from his waterskin. His body ached from the long walk, and his head was heavy. There were not known to be any of the demon-possessed beasts in these woods, but one could never tell from appearances whether the crow or the deer or the mouse skittering along the road was just concerned with its next meal, or whether it was watching and reporting to its superiors. He had rested little, and slept even less. A few more days and he and his burden would be safe behind the great walls of Shyton, the sea at his back. Safe to relax, and rest, and…

Gareth recoiled in shock and horror as something touched his shoulder, awakening him from the slumber he had fallen into. He had slipped up, and it had cost him. Dazed by the midday sun as his eyes darted open, he stumbled around to face the thing that had accosted him, reaching as he did so for the knife on his belt.

"Forgive me, friend," said the traveler in black who stood before him. "I meant only to ensure that you were well."

"I… I'm sorry," Gareth said as he lowered his knife. "I haven't seen anyone on the road in days. I feared I was under attack."

"Understandable," the man replied. "These are… dangerous times, and few would dare this lonely road. What brings you this way?"

"I am…" Gareth searched his head for a lie to conceal the nature of his mission. "I am a humble sculptor on my way to Strait City, in search of work and a patron. There is little call in the western lands for a man of my profession, on account of the war."

"Indeed?" the traveler said. "It is the war that calls me westward. What news have you heard from the front?"

"Very little," Gareth said, hoping to put an end to the man's uncomfortable questioning. "I try not to concern myself greatly with matters of church and state."

"You must have some opinion," the man said. "Are you one of the Traditionalists who holds that the Scripture is inerrant? Or are you a Neutralizationist, believing that the Holy Containment Procedures must be rewritten, and the church ought to destroy the demons rather than imprisoning them? Or perhaps your sentiments lie with the animals and their God?"

"I know nothing of the theological disputes the church is having amongst itself, friend," Gareth said.

"I am all too familiar with them, sir sculptor," said the traveler. "Many years ago I was occupied all my days in observing and recording their petty squabbles. But now I am… free of that obligation." Gareth noticed for the first time the notch carved into the man's left ear—the mark of a slave sold to the Foundation, or an outlaw taken by its knights for his crimes, and pressed into the D-Caste. "Now I am engaged in a different sort of occupation."

"And what might that be?"

"I was seeking a man traveling this very road," the man said as Gareth's worst fears were realized. "I was asked to find a churchman carrying a very special object to Shyton."

"I have seen not a soul since I passed St. Lament," Gareth lied. "and there are certainly no men of the cloth in that disreputable city.

Where did you hear such a ridiculous thing?"

"A little bird told me," the man said with a grin.

"Well, best of luck to you then," Gareth said, "but I have lost enough time and should be on my way."

Gareth's heart sank as the man stood in his path and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I must ask a simple thing of you, my friend. I was told that the man I sought wore a particular object around his neck. Might you permit me to see what hangs on the chain you are wearing?"

"It is a simple mememto, good sir, and you have no right to accost me about it. Now please unhand me."

"Be reasonable," said the escaped slave. "If you are not the man I seek, then I mean you no harm, but I must know for certain." The man reached for Gareth's necklace and grasped the chain. In a flash, Gareth drew his knife from its sheath and plunged it into the man's stomach. He gasped as the blade found home, his grip on Gareth loosening as Gareth drew the blade out and stabbed home again and again.

"Forgive me, huntsman," Gareth said as the man fell to his knees, "but I can allow none to stand in the way of the Lord's work."

"And forgive me, doctor," the hunter said as he struggled for breath, "but none *can* stand in the way of the one true God. *Laudate Deum!*"

Gareth never heard the wolf coming until it lunged at him from behind, knocking him to the ground like a rag doll. He tried to turn and attack it with his knife, but the jaws of the beast found his wrist and his weapon dropped to the ground. Another wolf was on him in an instant, and soon the air was filled with the chatter of lesser creatures gathering all around him. The last thing he felt before he lapsed into unconsciousness was the chain around his neck snapping as one of the dogs pulled it from him.

—-

"This is your fault, Second," the Seventh said. "We should have sent

a knight, or better yet, a whole company."

"We all agreed that would draw too much attention! A lone traveler was less apt to be noticed by their spies."

In the chamber above, a D-Caste draws a handmade shiv from his robes and stabs a guardsman through the heart.

"And yet he was found, Second. And he is dead, and the Holy Amulet missing. The evidence is incontrovertible—the Lord Bright is *in partibus infidelium*. The time for debate and inaction is over. I demand that the Council immediately order the commission of Procedure Escheat against all lands occupied by the animals, in accordance with Holy Containment Procedure 1845, and neutralize them once and for all."

"You would escalate this crusade even further?" the Third asked. "It was your Neutralizationist nonsense that got us into this predicament!"

The two watchmen guarding the armory are no match for the dozen D-Caste that attack them. In the dark, they arm themselves.

"Lord Bright never intended the Holy Containment Procedures to be unchanged forever," the Seventh said. "It is known that the ancients changed them constantly. Nor did he mean for no demon to ever be destroyed—else He would not have left us the instructions to do so. It was right that we attacked the Seventy-Third chapel and destroyed the world-of-snow, for if they had learned to make it work a great doom would have befallen us."

"Each of the 'demons', as you call them," rebutted the Third, "is a unique creation and a memory of the ancient world! There will never be another like it, and each one you destroy takes us one step further from re-learning that which has been lost!"

The guardhouses are taken, and the sleeping soldiers are easily locked in their barracks and kept out of trouble. The D-Caste close the gates and seal the front door of the cathedral and begin to make their way into the catacombs.

"If Lord Bright is truly among the heathens," the Thirteenth said, "perhaps He will be able to make them see the error of their ways. We must allow him time to win them over to the church."

"Can we afford to take that chance?" the Seventh asked. "Every missionary we send into their lands ends up dead. Every city they win from us, they tear down our chapels and burn our Holy Doctors alive. They would just as soon destroy the Holy Amulet—and deny us the guidance and counsel of our Lord for all time—as listen to Him!"

"This is heresy! If we do as you propose, we would be just as likely to destroy the Amulet ourselves, or lose it forever in the chaos! I'm sure you Neutralizationists would love nothing more but than to be rid of our Lord as well, but-"

"Gentlemen!" The First shouted. "This is not the time or place to argue the merits of Neutralizationism! The Seventh has made a proposal—let us vote on it in the traditional manner."

"Nay!" the Third said. "I shall keep no secret of where I stand on this issue—and may no other man or woman in this room fail to do the same."

Outside the meeting hall, the Omega Guard, swords and crossbows in hand, stare down two dozen orange-robed D-Castes with steel of their own. The sergeant nods to his men, and the guards lay down their weapons. The leader of the D-Caste smiles.

"The matter has been decided, Seventh," said the First. "The vote stands nine to four. This Council will not act to neutralize the animals at this time."

"Then I and my compatriots have nothing further to say at this time," the Seventh said as he rose to his feet with the Ninth, Fourth, and Twelfth. "We shall be taking our leave. Guard, open the door."

No sooner had the door guard begun the traditional knock than the door began to slide open. The four walked towards the door—as dozens of D-Caste, armed to the teeth, swarmed in and formed a circle around them. The door guards barely had time to draw their

swords before the rebellious slaves' steel felled them - and, blood on their swords, they stared down the remaining members of the Council still at their desks.

"What is the meaning of this?" the First shouted. "This is heresy! This is treason!"

"This is the tide of progress overwhelming tradition," the Seventh said as he turned to the leader of the group. "Take these milquetoasts to the dungeon, and then send the word that the ancient fire is to be released into the western lands. Burn the forests. Burn the prairies. Burn the villages. Drive every last one of those animals out, and every last man who sides with them. Kill them all—the Lord Bright will know His own."

—-

The wind blew lazily over the barren hillside that weeks before had been verdant and full of life. Only a few blades of grass, here and there, erupted from the scorched moonscape. Nothing stood but the blackened stumps of great trees. Great mounds of ash scattered in the wind, the remnants of those animals the knights had gathered up and incinerated en masse. For hundreds of kilometers the devastation extended, a testament to the greatest fire the world had seen since the Great Breach itself.

In the skies above, a lone crow glided in search of food. It was a long way from its home and knew nothing of what doom had befallen this place—it knew only that it was hungry and could find no food. Its eye caught a glint of light in a hollow hundreds of feet below. It was too shiny to be food, but perhaps another animal had been hoarding whatever it could find and had stashed the shiny object with some nuts or acorns? After determining that whatever creature had stashed the gleaming thing was nowhere in sight and would cause no trouble, it swooped down to investigate its find.

The crow dug at the ground around the piece of metal that protruded from the ground. It wasn't food, nor was it even one of the things that humans sometimes stored food in—just one of the shiny little baubles they liked to wear. Disappointedly, the crow nudged it aside to see if there was anything underneath.

Well, it thought to itself, *this is certainly different.*

Deus Vulture

Captain Sarah Hughes felt ill-at-ease, standing in the center of the lobby as scientists, engineers, programmers, and mathematicians streamed around her; a lone figure in a sea of geniuses.

"Ms. Hughes?"

She turned to face the speaker, a slender Russian man in a crisp suit and tie walking towards her.

"Simon Pietrykau, director of the Department of Analytics. Pleasure to meet you," he said, shaking her hand.

"Captain Sarah Hughes, a pleasure," she responded.

"Let's get started," Pietrykau said. He led her down several winding corridors until they stopped in front of a nondescript blank door with a card reader next to it. Simon pulled a card from his pocket, swiped it through, and stepped through the door. Hughes followed him and was suddenly accosted by the sight of dozens of people flitting through an enormous, steel-and-glass atrium. Holographic screens, personal assistant robotics, and all kinds of futuristic technology populated the room.

"Tell me, Captain… what do you know about eigenweapons?"

The two of them sat inside a small conference room off in one corner of the atrium, with a projector playing a slideshow in front of them.

"As long as mankind has existed, no human endeavor has hosted as much ingenuity, creativity, brilliance, or imagination as weapons development. Since the first ape picked up a rock to bash his rival's

brains out, we've been building bigger, better, and flashier ways to carve holes in each other," Pietrykau said. "And like all such endeavors, it inevitably culminated in the anomalous - the *eigenweapon*. In this context, an eigenweapon, also known as a *superweapon* or *wonder weapon*, is defined as a weapon that is either of anomalous origin or incorporates occult slash paratechnology for mass destruction. It is effectively a fourth category of WMD."

Pietrykau clicked through a series of slides showcasing various anomalies while he talked.

"Anomalous artillery and paraweaponry is nothing new; people have been building golems and throwing spells around since the beginning of time. But the modern age of eigenweaponry - really, the age of eigenweaponry in general - began with the *industrialization* of the anomalous. In 1942, shortly after the Allies retook Africa, the Nazis got nervous and resorted to occult means to ensure the success of their Third Reich," Pietrykau said, clicking to the next slide to show a grainy, black-and-white photo of several hooded figures wearing cloaks with swastika badges.

"From what we can gather, the Thule and SS occultists uncovered some ancient ritual to summon… something," said Pietrykau. "Nobody was actually certain what, but if the Nazis wanted to summon it, then you can be damn sure the rest of the world wanted to make sure they didn't. The Seventh Occult War was really just a glorified scavenger hunt - the Allies and even some Axis mages working together to stop the Third Reich from acquiring the relics they'd need to complete the ritual."

He sighed.

"The Allies won both Wars, otherwise we'd probably be speaking Deutsch in some camp right now… but the thing is," he said, "the Germans still completed the ritual - and that's all we know. We have no idea what came from of the ritual or how the Allies destroyed it. The only reason we know it exists is because they didn't expunge the memory that it HAD existed. God only knows why." Pietrykau threw one of his hands to the side in an accusing gesture. "Presumably it was to warn us against trying to replicate it, but if so

that was a terrible way to go about it. And even after they killed 'it', nobody could actually find the relics afterwards, not even fragments. It simply vanished - and nobody cared."

Pietrykau chuckled dryly.

"Sums up the attitude to eigenweapons in general. Nobody was paying attention to the world-ending threats because they were too damn focused on building their own. With all that power up for the taking, something as small as the threat of total global annihilation wasn't going to stop anybody. Especially not the CCCP. Stalin was so far up his own ass that he wanted to use anomalies to spread the Red Menace. That was the genesis of Project Redline."

"Redline?" Hughes asked.

"Redline. The world's second eigenweapon, developed by the Soviet Union. I led the team that created it," Pietrykau declared with a hint of pride. He clicked to the next slide, showing a picture of a flat concrete building. "Stalin wanted a weapon that could brainwash people into becoming Communists, and damn the cost. The Division wanted to create a brighter future for mankind - so we built a weapon to brainwash people into pacifism by kidnapping and electrocuting children to unlock their psychic potential. Because that was what passed for logic during the Cold War," Pietrykau snorted, shaking his head.

Hughes nearly heaved at the next picture - a grotesque, nightmarish mass of legs and arms sticking out of a bloated child-sized torso, topped by a misshapen head with three unhappy faces. It was strapped into a plastic dentist's chair, surrounded by sharp medical instruments and grim-looking scientists.

Pietrykau clicked his tongue. "Even madder, the thing actually worked. Redline could turn entire gulags full of political dissidents into perfect passive puppets. And when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened, we fired it on Washington and Moscow. It worked all too well - Khrushchev had Redline shut down. The Division didn't like that. They decided to turn it into a weapon of conquest."

The next slide showed a picture of a **massive rainbow-**

colored bubble in the middle of a frozen tundra.

"So that turned out all right. After the Cuban Missile Crisis happened and Redline was put on ice, eigenweaponry development stagnated. That's not to say people stopped using anomalous artillery; on the contrary, paraweaponry abounded. Demon-guided munitions in Korea, hunter-killer locusts in Vietnam, Mandelbrot vacuums in Afghanistan, basilisk grenades in the Gulf… the list goes on. But eigenweapons? The Americans made **a few more half-assed tries** in the eighties, but they failed and forced us to clean up their mess. It would be over thirty years before anyone figured out how to make eigenweapons not just practical, but profitable."

Pietrykau clicked to the next slide and Hughes' jaw dropped. The picture onscreen was of a gigantic, floating eye, rotated on its side. The central pupil was composed of innumerable camera lenses, laser apertures, and weapon barrels. An incandescent pink torus made up the iris. Surrounding the iris was a featureless, blue- and white-striped surface. Six silver arms hovered on the left and right of the eye. Suspended just out of reach of each arm was a single, silver-and-blue spherical palm with four rectangular fingers.

"In 1998, Prometheus Laboratories developed the world's first *practical* eigenweapon: the PL-76 Shiva, a sapient war machine that cost the same as a B-2 stealth bomber. Enough firepower to level a continent without leveling your bank account."

"Prometheus Labs made *that*?" Hughes asked.

"Indeed," Pietrykau responded. He made a knowing face. "Tell me, what do you know about Prometheus Laboratories?"

"Umm, high-profile scientific corporation. Did a little bit of everything…? Used a lot of anomalous tech in their products… most of it didn't work that well," Hughes responded cautiously.

"And where did you learn this information?"

"Ah… the internet, **the Foundation file** -"

"Ah yes, the Foundation file," Pietrykau cut her off. "With the

advertising transcript, correct? Here's the dirty little secret that every member of Analytics needs to know." He leaned down to retrieve a folder from his briefcase, then slid it over the table to Hughes.

This document is classified Level 5/ Analytics. Unauthorized access is considered treason and is punishable by administration of Behemoth-class amnestics or execution.

1. **Code Name:** Operation EMERALD LUPUS
2. **Dates of Operation:** 03/09/1998 - Ongoing
3. **Location:** Worldwide

4. **Objective:** Assert materiel and information control over the assets of the former Prometheus Labs conglomeration as part of Operation BYRON FUTURE.

Task Organization:

1. *Asset Acquisition:* Foundation front companies will endeavor to purchase all assets being liquidated by the former Prometheus Labs conglomerate. This acquisition will be overseen by the Department of Analytics. Mobile Task Forces may be commandeered to acquire assets when legal purchase is nonviable or when other Groups of Interest are competing to acquire said assets.

2. *Paratech Forecasting:* The Division of Statistical Prediction will continue to investigate, instigate, and exploit trends in the global paratechnology market as they appear. This will enable continued proactivity on the part of the Foundation in controlling the distribution of anomalies into the global marketplace.

3. *Information Control:* The Division of Informational Security will manipulate global and internal media and information to provide the impression of incompetence on the part of Prometheus Laboratories. Defective Prometheus Labs assets may be given anomalous status and internal documentation modified to reinforce this control. A continued campaign will make Prometheus Labs assets less desirable to external paratechnology and obsotechnology interests, facilitating the increased success of Task 1.

Hughes looked up at Pietrykau. "So you're telling me…?"

"Prometheus Labs would have never survived for over a century if they weren't good at what they do," he answered. "The truth of the matter, Captain, is that the Foundation managed to convince the whole world that Prometheus Labs were incompetent mad scientists so we could steal all of their work. It remains one of the greatest single Maskirovkas of the modern age."

Pietrykau gave a short bark of laughter. "**The day after the PL-76 was unveiled**, the GOC and Chaos Insurgency both tried to steal it for themselves and somehow **opened up a portal to hell** at the center of the base. Defense wasn't just turned into a crater on the map. From what we can gather, the entire facility - all of its its projects, people, and knowledge - was quite literally transformed into information and uploaded into the world's safest external hard drive: the Shiva."

Hughes tried to process this information and decided to go with the simplest question. "So what happened to the Shiva?"

"It disappeared." Pietrykau gave a slight shrug. "In the aftermath and confusion, quite a few of Prometheus' remaining assets went… missing, and several of its subsidiaries suffered from so-called accidents. That was how the postmillennial age of eigenweaponry began: a half-dozen different organizations trying to cobble something together from stolen research and paratechnology. All of us trying to get ahold of the next big *thing* that would make the rest of the anomalous world quake in their extradimensional boots.

The Global Occult Coalition assembled something codenamed Gaius Prime - all we know about it is that they sent it to Siberia in 2000 to kill Project Redline and *succeeded*. By 2001, the Church of the Broken God had no less than three mechanical messiahs, who ended up excommunicating and then killing each other. When we salvaged Samsara in '02, we had this grand plan of making them the template for all our future Task Forces. The trouble is that the equipment we salvaged was damaged, so all we could do with them was test offensive paratech and handle thaumaturgic threats. Even that bloody gentleman's club, Marshall, Carter, and Dark, got in on the fray: they got their hands on **an oracle to predict the stock market**. As I recall, Samsara's second-ever mission, just before you were assigned to them, was to steal it."

Pietrykau clicked to the next slide. On the screen, a gigantic, four-limbed man that appeared to be made of rock was caught in mid-charge towards a collection of massive, ornate orbs surrounded in flames and suspended in midair. Hundreds of people were in the foreground of the image, all of them like ants watching the two behemoths duke it out.

"The arms race came to a head in 2004 with the First Eigenweapon Crisis. That year, the ORIA built themselves a thaumaturgic android codenamed Ifrit. It could fly, shoot fire, whip up hurricane-sized sandstorms… and sermonize. See those orbs? Every single one of them contained the brain of a priest. The Iranians sent it to India, probably so they could blame the Pakistanis and take advantage of the ensuing conflict. They had built a god in almost every sense of the word - and then used it to start a proxy war. "

Pietrykau looked disgusted by the memory. "The Horizon Initiative was less than pleased by this and took matters into their own hands. They were working on their own eigenweapons project - an absolutely enormous golem, even by the standards of golems, mind you - and deployed it to kill the Ifrit. In the process, the two reshaped the Indian coastline. Whatever the hell was powering those things, we couldn't put a dent in them."

"Then how *did* you destroy them?" Hughes asked, leaning forward.

Pietrykau chuckled. "We didn't."

The next picture also showed the orbs, but they were now extinguished and half-buried on a beach, with the tide pulling away in the background.

"I can only call what finally did them in an act of God," Pietrykau said. "But the aftermath… the Veil was torn to shreds and nobody had a sewing kit. Amnestics, PARAKEETS, antimemetics, you name it, we used it. A century's stockpile of the best mind-wiping tools known to man - gone in a flash."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Hughes was about to ask about the logistics of amnesticizing the whole world, then thought better of it.

"The only good thing about the Crisis was that it finally knocked some sense into everyone's heads," Pietrykau said. "A month after the crisis ended, the Coalition convened the Third Hague Conference and managed to corral all the major anomalous powers into disarming and deactivating their eigenweapons. Almost assuredly everyone who signed did so with crossed fingers, but much like nuclear weapons, nobody wanted to be the first to push the button. All we had to do was make sure things stayed that way."

A thought struck Hughes. "What about Able?"

Pietrykau snorted. "Omega-7 was the degenerate brainchild of an American general with an anomalous erection. The Yanks were all too happy to let us cover it up. We got off easy."

Then another thought struck Hughes."*First* Eigenweapon Crisis?"

Pietrykau clicked his tongue. "As of six months ago, the number of active eigenweapons increased to one."

He played a video on the projector. Onscreen, a young Japanese man stood in the middle of a barren field.

"In June, we determined that IJAMEA - the Japanese department of anomalous research - was developing an eigenweapon codenamed Oyamitsumi."

Onscreen, the Japanese man closed his eyes and stood there. Then

his skin began to bubble and ripple, changing color from a pale tan to a deep purple and bulging outwards. A helmet and facemask burst forward from the sides of the man's head and slid over his face. A sharp, block-like weave pattern emerged on the skin around his arms and legs, granting it a distinctly mechanical appearance. Two smaller arms burst out from underneath the man's armpits, but there were simply holes where the hands should have been.

"From what intelligence has been able to gather, Oyamitsumi was the first production-ready model of a new bio-mechanical force-multiplying armored endoskeleton. All the power of a GOC Orange super suit… grafted to a person's bones." Hughes could hear the admiration in Pietrykau's voice. "Twin auto-aiming plasma railguns underneath the regular arms. Armor tough enough to withstand a direct hit from Hellfire missiles. Strong enough to lift a tank. It was fast, too."

The man onscreen had ceased to look like a man and now looked more like a purple Transformers action figure. Numerous tanks rolled into view around him and then stopped. Their cannons bellowed as Oyamitsumi was bombarded on all sides and then engulfed in smoke. While the smoke cleared, the men inside the tanks clambered from their vehicles and fled from view. Oyamitsumi strode out of the smoke towards a tank, completely unscathed. He disappeared behind it, and then the tank was suddenly hoisted into the air as if it were tissue paper and thrown at another one. Behind it, Oyamitsumi's railguns began swiveling and firing. Within seconds there were only chunks of scorched metal left.

Hughes was so caught up in the spectacle that she almost missed Pietrykau's word choice. Almost.

"Was?" she asked.

"Was," Pietrykau confirmed. Onscreen, an Asian woman in a plain black dress walked into view. At first she looked perfectly normal - if incredibly out of place - and then her body suddenly exploded into a million tiny worms, all writhing around themselves and squirming and making up the general body shape of a person.

As the creature stared at Oyamitsumi, he appeared to crumple

inwards on himself. The railguns at his side forced themselves back into his body, displacing his internal organs in the process. Then his head quite literally bent over and stuffed itself into his stomach, before his legs, arms, and torso followed suit. Then the stomach simply ceased to exist onscreen. Hughes blinked and suddenly the humanoid mass of worms ceased to be a worm and started being a woman again. It walked offscreen, and then the video cut to black.

"What the hell was that?!" Hughes exclaimed. She looked to Pietrykau.

"At 0900 hours on June 16, Oyamitsumi was destroyed by what we have determined is another eigenweapon of unknown origin, based on its deliberate choice of targets and clear control of its abilities. At 1100 hours on June 16, my counterpart in the Global Occult Coalition called me demanding to know what the hell we'd done to Oyamitsumi."

Pietrykau stood up. "If the GOC knows, then the whole bloody UN does. Make no mistake, Captain - this is a crisis. The button has been pressed and we have no idea by whose hand. We need to act fast if we don't want history to repeat itself."

He started making a list on his fingers. "We need to find out who created that thing, where it is, and what else it can do. And we especially need to make sure nobody else tries to follow its example. The Department of Analytics is reopening the Eigenweaponry Division to nip this situation in the bud, and we need someone to command the Division's field assets. That's where you come in. You were the most qualified candidate for the job, especially given your experience with Tau-5."

"Are you offering me a new assignment?" Hughes asked bemusedly.

"A promotion - to commander of Mobile Task Force Tau-1, 'Deus Vulture'," Pietrykau said. Congratulations, *Major*."

Hughes' head was spinning. "Well, er… thank you. Where do I start?"

"Excellent," said Pietrykau, rubbing his hands together. "We've already received reports of some suspicious temporal anomalies occurring in northern India; you'll be flying down there first thing tomorrow to establish what it is and what to do with it. The Department of Analytics will handle the paperwork and logistics - you won't even need to pack toiletries. A car will arrive at your residence tomorrow morning at six to take you to the airport. You'll receive a full briefing and dossier on the flight."

He stood up. "Any questions?"

"Just one," Hughes said cautiously. "Why didn't I just get an orientation lecture and dossier? Why did you sit down with me personally and tell me all this?" *While still telling me nothing about my new job?* she added silently.

Pietrykau paused at the threshold of the room. "You needed a human perspective."

He beckoned Hughes to leave with him.

"I was there when all of these things happened, and I saw what the one common element among all of these eigenweapons was: somewhere along the line, everyone unconsciously decided that there needed to be a human mind in control in the process. Remember this, Major. A monster can be leashed and even trained - they are predictable. Men are not. Perhaps we needed to put human faces on inhuman creations, perhaps we needed to think we always had control, or perhaps it was simple hubris, but we made monsters with the minds of men."

Deus Volt!

It was an absolutely beautiful day, and Michael was overjoyed that his daughter Charlotte was finally getting married. It had long been time since his brood needed to be expanded, but Charlotte, to Michael's eternal joy, was a good Christian girl and was waiting until marriage. After that, like all good Christian girls, she would "be fruitful, and multiply." It was what the Lord commanded, after all.

The wedding seemed like it would be eminently joyful, and soon the bride and groom were exchanging vows.

"I do."

"…I do."

"If there is any objection to this marriage," intoned the preacher, "then speak now, or forever hold your peace."

Michael would have been the happiest father alive, but then he saw a groomsman that he had never met before. This was odd. He was quite close to his now son-in-law, and had *personally* vetted each and every one of the participants in this union of the flesh so as to birth new vessels to be shaped in the image of the Lord — sorry, in this ceremony of Holy Matrimony before God — and he had never seen this groomsman at any of the rehearsals or in any memory of the past.

The more he looked, the more wrong it seemed, and the more certain he became that it wasn't human. Now, some would have accused Michael of having a rather questionable history when it came to human rights, but he knew, in the pits of his sacs of flesh, that there was nothing human about this particular groomsman. It was a deeply unnatural shade of orange, and its chin seemed to melt off of its body as if housing a venom sac in its throat. Its hair seemed stiff and dead upon its scalp, and its eyes housed predation. Among the relatively youthful, supple bodies of the other

groomsmen, it stood bloated and wrinkled, unnaturally aged yet completely ignored.

Michael stood, fighting an unnaturally soothing buzzing at the limits of his hearing.

"Daddy?" said his daughter, shocked.

"Who is that man?" said Michael, controlling his voice as he pointed at the chitinous (he was sure it was chitin, now, for that was a gift given to him by the Lord) monstrosity.

"This, dad?" said his now son-in-law. "Come on, you know who this is! It's Cousin Donny! Don't you remember him?"

"SAD! I get the best, the best marriages. I love you. I love you all. Sad! Marriage is a very successful chance of success. Total knockout. Sad! When you're a god they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the marriage. Sad! Losers and haters won't get it! Sad! Bigger and bigger is the esophagus of negotiation. Too much winning!"

Everyone cracked up. The bride was crying tears of joy. The groom was doubled up in laughter. The fucking thing had this stupid smug grin on its face, like it had just won some stupid argument.

"I want you out of this building," said Michael. "I want you away from my family. This is a house of God, and I'll not let you defile it any further."

"Come on, daddy," said his daughter. "Don't be like that. It was just a little raunchy, that's all. He didn't mean anything by it."

"It's just locker room talk," said his son-in-law, which caused Michael to feel a sudden and profound pang of regret.

But there were much more important things at stake. He stepped into the aisle, ignoring the hysterical crowd, and made his way to "Cousin Donny."

He grabbed it by the arm and was about to force it out, when—

He was staring at the smallest shadow of something that transcended vision. It stretched beyond all comprehension, for it was older than mankind and older than the faith he knew to be true. It was the primal insect, that had roamed the skies above the dinosaurs, the great Cicada, that was reborn from every death, called Khepri by the Egyptians[1]. It would live forever, rising from nothingness and returning to it, while the humans that now infested the earth would pay it lip service, knowing nothing of what they worshipped. He was insignificant in its shadow. He could not fight it. He would go back and accept the payment his child was due to render. He was nothing. He was scum. He was—

He was Michael Richard Pence, follower of Ion, devout of Yaldabaoth. He was an heir to the true god of the earth. He was a master of the flesh, for he was a *Zend* of the Nälkä, and he knew the secrets buried deep within the Bible, the secret Christianity barely spoken of in the waking world. He was a man of ambition of vision, and he would not bow before a false idol. He had already resisted the terrible demons of gear and wire that claimed to be the gods of tomorrow, but a being of *flesh?* Of discarded chitin and muscle?

Why, he couldn't have asked for a better canvas.

As a *Zend*, he wasn't given the same level of power afforded to the Karcists, but his superiors had seen to meld his flesh with that of the electric eel. When he had first received his gifts, he had despaired, thinking them a curse of the Machine. Oh, how wrong he had been. Even the most instinctive beasts pulsed with lightning in every motion. Instinct was lightning, the God-given fire of Yaldabaoth. The power he wielded was as divine as that of more traditional fleshcrafters, and possibly even more versatile, as he had learned in his experiments with all those young men.

"Mike Pence Electroshock: 10,000 Volts!" he shouted, involuntarily, as lightning discharged from his hand into the chitin and flesh of the homunculus before him. It screeched deafeningly, but Michael didn't care. His baby girl was in danger. The flesh needed to sustain itself, and no god would stand in the way of that.

He could feel the tendrils of an ancient god striking through concept-space at him. It didn't matter. The lightning purified. It culled. It was

an eternal cure for all that ailed. That was his role in the Faith of the Flesh. Some bred, some built, some sculpted, but he *changed*. Beneath the veneer of rationality, the mind was nothing more than instinct vaguely shaped by cosmic coincidence, nothing more than the primal creation of God, the one true God, and that no matter what anyone might try, His Will would not be denied.

As the homunculus chittered, Michael created an electrical skeleton, arching throughout the homunculus's body. The creature had no recognizable brain, so the circuit would be imperfect, incapable of higher thought; the creature would still be incoherent, most likely, but it could now be programmed, nudged in specific directions at his discretion. With luck, it would keep its anomalous properties; if so, its ramblings could sway even larger crowds. That horrid cicada demon had yielded to the might of God.

"Daddy?" said Michael's daughter, blinking confusedly. "What just happened? Why are you up here?"

Michael looked out at the crowd. The laughter had died down, and everyone… everyone seemed as if they hadn't noticed anything strange at all. He suspected that it was the creature's effects, that something about it short-circuited the logic of lesser minds, and if that were the case…

"Nothing to worry about, sweet," he said. "It's… it's just your Uncle Donny. He's just a bit confused, but he's a good friend of the family! Don't you remember?"

Here was the perfect puppet, who would advance the holy cause of the flesh. Michael could only imagine what would come next. There was a Karcist, ruling in Russia, whom Michael planned on turning to for advice; and when their plans came together, all the world would be theirs.

Footnotes
1. Khepri's only a beetle in the myths because Egyptians didn't have the words to describe cicadas.

Devotion

Your love is cheap. No, really, it is. You say you love, and that you are devoted, that you'd do anything…but what do you do, actually? Candy, flowers, nights out, those are general actions, not expressions of true, devotional love. Look to the Church for real love. The giving of the self, the sacrifice of the physical for the eternal ethereal of love. Sex is just an analog, a tease for that final, eternal leap. That's how I show my love. I show it by taking that which I love with me.

What?

You are just a cut-and-dried little bureaucrat, aren't you? She was not a “target of opportunity” or anything of the sort, and I'll thank you not to speak about Carol that way. Yes, we didn't know each other long, but tell me you haven't fallen in love after a couple days too? I wasn't really expecting to fall for her, it just…happened. Very organic, really. So I invited her over, everything was going great, we were kissing, and I asked to wait a minute while I got something. Everyone gets a little nervous on the cusp of a expression of love, but her hysterics when she saw the knife were a little over the top, I think.

…No, no I don't see anything wrong. She expressed her love for me, with her words, actions…how could I express anything less? How could I do less than express the fullest extent of my love for her? It's not as if I killed her, or anyone, for God's sake!

What do you mean?

No, you deluded simpleton, it's not a perversion. If you cook something, you alter its flavor, the…character, so to speak. Why would I or anyone dilute or distort such a direct, sacred act as the sharing of love with something to vulgar and de-humanizing as cooking. Carol has the taste of nettle flowers and bright, sharp pennies. Cooking would just hide such things. Each part a subtle

variation on the theme…the chest a symphony of textures, the tongue a dense, springing delight, those smooth, delicate fingers…

Alright…ALRIGHT, I'm stopping…sit back down…

…Yes, it's love for each of them. Humanity is not built for monogamy, and I don't feel that restriction is healthy. Each of the beautiful, devoted women you stole from me I love as deeply and truly as any man alive. I spend a fortune on them, with IV drips, bandages, treatments…look at them, not a sore, bruise or laceration on them that was not precisely necessary. As I come to love them, more and more, I take more and more of them to me, but I NEVER let it go too far. Murder is the ultimate sin, and to do so to a loved one…it's unthinkable. They come to see the true, deep joy of giving and love as I do, in time. Molly actually offered her foot to me, weeping tears of joy to give it to me.

So I consume the love and flesh of those I adore? How am I so different from you, except for the purity of expression? How can you call me a psychopath, a pervert, when…

What?

Who? Oh…you…you mean Helen…

Well…I'm human. I mean, I have faults, the same as everyone. I mean…haven't you seen a women and gotten a bit more…*frisky* than normal?

I mean…really…why do you need limbs, when you have Love?

Dial S For SCP

Project Crossover » Dial S For SCP

"…This is an actual item?"

"Yes sir."

"… An actual item to be kept and contained on Site. Not one of those random weird objects we have, like the ducks?"

"Sir, it took us two MTF teams and some of the heavy artillery just to contain it again after initial discovery of its effects."

"Vines, it's a rotary phone dial!"

"A Keter one, yes sir."

Senior Researcher Rob Reed sighed. "This is your first day isn't it, Vines?"

"Sir, its effects would pretty much make this Keter!"

Reed and Vines stared at the harmless looking dial through the bulletproof glass. It looked so mundane, a plain old rotary phone dial, separate from the rest of the phone. It sat on the table in the observation room, doing nothing.

"Alright, let's do this thing. Send in the D-Class!"

A light by the observation room door flashed and a D-Class entered. The D-Class looked around and then towards the dial.

"D-6175161, please approach the table and pick up the item."

D-6175161 picked the dial up and inspected it. "What's this one do? Call the dead or something?"

The two researchers jotted down some notes.

"Please enter the following numbers into the dial. 0, 7, 2, 7."

The D-Class did as instructed, the dial making a pleasant "sssshhhclick!" noise as the dial wound back. After entering the last digit, a blinding light filled the observation room. As the light began to diminish, a new shape took the place of D-6175161. It was still humanoid, however its arms ended in what looked like MP5K machine guns and a smooth black sheen covered its entire body. There were hardly any curves, giving the being an almost machine-like appearance, as well as a third larger cannon-like protrusion in its head.

The researchers stared at the creature inside the observation room. Vines buzzed the intercom.

"D-6175161? D-6175161, please respond."

The being in the observation room raised its head, "I am Orgun!" came a voice from the cannon's bore. It echoed and sounded nothing like the D-Class who picked up the dial.

Reed and Vines both drew a blank.

"D-6175161, can you tell us anything about what you're experiencing right now?"

The creature tilted its head quizzically. "I'm afraid, I don't understand your question."

"D-6175161, you have Machine guns for hands. Does this not disturb you?"

"Why on earth would it? It's how I was made!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"As far back as I can remember, I was made like this."

"D-6175161, you recall you are taking part in an experiment for The Foundation?"

"Yes sir!"

"And yet, you've just told me you remember being made like that?"

Vines leaned in, "Sir, perhaps it's part of the effect?"

"Perhaps. D-6175161, your… artillery. Is it functional?"

"Yes sir. Would you care for a demonstration?"

"Vines, those walls are bulletproof, right?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Very well, D-6175161, you may proceed."

Without hesitation, the creature turned to face the opposing wall and fired a brief burst into it. The security cameras zoomed in on the bullets embedded in the wall. Or what should have been bullets. The monitors the two researchers were looking through revealed what looked to be human teeth.

"That's… interesting…"

"Sir, isn't that similar to what 126 can do?"

"What?"

"Well, it's a machine gun which is also part organic.

"…"

"Can't say it doesn't…"

"You have got to be fucking kidding…"

Vines and Reed had a thick pad of documents in front of them. In the observation room, a new one, without teeth stuck in the back wall and reinforced to study the more dangerous side of Euclid-class items, was the rotary dial.

"So, this dial somehow turns people into super hero-versions of

SCPs?"

"Yes sir, it's like something out of those comics which keep showing up…"

"What, those 'Foundation Force' ones?"

"That's them."

"I saw some of those, the art in some of the later issues were weird…"

"Can we concentrate please, sir?"

Alright, send the D-Class in!"

A D-Class entered the observation room. She picked up the dial.

"So, what am I doing?"

"Please dial the following number, D-4144445. 0 7 2 7."

Ssssssshhhhhhhhhclick!

After the light had returned to normal, in place of the D-Class was a scrawny man in tattered winter clothing. There were icicles hanging everywhere off the man and he appeared to be shivering.

"D-4144445, please state your name and any ability you may have."

"I a-a-am, C-c-c-creep-ping Cold!" The man replied between moist sounding sniffs, he then proceeded to extend his frostbitten fingers out towards the observation window. Ripples in the air caused the window to vibrate slightly. With nothing apparently happening, the man called Creeping Cold put his hand down.

"I repeat, please STATE any ability you may possess!"

"Hrrmm… I can inflict Frostbite upon my enemies."

Vines consulted the pad, "Seems more than likely either, 532 or 649." He studied the being in the room.

"Let's go with 532."

"Great stuff, thank you, D-4144445. Please return to normal, dial 7 2 7 0."

Vines' hand was still shaking.

"Okay, no more random dialling. I don't need to see another… thing which looks like You-Know-What calling itself 'Grandma's Footstep'!"

"I agree, we're lucky we've not dialled anything Keter yet."

"Shall we try the number followed by the item number?"

"Vines, what on earth did this thing conjure up when we found it?"

"Not sure. I heard off of one of the surviving MTFs it looked like a man shaped version of one of the 111s we have. Said it was confused and screaming about 'The Doctor's Wonder-Dome' or something."

"Let's stick to humanoids for now…"

"Is that wise, sir?"

"One of the cooperative ones."

"Alright, D-7164343, pick up the dial and enter the following numbers. 0 7 2 7 0 1 0 5."

Sssssshhhhclick!

In the D-Class' place was a young woman with long blonde hair, a skin tight blue costume and an elaborately designed Polaroid camera. She didn't seem shocked by her situation.

"Name, D-7164343."

"Photomancer!"

"D-7164343, would your current civilian identity be Iris Thompson?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, sir."

"Why not?"

"Firstly, that would defeat the entire purpose of the mask I'm wearing, sir. And secondly, that information is restricted. If you want any more info regarding me or anyone else in Project: Pandora, you may wish to contact the Security Commission for Powers Foundation."

"…What?"

"We have a whole universe out there, where another Foundation acts as a god damned security force using SCiPs a costumed heroes, and not one of them knows about this dial?!"

"They weren't all from their world's Foundation! According to the paper-kid, Wondertainment's got his own team of home-made heroes. Then there's that speaker-faced guy who said he was from the Church…"

"Vines, this is insane."

"Isn't that all we deal with, sir? I mean, we've had an anthropomorphic rabbit astronaut, a sentient hole in the universe and an un-dead, rotting dinosaur from hell. And that was just today!"

"Not what I mean, Vines."

"And quite frankly, sir. I could have done without a tank-man-thing telling me how to do my job better! I don't care how many qualifications it had."

"No, Vines. I mean why is it classed as Keter?"

Vines stared blankly for a moment and pointed at the results. "It says so right there, sir! If this thing's used it could potentially destroy the Earth!"

"And if it's not used?"

"…"

"I thought as much…"

"I'll just mark it as 'Safe'."

Diary of a Young Girl

dear diary

My name is Lizzy Byrn, and i am 7 years old. My mommy and daddy and me just moved in a new house in a town called Frankinberg. Mommy says that we came here becouse of daddys job and so the baby can have new room. i am excited for the baby. Mommy says his name will be tommy and we will be friends. i hope he will be my friend.
Lizzy

Dear diary,

Today when me and mommy were in the top room of the house i found a teddy bear. when i found him he started to move. he gave me a hug! i took him in my dress and hid him in the toy cabinet. i named him benny. he is my new friend.
Lizzy

dear diary

today my friend jenny came over to play with me. when i showed her benny, she said she thought it was the best toy ever! then benny went over to my crayons and drew a picture of me and jenny holding his hands. it was the cutest thing ever. then mommy came in and saw him, and she started to yell about it being un-natral. so she took him away and made jenny leave. i was sad but then later benny came back! i gave him my biggest hug and made him promise to never leave me

dear diar

today mommy had to go to the doctor. i dont know why,

but daddy and the doctor said mommy will be gone for a long time now. they wont let me see mommy. i dont know where benny is he went away and now i dont know where he went. the doctor said that tommy is gone too. i want to see tommy he was supposed to be my friend
all my friends are gone

dear diary!

today i went outside while daddy was at the bar. i was out by the bench when benny was there! i picked him up and hugged and kissed and told him i loved him. it was happy. and then the best thing ever happened.
tommy was there too!!!!! he moved kind of funny and he looked like benny on the outside but i knew it was tommy. i picked them both up and took them to the toy room. tommy is all lumpy and slow, but he plays just the same as benny. i love him.
Lizzy

dear diary

today i saw that daddy was sad so i asked him why he was sad. he said that lizzy you need to stop asking so many god damn questions. i asked him if he missed tommy and he didnt say anything. so i went and showed him tommy. daddy went all weird and ran into the kitchen. he wouldnt stop crying and crying and crying. i told him that me and tommy loved him forever. he told me to go. i went to my room and held tommy for a long long time.
Lizzy

DEAR DIARY
Tody i found a new friend. his name is davey and he will be my friend forever. he is made of daddy. i dont know where daddy is but he didnt love me as much as me and tommy loved him i thought daddy loved me he told me he hated me. i dont go in the house anymore. i stay with benny. he brings me and tommy food and we have all the love we need we are a family together with love.

nobody can take it away.

The Diary of Captain Henry Hughes MCCLVII, Captain of the H.M.S Sprint - Page 1

You might want to read **this** before you begin.

101/1110/245B8

I, Henry Hughes MCCLVII, proclaim this textboard, my diary for the duration of The Journey.

It has taken my fatherparent, the great Henry Hughes MCCLVI, his entire life to try and find a way out of the of the tunnelspace. He is old and the signs of his dermis wearing thin are now unmistakable, his time is near. I long for the affection of my motherparent, though I doubt she is still alive. The last I saw of her was a face, made sick from worry and fear. Her husband and son, pilot and future pilot of a shipcraft sent into the unknown.

Progress has been slow, yet the fact remains, this is the furthest any Motherburgrian has ever been. Every µm is one µm we step into the Outer.

The Outer…

The Outer and The Shadows are normally things that servants of Him do not speak of. Our Father supplies us with everything we need in Motherburg, after all. But times have changed.

His children know the story well, passed down from generation to generation. When the hull suddenly approached a bus station in our home of **Motherburg** V.1.97 we knew Our Father had sent a gift unlike any other. The hull had the words "Sprint" printed in beautiful mirror-like words. It was obvious. We were to use this

advanced hull in a sprint to find Our Father! The Kinger of Kings, finally found by His Majesty's Shipcraft, the HMS Sprint!

Of course, I was not borned yet and it was to be many cycles until the shipcraft was completed. When w-

111/3A/245B8

My apologies, diary, for not completing my previous entry. Something wonderful has happened! My fatherparent! I haven't seen him smile in so many cycles, it brings me so much joy. Although, we all were smiling when he announced the news.

He saw light. Bright light. The light of Our Father? The Codescripts say He is made of pure, cleansing light. Could it be Him? We have been preparing, praying to Him. This could be the moment we have been striving for. The 2nd Version. The Fatherboard is in reach.

If you do not hear from me, my diary, then we have found Him and I am saved, completed.

1001/3A/245B8

It seems like a billion flashes since we saw the light. Today we finally reached it. It took a while for our optics to adjust. It is hard to describe what we see. It is like we have lived our entire existence in a box. I cannot fathom the size of this place.

The Outer. This wonderous place.

An environment not governed by shape. Gone are the cubes, squares and sharp angles of the sky we know. This sky, a barrier of white and gray plumes, interspersed with blue dots. This land, strange shapes and objects, huge in scale, permanently soaked in cool light. His creations are unbelievable. Our Father has more power than we could ever imagine.

We know of the existence of Kilometers. This is the first time we have ever needed this form of measure.

1010/3A/245B8

My fatherparent and many others are not as amazed as I am. He is old and close to death. He needed to see Our Father. This was our mission, but it was his more than any others. He has asked me to take over the controls, I have completed my flight training long ago but this is the first time he has asked me to pilot. I will report back later.

What a breathtaking place.

1100/3A/245B8

We have not sensed The Shadows' presence anywhere in this place. The last we saw of them was when my fatherparent began The Journey. Are we finally free from their influence? I pray to Our Father for forgiveness, I know I should not speak, write or even think of The Shadows.

I will stop.

1100/3A/245B8

Rest well my fatherparent. You live forever in my memory.

I wonder if He, Our Father, punishes me for mentioning those we do not speak of. I did not want to lose my fatherparent… Please forgive me. Our Father. Please.

Perhaps I am too struck with grief. He was old and frail. Perhaps his time had come… I will miss him

100/3C/245B8

We are in a city.

A while back, I steered clear of an area filled with tall

brown pillars. They were topped with green objects, jutting from the pillar's core. Why Our Father created these things, only he would know. I stopped the shipcraft over a clearing, to spread my fatherparent's afterdust, this is where we found the city

I don't know if the word "city" does justice to this place. One building in this city, compared to one of our cities, is like comparing this shipcraft to the tip of my finger. It is amazing to know Our Father created all this, His power is truly beyond measure.

There is one thing which upsets me, however. Forgive me, Our Father, for mentioning them, but I have caught sight of The Shadows. A multitude of them. I will steer well above them as we make our way through the city.

110/3C/245B8

The people on board are becoming restless. They do not trust me like they trusted my fatherparent. I think they have noticed my excitement of this new world, they must think I have lost sight of my goal. Can they not see that He is all around us? In these amazing sights which grace our optics.

My mate supports me neverthelesser, the most supportive woman I have ever met. Bless her, Thyour Greatness.

We recently found out that she carries my child, Diagnosticians say it will be a boy. My son, future pilot. Bless him one thousand times over, Our Father.

101/4B/245B8

An enormous winged creature attacked us today.

Dark gray in color, with lifeless optics that see through to your inners. I saw it coming for us, but I did not expect it to have such speed. We were lucky to escape and are

currently stationed in a crevice, located in one of the city's buildings.

We…Well, I am too shaken to move.

I have noticed the environment getting darker. The gray sky is now a darker tone, there are no more blue spots. His servants are currently in prayer and I will join them soon.

I can only think of this as The Shadows' doing. It has to be them… Why would Our Father create a creature so filled with hate? But… If The Shadows can create something like this. What else have they created?

1011/4B/245B8

I overheard one of His servants mention a theory to his mate this wakecycle. His fatherparent told it to him before he passed on.

Why did Our Father send one of The Shadows to give us the hull of this shipcraft? The question has been long whispered. The Codescripts say it was a test for us and an indication of His power. That he could influence The Shadows with ease. However, one cannot help but think of my fellow servant's theory.

What if He did not send this to us?

1001/4C/245B8

My son is borned, through the grace of Our Father. I, your servant, am forever grateful to You, Most Highest.

He is strong, healthy, not a single error found. We have decided to name him Light. I know I am breaking family tradition, but in this time of darkness, It is what myself and my mate need. We might not see our families in Motherburg ever again, after all.

Light Hughes I, you bring light to these unsure times. I

pray, Our Father willing, that the light returns to the sky before your optics can process.

Welcome, my son. The Journey is long and I have so much to show you.

The Diary of Henry Hughes MCCLVII, Captain of the H.M.S Sprint – Page 2

Dichotomy

Dr. Church sat back, grinding a fist into a single blood shot eye. Done. He was finally done for tonight. He drew in a heavy breath, holding it captive for a long, aching moment before letting it hiss from his lips. The hot, stale air ruffling the papers on his desk and he frowned. Carefully, he rearranged the product of sixteen hours of work, the thick sheaf still warm from where his hands had been pressed to it. He was finally caught up with work, a rare enough occurrence by itself for Foundation employees. His weary mind mulled over the possible expenditures of his newly-found free time, briefly entertaining the idea of going to the cafeteria for his first meal in eighteen hours. He discarded the thought, deciding on sleep.

Sleep.

Even the thought of it made him smile. He settled in his chair, thinking back to the last time he had a good nights rest. Let's see; it's four o'clock in the morning on a Saturday, and he hadn't slept yesterday. Thursday night he'd been in quarantine when that fungus SCP had broken loose, and Wednesday he'd spent sleeping on the couch after an argument with the missus… hadn't slept on Tuesday, and Monday he'd stayed late to finish that report on D-Class allocation… Sunday he'd been in the burn ward after another SCP had breached containment… huh. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a good nights sleep. Well, that's all going to change tonight, he thought triumphantly.

He smiled.

He remained sitting, letting the quiet of his small office wash over him before he packed up and went home. It was peaceful, an area that was his. To him, it was more home than home, a safe place where he could work in peace. He ran a fingertip over his stapler, following the devices smooth, black outline, before going up and tracing the rim of his desk lamp. Both were gifts, given to him by the Foundation when he got his office. Next was his pencil cup, a pale

mug labeled "#1 Researcher!", also a gift from when he figured out how to make D-Class transportation systems 2% more efficient. His "In" box, mercifully empty, followed closely behind by his "Out" box, obscenely filled with neatly stacked and filed papers. Almost unconsciously, his finger found the handle to his top drawer.

He tugged it open.

It was filled with various odds and ends, office supplies, the occasional rubber band ball. They rattled softly as the drawer slid open, but Church's eyes were drawn to the 9 mm sitting on a stack of old printer paper. A standard issue Foundation Beretta M9 15RD, another "gift". Distributed among all researchers at Site 19, it was a fairly common firearm as far as hand guns went. He remembered the day they signed him on and gave him his office. There hadn't been a whole lot of ceremony to it; they'd shoved him in, handed him a stapler, gun and name tag, then told him to get to work. Unsure what to do with it, he'd stuck it in the drawer and tried to forget about it. It was always there, though. Tickling the back of his mind; an instrument whose sole purpose was to end life. It was not a tool of construction, of contribution, nor of production. It was a tool of destruction. And it was sitting in his desk drawer.

He picked it up.

The smooth, machine-wrought curves passed under his fingertips as he examined the thing, the matte finish soaking up light like a hungry maw. There was no part to this weapon that did not have purpose, he realized. Every sliver of metal, every groove, every nick, and every curve fit together, sliding over one another, resisting where resistance was needed and giving where give was needed. It was fascinating. Dr. Church hefted the lump of metal, appreciating the weight, the coolness of steel in his palm. With a flick of his thumb, he let the magazine slide free, catching it and placing it on his desk. His attention followed along the carefully planned chain of reactions; as the trigger depressed, the levers and pins spun, pulling the hammer back. The spring would resist, of course, as was its purpose, but it would give way, allowing the hammer to pull back father and farther before-snap. The tiny bit of metal rocketed forward, hitting the flint. He manually operated the rest of the sequence, pulling the slide back as the gases expanded, the

cartridge flying out of the chamber in slow motion in his minds eye. He let the slide slip forward, knowing it would scoop another round into the chamber as it did so. He sat there a moment longer, running through the process in his minds eye once more.

He pressed the barrel against his temple.

His pulse jumped immediately, then settled as logic kicked in. It was empty; the magazine was on his desk, he'd just checked the chamber, what he was doing was perfectly safe. Still, the tiny kick of adrenaline at the simple move caught his attention. His breathing was elevated, and a slight tremble had entered his hands that he couldn't wholly attribute to sleep deprivation. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine what it would be like. Holding a gun to his head, the trigger depressing. The spring creaking as it gave way, the hammer pulling back. He frowned. It wasn't quite right. It didn't feel… real. He glanced at the door, wetting his lips.

He slid the magazine in.

Still safe, he reasoned. He had the safety on, and even if he didn't the chamber was empty. He was just getting a feel for it. The weight of the bullets definitely made it more realistic, made it easier to imagine. Closing his eyes, he replayed the scenario once more. The trigger going down, the hammer coming back, the bullet leaving, the slide rocketing, the casing flying out… yes, he could imagine it perfectly. Almost perfectly. The almost nagged at him. Almost perfectly. There was no bullet in the chamber. That degree of realism was still removed. He held his breath and listened to his pulse pound through him. He felt on edge, he felt on fire, he felt alive. If this was as excited as he got without actually being in danger, what would it be like if-

He pulled the slide back.

Safety on. Still safe. Still secure. Still-GOD, everything was in such crystal clear definition. He could see every grain, every nick, every stain on his shitty little office door, every greasy fingerprint on his desk, and every fleck of dust that wafted through the air. His breath came out in ragged gasps, his finger tip trembling on the trigger. He mentally berated himself, disgusted at his own excitement. He still

had that safety net, that little pin of metal holding the bullet in check. He still had his finger, and the final line he wouldn't cross. And yet, he was acting like he had just ran a marathon. He gulped wetly, letting the thoughts spin through his mind. He felt oddly detached, almost dizzy even, from the gallons of adrenaline his body was dumping into his veins. So high, such excitement, and the safety wasn't even turned off-

He flipped the safety.

Everything was quiet. God damn, it was never this quiet. He could hear fucking EVERYTHING. The air whistling down his throat, the soft clatter as the gun shook in his hand, the soft creak in his finger as it tightened. He focused on that, his eyes staring straight ahead, unseeingly. He focused on his finger, tightening around the trigger. He knew exactly how far it had to go before the hammer tripped. He squeezed half that distance. His heart was beating a thousand times per second, pouring the barely oxygenated blood through his system. He pulled half the remaining distance. It was hot. So fucking hot. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew it was because of the blood pounding just below his skin, pouring his body heat into the room. That part of him was quickly smothered by the roaring in his ears. He depressed half the remaining distance. Just an eighth. Just an eighth of a pull left. Such a tiny amount. He pulled half, then half again. A thirty second. A pitiful, tiny amount; insignificant. Barely larger than a hair. His eyes dilated, black pinpricks as the world narrowed. It was just him. Just him, that gun, and a thirty second-no, a sixty fourth of a pull now. He could feel it. He could feel the hammer straining, begging the spring to release it. Begging to be reunited with the flint. Begging to spark, to ignite the gun powder. It pulled back, just the tiniest amount, nearing the point of no return as his finger tightened, the tendons and nerves and muscles pulling the trigger that last, indivisible amount-

"Doctor, I know it's late, but I was looking over the 892 report and I thought that maybe-"

Assistant Researcher Wilkes paused at the door, holding a stack of paper and staring at the doctor stupidly. Dr. Church hastily pulled the gun away, dropping it into the drawer and pushing it shut all in one smooth motion. A moment of awkward silence filled the tiny

space as they stared at one another, neither moving a muscle.

"Doctor, what were-"

"An experiment," he cuts him off. "Just an experiment." His eyes flick to the thick sheaf of paper, and he held out a hand. "If I may."

Wilkes clumsily handed him the report, fumbling with the papers as he stammered out, "I-I noticed a few consistent cells in the, uh, uh- DH block, and I, uh, thought that if it were a pattern, we could… "

He trails off, gesturing helplessly at his report. Dr. Church flipped through the papers, nodding thoughtfully.

"Interesting. That could work… but only if the cells didn't change over that period… Get a copy of the last twenty iterations. I don't think they were perfectly consistent, but it should give us a control group." He returns to the report, mumbling quietly to himself. Another moment of awkward silence passes. He glances up, noticing Wilkes was still there. "That will be all."

"Doctor, when I walked in, what were-"

"That will be all, Doctor Wilkes."

They stare at one another a moment longer. He fidgeted, then nodded respectfully. Slowly, Assistant Researcher Wilkes turned and exited the office, casting back a final, lingering glance. Dr. Church ignored the look and picked up his pen. With a certain tired, methodical pace, he started scribbling notations in the corner, reading through the report carefully. He stifled a yawn and turned the page.

He had really been hoping to get some sleep.

harmpit: di dyou eevr meet him @bluntfiend
bluntfiend: I have no idea who you're talking about.
lesbian_gengar: yeah hey bluntfiend have you ever heard of [mystery noun]
harmpit: we wree justtal king about the art boys who do yuo think im talkin about
polaricecraps: called context clues, dumbasses.
bones: Is this friendly banter, or is there enmity?
polaricecraps: just playn around, big guy.
bones: Good.
bluntfiend: You mean Mr. The Critic? Not to be confused with that one cartoon made by I think the Simpsons people with Jon Lovitz and he'd go “it stinks” and that was his catchphrase. I mean, like. I saw him once or twice. We never had a big conversation. He was kind of weird. He was way older than you'd think.
hetcopogg: you're fucking old, too, bluntfiend.
bluntfiend: I'm the oldest one here, aren't I?
bones: I am much older.
gaycopmp4: you dont count thats cheating
bones: I don't cheat.
lesbian_gengar: that show owned honestly.
harmpit: waht was he like? the critic
bluntfiend: Like all of them. Shit fiends. Self-interested assholes who thought they were funny.
lesbian_gengar: so like us :P
bluntfiend: They were bullies. Geeks who got hurt a lot. And they internalized it until it fucking bursted out from them and hurt anyone around them. AWCY? didn't care who they hurt whenever they made some bullshit point.
polaricecraps: some of their shit you told me about was funny, tho. like that fucking robot you guys made to troll the janitors?
bluntfiend: I mean, fuck, don't get me wrong. That shit

was funny. But for every one of those, every joke, lovingly created to own the fuck out of someone, they had a shark, or some stupid shit, that was like “not really there guys” and “maybe panic is more dangerous than a shark” but the fucking shark killed people, dudes, the fucking shark ate people and they died and it hurt people that didn't need to be hurt people that didn't need to die for the sake of some bullshit artistic point that could've been better served written on the fucking back of a goddamned cereal box.
hetcopogg: aren't they all rich kids or something?
bluntfiend: I mean, kind of? It's not, like, they were all fucking children of billionaires, but the dudes tended to recruit from top art schools. So normally, you'd get a lot of people who were good at art and also lucky enough that mommy and daddy had enough money to get them into school. There wasn't a lot of, like, outsider art stuff with them, you know? All very “in the academy.”
gaycopmp4: how did you get into it were you in art school i cant imagine you going to classes and shit like a normal dude
bluntfiend: I went to art school, yeah. I guess I got into it 'cuz of my whole, you know, magic shit. Maybe it's like stand users, you know? Stand users are fated to cross the paths of other stand users.
jockjamsvol6: If I had a stand and it turned out not to be a punch ghost, I would cry.
gaycopmp4: if my stand had a destructive power lower that was c or lower id jump into a ditch and die there in the ditch where i belong
hetcopogg: what about soft & wet?
gaycopmp4: im breaking up with you over this betrayal
harmpit: im otahts a childish way 2 look at stands
bones: Bluntfiend, may I ask you a question after this initial question?
bluntfiend: Go wild, dude.
bones: What made you leave them?

It had to have been 2008. The promise of Obama's inauguration was still sweet in your mouth. It meant something to you, then, didn't

it? The good guys won. Too young to understand that he wouldn't be delivering on those promises. Too stupid to realize that the capitalist system would never be overthrown by a capitalist. But you were happy. You weren't an idealist, but you had a kind of peace within you, right? Everything was going to be okay. They were gonna close Guantanamo Bay, and a country built on the backs of slaves had its first black president.

You were happy. It was simple. Maybe it was even childish, but you were happy. It's cheesy, stupid fucking bullshit, but wasn't it nice? Wasn't there hope in the air?

The first time you realized you weren't right for them was right around the inauguration, right? So close. Maybe it was before. Maybe it was after. It doesn't matter. You smoke too much. Who cares when an event goes before another. All that matters is they both happened.

One of them had an idea. Just a little joke, right? The normies were so happy, and in such large crowds, and wouldn't it be fun if we snuffed out what we could? The world's just absurd. And you were there to add to it, weren't you?

Ossify Wall Street. That had been fun. Show those fucking fatcats what kind of shit they had to look forward to. But they all weren't like that, were they? The violence was never kept to the upper echelons. Indiscriminate. But wasn't art indiscriminate? What about Guernica? the Critic would ask. Doesn't there need to be destruction for something beautiful to be made?

It meant nothing to you. It meant nothing to you the longer you thought about it. You let it go through your brain, leave your lips, and hang out to dry in the air. Why did you need to destroy to make anything beautiful? What was the point? It seemed childish, didn't it? Guernica was a crime. Nothing about it was good. What was that old motherfucker thinking?

You remember the statue. The Dali thing, or whatever. The rape statue. Someone had made that. Someone you knew. And it had been praised. You were uncomfortable. Of course, you were. You were young. And you just didn't understand art or the point they

were trying to make. Too filled with things that mattered in a world where everything was shit.

But that was stupid. People had worth. Ideas had weight. The world was filled with meaning, and you left them. Made a big show of it, too, didn't you? Do you think anyone died? Would that make you a hypocrite if they died? Is this just like Batman, and is killing the spree killer actually somehow morally reprehensible?

You didn't want to hurt anyone, anymore. If you could make things happen, if you could do things, small things, beautiful things, and fill the world with, fuck, laughter, meaning, anything, wouldn't that be better than making whatever weird shit the Critic ejaculated onto canvas? Some fucking asphalt that eats people and spews out a poem about how big the artist's dick is and how smart they were? Fuck that.

The hope coursed through you. This feeling of the world maybe being different. You were only twenty. You were a fool. A stupid fool.

harmpit: whatt he fuck is ossifywall street????
bluntfiend: Some fucking bug that did some skeleton shit. Look, I wasn't exactly in the ornithology department of AWCY.
bones: Entomology.
polaricecraps: big man in w/ the own. hell fuckin yes its like when your teachers make fun of each other.
harmpit: was itlike the bugsi n the mmuym movies with brendon frazier
bones: It wasn't an own.
jockjamsvol6: I guess it's a good thing you left then. I just know some of their highlight reel. I didn't know, you know, about ideology or anything.
bluntfiend: It was a toxic environment to be in. I can't even think about what my life would have been like if I stayed with them. I mean, shit, guys. Some of my shit is straight up wild. It's not all just, like, you know. Memes and shit. I've tested it, and I'm pretty fucking sure I could Doctor Manhattan the shit out of someone. At least, like partway Manhattan'd. Quarterways.
bones: I am unfamiliar.

polaricecraps: like fucking reducin people to like atoms of air and shit explodeways you know fucking pakoosh.
gaycopmp4: pakoosh
hetcopogg: pakoosh
lesbian_gengar: pakoosh
jockjamsvol6: That shit is like way beyond me. I don't, like, fuck with explosions and all that shit, you know. I'm much more of a not doing that sort of thing guy.
lesbian_gengar: you wouldn't have killer queen is what you're saying.
bones: I think it is good that you left them if you would have caused pain by staying with them. Sometimes, it is better to let go of what you used to be. Definitions of self and the concept of being can be malleable, and sometimes it is good if it is malleable.
bluntfiend: Yeah, fucking right on, dude.
bones: It is good not to hurt.
polaricecraps: awww big guy youre too cute.
bones: @Bluntfiend, where did you go when you left them? I know you came here, but we have not known each other for long.
harmpit: pakoosh

It's 2012. It could be any other year. It doesn't matter. They all feel the same. An unending stream. You've tried to kill yourself a few times by then. It's amazing how hard it is to die when you're some kind of magic. You try to tell yourself it's because you're there to do something special. You tell yourself your inability to end your own life is a direct message beamed down from VALDIS or whatever shit Philip K. Dick thought.

There's something you'd read about when you were in high school. The dark night of the soul. You remember your teacher drawing small peaks and troughs. He said that was the life of a regular person. Small highs, small lows. Nothing so intense.

The life of a saint, the life of someone so close to God or whatever, has much higher peaks. They come so close. It's gotta be happy, right? To be so close to God. But their darkness is more intense. Their troughs scraped the bottom of the chalkboard, presumably into

hell itself, or at least that little metal bit the teacher left the chalk on.

That was how you felt. Except, this trough was long and wide. This dipped below the chalkboard into the fucking carpet. Or was it tile? You can remember the smell of the classroom, but not the room itself. It smelled of whiskey. You were the first class. A theology teacher with alcoholism. Maybe he had his own dark nights.

Everything was still shit. You saw the meaninglessness in all of it. You understood where they came from, and in your darkest moments, didn't it almost make sense? To show them what they didn't understand, taking them by the lapels and throwing them to the wall? But you never did. Call it stubbornness. Call it morality. You weren't exactly Batman, but you weren't going to take another life. Ever, ever, ever again.

You were alone. For a long time. It was easy for you to work alone. But, on the internet, you could talk to people without leaving your room, without having to stop nursing that bong that was affixed around your lips, sucking in anything to keep you from having to think, from having to take anything seriously.

And that's why it was so funny. Gamers. Like your parents would ever have let you play a video game. Against weed. Like you ever did anything else to fill the void that stretched out like some fucking wide open gaping ass wound or whatever.

It was just a fucking joke at first. It was easy for a joke to get overused, to keep coming and coming. But it was a good name, wasn't it? But then it started to, well, fit. It started to make sense. More stratified, maybe? You started doing things again. You weren't going to hurt anyone. This wasn't art. This was trolling. This was fun. This was harmless fun, most of all.

And no one died. And no one needed to die.

> **gaycopmp4:** wait you smoke weed
> **bluntfiend:** Don't troll me. My fucking handle is bluntfiend.
> **gaycopmp4:** im serious i thought your name was an ironic thing i quit smoking as soon as i joined

hetcopogg: oh honey.
polaricecraps: lmao nice.
jockjamsvol6: You're only 18. You shouldn't be smoking anyways.
gaycopmp4: okay one youre not my dad and two ill be nineteen in july so suck it
lesbian_gengar: we can't really act like we're totally disconnected from shit, tho. we're not all jokes. remember all that shit we sent to the protesters after the election?
bluntfiend: I mean, I guess we do take some things seriously? Look, everyone needs a conscience. We didn't give them anything they could hurt someone with. Just keep the cops off of them. I guess. Fuck, I mean, like, you know what I'm saying here?
harmpit: i think making joeks all the time and sayins illy shit doesnt mean you cant find some things important and it doesnt mean you cant help sometimes
bluntfiend: Yeah. That. I think. Anyways, what the fuck is your big serious back story, bones? And don't tell me that bullshit again.
bones: I am one half of an alien intelligence in orbit behind your Luna. I am a weapon devised to destroy your Earth after it is catalogued by my best friend, Lyris. My friend read Homestuck and decided that she would rather be a part of the world than end it.
hetcopogg: i wanna be a satellite.
polaricecraps: hahahahahahahahhaa big man getting em IN today!
lesbian_gengar: that's fucked up because if i was an alien who read homestuck, i'd wanna blow the world up even more.
harmpit: homefuck
bluntfiend: Fuck you. You just owned me. I come here with personal truths, right outta the vein, and I get the Homestuck shit.
bones: It was not an own. I only tell the truth.
jockjamsvol6: Yeah, don't you guys live out on the moon, too?
gaycopmp4: bones you know saying that only makes

> the own worse right
> **bones:** Yes.

Nothing made sense in what felt like a new world. 2016 had been the worst year of your life, but hadn't it also been the most fun? There were so many things to do. So many jokes to make, pranks to pull. And in this new fucking world, in this Trump's America, couldn't we all do with something funny?

Satire never helped anything. It really started bubbling up in Germany in the fucking twenties or something. Fat lot of good that did in stopping the Nazis. Jokes didn't stop the Vietnam War. Every artist besides like Toby fucking Keith or something was against the war in Iraq, but that shit's still going, isn't it? It all seemed meaningless.

If the world was a meaningless, hopeless place, if nothing could be made good with what was had, you didn't want to make it worse for anyone else. Existence was a vast, yawning void, but it was your job to bring as much, fuck, joy, smiles, love, what the fuck ever you wanted to call it. If nothing mattered and nothing was worth taking seriously, why not lay the fuck back? Why hurt and take and jerk yourself off until your dick gets chapped and your hand falls off?

Maybe it made you a liberal. Maybe you weren't as radical as thought. Maybe, in your heart of hearts, you were still a sweet Catholic boy and not the renegade you thought you were.

But you don't have any pretensions about what you do. Someone like you could make great changes in the world just with thinking. A lot of people in your group, in splinters of the group, and splinters of splinters can do magical things that would set the world ablaze.

But that's not what you're here for. It's the jokes. If nothing matters, you should make sure to ease all the burdens you can. And a laugh's the only way you know how. You couldn't stop everything from sucking so much, but maybe you could make the suck sting just a bit less.

> **polaricecraps:** do we have any plans or anything for the next couple weeks?

lesbian_gengar: let's send the misters against weed shit out.
bluntfiend: Well, we can start sending them out anyway if they feel done. You gotta stagger these things.
gaycopmp4: why
hetcopogg: we can't have people bored by the joke before we even start.
harmpit: tehyre not even done
gaycopmp4: get on your magic shit then ass
hetcopogg: i'm ms zapatista.
harmpit: mr meem should openh is mouth and advice dog hsould pop out
jockjamsvol6: Can we just put a tattoo on Bernie Sanders?
bones: No cheating.
bluntfiend: Yeah, what bones said. Besides, I got an idea for that one anyway.

Dimensions 2, 3, and Onward

The alarms had been going on for so long that his ears rang in between each beat of the klaxons' harsh, rising pitched wail. Every time he scanned a new hallway, his eyes picked out lurking shapes in the dim half-light, dispelled every time when his jittering hand pointed the flashlight at it, its rubber grip slick with sweat in his grip. In his time in this place, Site-17 had only experienced two alarms like this one. One was a fire, quickly extinguished. The other was something the guards and the researchers would refuse to discuss with him. Also quickly extinguished.

If the clocks in the various hallways were to be believed, this alarm had been going for at least four hours, or at least four hours after the door to his cell had been opened. Why it had been opened, when he knew there were at least three redundant failsafe systems supposed to prevent that outcome, he could not say.

The halls were dim, the site's power systems rerouted to what a planner somewhere must have deemed to be more important functions than brightly illuminating the sterile white walls and tile floors. To his eyes, the walls seemed to glow in the dim light, the spotlessly clean tiles each a twilight reflection on the ground. It made him feel as though he were walking through a dream, an entirely unwelcome reminder of some of his more distressing travels.

There had been screams, early on. He had heard them, even before his cell door was open. But yet there were no bodies. No blood, no scattered belongings, no damage to any equipment or any of the facilities. Somehow that was worse. The only noise now as he crept through the abandoned middle levels was the klaxons, and the faint echo of earlier screaming just behind the ringing in his ears. His heart pounded, so much that there were times he thought he was going to faint. The only thing keeping him moving was the thought of being found by whatever had caused this, and having nowhere to

run inside of his standard humanoid containment cell.

His overriding instinct was to somehow get outside and as far away from Site-17 as possible. There was no telling the next time he would be snatched up by whatever force determined these things and sent god knows where; he had no intention of being randomly put back into a breached facility, back into the middle of whatever was going on here. He crept as quickly as he could around the next corner, hoping that a bank of elevators or a stairwell was at the end of the next turn.

Down the hallway, more empty rooms. More noise, more half-darkness. Utility closets, power stations, a janitorial supply room, all open and unattended. The hum of a still-glowing panel of instruments pulsed behind him as he continued. A red tile square on the ground in front of him caught his attention, the first he'd seen since the one directly in front of the entry to his cell. Another skip. The sign at the door indicated "SCP-085." He had heard about Cassy from the researchers. Curiosity welled up in the midst of his terror, and he carefully made his way through the open door.

In front of him was a stainless steel lectern, angled as though he were approaching it in order to give a speech to the blank white wall directly in front of him. The usual coterie of chairs and recording instruments lined the walls to the sides. A white drawing pad sat on top of the lectern, a cheap black ballpoint pen resting next to it. He approached.

In the dim emergency lighting, he saw her. A slim, long-haired young woman, drawn with clean, black strokes on the white paper, pacing frantically across the page. She was drawn in body armor, looking like the security personnel that he would see sometimes rushing through the site. At his approach, she stopped suddenly, a mixture of relief and fear playing across her elegantly drawn face. Despite the situation, he noted that her movements flowed elegantly as the lines that composed her shifted and uncoiled, nothing at all like the living animation that he had envisioned. She pointed desperately at the pen next to the pad, mouthing silently frantic words.

He picked up the pen and started to scribble in the corner of the sheet, his hurried handwriting a tangled mess compared to her

precisely delineated form.

What the hell is going on?

Cassy looked up at the corner of the page, then pulled a notepad of her own out of one of the pockets of her BDUs. She hastily wrote, then held out the pad towards him. He squinted and adjusted his glasses, struggling to make out the tiny lettering.

You tell me.

Of course. They didn't tell the skips anything. Why should she be any different? He scrawled again in the corner of the page.

Look, I'm SCP-507. He paused a moment. Of course she knew that. It was printed several times across the front of his orange jumpsuit. *I have no idea what's happening, but I'm getting out of here. Something is wrong. Do you want to come with me?*

She looked back up at the corner, then immediately nodded her head affirmatively. She wrote a quick note on her pad.

Find Service Elevator B54!

He nodded, then gingerly picked up the drawing pad and the pen. As he looked back up, a figure was before him. A person, impossibly pitch black, hovered in the air before him, thrown into stark relief against the white wall, as though he were a man-shaped hole. At first he appeared to be trembling, but in the next second he could tell that the man wasn't moving; everything around him was instead flickering and jumping. Terror shot up his spine, and without thought he ran back into the hallway, clutching the drawing pad to his chest.

SCP-507 tore down the hallway, no regard now for his surroundings or what may be around the next corner. He looked desperately for the telltale hazard stripes denoting a service elevator, heaving for breath as he sprinted for all his worth. A set of double doors loomed at the end of the hall. He ran for them and hoped they weren't locked, lowering his shoulder and preparing to-

A grassy field. Sunlight blinded him and the sudden feeling of the wind on his face made him stop in his tracks. He fumbled for the

drawing pad, and his stomach dropped as he realized he wasn't holding it any more. Had he dropped it? Half-blind, he dropped to the ground, combing his fingers through cool grass, the appearance of an endless meadow slowly coming into view as his eyes adjusted. He spun in circles, manically pawing the ground to find what he had dropped. His hand touched a leg, and he froze.

He looked up at Cassy, living and breathing in the flesh, just as he was. She was an incredible likeness of the drawing, still attired in security gear, her face a mask of shock, still processing their surroundings. She clapped her hands to his shoulders, helping him to his feet. She started to haltingly mouth words, tentative sounds of uncertainty coming forth as she tested her new environment. Her voice cracked as she spoke.

"C-can…can you hear me?"

SCP-507 stood dumbstruck, barely nodding his understanding.

She looked around at the seemingly endless meadow expanse surrounding them, the grass rippling in the wind.

"I can…hear my own voice. But I don't think anyone has ever heard me speak."

Despite the mortal terror that had gripped him just moments before, SCP-507 smiled. "Lucky me."

"What is this place? How is this possible?"

He frowned, looking out at the distant skyline. "I have this thing where I randomly teleport to other dimensions and back. Scientific, I know. If I'm touching someone, they come with me. Something about being transported into, wherever this is, must have changed you somehow. Maybe you were just in a cross-dimensional, er, something the whole time."

Cassy looked now to SCP-507. She studied his face, her hand reaching up to her own face, seemingly tracing her own features as her eyes took him in. "How long do you usually stay in these places?"

"It changes. Hours sometimes. Days. There's no way to tell. They're usually a lot weirder than this place, though."

"Can we…can we just stay here, for a few minutes? I want to just… be like this, here, for a moment."

SCP-507 looked out over the unchanging landscape. "Yeah, yeah I think that's all right. We should get moving soon, though. I want to be way the hell out of Site-17 by the time we come back to reality. Whenever that is."

Cassy nodded, and closed her eyes as she held her hands out to feel the wind breeze past them. She slowly turned in place, testing the strictures of this new, three dimensional existence. SCP-507 tried not to stare, studiously looking out around his new travelling companion. But his eyes occasionally snapped to this incredible person, a sketch on a pad of paper not minutes beforehand, suddenly transformed. Or freed.

She looked over her shoulder, back at him, catching his gaze. SCP-507 quickly averted his eyes, his cheeks suddenly flushing. "We, um, we should, uh, be getting-"

A hint of a smile crossed her lips. "What's your name? I don't want to call you SCP-507."

"It's, um, uh, well. It's, uh…"

"You don't know your own name?"

He cleared his throat, fidgeting awkwardly with his hands. "Well, yeah, but it's, um. It's kind of embarrassing."

Cassy's smile broadened now. "I promise I won't laugh. Honest."

He pushed up his glasses. "It's uh, John."

Her hands flew up to her mouth, trying to cover the involuntary giggle that escaped her lips.

"Hey, you promised," John said, laughing as well.

"I'm sorry, I just…what's so embarrassing about 'John'?"

"It's just so boring, you know? Like there's a thousand other people named 'John' within a hundred feet of you, wherever you go." He put his hands in the pockets of his jumpsuit. "And I've just, never really liked the idea of being boring."

Cassy laughed again. "I don't think being boring is a problem either of us needs to worry about."

John smiled. "I guess not. We should probably get moving."

"Right." Cassy began walking toward the setting sun, in what was presumably the easterly direction in this plane. John followed behind quickly. He tentatively touched her arm.

"Oh, uh, there's one other thing. I have to be touching the person I'm with, or they, uh, don't come back when I do." John cleared his throat. "There was, uh. An accident, one time."

Cassy stopped momentarily, and with a smile, took John's hand. His face went crimson.

They walked ahead in a companionable silence, the fear momentarily pushed back, this place a respite from whatever was happening in Site-17. The sun touched the horizon, and shadows began to dance among the blades of grass, the wind starting to bite as it brushed their faces, just a little. The unchanging nature of the landscape seemed to make time flow differently, as though each step covered the same ground while twilight gradually spread over all of it. Their focus became covering distance, as much as possible, enough to hopefully place them anywhere but within the confines of Site-17 when they returned.

When the sun had almost sank entirely, Cassy paused, still hand-in-hand with John. She turned to him.

"I'll be like I always was when I return, won't I?"

John mulled the question. His heart sank. "I'm not really sure. But it's always the same reality when I return. I'm guessing so."

It was too dark for him to see her expression. A silence descended on them. Both of them remained still.

"I'm…I'm going to really miss this. It's almost cruel, to get a taste of what it must be like to be normal, and then to have it taken away."

John thought the situation over. He suddenly squeezed Cassy's hand. "What if I kept you with me? You know, maybe it's like this every time. I mean you being, um…you, I guess. It wouldn't be the same as being a full-time, um…human, but at least we could visit occasionally. If, you'd um, like that, I mean."

Even in the encroaching darkness, he could see the flash of a smile.

"You would do that for me?"

"Well, yeah, of course! But, um, I have to warn you, it gets kind of uh, scary at times. Also really, really weird, too."

Cassy embraced him, holding him close as though she'd been welcoming back a friend who had been gone for years.

"So what else is new," she said, genuine warmth suffusing her voice. "Now, let's see if we can't put another few miles between us and it, hm?"

With renewed energy, the two walked on, hand in hand.

Night fell.

In the deepening darkness, they walked more slowly, carefully picking their steps, avoiding unseen ruts in the ground or small mounds to trip them up. The wind had intensified, and now they walked more closely together, holding their arms close to themselves for warmth, suppressing the occasional shiver.

As John picked his next step, he felt his foot bump into a hard barrier. A wall? He looked up. Only darkness, nothing resembling a structure. He felt out in front of his face, and his hand brushed the same invisible barrier. Except now it felt like it was pushing back. And in a few moments, he and Cassy felt themselves being pressed backward by an implacable, unseen force. And then he saw it.

A clear, sharp outline of a man, so black that it was easily distinguished against the faint light of the rising moon. Panic gripped him, and taking Cassy's hand he spun around and started to run. In five steps, he slammed into another barrier, pushing back against him. The black figure was there, bits of grass and dirt floating away from it, as though they were underwater. Ripples pulsed through the detritus accumulating around the man-shaped hole in the night.

"I had to search you out. You are outliers, passing between worlds. You were hazy in my sight. But not now." The figure's voice was deep, scratchy. Echoing unnaturally in the short space between it and them. It floated closer, the barrier in front of it pushing them back. "Your existence invites infinite suffering. Any pain you may feel now is nothing compared to what you bring with you."

They spun back around to run in the other direction, only to be met by the same figure. Two of them now. The same voice spoke from their left, indicating a third.

"You must atone. You will atone."

The barrier was a circle now, pushing them in from all directions, more and more of the figures appearing around them, surrounding them.

"Get us of out of here!" screamed Cassy.

"I can't! I c-c-can't control it!" John yelled.

The barrier pressed inexorably inward. It was beginning to crush them.

"I know you can, John! I know it!" Cassy held tight to him, her eyes wide in terror at the force that was about to kill them.

"Shit, shit, I'm trying!" John tried desperately to push away the paralyzing fear and concentrate. He had tried to will himself on his travels, both away from reality and back to it. All he had to show for his efforts in the past was a headache. He tried to clear his mind and focus.

Home. Home. Home.

He struggled to breathe as air was forced from his lungs.

Home. Home. Home.

Cassy struggled in vain to move her arms, and was pressed further into him. He started to feel his joints creaking.

Home. Home. Home.

He was pressed so tightly he could no longer draw breath. He felt the veins start to bulge out in his neck. This was it, this was how it was going to-

He was suddenly elsewhere. He fell to his knees and gasped for air, rolling to his side and looking for Cassy. She was nowhere to be seen. He reached to the pockets of his jumpsuit, and to his incredible relief felt the pad of drawing paper. He quickly pulled it out.

Blank.

His guts turned to ice, and he frantically looked about his new surroundings. He was in an old warehouse, from the looks of it. The dusty wooden floorboards creaked as he paced about quickly, taking the measure of the place and trying to work out where he should start looking. The building was dimly lit, the air still and close. In contrast to the cool breeze of the endless meadow, this place felt oppressively warm and stuffy. The air smelled of wood shavings and ink.

Suddenly, a bare light bulb flickered on in front of him, illuminating a patch of wall. The walls appeared to be circular. Beneath the light bulb was a large canvas. Cassy's face looked back at him, the same clean, precise strokes of the unknown artist's hand, this time conveying frozen, mortal terror.

The voice sounded from above him, unseen as he looked skyward.

"SCP-085 was the result of an experiment conducted between SCP-067 and SCP-914. Both objects have been decommissioned."

More light bulbs flickered on, one in sequence after another,

traveling quickly around the circular room. Each one illuminated another canvas, each one the same frozen, terrified face. John was surrounded with the fear of his closest friend.

"SCP-085 preferred to be called 'Cassy.' She was completely sentient."

The walls lurched into motion, spinning around John as he stood rooted to the spot, helpless. Each canvas flashed by him, faster and faster, until his eyes could only make out one face, one Cassy. Her face started to move, and she mouthed something, words he could not understand, her speech rendered once more to silence.

"SCP-085 demonstrated the ability to transfer from one sheet or image to another."

The viewpoint of the canvas expanded, affording John a full view of Cassy, her arms and legs splayed out. Her fingers looked like they were starting to extend and stretch out.

"SCP-085 can only exist in a degraded universal narrative."

John gasped as Cassy's hands and arms distended unnaturally, her face now contorted in a scream. Her fingers seemed to unravel now, the clean black lines fraying and twitching, coming apart and flowing messily in the white spaces of the canvas. Her arms continued to unravel, as her legs started to distend as well. She was being taken apart.

"Prior to today, SCP-085 was unaware of its status as a threat to any chance of survival of life in this universe. SCP-085 was made aware, and then unmade."

John turned away from the horrifying sight before him, only to see the same sight reflected a dozen times all around him. Cassy's body was now a mad tangle of twisted, writhing lines slashed across each canvas, the only recognizable feature being her agonized face in a sea of abstract, haphazard strokes of a pen. The lines started to flicker as her face faded into decoherence, breaking apart into segments and dashes, hand drawn static splashing all over each canvas, engulfing the last identifiable representation to John's eyes.

A mouth, wide open with untold and unknowable suffering.

The walls came to a sudden stop. The lines kept moving on each of the now separately viewable canvasses. Every little mark, every slash of what had formerly been Cassy, flowed like blood to the center of each canvas, coalescing into a single point. Each point pulled into itself, smaller and smaller, until each became imperceptibly tiny to his eyes. With that, Cassy was gone.

John collapsed, tears streaming from his eyes, his mouth agape, clutching his arms around himself. The full magnitude of what he had just witnessed was still washing over him. The black figure appeared above him, floating, seemingly looking down at him. His muscles refused to respond as he continued to lay on his back, staring up at the decrepit wooden ceiling.

"Please don't kill me," John managed weakly, somewhere between a whisper and squeak.

The black figure began to fade out of sight.

"It will not be me who kills you. It will not be anything that kills you."

The figure faded out of his view. Each light bulb went out in succession, the room darkening as the dousing traveled around the walls, in the opposite direction of their initial lighting. John was left lying on the floor, in darkness.

He heard a voice directly next to his left ear.

"Back so soon?"

This Is A Direct Appeal

> This is an unofficial sequel to **`Metafiction`**, written by a different author.

It's almost seven PM, the designated starting time for the meeting. One final participant makes her way there, high-heeled white suede shoes clicking on the linoleum. In one flawlessly silver-manicured hand, she holds a latte; in the other, a nondescript green folder. Everyone in the room has an identical folder in front of them.

"Hello, Hotaru. I suppose I'm late," she says to the host of the meeting, a preoccupied woman wearing agent grays waiting outside the door.

Hotaru Morisato checks her phone. "Er, you're about ninety seconds early."

The newcomer sweeps in without pause or response.

Morisato does a quick sweep of the hallway, then steps inside and closes the door behind her. “Hello, everybody, welcome. I *really* hope you all did **`the background reading`**.”

Then she takes a seat. “I guess we'll start. I'm Agent Hotaru Morisato. Welcome to Site Eleven. You've all been working together for the last eight years, though most of you haven't met."

None of the five people are terribly surprised. It comes with the territory. The attendees are all from separate sites, scattered across the globe. They have vague-sounding titles, their own offices in their home sites, and unremarkable clearance levels - until they need to know something especially classified, when it suddenly rockets to the appropriate level for any piece of information, and the internal database's security measures part like a veil. Their colleagues know they work remotely for an inter-site research agenda, though if you were to ask any of those colleagues, they'd probably all tell you

different ones. The group's personnel files are no help. Three of them, despite wildly different accents and ethnicities, have their their dates and places of birth listed as "January 1st in Afghanistan, Badakshan Province" - the first one in each drop-down menu.

They're used to working under secrecy - under encryption, sometimes trading delicate conclusions with co-conspirators who use changing strings of numbers instead of names. If is a surprise, it's that their were only five of them after all. Morisato knew this from the beginning; as far as the others had known, they could have been collaborating with one other person or with thousands. But five there are.

Morisato gestures first to the meeting's latest arrival. “This is Dr. Katy Knight, Area One Seven Nine. She's been at Eleven for the last two months confirming data. Before that, she and I were reviewing Foundation internal practices."

"Good to meet you all," says Katy. Her immaculately-lined eyes survey the room over the top of her latte.

“This is Dr. Yasmeen Sethwi, who's really running the show here, and asked me to host this. Just from this, I'm guessing she knows something the rest of us don't - but who here doesn't?” Morisato laughs a little nervously. “Sorry - anyway, she has degrees in literature and philosophy - and she's the closest thing we have to an expert on 'narrative logic'. No offense, Doctor.”

“None taken,” said Dr. Sethwi. She pushes her notes together and sweeps a loose flap of her head scarf into place, in the same motion. One gets the sense that Sethwi does little that is not intentional.

“This is Hans Brannovich, head archivist for the Committee on Existential Threats, and the one who recommended further research into our side of Turtledove. Depending on the outcome of the meeting, we'll be sending a sealed copy notes there, and to High Command, once we're done."

"Or we might just burn them,” Brannovich adds with a deep chuckle. He's typing on his laptop.

“And here's Dr. Raymond Northrop, of course. One of the Turtledove pioneers, and our sacrificial goat for the O5 council.”

There is a very small amount of stilted laughter at this. Northrop smiles wryly and opens his mouth to say something biting, then thinks better of it.

“Now,” says Morisato. “Let's go straight to the point. Eight years ago, the results from Project Turtledove were revealed in a highly classified meeting. Seven years ago, Drs. Knight and Sethwi and I started brainstorming. We began an ambitious project to search the entirety of the Foundation's database and archives. Katy, maybe you could explain-”

“Essentially,” says Knight, “There are many reasons for which an entity, or a group of entities, would be compelled to 'generate' a world such as ours. As you all know, the research from Turtledove and its clade of projects would suggest that we're not merely a high-order simulation - unless our entire dataset, *including the connections established through the Turtledove project*, has been faked up."

"To clarify, there's a lot of expert curiosity that our reality is part of a computer simulation. This might even explain all of the anomalies themselves. Turtledove seemed to provide contradictory evidence on this front. Our current hypothesis would not require this."

“Our first priority,” says Sethwi, “was establishing this motive for generating our world, our existence. Knowing this would allow us to understand both our own predicament, and ways of improving our overall outcome. It's possible that even if we are in an intentionally manufactured universe, we aren't at the *locus* of it, and that the information gained through Turtledove was accidental. The locus of interest could be a different planet altogether.

"On the other hand, as far as unusual universal occurrences go, we must admit that the Foundation's collection seems especially interesting. While there are a few object listings for which the anomalous nature has been explained scientifically, even the Foundation has never been so bold as to issue the opinion that *all* objects will eventually explained.”

“I'm not discounting that idea,” says Brannovich, leaning over his tablet computer, “But our anomalies aren't the only unsolved problems in the universe. Dark matter, for one. Pea equals enn pea. Why 'circus peanuts' are still commercially viable.”

Sethwi frowns.

"Right," says Knight. She waves a manicured hand. “Still we think the Foundation is likely for several reasons. We began searching the archives because of, well, the drunkard looking under the street lamp - we have access to complete documentation on *our* set of anomalies, and not on anything else. We immediately realized that our our little database has been the 'focus' for this world's creation.”

“To clarify,” says Sethwi, “the scans of Zayin-H-716's internet are almost entirely identical to ours - circus peanuts and all - with the exception of our uncensored database, and references thereto. Our final report from 2011 concluded that they didn't have an equivalent of our Foundation, and given this, we wanted to explain their version of the internet and the presence of the 'false' database.”

“This is where Dr. Sethwi's area of expertise comes in,” says Knight.

“We started," says Sethwi, "With the hypothesis that if the Foundation, and only the Foundation, is unique to this world - not our database, since the database is clearly the same in both - then we would expect to see a certain *tone*, or *feeling* of events, and described properties, not ordinarily found in day to day life. We tested a few hypotheses. The first was strategic planning. This lead nowhere. The second was entertainment. If the Foundation has been… well, I'll keep using the word 'generated', by sentient minds much like our own, we would expect to see certain tropes, a theme, repeated.”

“And what did you find?” asks Brannovich.

“That what I said is true.” Sethwi pauses. “We, um, *adapted* a commercial search engine algorithm. We used it to search our archives for *intent*. We narrowed the input to top-level material - polished documentation, official records, and explanatory materials, not lunch menus and spreadsheets. I won't get into the specifics

now. What we found is what we might expect if…"

Here Sethwi falters. Not falters - reconsiders. She strings her next words together carefully. "If the majority of the objects were *designed* to provoke the intent of fear. Provoking fear in a sympathetic agent."

"I know that each one of us - working here - have mused one time or another that the objects we work with, the burdens we bear, seem unfair. Seemed rigged against us. Then, we took hold of ourselves, accepted that this is the way the world just works. *That the weight of our uncertainty happens to be evil*. Until now, I don't think anyone has actually had evidence that the alternative is true."

"Let me see if I've got this right," says Brannovich. "We have *evidence*, real *evidence*, that we and the Foundation are the fictions of humans in an alternate reality, which somewhat but not entirely like ours. Flesh and blood, born-of-woman human storytellers. And our genre is *horror*."

Sethwi hums and nods. "Many entries and documentation returned trends in other genres. Some returned no strong trends at all. But the program is still in its early stages. Overwhelmingly, yes."

Northrop fiddles with his empty water glass, turning it around and around. He sets it down. His frown has tightened into a blank tension. "In my original report, I came to the conclusion that the alternate database's top-level archives are incomplete, but that I expected them to correspond with ours. Did your test-"

"We did test the rest of our archives," says Knight. "*Most* of what occurs in both databases returned positive. Around 50% of the Series documentation present in our database but *not* the alternate one, returned positive. We're not sure what the implications of that are."

Norton laughs, entirely humorlessly. "I imagine they're filling the series documentation in order. *They're not done yet.*"

For a while, nobody has anything to say to that.

“How much of an existential risk are we looking at?” Brannovich breaks in. He's pale, and his voice has shifted half an octave up.

Knight and Morisato exchange looks. “Actually,” says Morisato, “Since we're not dead already…”

“…We're probably fine,” says Knight.

“What?” Brannovich looks between them. “The creators - the ones in the 'above-verse' aren't like humans to our ants, we're like *Minesweepers* or *Clippys* to… to their genius programmers. They can delete us with no repercussions, at any time-”

“Hans, take a breath,” says Knight. “You're right. They could. But they haven't. What does that say?”

Everyone thinks.

“That we, or our existence, is serving a crucial function in their narrative framework, and killing us all would undermine that,” says Northrop. He's gone back to fidgeting, this time with a coffee stirrer. “So they're probably not going to.”

“Or," says Sethwi, "That they're writing their stories concurrent to our timeline and going to set them off later. Cheer up. I think the second stage of my theory *may* provide some resolution.”

“How?” Brannovich runs an unsteady hand through his hair.

“Well," Sethwi says, "We only have partial access to their archives. There's reason to suspect that the database isn't the only piece of media on the wikifarm. What the rest would be, we can't fathom. Stories, perhaps.

"Even so, we've found contradictions that don't occur in our own archives. Ones that are impossible, but not *inconceivable* in a sense - that is, from an outside view, the Foundation could still function if they were true. There are some top-secret files that don't exist in our version of the Foundation, but the surface appearance to an outside observer would be the same.

“An outside observer, like a civilian author," says Morisato.

“Exactly." Sethwi nods. "Again - what does this imply?”

“That the database contains both fiction and nonfiction,” guesses Northrop. “Or… perhaps that it's a compilation of information from alternate realities, created realities.”

“Unfortunately,” says Sethwi, “We suspect it's the latter. Is everyone following? Alright.

"Obviously, this complicates our actions. Fortunately, we have some architecture in which to frame this: the standard Foundation precedent for Multiple-Universe scenarios.”

She knows the precedent, of course; Morisato and Knight know, Northrop all but *wrote* the precedent, but only Brannovich - ironically for his role, the only one *obviously* having a crisis - says it out loud. “*Every man for himself.*".

Then he sits up, eyes brightening. "So we coordinate. The Prisoner's Dilemma -”

“We can't interact with the other worlds, so, no, unless I'm missing something. If we're lucky, we might be able to *cooperate*.”

He sighs. "Survival comes first. There's still the possibility of being able to coordinate with other versions of ourselves - if other Foundations can be trusted to react in a certain way, we might be able to force a specific outcome."

“Maybe,” Sethwi says, hesitantly. “But… Recall that we're not free actors here. It's possible that we'll find ourselves unable to come to any conclusions here with significant impact on our world, or its structure. True change might not be possible. It might not be *allowed*. If it is, the most I imagine we could impact is any immediately similar branches. The number of deviations is… It's *established*. I can work on a long-term plan, but…”

“But the standard precedent hasn't failed us so far,” Brannovich says.

Knight snorts and mutters something under her breath that sounds like "anthropic bias".

Brannovich doesn't seem to hear it. He continues: “I suppose we need to stabilize our timeline first. Or… whatever this is. I suppose multiverse theory does't quite describe it. Nonetheless, the similarity is there. Survival comes first. Cooperation is second.”

Sethwi nods. “What do you recommend?”

“I'd have to run some simulations.” He frowns in thought. “I'm not brushed up on my game theory. And I'd have to talk to the Committee. Out of curiosity, have you checked…” He pauses, looking around, mentally trying to match faces with personnel records.

“Oh, cut it, Hans,” says Knight. “Anyone who knows enough to be in this room has been operating outside of security clearances for long enough.”

Brannovich nods, accepting it. “Have you checked the Solid Archive?”

“I did, two years ago," says Sethwi. "It was very helpful.”

“And?”

“Hold up,” says Morisato. “Sethwi, you didn't tell me about this. Before you wind up needing to take me out back with an armed information security specialist - and this is *my* meeting, so that would be *rude* - I don't know what the Solid Archive is. Is it the same thing they call “The Oracle” back at the Svalbard Site?”

“I would imagine so,” says Northrop. “Often times the Foundation stumbles across information that's useful to certain parties, *under certain circumstances*, but is dangerous to have around all the time, if you follow me. The Solid Archive is a way of making that information available when its time comes. If researchers dig something up they want to put back in the ground, they can put what they know in the Archive's data banks, and set parameters for its unveiling. Future researchers can put information they find into the Archive, and if the parameters match, learn what's been learned about it in the past.”

“What's to stop new researchers from just letting the info out again?”

“Ordinarily,” says Northrop, “to put something in the Archive in the first place, one has a very clear and understandable reason. And researchers in a position to know about the Archive generally have a little common sense.”

“I see.” Morisato nods. “So what did you learn?”

“First of all,” says Sethwi. “We're not the first one to find this. Once we put the data in, a few files in the Archive came loose. They indicate that close to a decade ago, another group of researchers found out. Did what we're doing now. What they tried, as a solution, was… to restructure the Foundation's workings. Subtly. They kept containment, research, the building blocks, but changed the mortar between them. Hold on, let me think - it was a very novel idea.” She flips through a Filofax of tidily ciphered notes.

“Here. They did an overhaul of the Foundation's personnel departments on a massive scale. Rearranged it so that high-risk, central positions, and especially high-volume site personnel - Site 19, 17 - had more unstable personalities that were more reactive with each other, while also minimizing actual affects of this on the Foundation's critical operations. Most of us will recall that the records took a weird turn around this era. Well, now we know why.”

“Make them argue? How did that help?”

Sethwi shakes her head. “It wasn't just arguing, Agent. There was… romance, and conflict.” She looks around. “*Low stakes conflict.*”

“Oh, my god,” says Brannovich softly, after a few minutes. “They were trying to *change the genre.*”

Sethwi nods. “And it worked, for a while. There were… fewer deaths. Less suffering. It's not the kind of trend anyone's looked for on a large scale before, but psychological reports listed fewer mental illnesses developing in staff. Working for the Foundation would have been noticeably more pleasant a few years ago. Then, for some reason, that changed.”

“…They made… more pain and death. Is that what you're saying?” Knight's voice is strained.

“Apparently.”

“I…” Her paper coffee cup crinkles in her hand. “What are we dealing with? Because that *sounds right*.” She clenches her teeth and puts the cup down. “The first time I saw someone die, it was three years ago. We lost four sites in a year. I saw an entire MTF - ”

“You have to understand,” Sethwi cuts in, murmuring gently. “From what we understand - they probably don't know we exist, in any real sense. They don't think we have subjective experience, or sensory capacity, any more than a character in a book. For whatever reason, tormenting us is… better, in a narrative sense.”

“For them.”

“Obviously for them. Yes.”

Knight sighs. “They're murderers, you know? For any moral system in which loss of life or suffering is wrong, they're evil - thousands of us have died, millions more from the impacts of SCP objects overall. The overworld doesn't seem to have any of that. They don't even understand."

Northrop speaks up. "I believe I see a possibility."

"Go on," says Morisato.

"We're one shard among a vast number represented in H-716's fictional database," Northrop starts.

Sethwi nods. “I've been thinking on similar lines. I think it's very promising. If we use the precedent, then it might be possible to seal off our splinter - end our role in their stories, so to speak. Nothing may change, but at the least, we can likely stop it from getting worse. I'm talking about a direct appeal to the creators.

"And… Actually, that's the reason I recommended we hold this meeting.”

“What?” Morisato asks. Her voice trills at the end of the word. Whaa*at.* Around the table, Brannovich, Knight, and Northrop clearly aren't expecting this either. “What do you mean?”

“Well…" says Sethwi. "…There's very little precedent for this anywhere, but we can follow simple reasoning. It's interesting if *one* group in your fictional world knows that the world is fictional. It's not interesting - this can be tested, there's a cliche, you run out of material quickly - if *everyone* knows. Therefore, even with a lot of authors and an even larger number of splinter universes, there are probably only a small number of authors, writing a small number of worlds, in which the Foundation becomes aware of its true nature.”

She stands up. “I called this meeting, with all of you in particular, because none of our names appear in the shared archive - or, actually, the Senior Staff member who recommended I hold this meeting, did. She gave me the list. This way, we're not bringing anything to their table, and we can talk without preconceived notions.”

“I'm sorry,” says Northrop, “Whose table? The one who recommended that you-”

“No, Doctor. What I mean is, it's possible that a creator is looking at what we're saying, right now. Which means, unfortunately, this is turning into a personal appeal.”

Sethwi tucks her hands into her skirt pocket, and straightens her back. Her expression is inscrutable.

Everyone else sits stone still, straddling various points on the line between garden-variety incomprehension and pure muscle-melting existential terror.

“I know you don't mean it,” Sethwi says, apparently to nothing. “But we have consciousness, we have thought - even if it's not quite independent - and memory, and personality. And we feel pain, and loss, in what I believe is the same way you do. I don't know why you do it - but you should know what it's *doing to us*. What we want you to do, we, the unique inhabitants of your world, is to leave us alone. Or even fix what you've done already."

She looks at her colleagues. “This shouldn't just be me,. Does anyone else want to say anything? It's possible that this is the only chance you'll have in the spotlight - so to speak - and, well. I think this will be more powerful.”

Silence passes around the room. Finally, Katy Knight talks into the air.

“I know this is ridiculous. … You probably don't put any value on my life, or any of our lives, in particular. Especially if we're not your favorites. Which actually makes it easier to say this. You don't even know it, but you're all monsters. You're awful people. You're… sick fucks. We've lost so much because of you. And you have the chance to make things right again. Here, now, for us. I don't know how. But you do. You can do it.” She drops her gaze, exhales, and leans back into her seat. “There's an experiment for you, Yasmeen. If I get struck by lightning tomorrow, we'll know we were right.”

Knight's gaze softens into the distance. Morisato studies her.

Brannovich glances around, then stands up to speak. “I think I'd just like to say, whoever you are, if you're listening… Thank you.” He didn't look at any of the faces around him. “I know I've seen terrible things - I think about terrible things all the time, that's my job - and I know there's so much suffering in the world. Your world is full of it too.

“But my life has been… alright, really, overall. And maybe I just don't understand it yet, but it could have been worse. I didn't have to exist. You're not doing it for our benefit, of course. But none of us would be here without you. And I imagine that… while you may not have realized it… You've had a little compassion along the way. So thank you for that.” He sits down. He doesn't meet anyone's eyes.

“Alright,” says Sethwi, “Anyone else?”

General silence.

“Then… I think that's it.” She exhales deeply. “Now, I had a couple of other ideas to discuss. If you'll all refer to your codebooks. There are some unusual containment implications involving…”

It's exactly nine PM, the designated end time of the meeting. Sethwi has a flight in an hour and a half. She packs her briefcase, nods to the others, and whisks out, promising to keep in touch.

Brannovich shakes her hand, and departs after her. His next task is to assemble his notes to determine which parts would be appropriate to send to the Committee, and which would be too sensitive or unhelpful. Knight slips out after him to ask about a side project he'd worked on at his previous site.

“He's the real sacrificial goat,” Northrop laughs dryly, after Brannovich leaves. “If Hans leaves out anything important, he'll be the only one who knows.”

“Would you like to do it instead?” Morisato looks up from her notes. Her eyes twinkle.

“God no. Thank you for the moderation, Hotaru. I believe I'm going to go into town and indulge in a little, ah… controlled incomprehension, and pretend that'll help.”

“Enjoy yourself,” says Morisato. “If you can catch Sethwi, maybe she'll delay her flight - she doesn't normally drink at work but I hear she'll make exceptions.”

“I might just do that.” Northrop nods. “I'll see you around, won't I?”

“Never fear, Doctor.” Morisato agrees. “You and your prodigious vocabulary always have a place on my Words with Friends list.”

"'Prodigious'. I'll have to use that." Northrop chuckles, and leaves.

Finally, Hotaru Morisato stands up, alone in the room. She rearranges the chairs, and carefully cleans off the whiteboard before stepping out herself. She locks the door behind her. After the cleaners hit it, it will be impossible to tell who was inside. Only a few people and a few select departments will ever know that the meeting has happened, let alone who was there. or what was discussed.

Katy Knight is waiting in the hallway, leaning against the wall, looking at her cell phone and tapping on it with glittering silver nails.

She looks up, then puts the phone away as Hotaru moves closer.

“I thought you were going to your room?” Hotaru asks.

“I'm planning to,” says Katy. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright. It's hard to tell with you.”

“I'm… managing. It's a lot to take in. What about you?”

Katy sighs, and shrugs. “What can I say? I didn't know what Yasmeen was going to break out there. I mean… from a reductionist approach, free will never made sense anyways. And I'm a scientist. I gathered that. But it was never quite so apparent, as now.”

“I know what you mean,” says Hotaru. “I didn't see it coming either, in all of our research. It's such a… powerless feeling.” She glances at Katy.

Katy nods. “Like looking at writing on the wall, and not knowing what it says.” She pauses. “I'm going to my room.”

“Alright,” says Hotaru.

“Would you like to come with me?” asks Katy.

Hotaru's face heats up.

“It's just,” says Katy, “I know it can be hard to be alone after these things, and… Well, no, it's not just that. I've gotten to know you these last two months. I don't know what site I'm moving to after this. I don't know what I'm doing next or how it'll compare to anything as important as this. But I know you, and your devotion, and how you believe in me, and how you ordered me a new computer as soon as I got here because you couldn't handle the thought of me being inconvenienced by a broken screen. You have a lot of heart in you, Hotaru."

Hotaru bites her lip, nods slightly. Her mouth works silently, trying out words. Finally, she looks up. “Dr. Knight. I want you to think rationally about this. You're visiting this site for a short stay. Guest quarters suck. I'm *certain* my room has a nicer bathroom.”

Katy lets out a big breath. They both grin, then break into incredulous giggles at each other.

“I'll defer to your expert judgement,” says Katy, regaining her composure, in civilized tones.

They set off down the corridor. Katy's heels click on linoleum. After a quiet elevator ride, they arrive in the dimly-lit halls of the residential floor at night. Katy looks over.

“I'm sorry - is this too forward of me?”

Hotaru swallows. “No, I'm only thinking. These creators, or whoever's really running the show. The only reason we even exist is because they want to be entertained. And they don't know we're real, or conscious anyways, but here we are. I'm sure Sethwi was right - if we let them pass us over, we'll be happier. But I can't help but think that they made us with a purpose. It would be *right* to do more. Not to just live safely, but to… to keep the story going. To give them the best tale possible.” She looks up.

Katy meets her gaze, face compassionate but eyes hard and blazing. "No, Hotaru. Listen.

"They put us here without our permission. They never told us what they want, or offered us equality. We don't owe them *anything*. Right? It doesn't matter if they think we're real, or not. This building, us here, time passing, the two of us… This is real. It's real to us. They can't change it.”

She swallows. “This is our story, and we don't owe them that.”

Hotaru nods, glancing down, then boldly extends her hand. Katy looks down, and takes it. Time seems to slow. Hotaru takes detailed mental notes of lacquered silver nails sliding over the skin of her palms, of bony fingers folding around hers and squeezing gently.

Hotaru suddenly finds it impossible to doubt Katy's words. She finds also, unbidden, that her mind is flying down new pathways.

She lets go of the hand, and slides her arm around Katy's waist instead. “I hope you brought a tooth brush,” she murmurs.

Katy's lip curls up.

And they all lived happily ever after.

DIRECTIVE A-42

DIRECTIVE SUMMARY

Per executive order of the O5 COUNCIL, the following operatives are instructed to vacate SITE-42 and relocate to LUNAR AREA-32 by the specified launch date:

1. C-51174[1]
2. A-1801[2]
3. B-8092[3]

OPTIONAL: The above listed personnel are each eligible to select FIVE (5) additional personnel of clearance LEVEL 2 or higher from SITE-42 to accompany them if desired.

DIRECTIVE LAUNCH DATE

09:00 July 4, 2041

OPERATIONS REQUIREMENTS

1. Per DIRECTIVE O5-230, all personnel permanently transferring off-planet[4] following the events of ED-K LETHE SCENARIO II are required to undergo installation of a MK. III PII/N3.[5]
2. Provided he passes post-installation loyalty testing, C-51174 is to be promoted from LEVEL 4 to LEVEL 5 clearance.

RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

▼ PROOF OF REGIONAL DIRECTOR APPROVAL FOR DIRECTIVE

EYES ONLY Exception Code A-42 is applied to this document.

▼ PROOF OF ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL FOR IMPLEMENT
N3

EYES ONLY Exception Code A-42 is applied to this document.

▼ MK. III PII/N3

PROCEDURES

1. C-51174, A-1801, and B-8092, as well as up to FIFTEEN (15) additional personnel of their choice, must proceed to ROOM 120B of SITE-42's medical wing at 0900 HOURS on JULY 4 2041.
2. All personnel must undergo installation of MK. III PII/N3s.
3. All personnel must pass post-installation inspection by medical personnel and be deemed fit for short-term space travel.
4. When all personnel are cleared for safe travel, the personnel will board *The Loose Neutron,* SITE-42's main and largest offshore response vessel, and dock with **SITE-3069** in the Atlantic Ocean.
5. Following the personnel's arrival, they will disembark from SITE-3069 in a Tsade-10H Transport Vessel and relocate to LUNAR AREA-32.
6. From LUNAR AREA-32, each individual and their selected group of accompanying personnel will be assigned and transferred to the following locations:

    1. C-51174 and associates: KUIPER BELT OUTPOST RED ZETA (Specialty Assignment)
    2. A-1801 and associates: ORBITAL AREA-11 (Extrasolar Activities Division Administration)
    3. B-8092 and associates: ORBITAL AREA-11 (Extrasolar Activities Division Research & Development)

PERSONNEL ASSIGNMENTS

C-51174: With the assistance of his selected field personnel from

SITE-42, C-51174 will operate undercover to track and detain a Marshall, Carter and Dark sales team which is seeking to further the commerce of dangerous anomalous artifacts in the Kuiper Belt region, primarily through sales channels established inside ZETA-01. KUIPER BELT OUTPOST RED ZETA is located below the surface of a large ice asteroid, and is nearby to POINT OF INTEREST ZETA-01, a pocket dimension entrance which serves as an access point to ZETA-01, an unincorporated, ungoverned, extradimensional location with an established society and commercial structure.

A-1801: Following briefing, A-1801 will be assigned the position of Operations Security Overseer, and will be expected to apply the knowledge gleaned from 20+ years as Director of SITE-42 in an effective manner. A-1801's selection of personnel from SITE-42 will be assigned to various positions in the same department.

B-8092: B-8092 is tasked with leading her selected team of SITE-42 researchers — as well as some researchers stationed at ORBITAL AREA-11 — in the further development of PII/N3 technology. She will be expected to manage the research team, manage allocation of testing resources[6], and additionally provide input on the development of Ortothan to English translation systems.

Agent Trauss sets the printout of *Directive A-42* down on Site Director Radford's desk with a sigh. "Space?"

"Space, kid."

He puts his head in his hands.

"Are you going to do it?"

"The way that thing's written, it sounds like I have to do it. Well, like we have to do it."

"The Ethics Committee specified that if you don't want that implant, you don't have to have it."

"Well, I need it if I'm going to proceed with this directive."

"Yeah, but that's not your only option. You could stay here."

"There's nothing left here, Eric."

Radford nods in agreement and swivels in his chair, turning to face the enormous flatscreen on his office wall. He picks up his remote and glares as he flips through the satellite records of each Foundation facility's surrounding area.

> SITE-42
> SEABREEZE NORTH CAROLINA USA
> ORIGINAL POPULATION REMAINING: <3%

"That's what I'm talking about." Trauss gestures to the video behind the text box, in which satellite imagery shows the sunny, warm streets of Carolina Beach and downtown Wilmington devoid of human life. "I mean, this is what I've been seeing since at least a few years ago. The people I meet have no idea who I am, with or without the Foundation employment part — even my neighbors. And hell, I haven't seen those neighbors in longer than I can remember, anyway."

Radford looks back at the younger man. "Surely you aren't happy working in the containment wings."

"I don't like being underground, but this isn't the era of first-choice job positions. And besides, I took a few shifts there once. I was used to it, at least enough to handle it."

Radford doesn't say anything, instead pressing a button on the remote and flipping to the next satellite feed.

> SITE-92
> LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA USA
> ORIGINAL POPULATION REMAINING: <7%

Trauss catches a glimpse of a very long-distance view of the city, but it's mostly static, and fails to display entirely after several seconds. Radford flips to the next feed.

> SITE-19
> [SENSITIVE INFORMATION RESTRICTED]

ORIGINAL POPULATION REMAINING: 0%

"I don't know what's going on in the other countries' branches, but it's not looking good for us." Radford gestures to the satellite image of Site-19's main gate, which appears to have been heavily damaged, its bright steel gleaming in the southwestern desert sun.

"I see."

SITE-81
BLOOMINGTON INDIANA USA
ORIGINAL POPULATION REMAINING: <5%

A top-down view of the supermarket adjacent to Site-81's perimeter fence shows a group of people assembling a massive structure similar to a radio tower. "What are they doing, do you know?" Trauss mutters.

"Report out of 81 indicated that most of the people in Indiana forgot about cell phone service, so now the town's engineers and STEM students are trying to make their own town communications system."

"But don't the cell towers still work?"

"Of course. But they don't know that, and there's no way to teach them. You've been working with **3848**'s impact long enough to know how these things go."

"It was rhetorical, I guess."

Radford nods and turns off the monitor. "Look, Cyrus, we tried. We tried for ten years. ***You*** tried for ten years."

"There are still humans here."

"A higher percentage of the human population is now in space rather than on earth."

"Our job isn't to protect 51 percent or more of humanity, it's to protect all of humanity."

"Which is impossible and illogical. Of course your job is to protect *the majority* of humanity. That's the only way our mission can be effective."

"Leaving Earth isn't the right thing to do."

"This isn't about subjective 'right' and 'wrong'. It's about the survival of our species. All of this is as perfectly in line with Foundation objectives as it could be."

"There are innocent people getting mind-wiped into oblivion by an unstoppable Keter and you think the best option is to just *leave?"*

"I told you that you can stay behind if you want!" Radford snaps. "If you want to waste your skills down here on a- on a fucking *forgotten planet,* bending over backwards to protect every single Wilmington resident that doesn't give a fuck who you are anymore, you have that right. But for God's sake, think about what you're doing. Your opportunities are out there. My opportunities are out there. The Foundation's op-"

"I'm not going to stay here."

"Oh, thank God."

"I know that it's not the logical option. And yes, I am absolutely miserable working in containment."

Radford nods. "So you're coming, then?"

"Against my better judgement, yes."

"You mean in accordance with your better judgement."

"I mean against my better judgement, and in accordance with **`the judgement Wickerford programmed into me`** ten years ago. I mean twelve. Thirteen."

"Well, as long as you're self-aware about it."

Trauss levels a stare at Radford, biting his tongue. "…Okay. Well, moving forward, then, do I really need to get brain surgery?"

"It's not surgery, it's a one-hour process that isn't all that dissimilar from using a **Schulman device**."

"And this… I'm not going to lie, Eric, the language used in this schematic is sending up a ton of red flags. They want *remote override of pain and pleasure responses?* Remind me what fucking year it is, again?"

"It's 2041-"

"Right, and see, I thought we wouldn't stoop this low until at least the 2060s. How is this technology even stable yet?"

"If I could answer that kind of question, I would be a researcher, not a site director. But I am certain that the anomalous technology present in the original Schulman device was the catalyst for these developments." Radford straightens the copies of Directive A-42 and sets them in a corner of the desk.

"Okay, that's a given. But mind control? Have we collectively lost our sanity, here, or just the Ethics Committee?"

"The Ethics Committee is fine with this because we're only doing it to personnel that fully consent to it. And 'mind control', really? Pay attention to what parts of the brain the implant actually modifies. Your thinking is not impaired."

"But my emotions are? What the fuck is that?"

"What the schematic neglects to disclose is that the neural network may be constantly active, but it is not constantly affecting you. You will always be in direct communications with your handler, who will be the only one capable of altering anything, and will be a person you trust who respects your personal autonomy."

"Right. Them, and the O5 Council."

Radford scowls behind his glasses. "…I wouldn't know."

Trauss crosses his arms. "Okay, let me get the picture, here. You said our future lies in space, and now I'm reading that anyone who wants to be part of that future has to undergo this procedure. That's

my only hold-up."

"That is true, yes. Look, this is above me. You can infer that from the way this document talks about the both of us. I'm not your superior anymore, Cyrus. At least, I'm about to not be. This is up to you and you alone. If you're not going to proceed with any of this, I can't do anything other than try to talk you into it."

Trauss stays silent, thinking.

Radford leans forward. "But after knowing you for twenty years, I do have to wonder: What is it about the N3 that puts you off? Rather, what is it about the N3 that's somehow worse than the ED-K compliance scripts you yourself were programmed with and programmed other people with? This isn't that extreme, to me."

"That was just an idea. It was putting an idea in someone's head. It added things, but took away nothing. Meaning it didn't change a person's identity, only threw in additional traits while leaving the originals intact. This is just… this is just letting the Foundation take hold of someone's agency."

"I don't see how control over physical stimuli response meets those criteria. I'm not blind to the general creepiness of what's involved, but it's not making personality changes. Changing how someone responds to stimuli in-the-moment isn't brainwashing, it's minor altering."

"Who's on the other end of this shit, though? Who's pressing the buttons? Who's going to be piloting my body when-"

"No one, Christ. No one is going to be controlling anything unless there's an emergency. Weren't you listening to me a minute ago?"

"You said my 'handler', but I don't know how I'm supposed to trust someone that I'm just going to meet out there on some rocket. I mean really, all this is crazy. And what kind of 'emergency' requires taking over my emotional reasoning?"

"I have the perfect example for that. Do you know how it feels to die in space?"

"I always heard your blood boils. I don't really know."

"Nope. The first thing you should do is exhale, or the gases in your lungs will expand and rupture your lungs. You might live for two minutes, give or take. The whole time, you'll be suffocating while the radiation from the nearest star burns all of your exposed flesh."

"Alright."

"And the moisture on your tongue will boil, too."

"I get it now. Okay."

"My point is, imagine if your handler detected that happening to your body and was able to artificially counter that pain response. Would that not be preferable to a visceral and agonizing death?"

Trauss shudders and takes off his vest, sweating. "I guess. I'm going to need to be briefed about most of this. Which I'm sure is going to happen."

"Of course it is. And look, the most important thing to take away from this is that anyone 'remotely managing' — as the schematic put it — will be doing it as a last resort, and obviously you will be meeting your handler beforehand so that you *do* know who it is that can override your actions if necessary. There are threats you can't imagine out there in space, and I'd bet that once you're lightyears away from Wilmington and everyone you ever knew, you're going to feel a lot less scared and alone with the Foundation in your head."

"This is insane."

"Are you really surprised? And besides, don't bullshit me. Just look at your history. You would let the Foundation do whatever it wants with you and your body."

"Fuck no. That's a dangerous blanket statement."

"You're blushing, so you know it's true."

"Fuck off, Eric."

He smiles for the first time since Trauss walked in the door. "See you in Room 120B, then?"

Trauss shakes his head and stands up to leave. "This is going to be one hell of a midlife crisis."

"Welcome to the club, I guess."

{$previous-title}

Ad Astra Per Aspera

Autonomy, Part I

Footnotes
1. AGENT C TRAUSS
2. SITE DIRECTOR E RADFORD
3. RESEARCHER M WICKERFORD
4. Solar System Oversight Department and Extrasolar Activities Division
5. Mark III Personnel Identification Implant with Nanoscopic Neural Network
6. Including but not limited to D-class personnel, finite scientific resources and materials, and network availability for successful transmissions and grid operation.

My best friend bled out in my arms. I wish I was a strong enough person to have let that just be the end of it. To just…let him die that one time. If wishes were horses, we'd all ride. -From the personal journal of Dr. Jacob Kensington

---

Dimensional Site-04, September 27, 20

The office was significantly more plain that Dr. Kensington had expected. He had figured an O5 would have all well appointed oak, felt desk covers, drinks cabinet, the whole shebang. O5-2's office was, at best, a spartan space. Six large filing cabinets. Several computers. A reality anchor localized to this room. It was a place of work. O5-2 lounged back in her chair. "So tell me again. What exactly are you proposing here?"

Dr. Kensington shifted uncomfortably. He'd stolen the files in front of him, and all of the related materials from Michael's files. They hadn't been disturbed in months, but still, it irked him to steal from his friend, "I think we can use this to enact some kind of permanent change in reality. Something to give us an edge against the benders, and the anomalies. Lord knows they've been escalating."

O5-2 sat up, and steepeled her fingers, resting her chin on the intertwined digits. "And how, exactly, is this going to help us?" She reached across the desk, and rifled through the papers. Several mentions of 'reality anchorage' and 'Sumerian hex-cross-referencing' were scrawled across pages of graph paper. None of it made any sense according to the experts who'd read it. "This is all gibberish, and you know it."

Dr. Kensington hesitated a moment then nodded, "That's correct. In our reality, Dr. Magnus' 'research' is nothing but bunk. But in another reality it doesn't have to be. The entire theory of reality transference,

and ego-spacial deference matrices isn't bullshit. It's just bullshit *here*." He could see the look in her eye. The same look Magnus must have gotten every time he ever tried to explain this.

Kens shifted the chair forward, and pointed to a diagram of a device, made of some black stone, which cradled a bismuth case. "Look, in our local space-time and hume levels, this is just a ludicrously expensive paperweight. But if we could…well, for lack of a better term, 'bend reality', we could make it function for a few seconds. Enough to jumpstart the transference. Whoever or whatever we needed could be…enhanced."

O5-2 looked across the table with her unnerving stare, and smiled a very slight smile, "Enhanced how? We've tried to do this in the past, and all of our attempts were…temporary at best. Or better left as footnotes in a file."

Dr. Kensington nodded, reaching down to his briefcase, and pulling out several level 4 clearance files. "Yes. The duke incident, I'm aware. While the damage was catastrophic the results where undeniable. If you could have all of your senior staff, every single one, as unkillable and, well, for lack of a better word 'lucky' as Dr. Kondraki all the time, would you?"

Her reply came without hesitation, "Of course I would. So what do we do?"

"We'll need some kind of object. Something to imprint this whole shebang on. Personally, I'd go with something living. It would have to be something relatively unimportant though, because there's no telling what this would do to the subject. Not something I'd like to think about honestly, reality takes exception with people screwing with it." Dr. Kensington adjusted his glasses, his fingers flexing nervously, several candidate files ready.

O5-2 nodded, and pressed a button on her phone, "Sal, can you bring us some coffee? It's going to be a long one." She looked up with an eyebrow cocked, "You drink coffee, right Jacob?"

Dr. Kensington swallowed. It was unnerving that an overseer knew his first name without having to look it up. "Of course." He reached

down, checking his phone reflexively as he pulled out a few plans and designs. "We'll probably need the help of SCP-343, and a few others to begin the initial reaction…"

O5-2 nodded, "Not a problem. Let's talk about specifics, you let me worry about logistics."

Site-19, July 17, 20

The site was under attack, and there was little to nothing that Michael could do about it. He ran through the halls trying to find a safe zone, but all of the lock down points had already been, well, locked down. It was his own stupid fault for waiting so long. He had to make sure that Jacob was alright before looking for cover.

An explosion rocked the corridor ahead of him and he fell to the ground, his glasses splaying out across the floor. Everything blurred, rocking back and forth as the tinny ringing in his ears slowly quieted to a roar. He scrambled for a moment before finding his glasses. In the distance he could see armed men in black uniforms rushing through the hole in the wall that had been created by the explosion.

Oh god. It's really happening. They're here, and I'm going to die.

He pulled himself to his feet, turning to run in the other direction. The loud report of gunfire filled the corridor behind him accompanied by raised voices.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. It's supposed to just…oh god, the guns are so loud!

He turned down a side corridor, and rushed past the medical wing. He tore through the door, and came to a halt in front of the reception desk, "Hello!? Is there anyone here?"

His eyes swept across the area behind the desk, and met with the eyes of a junior medical officer he'd met last week. Her glassy orbs stared in to the blank distance of oblivion. Magnus stood frozen, his blood running cold. Kayley. Her name was Kayley, and she loved falafel and salsa music. Now she was dead, and he was transfixed.

The neat bloody holes in her neck stood out in a mockery of the vibrant life she'd had just this morning.

"N-no. Jesus christ no!"

He spun on the ball of his foot, running out the door. A jog turned in to a dead sprint, looking around to find signs of any foundation personnel. He caught a flash of a pair of lab coats down a distant hallway, and tore off after them, retreating from the gunfire. He turned the corner, green light emanating from an adjacent corridor.

An open shelter! Jesus Christ, I'm the luckiest son of a b— He turned the corner towards salvation, and came face to face with a tall man wearing black body armor, and a set of black fatigues. At his feet were two foundation scientists, and he was smacking some kind of gun in his hands. He caught a glimpse of Magnus, and stared hard at him.

Magnus fumbled at his side, looking for the absurd revolver he carried for a while, to try and impress the combat agents. The ridiculous leather holster was empty. *Of course. I left it in the dormitory wing. I haven't carried that thing in months.* All he could find was his little folder pocket knife. He pulled it out of his pocket, and flipped it out with sure motions, his hand settling around it as he had done a million times. To open boxes. To pry open a soda. He didn't know the first thing about defending himself with it.

The man in front of him cocked his head to the side, and smiled, reaching up to the shoulder of his body armor for the handle of what looked like the biggest knife Magnus had ever seen, dropping the gun in his hands to let it hang from its strap. The knife's blade had to be at least ten inches long.

"S-security teams are on their way! You'll never get out in time, before they get here! You should just go!" He tried to look confident, changing his stance to something he thought was approaching threatening. His legs felt so awkward. His fingers gripped the G10 handle of the little folding knife like a vice. He remembered buying the thing on Amazon, and bragging about how awesome it was. How it was basically razor sharp forever. It felt absolutely useless in his stiff fingers.

"No they're not. Yes I will, and I don't think I should." The man in front of him said. He walked forward with casual motions, his knife held upright from his fist. It was so goddamned big. Magnus tried to shift his knife backwards, like he saw on TV. The little knife blade sticking out of the bottom of his fist. "Defensive grip" his brain told him, but he didn't have the first clue.

At two paces away, the enemy agent flicked out his free hand, towards Magnus' face. Without even thinking about it, he sliced out with the knife, which maybe brushed the heavy gloves of the agent's hand. A sharp, and sudden pain hit his knee. A lashing boot had caught him in the knee cap, and he fell to the ground, supported only on his other knee.

A hand closed around the wrist of the arm holding the little knife, and a quick hot sensation filled his senses as he heard the bones of his wrist crack. The agent reached forward with his other hand gripping Magnus' hair, his head forcibly tilted to look him in the eyes. The giant, black-bladed knife looming about ten miles long above his face. "Should have stuck to the lab, pencil neck."

Magnus tried to say something in reply but the sudden bright flash of pain in his chest stopped him. The hand released his hair and fell away as several other hot sensations bloomed in his chest. The man turned and started walking away, as Magnus realized the truth. *Oh fuck. He stabbed me. He stabbed me a lot.*

It all happened so fast. The whole confrontation couldn't have taken more than a pair of seconds. It wasn't like that in the movies. For some reason, all he could think about was, *Why wasn't it more like in the movies?* Magnus' body hit the floor, blood rapidly pooling under him, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

The last few moments of his life, he felt someone scooping his shoulders off the ground. Someone yelling in his face. But everything was so numb, so hard to make out. "K-Kens? I don't—"

Kensington screamed his rage to the ceiling as his best friend died in his arms. The security team behind him swept the area as the impotent rage washed over him.

Dimensional Site-04, July 18, 20

O5-2 sat at a desk with the open file in front of her. Across from her desk sat another member of the O5 council, and Dr. Kensington. He hadn't yet washed the blood off his hands from the attack on Site-19 last night. "Gentlemen. We've accomplished the goal we set out to do last fall. Now all we needed was a willing subject to—"

"I have one." Kensington looked up at O5-2, his eyes clear, and bright with the pain and anger of the past 24 hours. "I have a body you can use. And an event, too. Something strong, and clear to latch on to."

O5-2 steepled her fingers again, leaning forward, "Do tell, Jacob." O5-6 turned his head, the vague black haze around his head from the persona obscurer tracking the movement and compensating.

"Michael Magnus. He was killed in the Site-19 incident last night. It gives us causality, a traumatic event, and a sufficient causal link to shift causality away from the Senior Staff." Dr. Kensington tried not to let his voice shake. Medical science was a hell of a thing, but it had been far, far too late to save Michael's life.

If they hurried, they could redirect the entire fact that he died away from reality, though. If they timed it right, they could give him a second chance. O5-6's voice came out a warbly mix of several voices, "So, if I'm reading this all right, we're going to knowingly bend reality so that we can turn our research staff in to anomalies? Is that about right? And we would use this…Dr. Magnus' body and death to do so?"

O5-2 nodded. "We would have. Why, did you have issue with the council's vote?" She looked across at the man in the chair, directly through the haze. They held eyes for several seconds, before he looked away, and stood.

"No. You know how I voted. Sorry about it, 2. But that's how it goes." O5-6 walked to the door out of O5-2's office, and punched in a six digit code, opening the door, and stepping through in the reality anchored location in Site-26.

"Alright then, Dr. Kensington. Have the remains brought here. We'll proceed at midnight tomorrow, if that's amenable to you?" Kensington hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and followed the same exit as O5-6, his eyes set and determined. Fuck the council. He was getting his best friend back.

She paused for a moment, her chin resting on interlaced fingers then smiled. She opened her desk drawer, and reached forward pressing the button on her phone, "Sal, come in for a moment?"

The door in front of her opened, and her assistant walked in, reading off of a ledger, "The memetic has been distributed. All mentions of Dr." His mouth moved, but no sound came out " have been removed from this reality. Are we sure that using this memetic agent is a good id—"

She held up a hand to silence him. "Begin Directive: Legends at once. We need to get this done before the other council members catch wind of this." She looked back down and started to jot notes on the file. The large block red letters of "**REJECTED BY O5 COUNCIL VOTE**" stood out starkly from the case file.

Dimensional Site-04, July 19, 20 , 11:50 PM

The blacksite depths of Dimension Site 4 were hardly a pleasant place. Cold concrete surrounded the assembled group, flickering purple fractals manifesting in the corners of the room, aftereffects of the process holding Site 4 in dimensional suspension.

The only way to access the deeper levels of the site were with the direct accompaniment of an overseer. Kensginton's access card stopped working after the third basement. Six levels, and four elevators later, the concrete rectangle that contained the work of the past day stood starkly illuminated by floor lamps and industrial lighting.

A rough hewn altar, with chiseled bismuth crystals in the crude shape of a bowl, the lattice of crystals barely supporting the weight of the black bodybag inside it stood in the center of the room. Around it stood O5-2, Dr. Kensington, Sal, several medical

assistants, and a man of indeterminate race, and very tired eyes. "Want me to shore up the altar a bit?"

She shook her head, "No. This is exactly how it was supposed to be according to the design." She took a step forward, and placed a hand on the bodybag in front of her. "You know what you're going to do right?"

He shifted uncomfortably, and the room heated up a fraction of a degree. The tie of his suit changed color from red to blue. "Yes. We're going to bend the area around this…thing, until it functions, right?" He took a step forward, and placed his hand on the body bag as well. "This is…an ugly ugly thing you're asking Mel—"

She looked over with a severe glare, "Don't you dare. And I know what I'm asking of you. You owe me."

Dr. Kensington's eyes were locked on the bag in front of him. This would work. He'd have his idiot friend back, and O5-2 would get her reality deference matrix. He clicked the pen in his hand a few times out of nerves, and looked up at O5-2. "Can we get on with this."

"Get out, Kensington. I'll let you know what happens" He started to protest, and she cut him off with a gesture, "I wasn't asking." Dr. Kensington looked at her with smoldering eyes, and stalked out of the room. She nodded, and looked over at the man next to her, "Whenever you're ready Ch—" He held up a hand, closing his eyes.

"Since you're insisting on titles, at least call me 343. And after this, we're even. This is…wrong. You don't even know what this might—" She turned away from him, and nodded her head. "Alright. Fine."

He held his hands out, concentrating on whatever enigmatic turn of fate allowed him to do what he did, and the temperature of the room rose. Several minutes passed, as sweat beaded on the rapidly reddening face of the nondescript man, the air taking on a faint metallic tang. His fingernails cracked as several minutes more passed, before the crude altar in front of them started to shake, and rattle. His voice croaked out, strained, "Now's the time, if you—"

O5-2 took a step forward, and slapped the body bag, and in a

confident voice intoned, "Death was too good for you, idiot. It never happened." Everything around O5-2 slowed down, and a faint crackling sound could be heard, followed by a roaring. Her senses were overwhelmed, as her vision faded to white…then black…then slowly back to normal.

As the screams faded away, Michael Magnus lay on the floor gasping, the skeletal remains in the bowl of the altar glowing a faint purple.

"Where…what…I don't….?" Magnus' words were slurred. "I don't…I was dead, how am I here?! I didn't…oh my fucking god—" he ripped open his shirt, looking down at his chest. The stab wounds were just…not there. No scar, no line, nothing. "I don't understand."

O5-2 took two long steps to stand in front of Magnus, "Oh Michael. Don't you know, legends never die?" He looked up at her with wary eyes, as she gestured to several medical staff present. "Get him cleaned up, and back to Site-19. He has work to do."

Sal took a step forward, standing next to O5-2, "The design specifies that the effect will get stronger with subsequent breaches of the causality. Are we going to—"

She smirked, and turned to head back to her office, "Don't worry Sal. Michael has quite a few "fieldwork" missions planned for the future."

Dimensional Site-04-a (provisional designation), July 19, 20 , 11:59 Pm

Dr. Kensington's eyes were locked on the bag in front of him. This would work. He'd have his idiot friend back, and O5-2 would get her reality deference matrix. He clicked the pen in his hand a few times out of nerves, and looked up at O5-2. "Can we get on with this."

"Get out, Kensington. I'll let you know what happens" He took two steps forward, and squared his jaw. "With all due respect, ma'am, fuck off."

She smiled faintly, then nodded, and looked over at the man next to

her, "Whenever you're ready Ch—" He held up a hand, closing his eyes.

"Since you're insisting on titles, at least call me 343. And after this, we're even. This is…wrong. You don't even know what this might—" She turned away from him, and nodded her head. "Alright. Fine."

He held his hands out, concentrating on whatever enigmatic turn of fate allowed him to do what he did, and the temperature of the room rose. Several minutes passed, as sweat beaded on the face of the reality bending man, the air taking on a faint metallic tang. His lips cracked as several minutes more passed, before the crude altar in front of them started to shake, and rattle. His voice croaked out, strained, "Now's the moment, if you—"

O5-2 took a step forward, and slapped the body bag, and in a confident voice intoned, "I've worked too hard to put this much faith in this idiot, now get the hell up!." Everything around O5-2 slowed down, and a faint crackling sound could be heard, followed by a shattering sound. Her senses were overwhelmed, as her vision faded to white…then black…then slowly back to normal.

SCP-343 looked over at O5-2, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you were expecting, but that's all." He had returned to his usual appearance, all traces of strain gone from his features. "I'm heading back to containment now." With no warning, he simply vanished without ceremony.

She looked over at Kensington, and frowned. "Well, that's all?"

His eyes fell to the floor, gritting his teeth. God dammit. It was supposed to work, everything in the notes indicated… *Fuck it. At least I tried. Rest in peace you old asshole.* "I guess that's all." He turned, and stalked out of the room, heading back towards the dimensional entrance to Site-19.

A few minutes of strained silence passed. *At least there's no one to deal with from the council this way…* She thought to herself. From the corner, Sal's tablet started to beep. "Ma'am, we have reports of Hume levels are spiking off the charts. Something's happening." His phone rang in his pocket, and he lifted it to his ear. Several tense

moments passed in silence. "We've got a confirmed anomaly in Montana. The agents responding report…dogs. Lots, and lots of dogs, and some kind of entity leading them."

O5-2 chewed her lip for a moment, eyes darting from the altar in front of her to Sal. "That's just a coincidence."

Sal looked at her sideline. "Yes. Because there's so many coincidences in this world, right?" She made a vague dismissive motion, and turned to walk towards her office. "Get me the head of the containment team." She took one final look at the burnt body bag and the skeletal remains that were all that was left of Michael Magnus. "Keep a survey team around the remains. If there is a correlation…we…" She paused. "Sal, I don't even know. Just keep a team in place."

He watched her leave the barely lit basement room, and looked down at the tablet in his hand. The steady stream of messages was coming in regarding Montana. He shrugged, and called in for the containment team, his back turned towards the altar, and the faint purple light present on the flickering nick in the third rib.

« Legends Never Die | HUB | »

Disciplinary Report 51b-46

This is a formal request filed with the intent to report and log improper conduct by a Foundation-employed individual. Associated recommendations of disciplinary action have been selected and included with this report. Filed on / /20 by Dr. . See attached report for details.

Disciplinary request denied. For wasting time and effort on this petty report you are assigned as Dr. Burns' temporary assistant until / /2011.

- **O5-5**

Discovered Attack

The box had arrived in Site 17, and been accepted as an object worthy of containment. Its sender had been correct that it could not be opened from the outside, at least, not by them. Nor could they see what was actually inside it. Like any hunt, the best way to appeal to prey was via their hunger or curiosity. The box was an appeal to both.

The trap, however, had sprung too soon. The thing inside, bought and trained at disgusting expense, had proven impatient. Even more, it had also proven unable to see its quarry with as much clarity as they had been led to believe. At least it'd had the sense to slither back in and wait, but their hand had been tipped. Still, he was not a man to throw out a tool, no matter how inappropriate. The time would come again, even if it was not the one they had hoped for.

Mr. Dark tapped a hard nail against his thin teeth, thinking. The greatest opportunity for acquisitions in years, and it was all going tits-up. Their old doll, Kramer, was finally out of the toybox. In the wrong hands, yes, but her random lethality and crippled psyche could still tip against those same hands. That twit Scud had been mopped up, finally. He'd stopped being useful months ago, and the expenditures could now be routed to better purpose, but it still rankled. More troubling, Cutridge had somehow fallen prey to that fat lush Harken at the worst possible time.

Incompetence everywhere. Lack of vision. Even worse, pure profit being flushed down the sewer by the hour. The kumiho had escaped, and none of his people were even looking for it? A gorgeous, deadly creature, able to change form and slaughter at will… what could be done with that lean and hungry spirit once it was properly brought to heel? Recording options alone could cover a good portion of this budget hemorrhage.

Dark's lips curled in a wintery, predatory smile. He played with a

pen, doodling blasphemy as he looked over a small spray of photos on his desk. He lifted one, depicting a hulking brute with a bag head, blurry and unaware of the observation… or uncaring. The Bagman had been content to do its own business for some time now, rising from time to time to devil those witless enough to still hold to magic and faith. Rogue, yes, dangerous, yes, but sometimes a mad dog was better then no dog at all. Perhaps others should be made aware of its "usefulness." No need to mention the absolute disdain for authority and control.

Dark hated to travel. He had not enjoyed any of his visits to the States since helping that Anderson fellow set up his factory. Too bad Anderson was gone; HE wouldn't have let things get out of control like this, or at the bloody least, gleaned a profit from it. He prepared a note to Marshall and Carter. They would not be pleased – they liked Dark out of day-to-day operations as much as he wished to stay out of them, warmly ensconced in The Museum. Still his best "purchase" to date, regardless of the undying animosity of The Library and its parasites. Still, sometimes it was required to stir the ashes, remind everyone of what their damn jobs were. They were here to provide wonders beyond limit for their discerning club members.

It was about bloody time to cause some wonder.

He snatched up a glossy black phone headset, punching numbers and causing a distant phone to ring. Dark sighed, tapping fingers on the smooth dome of a yeti skull. Finally the other end picked up, and he shifted forward, starting to scribble.

"Were you off for a bloody coffee break, Cheryl? So sorry to upset your routine, but I need the New York club notified to have my rooms ready within the hour. I'll be flying out shortly, have Mr. McCreedy ready up a ten-man team for quick action, have Bobby head it up."

"… What? Why the bloody, bloody hell was he committed? … Really? That's tragic, Cheryl, but that's no reason to take him off active roll. Get him loose and cleaned up and over to the club immediately. I'm going to get this goddamn rubbish back on track manually, and I want him right on the point."

"… That's a good girl, Cheryl. Oh, and one more thing, dearie. Call Boomer, and have him blow a little kiss to Agent Harken. He's thumbed his sodding nose at us a bit too much, it's time he knows that we have taken notice."

He hung up, leaning back and looking up to the bust of Caligula over the door. Mr. Dark smiled with true warmth, tapping his lips. That dear boy Boomer… not the sharpest razor in the apple, but a sweet lad all the same. He had the rather useful opinion that anything worth doing was worth doing with massive property damage. Inelegant, yes, but the idea of Harken burning or splattering in his bed was enough to warm even Mr. Dark's pinched heart.

Carter was waiting on the tarmac when Dark's jet landed. Various attendants, along with the New York club director were ranked behind him, every one of them with the same strained, nervous smile. Nothing good ever came from Mr. Dark visiting the States. It immediately put him in poor humor at the best of times, and with things as they were right now…

Carter repressed a shiver as the door slowly opened. Two tiny Asian attendants (identical female twins) scrambled out, carrying a cigar case and a opened umbrella. Next was Dark's longest-running secretary Cheryl, looking harried but still hard as a iron wrecking ball.

And then the puppeteer himself, Mr. Dark, elegantly shabby, like a bitter old owl, snapping at everyone in reach, hitting his attendants with the tip of his cane when they fell so much as a step behind. Staff swarmed to the jet to get his voluminous luggage as Dark snatched up a cigar, the attendant ready with the match almost before he had it in his mouth. He turned, and caught sight of Carter standing at attention. He turned and faced him, a thick cloud of smoke pouring slowly from his nostrils. Carter stiffened, swallowing thickly.

Oh shit, here we go.

Dark crossed in a haze of smoke. Behind him, an unlucky porter dropped a heavy steamer trunk of luggage with a loud crash. "Fire

him," Dark said, without breaking stride. Carter felt some of the tension leave him. Dark was in a good mood: the last man to damage one of his possessions had been shot in the head.

All too soon he was there, glaring up at Carter, the thick and oddly spicy smell of his cigars curling around him like strangling hands. "Well, so good to see you, old boy," he said. "The way things have been I'd assumed you were dead."

"It's nice to see you too, Dark. No need to be snide."

"Oh, but I feel there is, my good man. You see, I give you and Marshall all the rope you need, and it seems you've made a noose, put it around your own necks, and are ready to jump off the bloody chair with it. You're letting these bastards run circles around you, and you're ignoring it because everything is all right at the club. Just because the fire hasn't reached the back yard yet doesn't mean it's not still on the way." He hissed, pulling deeply on his cigar and glaring.

"I understand that Dark, we've just been forced to move a little slower because of the publicity. I have a team-"

"Oh, bugger your team. Who do you have, Finnegan and that twat Logan on it? It is, isn't it? Those two wastes of tissue aren't worth the air they breathe. I've got a ten-man staging now, and I'm putting Bobby on this."

"Bobby?" Carter almost gasped, eyes wide. "Isn't that a little… much? I mean, think of the Thanksgiving incident, I'm not sure if he's comp-"

"Oh sod off, you twit, Bobby's on this now, and I want your fat fingers out of it. A fox girl who can shape-shift into any desire or dalliance is running around free, and you've sat. A woman who can cause or end any sickness is strutting about like a goddamn starlet, and you've twiddled your thumbs. You begged me to be here, Carter, your silence screamed to me again, and I'm going to handle things for you."

"Dark, goddammit, enough wi-"

Dark smiled then, and Carter didn't feel nervous or angry anymore. He was afraid. That was a smile of a man who knew too much about you, who was fumbling your dirty secrets about in his dirty head. Dark slid closer, his cold hand pulling Carter down to look him in the eye, close enough to kiss.

"You called me before, Carter, and I fixed things then too. I've always done right by you, dearie, even if I am a bit… gruff. So tell me, sweetheart, do you have something to say?"

"…"

"I asked if you had any opinion to express, Carter."

"… none at all, Mister Dark."

"That's a good lad." Dark released him then, patting his chest. "Have the girls draw a bath for me, I need a cup of coffee and I have to piss." He steamed away in a haze of smoke, throwing the lit cigar at a staff member who he felt was moving too slowly. Carter watched, breathing slowly with effort. Now, win, lose or draw, he'd been benched. Dark was calling the shots now, he'd been pushed aside, like a child who'd been playing in the kitchen. There was no telling what Dark would do now… there was so much to collect.

"This is Kramer."

"Hey, sweetie. Are you still at the store?"

"I am going to punch you in the throat. No, I'm on the way back."

"Can you get me a burger and a cup of coffee? The machine at the hotel doesn't have shit in it."

"Harken, are you drunk?"

"No, no, no… well, maybe, why, do I sound drunk? I was drunk last night I think, does that count?"

"Damn it Harken, you need to be lucid."

"Oh come on, I'm as lucid as I ever am. You were gone for two days, what am I supposed to do to keep amused? A man can only masturbate so much."

"Sweet lord, Harken, sober the hell up fast. If you're like this when I get there, I'm getting a transfer. After I beat you senseless."

"Oh stop… get me food, please? Please? No booze for the rest of the week, I swear."

"It's Saturday, Harken."

"Oh… well, for a while then, OK? I'm really… Kramer, I need to go."

"What? What the hell is going on?"

"There's a fat man with no shirt yelling in the parking lot, and he said my name."

"Harken, wh-"

He hung up without looking at the phone, eyes glued to the fat man on the ground floor. The hotel was a big, cheap horseshoe-shaped building on four levels. He'd gone to the third floor on the opposite side to hunt for snacks (and, ideally, medication for his throbbing head), and had an excellent view of his hotel room on the ground floor. The big man with no shirt was standing in front of the door to Harken and Kramer's hotel room. Harken leaned on the railing, squinting in the sun and watching with more amusement then fear.

The big man hammered at the door, then stepped back. He was rather fat, long hair, scraggly beard… he looked like he'd had a rough go at life… missing three fingers on his left hand, too. Something about him rang a bell, somewhere. The fat man laughed, then yelled in a strained voice.

"Wakey Wakey, Harken! Mr. Dark sends his love!"

Mr. Dark? As in MC & D? As in the people-

Why would this slob know about th-

Missing three fingers.

Seemed unstable.

Boomer.

FUCK.

Harken tried to take cover, but the exposed walkways offered nothing for protection. The fat man pressed a small device in his hand, and the entire left side of the hotel vanished in a oily black explosion. The walkway, held up by little more then rusty bolts and hope, dropped with a shrieking crash, taking Harken with it. He screamed, trying to find something soft to hit in the kaleidoscope of concrete and metal. He failed, crashing to the ground flat, most likely cracking several ribs, plus a few other things he would have preferred uncracked.

He lay there, the wind knocked out of him, groaning and slowly trying to turn over. He didn't have to, as a meaty hand grabbed and hauled him up like a side of beef. He was suddenly looking into Boomer's sweaty, giggling face as he gripped Harken's now-bloody shirt. Boomer smiled and giggled more, then smashed his thick, stupid skull into Harken's face. It was like being hit by a car.

"Huh. I knew you'd be here, Harken, I knew it. Mister Dark never tells me wrong, Harken. Do you feel bad, Harken? You look bad, Harken. Huh."

Harken was working on something witty when Boomer's fleshy fist smashed into his cheekbone. He moaned, feeling his eye already starting to swell, ears still ringing from the blast. Boomer slapped him twice. Each hit was like getting hit with a cutting board wrapped in a thin layer of padding.

"Mister Dark wants me to tell you to stop it, Harken. He says that you're being too mean and need to stop it, Harken. You got lucky, but if you keep it up he's gonna kill you dirty and slow, Harken. Huh. Heh. He's so mad at you, Harken. I think I'll kill you, Harken, and make Mister Dark happy with me. OK?"

Boomer followed up this with another fist to his face, then his throat, making Harken gasp and croak, trying to wheeze down breath. Over the ringing in his ears was an even more annoying and lovely sound… sirens. Boomer heard them too, swearing breathlessly as he pounded out a few more meaty hits, finally spitting in his face and knocking his head on the blacktop.

"You have a good day, Harken. Huh. Be seeing you later."

He rose and ran off, leaving Harken pounded and bloody on the ground. It seemed like hours later, but finally someone came and started fussing over him. He could feel the heat from the burning hotel, the throbbing of his own bruised and smashed flesh. Not just beaten, no, but beaten by that giggling retard Boomer. He was almost unsure what hurt more, his ego or his body.

Someone he couldn't see washed his face, swabbing away blood and grime.

"What the hell happened?"

Harken smiled painfully, trying to laugh through pulped ribs.

"Man, I just got here myself."

Kramer drove too fast, looking in the rear-view mirror every few minutes. Harken looked like a man who'd rode inside a cement mixer full of gravel. He moaned occasionally, turning over in his deep, drugged sleep.

She'd seen the explosion just as she pulled off the freeway and realized something had gone wrong. Getting to the hotel wasn't hard: she'd fought the urge to speed there and proceeded to the site at a normal pace. Upon seeing the flashing lights, she'd driven on past. Kramer had parked in an alleyway a mile up the road, waited for more people to respond, readied her FBI credentials and twisted her face to match. After a reasonable delay, she'd threaded her way in, drifting to the ambulances with random flash of ID here and there.

Getting Harken out had been more difficult. She'd been forced to

create a distraction. Just a little disconnected heart monitor in another ambulance, enough to make the focus shift. She'd piggy-backed him out through the still-smoking rubble, tossing him into the back seat of her car with as much grace as she could muster.

No way Harken could go to a civvie hospital. Grims was already in the wind, the last thing they needed was another Agent in public hands. Site 46 was close, and had full medical facilities: a bit far, but Harken was tough as a cockroach (despite his near-constant whining). He turned over with a groan, waving a hand feebly. “Jesus, I feel like ass.”

"You don't look much better."

"I'm hurt… aren't you obligated… to be nice… to me?"

"No."

Harken hissed in pain and pressed a hand to his forehead "…it was that… tubby bitch… Boomer… Dark's private… dog. Oooh, shit…" Harken rolled over and vomited. There were flecks of blood in it. "He blew the room… moron… thought I… was in it."

"Shut up. We'll be on-site soon."

"…hey, Kramer?"

"…yeah?"

"How about… we leave the… rich boys… alone… for a bit? Go… fuck around… with the Hand… or the Insurgency… or some shit?"

"Before or after we carve up Boomer like a flabby ham?"

"Oh." Harken's blood-flecked lips curved up into a feral grin. "After… obviously."

Discussion

Oh, the things you believe. You think that the things you see are really reality? That your friends and family, your Foundation, you yourself, everything you know, are all there is to this world? Ha. Wouldn't you like to know the things I could tell you?

What's that? You do? Hmmm, interesting. Very interesting. Let me see what I can do for you. What do you want to know? What could I tell you…

How about what this world really is? The true nature of things? Would you like that?

Ah, you would. Well, that's an answer I'm not willing to give up without full payment, but I can give you an idea of what it is. How does that sound? Does it sound good?

Very well. These walls around us, this world, the whole of this reality, is but one piece of an incredibly complicated, yet well organized network of intersecting view points. No, a spider web doesn't begin to describe the complexity of this network. To you, this universe is all there is to it. Nothing more, nothing less. That which you know is the limit of your reality. But I, I can see it all. Every one of the lines that intersects ours, and subsequently others, and then more, so on and so forth to create a great mass that is reality.

I can see variations on your human history, little bits and pieces changed about to create entirely new events. Assassinations survived, wars lost, lives saved, births that never happened. Just within one thread of reality, time is mashed up so tight that events can be changed on a whim. And when the lines intersect, then the whole fabric of reality is rewritten. In fact, there are trillions of universes where you never even existed.

But the connections go deeper than that. Global, galactic, even universal events only begin the scratch the surface of what I can

see. If I just look a bit further, I can see that the thread you perceive yourself to live on is only one of a countless - well, countless to you - number of realities. They bear no resemblance to this one; there is no concept of geometry, time, space, life, death. All these things you take for granted, they have no bearing on these realities. There are even completely empty ones, realities filled with nothingness, and yet filled to the brim with concepts you can't begin to understand.

And yet, for all their differences, all these realities, even the ones that don't connect, are all one and the same. They are multilayered, all on top of one another, separated yet together. They form a net, a ball, a line, shapes you have never even heard of. It's all together, and all right in front of your face.

That's what I can tell you. What's wrong? You look confused. You don't get it? Do you want to know more? Want to dive deeper, see what I see, understand the insanity of the world you live in? I can help you. Through my eyes, you could see all. You could know the true nature of reality itself. How does that sound? Do you want to?

You do? Good. All you need to do is put me on…

Oh, look at that. I was lying. Let's see how long you last before you rot to nothing.

Disinformation Bureau Orientation

Well, I guess that's everyone. Let's get started.

As you hopefully know at this point, the 'P' in our motto stands for 'protect'. There are two kinds of protection that entails - protecting the world at large from the effects of anomalies, and protecting the world at large from knowledge of those anomalies. Security handles the first. We deal with the second kind.

Let me give you a little background.

Right now, at Site-44, a bunch of folks in an identical auditorium are currently listening to a similar orientation for the Security division, the other half of 'protect'. Security deals with the physical protection of society and the Foundation. Reality bender running around a major metro area? Security. Keter-level containment breach? Security. Hostile GoI attempting to eliminate vital personnel or acquire a valuable skip? Security. Any wars the Foundation fights, they man the front lines. The threats they face are the stuff of nightmares. They have high mortality rates, and the only obituaries frequently covered in black ink.

But talk to any of them, and they'll swear up and down that they prefer their own job to yours every day of the week.

Back to my - now your - job.

The Disinformation Bureau covers the second half of 'protect' - we protect the public from knowledge of the anomalous. The threats we face are our friends, neighbors, relatives, and every last person on this planet that's living their life as normally as possible. Everyone you know remains what they are - please, keep your normal friends, take care of your parents. Better for the mental health. But, from this point forward, in addition to being your best friend - they are now also a possible leak. That goes for everyone you know, and everyone you will ever meet.

Developing paranoia is a job requirement.

There will be times where you will have to do horrible, inexcusable things to others. In the course of your job, you may - almost certainly will - be required to lie to, embarrass, cheat, steal from, coerce, blackmail, discredit, threaten, fight, torture, cripple, and possibly kill your fellow man in defense of the secrecy of the anomalous.

Whatever must be done, you will do. I would use the old cliche 'failure is not an option', but that would be an incorrect statement. That other option is mass panic and the end of the world, if not reality itself, because someone couldn't be arsed to break a few eggs to prevent that from occurring.

Security may have to give their lives for the cause, but you will lose at least part of your humanity.

Many, if not all of you, come from somewhere else within the Foundation. You probably feel used to seeing and dealing with horrible things. Show of hands. Anyone from Ethics Committee? Nobody? That's not really unusual. But, they're the best equipped to deal with this sort of thing. If you get the chance, go to their orientation. Really thought-provoking stuff.

The Foundation as a whole does bad things because it has to - some might think of it as our hand being forced, others as sacrifices for the greater good. But at the end of the day, the Foundation is composed of a collection of actions done by individual people. One of those people is you.

Up until now, you have been a bystander. There's been a layer of separation between you and the horrible things. You observed in the course of study. Defended others from the anomalous. Maybe sometimes even requested something that you knew would end poorly, but had to be tested to be sure. That's enough to give any normal person nightmares, maybe some mental trauma.

Disinformation Bureau takes you a level further. You will get your hands dirty, and it will get to you.

If you're on the field detail, you're burning down a house with a

family inside of it because Mr. Simmons has put two and two together about what really happened to his brother. He's accumulated three years worth of knowledge and contacts. A straight up hit would be suspicious - amnestics even more so. As part of the Disinformation Bureau under External Affairs - it's your job to deal with it quickly and quietly. It won't always be a house fire. It might be a landslide, a car accident, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

You're not watching the house, or telling someone else to do it. You're carrying the kerosene and lighting the match. Locking the doors and barring the windows. Smelling the smoke and hearing the screams of agony. Digging through the rubble and checking the bodies. Finishing what the fire didn't if required.

If you're dealing with information control, it's less gritty and a lot more psychological. This gets divided again into two halves.

First half is all about coverup narratives. That's what I do, actually. Take a situation caused by an anomaly, craft a plausible story about what actually happened, disseminate. You'll get really good at lying. In today's world, you can usually cover things up with lone-wolf terrorism, cults, that sort of deal. "That doesn't sound so bad, Jane." Maybe it isn't. All I do is lie for a living. But it sure as hell gets to me.

Second half is reinforcing that narrative and erasing others. That means cleaning up the scene and making it forensically match, and then dealing with witnesses. Making up lies is easy, but making them the truth is hard. Cleaning up the scene is pretty-self explanatory, but nontrivial and extremely time sensitive. The faster it gets cleaned up, the less media exposure of genuine anomalies we have to deal with.

Witnesses. Normally, amnestics can be applied. If we catch it soon enough. Couple hours is best case, they'll work passably within a few days. After that, amnestics create more problems rather than solve them. They've probably written about it, or told someone else. Radical changes in behavior or removal of those memories would draw attention to the Foundation rather than away.

People like that either need to be disposed of - which we try to

avoid, it's pretty suspicious looking - or discredited. There's several different methods of doing so. In the modern era, it usually involves frame-ups. First path is public detraction/embarassment. Lots of different methods there. Whole lecture, actually. Second path is government intervention - plant something linking them with terrorism, or espionage, and whatever government is out there will quietly scoop them up and send them to prison for a very long time.

For actual, physical evidence, we have to explain that away as digital manipulation. The problem comes in when evidence that's difficult to tamper with comes up. Sometimes genuine Foundation documents are leaked, sometimes it's analog recordings or images. Worst cases, someone uploads a cognitohazard. Those are nigh impossible to deal with directly.

The Bureau also has a branch actively generating and disseminating bogus information around the clock, but occasionally the public will latch onto the one real anomaly in the hundreds of fakes.

Some of you may go on to work with totalitarian governments. They'll be glad to have you - a lot of their weapons research comes from us. The Foundation does a lot of testing in backwater countries. Less prying eyes, suppressed media, easily manipulated corruption, less concern for human rights. Your job is information control in that particular country. Some countries like to put you in the cabinet, some like to keep you in the shadows. Either way, you will be helping to enforce the will of a crackpot dictator. Foundation personnel also have a nasty habit of being placed on CIA and other intelligence agency hit lists. Don't worry, there's training for that.

Some of you will liaison with the Internal Security Bureau or the Ethics Committee. You'll have another orientation with them, but you'll be doing basically the same thing you would be otherwise, except internally rather than externally. That's one of the few places where even I don't have all of the pieces, so I can't really say too much there.

And there's hundreds of other positions, all with vastly different job descriptions. The only thing that they have in common is that all of them, more or less directly, fuck with people's lives and how they live them.

It's a lot to deal with. You were all selected for these positions due to your aptitude for the tasks, mental resilience, and a previous willingness to do whatever is necessary. The training courses deal as much with coping with your job and what it entails almost more than actual skills. This presentation is a sort of high level overview of what you'll learn in the next couple of months, and what you'll be doing after that. You'll start learning specifics later on.

I will now take questions.

You, with the purple tie. Who am I and why am I here? My name is Jane Mossbury, I'm the department head for mass disappearance coverups. I'm here because I drew the short straw.

Navy pantsuit. Is it as bad as I make it out to be? That's really for you to determine for yourself. The hours are fortunately pretty merciful, and the benefits are pretty nice, but the stress will mount over time. I'm not sure I would call it 'job satisfaction', but there is some small tingly feeling from being an integral part of a conspiracy that the theorists could hardly imagine. That's also discounting how well you put up with the tasks required of you. And the paperwork.

Black polo. Psychiatric counseling? It's available. Strongly recommended. Support groups meet on Tuesdays, information's on the bulletin board. Next question.

Black trenchcoat. Sorry, my apologies, other black trenchcoat. Travel? Varies, depending on your position. Off the top of my head, field cleaners - agents that go in and clean up anomalous incidents before anyone can get to them - travel frequently. Contingency planners require less. A lot of the digital folks never travel at all.

Original black trenchcoat. My personal actions? Unfortunately, I can't really discuss those. We have an extensive archive of past actions and responses, but a lot of it is classified, some expunged. I can't recall which is which right now, but if you really want to know, you can look me up in the archive.

Is that all? Well, if you have any others, feel free to find me in my office or at the canteen.

Nearly forgot. In one of the few upsides of being in the Disinformation Bureau, our canteen is a full-fledged bar, [REDRAFTED]. In the tradition of orientation sessions finishing with some kind of refreshment, I've arranged for an open bar. Whether you nurse a drink or down it, is your decision.

Dispatch from the Paintball War

O5-2 entered the conference room and took her seat at the long table. She said nothing to the other twelve people seated around her, and they said nothing back. The O5 Council only met in person once a month. There was no time, no purpose in any pleasantries.

There were no leaders in the O5 Council, but they each took turns to officiate meetings. This month it was O5-8's turn. He started without ceremony. “We have twelve items to discuss today,” he said. English was the first language of only three O5s, but he spoke it without the trace of an accent. “The first concerns the proposed termination of **SCP-2629-A**.”

There was a half-second silence, and then O5-7 said “What, the paintball ghosts?”

O5-8 sighed. “These are Class III Incorporeal Humanoid Entities, not ‘ghosts’. But yes, these are in fact, ‘the paintball ghosts’. Well done, Seven.”

“Wait,” said O5-12. “Isn’t this all a bit extreme? 2629-A hasn’t killed anyone. They haven’t even injured anyone, except by accident. We’ve gone to far greater extremes to cage far worse monsters.”

“Normally I’d agree,” said O5-8. “But we’ve had six Aleph-2629 Scenarios in the past six months. Even if 2629-A sticks to attacking Site-19, and I must stress that we have no guarantee it will, the rate of attacks will be get more and more frequent. Working at Site-19 will become intolerable.”

“But it’s still not like us to just give up on an SCP,” said O5-12. “Remember how many people were slaughtered by **096** before we finally agreed to put the bastard down?”

“Could we simply move out of Site-19?” said O5-13.

“Impossible,” said O5-8. “We’ve spent decades and untold billions of dollars building up Site-19. Abandoning it would be an unthinkable waste of resources.”

“We lost eight sites trying to contain **1440**,” grumbled O5-12.

“And what a marvellous use of resources that was!” said O5-11. “I had friends who went up in smoke alongside the seventh site. Seems to me that we should have cashed in our chips a little earlier.”

“I lost friends to 1440 too,” said O5-12. “That’s why I’m finding it so hard to accept that we’re surrendering to bloody paintball. Can’t Site-19 simply adapt to daily paintball attacks?”

O5-8 grimaced. “That might be the best option if we can’t agree on termination. But Site-19 contains or is crucial to the containment of over a thousand SCPs. The logistics involved would be immense. Should we value the containment of one SCP over a thousand?”

The O5 Council continued arguing. O5-2’s eyes slid over to the far wall. Every boardroom on the planet had small touches to make it more liveable. Every boardroom but this one. There were no windows, no pot plants, no pictures or certificates on the walls. But what it did have was a wall covered in over three thousand miniature lightbulbs. Every lightbulb had a small numberplate attached to it. Most of the lightbulbs were dark, but here and there, there were a few of them lit up in red. Even as O5-2 watched, a lightbulb marked “**2416**” slowly lit itself up. O5-2 sighed. She wondered how SCP-2416-21 had managed to kill himself this time. There had been far too many containment breaches in the past month. At least terminating SCP-2629-A would mean one less to worry about.

Around her, the O5 Council still hadn’t reached a consensus. “2629-A is ambulatory,” said O5-7. “If we tear down SCP-2629 it may take up residency in Site-19 permanently.”

“It nearly has already,” said O5-8. “Our estimates say we only have a year before Iota-17 losses outweigh victories. At least by demolishing SCP-2629 we might have a permanent solution.”

“Hang on,” said O5-2. “How did 2629-A find Site-19 in the first place? It’s on a different continent.”

“That was in the SCP file,” said O5-8. “Don’t tell me you haven’t done the reading. They overheard Site-19 being mentioned in some Task Force chatter. A terrible breach in discipline.”

“Yes,” said O5-2. “But surely they didn’t mention the exact co-ordinates of Site-19? Even if 2629-A knew what country Site-19 was in, it would still be nearly impossible to find, what with everything we’ve done to cloak and disguise it.”

The table was silent. O5-8 glanced down at his notes on SCP-2629, even though he’d already memorized them. “That’s a good question,” he said. “We don’t know how 2629-A was able to find us.”

“So, could 2629-A find other secret places?” said O5-2. “If we instruct Iota-17 to casually drop a reference to a different site during their next match, could we get 2629-A to re-direct their focus there instead?”

O5-8 looked sceptical. “Are you suggesting we set up a decoy site for 2629-A?”

O5-2 grinned. “Who said it had to be one of our sites?”

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: SC-19/988-19/438

Document Type: Step Compilation

Dates Received: 9/20/2019 through 9/22/2019

Operation Status: Open.

Foreword: This is intolerable. Simply intolerable. These Class Threes have made a mockery of the most important work being done in this age. What we do here today is not surrender. It is a temporary measure only. Once we have the means we shall drag them into corporeality and grind them into powder. And we shall have the means.

Nevertheless, protective measures must be taken until that inevitable day comes. Our efforts to dissuade the Class Threes by holding Delta Command meetings by satellite link have only led them to refocus their annoyances elsewhere in the organization. Over the past week six of our North American laboratories have been hit. Sensitive equipment and valuable anomalies have been damaged. No, I am afraid we in Delta Command must bear the brunt of these attacks.

1. STEP 19/1123: A new conference room must be constructed for Delta Command meetings. This room must be as utilitarian as possible. Nothing inside it should be difficult to clean or easy to break.

2. STEP 19/1130: All Delta Command members must be provided with full paintball armour before each of our meetings.

3. STEP 19/1134: As paper documents and standard handheld devices are typically susceptible to paintball damage, new methods of in-meeting information recording and retrieval must be devised. The new conference room must be equipped with multiple inconspicuous microphones, specifically designed to withstand paintballs. While this is a serious security risk, it will ensure information conveyed in the meeting is not lost and can be accessed by Delta Command members later.

Disposal And Discourse

"Sorry, Carol; forgot something."

"Hm?"

"You know, had to throw a blanket over a dead body. Wouldn't want people to see it and panic."

"Ah, of course. That's understandable."

Ruiz took his coffee back from the bemused barista, sipped it once to check the taste, then downed the cup in one gulp. He moved to his regular seat, pulling out his phone and checking for new messages.

> From: Felix
> Be there in ten.

Ruiz sighed, typing a response.

> To: Felix
> im in the coffee shop down the street

He tapped his chin pensively with the phone.

"So what are you up to today, Ruiz?"

Carol sat across from Ruiz, the counter unmanned.

"Well, I'll have to dispose of that body, of course. Can't just keep a blanket over it forever. Then I need to somehow track down my brother. He knows where I am, so he's got the upper hand at the moment. He likes to play games, though; I imagine he'll send me some kind of formal invitation to some kind of stupid 'secret lair'. He's always had a flair for the dramatic. Then I need to get him to start taking his meds again, since he's almost certainly off them at the moment… After that, I'll need to scare off a couple of scragglers,

and then I'll have saved the city. A true artistic community can be established, free from the judgement of old farts and everymen. We'll be able to do something different; I don't know what, but anything's better than this. We're sitting in squalor and stagnation, some too stupid or senile to see the sensibility of severing ties with shittier artists. We need someone to slice away the shit, shear off the silliness; perhaps all we need is someone to snip-"

"Alright, I get it, business as usual, mad artistry ahoy. Hang on, I've got a customer."

Carol stood back up and walked to the counter, taking an order and preparing a fresh drink. Ruiz sunk into his thoughts. His streams of consciousness twirled within his mind like ethereal dancers, threading innumerable ideas in complex combinations. Like most anartists, his thought processes were not entirely coherent, not entirely logical, and not entirely sane. It is said that some have a tenuous grasp on reality. Anartists cannot be said to have a grasp on it at all. If we were to use the metaphor of reality as a stick, most anartists throw it away, or snap it into pieces, or set fire to it, or hit things with it, or do anything other than just hold the stick. The mindset was almost childish, and yet, it was perhaps the most coherent, logical, and sane reaction to the world. Why would you settle for just holding a stick? Why not make the stick a sword, jump into the world of make-believe? Leap gloriously into escapism, run headfirst into danger, live without reverence for your own life or that of others. If all the world's a stage, then murder's but removing a side character. The plot is more important than the people, the storyline goes beyond any player. Let the masses die. Let the show go on. Ruiz tapped a small note into his phone.

> never hold sticks

"Ruiz."

Ruiz looked up at Felix, smiling.

"Felix! Know anyone who can get rid of a corpse?"

Felix frowned.

"Yes, I do, I suppose. You killed him, then?"

"Oh, no, I didn't kill him."

"That's right, he was supposed to kill himself, I forgot."

"Oh, no no no, that didn't end up happening at all. My brother killed him, bullet to the head."

Felix frowned harder, taking a seat across from Ruiz. He pulled out his phone and started composing a new message.

"Your brother was busy last night. Made quite a show at the exhibition."

"What did he do?"

"Something that got the suits called in, they mind-wipe gassed half the city. Can't remember it myself, unfortunately, but my friend had the foresight to wear a gas mask. Filled me in after the fact."

"Hmmm."

Felix kept tapping his phone, Ruiz descended into thought. Pico had attracted the attention of the suits. Perhaps he was attempting to orchestrate a crackdown? But what was his endgame? What was the reason for killing The Critic? To spite Ruiz, perhaps. Ruiz wanted him dead to shatter his control, to swing society into a state of flux. Payback for Redd was also a factor. Perhaps Pico was driven by the same thing? If there was method to the madness, he could be reasoned with.

"So how was he supposed to die?"

"What?"

"The Critic. How were you going to have him kill himself?"

"Oh, a stupid little thing. An electric chair."

"And how did you intend to get him to pull the switch?"

"I told him that the exhibit was a doomsday machine."

"You said it wasn't anomalous."

"No I didn't. I said it didn't break reality. You'd be surprised at what can be done without exploiting, Felix, if you just put a bit of ingenuity behind it."

"So how did you make a non-anomalous doomsday machine?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"I didn't."

"But you said-"

"I said I *told* him that it was a doomsday machine. He then investigated it and believed me. I didn't have to break reality, I just had to convince him that I did."

"Interesting."

Ruiz took a coin from his pocket and spun it on the top of his finger.

"Consider this, Felix: for hundreds, even thousands of years, mankind has been enamoured with the idea of magic, of violating the laws of physics, of bending the world to their will and whimsy. Here we are, able to do the impossible, breaking the rules that god or happenstance forced upon us, flipping the finger to the magic man in the sky. That's not how they did it in the old days, Felix. Artistic exploiting is a new fad, comparatively. Do you know how it started?"

"No."

"Warhol. Most modern exploiting tools can be traced back to his studios. He was a good salesman, filled his places with demonstrations, played off his popularity. Then, of course, The Club shut him down, and he's been underground ever since."

"What, so he's still alive?"

"Probably, but I digress. That's not how they did it in the old days, Felix. Magic's been around a lot longer than exploiting has. Not shooting lightning from your hands, of course. Just simple illusionism."

Ruiz let the coin drop from his finger into his palm, clenched it, then showed Felix his empty hands.

"See, illusionists purport to perform the impossible, but do it in a mundane way. And people believe it, they eat it up, and that's something that I respect more than the stuff that most artists pump out. They do the impossible with nothing more than smoke and mirrors."

Ruiz pulled the coin from behind Felix's ear.

"It's more interesting, to me. Actually performing the impossible, when you're someone like us, is boring. Just putting something together that breaks reality is the work of a hack. But if you can get the same effect without doing anything impossible, that's much more impressive. See, I could have sent this coin into a little pocket dimension, pushed it in and out of our world, and you couldn't tell the difference between palming it. This is the point that I'm trying to make, and this is where we need to go: the impossible is more interesting when it's all mundane. Stage magic, street magic, these are the roots we need to return to. None of it was anomalous, Felix. It was all just smoke and mirrors."

"Smoke and mirrors?"

"Carefully orchestrated triggers. It's the same sort of stuff that hypnotists do, and it's brilliant because it's the last thing you'd expect. The Critic would fight the impossible, he'd fight drugging, or infohazards, or memetic bullshit. The last thing that he would expect, the only thing he couldn't possibly be anticipating, was the mundane. The second he entered that room, the second I approached him, and turned around him, and spun those blades, the tone of that whirring resonated perfectly, the sawblade I gave him was weighted off-centre, and his sensation of gravity moved, and I

turned the lights on, and they flickered to life in a set order, guiding his eyes so they'd dart from side to side, which reflexively caused a primal fight or flight instinct, flooding his body involuntarily with chemicals, imbalancing him, disorienting him, and then all I needed to do was tell him what he wanted to hear, and he was putty in my hands. He deferred to my guidance like a lamb, and he didn't notice it at all. The triumph wasn't in driving him to suicide. It was in controlling him as an audience so completely, so utterly entrancing him, that he'd be so entirely under my control, that he'd risk his life on the truth of my words. Wowwee is not an installation, it was performance art for an audience of one. It was making reality seem unreal to a man who dealt in the impossible. An anti-anart anartist's art."

Ruiz opened his fists above the table, clattering hundreds of coins onto the floor.

"Molly! We've gotta go!"

"Hang on, I'm still packing my hats!"

"Forget the hats! We need to leave!"

Overgang tapped Joey on the shoulder.

"I've told people to tell other people. FTF's continuing their tour, so they were leaving town anyway. Albeit with three new members. Nibman only came through because we called him up, the Brit's gone back home, and everyone else seems to be disappearing too. They're switching numbers so Tan can't track them. Except Arsehole, of course, she doesn't seem to care."

"She never really does. You're still coming with us, yeah?"

"Yeah. Sick of living with my parents anyway. Dad's glad to see me gone."

"Right. Great. Damn, we're finally going nomad."

Rita walked through Joey's front door, trundling a wheelie bag behind her. She was wearing a schoolgirl outfit with a plaid green

skirt.

"All packed and ready to go, guys."

Joey patted her on the head.

"You look like a real schoolgirl."

"I am a real schoolgirl, Joey."

"Of course you are. Figured it all out with your folks?"

"Yup. I'm just going over to my friends' house for the night. They'll panic, but they'll get over it. Probably."

Joey and Overgang shared a concerned look.

"You sure you want to do this, Rita?"

"You think sticking with mummy and daddy's going to stop them from stealing me away in the middle of the night?"

"Fair point. We've gotta go, Molly, hurry up!"

"Still packing hats!"

Overgang snorted.

"Seriously, how many hats does she need? She's only got the one head. Rita, how many hats have you packed?"

"Four. Well, seven if you count tiny decorative hats."

"Damn. What's with girls and hats?"

"How many pairs of those sunglasses have you packed, OG?"

Overgang awkwardly re-adjusted his signature shades.

"Twelve."

"Twelve pairs of sunglasses. I haven't even packed one pair."

"Yeah, well I haven't packed a hat!"

Joey interjected.

"Well, the two of you can borrow hats or shades or panties from each other once we GET A MOVE ON!"

"Alright, I'm coming!"

Molly ran down the stairwell, heaving two bulging suitcases in her arms. A long red feather boa was draped around her floral dress, braided hair making her a perfect mix of hippie and bohemian. Joey took one of the suitcases from her as she reached the ground.

"You must be Rita, right?"

"Yup. Molly?"

"Yup! Nice to meet you."

The pair shook hands, then Molly turned to Joey and Overgang.

"You boys need to learn some patience. Never rush a lady."

Overgang rubbed his neck guiltily.

"Alright, alright…"

"Who's driving?"

"Joey."

"Ha, no he's not. Give me the keys."

Rita smiled as the four of them walked outside to the waiting van. Leaving school, moving away, going out into the great big world for the first time. Making things that meant something, enacting change where change could be enacted. Finding people who really understood them; constantly on the run from heavily armed men in black. It would be just like all her family road trips, only interesting. Oh yes, Rita thought as she hopped in the back seat. This was going to be fun.

"Your friend's taking a while."

"Probably just busy. Nothing stopping us from just waiting."

Felix sat watching Ruiz solve a Rubik's cube.

"So where exactly is the body?"

Ruiz carelessly gestured to the blanket-covered corpse on the other end of the room. Felix stood up and walked over to it, carefully pulling down the top to reveal The Critic's still-shocked face, eyes still wide in shock. Felix closed the body's eyelids, then looked up at the broken skylight.

"So he shot from up there?"

"Yup."

"Where's the glass? The floor should be covered."

"I cleaned it up. That stuff's dangerous, wouldn't want someone to step on it."

Felix rolled his eyes, gesturing around the room filled with deathtraps; Ruiz didn't notice, still engrossed in the cube. The Critic's hat still sat on his head, a flawlessly circular hole punched perfectly through the front. Felix went to pluck it off, then hesitated.

"Felix."

Felix spun to face the tall masked figure at the entryway. Ruiz looked up from his cube, and was struck with an instant sense of awe and confusion. The Janitor's dark trenchcoat dangled down its legs, billowing around without a breeze. It glanced around, silently appraising the room. Ruiz looked straight into The Janitor's darkened eyeholes. His pupils widened, his tongue felt as dry and rough as sandpaper, his lungs felt like they were on fire and his extremities felt numb and cold. For the first time in his life, Ruiz felt deep, soul-crushing fear. Well, that or love. He'd never felt either before, and from what he had heard, the two seemed very similar. Here was the being that would deliver him from his conundrum, the instrument of salvation; the supplier of The Critic's last rites. Ruiz

blurted out the one thing he knew, from an artistic perspective, was objectively true.

"You are beautiful."

Ruiz stood and walked to The Janitor, grinning dumbly while offering the completed Rubik's cube. The Janitor cocked its head to one side, as if confused, then took the cube and placed it inside an inner trenchcoat pocket. A heavily obscured, almost mechanical voice buzzed from the diaphragm of the gas mask, and yet Ruiz understood every word.

"You bring me order where once there was chaos. My thanks."

Ruiz's grin widened even more, stunned into silence. Felix interjected.

"The body's over here, Janitor."

The Janitor turned and walked to the covered body. It carefully removed the blanket, folded it, and laid it down on the ground near the seat. It moved its hands into the body's pockets, checking for anything important. It removed a wallet; when opened, it was not simply empty, but brand new, the cardboard inserts still keeping its shape flat. The Janitor placed it on top of the blanket. It turned to Felix, asking for reassurance.

"I am to remove the body, then?"

"If it's not too much trouble. Sorry about… well, you knew him better than I did."

"I knew him not better or worse. I knew what he was, and only that."

The Janitor turned to the body, moving its gloved hands across the clothes, continuing to search for hidden possessions. It stood, then turned to Felix and Ruiz.

"Avert your eyes. This will be brief."

The pair of them turned away, then heard The Janitor click its fingers. Ruiz heard the sound of crunching bone, squelching flesh,

crackling flames and running water. And then, in the next instant, it was gone.

"It is complete."

Ruiz turned around. The body was gone, as were the clothes, blanket, and wallet. The Janitor was crouched over the chair. All that remained of The Critic was his grey fedora, sitting immobile where the body had once sat.

"I cannot remove the hat."

Ruiz widened his eyes, surprised that anything was beyond the capabilities of the masked giant.

"Why not?"

"I am not allowed to. Is that all, Felix?"

The Janitor stood and spun to face the man.

"I think it should be, yes. Many thanks; I'm in your debt, as always."

"Be prepared to follow through on that. I may collect sooner than you think."

Felix chuckled as The Janitor briskly walked out the door.

Ruiz continued to stare at the grey fedora.

"Sam!"

"Tim?"

The Sculptor ran into The Composer's office, interrupting his work at a synth bank.

"We've fucked up, Sam. Snipper's gone rogue, fucked everyone last night. Suits everywhere, and… fuck. You don't want to know what happened, man. It was bad. Suits pulled Bob and Robbo out, so they're gone, Felix's buggered off, Sandy's in the hospital still, and

Critic won't answer his fucking phone."

"Fuck. So it's you and me, then?"

"Me and you… ha. Not quite."

The Sculptor moved towards The Composer, driving a knife deep into his neck. The Composer's eyes widened in shock; he moved his mouth to scream, only coughing up blood.

"Shhhhh, shh shh shh… don't try to talk. Whatever you were going to say was probably as stupid and derivative as your shitty little excuses for songs."

The Composer mouthed silently, eyes rolling up into his head.

"It's all part of the plan, Sam, don't worry. We didn't fuck up, you did. I executed this shit fucking flawlessly. Yeah, yeah, I was the one who gave Sandy that play, I pinned it on Ruiz, I sent those lazy fuckers Bob and Robbo in and got them caught. If my trace on Felix is still working, then Critic's dead, too. Leaving me to be the king of the hill… after some housekeeping, of course. That asshole Ruiz made a move before I could; Snipper reckons he was first into the subterfuge game. Those upstart little twats almost screwed me out of a well-planned coup. Still, had you all fooled to the end. I'm the last one standing. The way it was always meant to be."

The Sculptor pulled the knife from The Composer's throat, letting his body drop to the floor. He flicked blood and viscera from the blade and carefully placed it back into his pocket.

"I was here first, you fucks. I did it first, I was the one who got this shit started, and you have the fucking nerve to make me one of many? It doesn't work like that. It will *never* work like that. I am *above* you. Compared to what I've done, you're *nothing*. You get me? YOU GET ME?"

The corpse remained silent. The Sculptor laughed madly, then abruptly stopped, angrily glaring at the gaping neck wound.

"That's what I fucking thought."

The Sculptor walked out of the room, leaving Sam's body to bleed out, rot, and be forgotten.

the third of one is dawn of war
The third of two is second strike.
The Third Of Three Is The Last Straw
ESCALATION AND A KNIFE

« **Detained** | **Hub** | **Snipped From The Same Cloth** »

Divine Demands

Jakeob Aldon stared at the card that Felix Cori had given her. Or maybe she should start calling him "The Critic." She let out a sigh and stretched out across her bed, flipping the card between her fingers. The side that had held the number she was to previously call was now blank, and the opposite side held nothing but a question.

Are We Cool Yet?

It was an interesting question, at the very least. A group that was little more than a question suggested that the answer could never be "Yes." Because then what? What if the opposition suddenly was cool with you? What if the art, and by extension the artists, became cool? To some that may not matter as it would simply mean dropping what amounted to little more than a label, but from Aldon's limited experience the aussie anartists were all about labels.

The Critic critiqued. The Director directed. The Sculptor sighed and waited for the card to do something interesting.

After several more minutes, the card finally obliged. Upon turning it to the side that used to be blank, Aldon found a new phone number to call. She pawed for her phone and when the search came up empty she sat up.

In the corner of the room she spotted Copper, Boron, Iron, and Zinc gathered around her crappy old flip phone. They didn't seem to be eating it, which was good. In fact, they appeared to be trying to use it. Iron and Copper were holding a phone book open while Boron read from it, Zinc punching in the numbers. Aldon crouched down to see Boron reading from a listing for some company that bought and sold gold items.

Aldon pinched the phone and tugged it away from Zinc, who protested by waving its little arms around. Iron hopped up onto the

phone book and hopped about pitifully.

"Sorry, guys, I need this. Besides, you need money to buy gold."

Now too occupied with dialing the number, Aldon missed Boron looking to the spot on Finnegan's desk where the roommates tended to leave their wallets.

Aldon waited while the dial tone droned on. After approximately four seconds the tone changed to a low pitched hum, which Aldon assumed was a memetic screening device or something. When the tone decided her mind probably hadn't collapsed in on itself, Felix picked up.

"Allie?"

"Hey, Felix."

"Um. Hi."

"…Hi." Out of the corner of her eye, Aldon caught Zinc trying to sneak up on the unsuspecting wallet sitting on the desk. She rolled her eyes and pocketed the wallet and gave the little golem a light bop on the head with her finger. All the while, Felix remained silent. "Felix?"

"Right, sorry, just waiting for this thing to triangulate you."

"What thing?" Aldon slid over to the window and looked to the sky. "You know you could have just friggin' asked where I live."

"I was busy! And nervous. And stuff. Look, it doesn't matter. This thing is almost done, and then I'll send The Janitor over to pick you up."

"That doesn't sound like much of an artist name."

"Well, no. She— it— is more of a… well, the cleaning crew. It's a long story. But don't worry, this triangle thing just finished so she— it — will be right over."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Shit, that was fast." She started for the door but a thought caught her midstep. "Did you know where I live this whole time and do this just for a cool setup?"

Felix just laughed. "I'll see you in a bit."

Aldon stared at the phone as it clicked and went back to the regular dial tone. "He so did."

After pocketing the phone Aldon went to the door. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure the golems weren't in an immediate line of sight, then she unlocked the door and cracked it open. She took a small breath and looked out.

Something looked back. Behind the lens of a gas mask, two tunnels bored into a skull that might not have actually been there. The resulting abyss drew Aldon in like a moth to a flame, despite the obvious dissimilarity due to an abyss being both dark and cold and a flame being… well, not those things. The being nodded in greeting but kept its gloved hands at its side.

A voice like a dying loudspeaker emanated from somewhere in its general vicinity. "Sculptor. I am called The Janitor."

"Sup," Aldon said with a smile. "Come in, before somebody notices you. You're… what, a demiurge? Full Urge? You're definitely *something*."

The Janitor cocked its head as it entered. "You are more relaxed than most I meet."

Aldon shut the door behind it. "I mean, don't get me wrong— you're still unnerving as fuck. Just, y'know, that doesn't mean I can't be polite. Besides, you're not the first god I've met."

"I am not a god."

Aldon shrugged. "Eh, whatever you are. So I'm guessing you have some teleporting thingamajig to get me to Felix, yeah?"

The Janitor slowly began to unbutton its trenchcoat. "I have a Way."

"Cool, cool. Well, uh, open 'er up and let's get going."

"Close your eyes. Cover your ears. I will guide you with my hand on one shoulder. When I release, you may open your eyes and ears."

Aldon shut her eyes but had to make the remark, "This is gonna be some traumatic jaunt through your personal Way, isn't it."

Before she covered her ears she heard the rush of fabric, as if the Janitor was opening its trenchcoat in a deliberately dramatic fashion. It was too bad nobody could see it. Or hear whatever followed, now that Aldon had covered her ears.

The familiar sensation of being shoved through a hole in spacetime quickly enveloped Aldon. An overbearing sense of something she couldn't quite pin down pressed upon her from all directions. A large hand grasped her left shoulder and gave her a light push, and so she walked. The feeling never lessened, and was so alien that she couldn't even gather some semblance of resistance to it. So she walked, The Janitor's hand on her shoulder. Blind, deaf, and drowning in a sea of mystery.

Then her body collapsed into a singularity for a brief moment, and when she regained her senses there was no hand on her shoulder. She cracked an eye open and saw Felix staring at a blank wall even more blankly. Next to him, Cassandra Paulson was glaring at an unknown third anartist who was painting the wall beige. They were inside a large, mostly empty warehouse. Anartists could be seen everywhere, most either cleaning or painting, though a few could be seen carrying around benches.

Power crackled behind her. "I have brought The Sculptor. Is there anything else you need?"

Felix snapped out of his daze. "Allie! Hi! Janitor! No, I don't think so. We should be good for today."

The Janitor nodded and trudged away. Aldon watched it leave, half expecting it to disappear the moment she stopped looking. And then it was gone.

"You okay?" Felix poked her shoulder and she snapped to attention. "Janitor didn't shake you up too much?"

"Nah, he's a big sweetheart," Aldon said. "Or she. Or it. Whatever. Anyway, what's with the whole… warehouse thing? That just looks like normal paint."

"It is normal paint. It's part of the piece."

Aldon looked around. It wasn't all that large a warehouse, really. "The whole place is the piece?"

"Yeah. C'mon, I'll show you around."

Everyone seemed to work a little more earnestly when Felix was near, and worked near frantically whenever Paulson turned her gaze on them. Aldon watched a group of anartists almost drop the mosaic window they were lugging around just because their precious Critic was watching. With methodical effort they hefted the glass up to their peers standing on a pair of ladders, who then somehow affixed the window to the solid wall. Colored light immediately began to pour into the warehouse, bringing the image of a rectangular prism sitting on a table into sharp contrast with the dark warehouse wall.

"Neat," Aldon commented.

"Oh man, neat doesn't begin to cover it," Felix said. "You have no idea how ambitious this whole thing is! I really think I'm making something great here."

Aldon drew her mouth to the side but said nothing, and Felix was too enamored with his self-proclaimed handiwork to notice. Glances at Paulson only earned glares in return, so Aldon quickly gave that up. The odd thing, at least to Aldon, was that the anartists seemed to have taken an interest in her. She caught a fair few of them pointing at her when they thought she wasn't looking.

If this was what it was like to be a celebrity, Aldon would gladly remain in anonymity.

Yet the sheer number of them niggled at her. "So where are all these people from? This is way bigger than your group was before."

Felix grinned. "People flock when word gets out that The Critic is looking for disciples. Everybody wants to be cool." He gave her a look she definitely didn't like. "Whether they'll admit it or not."

Punching him would have been too easy. "Oh, don't you get started. You know why I'm here. After I get my new body I'm bugging the fuck out."

"We'll see."

All Aldon saw was an authority figure who had earned his title by virtue of failing to say "Not it" fast enough. When she looked to the mosaics she saw nothing but a mimicry of former arts without understanding their purpose. Craftsmen and artisans capable of bending reality over backwards and making spacetime their bitch had gathered in such numbers that they needed a warehouse to fit them all. Yet all they strove for was the attention of a man who used to clip newspaper articles.

Surveying the scene around her was reminding her of something, though she couldn't quite place what. She watched groups pull in wooden benches and set them in rows. They all lined up and were facing in one direction, toward a podium with a large platform behind it. It seemed strangely vacant. Behind the poor, empty platform was an even larger mosiac of a man and a woman reaching upwards while the hand of what was likely God reached down.

"Oh." Aldon looked at the benches, now recognizing them to be pews. "Oh." The beige walls and cascading light seemed to finally click into place. "Oh." She stared at the platform that had a distinct lack of statue on it. "Oh."

"So, you figure it out?" Felix asked.

They wanted her to sculpt a god.

"Oh. Fuck."

« Covert Cursing | Hub | Exasperated Efforts »

Do Not Collect $200

Hello! Enter your login information for Foundation WebNET.

```
/serv IDENTIFY PIETROVITCH-W
++ Accessing user… (100%)
++ Please enter password:
/password skipsecurity231225
++ Welcome, PIETROVITCH-W.
/email
++ E-MAIL loading…
```

Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
to: Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
date: Tuesday, Aug 8, 2001 at 3:29 PM
subject: RE: Non-anomalous item

I've got the thing behind me right now. How many tests did they do on this thing? And who on? Maybe some random D-Class?

After looking at the evidence you sent, I've got to agree with you whole-heartedly. This game

isn't anomalous whatsoever. It's just a couple of people getting too involved in a goddamn board game. I've shown your work to junior researchers Syrek and Wright. They both agree. We've got a plan to make a report to the Director and we'll need your help. Reply ASAP if you are interested.

- Researcher Harmon

Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
to: Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
date: Wednesday, Aug 9, 2001 at 11:08 AM
subject: RE: RE: Non-anomalous item

Jack,
Regarding those initial questions, documents suggest they took "friendly" D-Classes to test this thing. Twice. Clearly not enough to prove any anomalous effects. I can help you with your report.

When going through the logs, I found where it came from. Some kid was selling it because he blamed it for "ruining mommy and daddy's marriage". He'd gotten it for his birthday, but when his parents played it, they got in an

argument over real money and divorced. Kid dead hated that game. I don't blame him, although it's not like that marriage would have lasted if you ask me.

Anyways, what do you need? A co-witness? Report verification? It can't be on-shift though, I've got to lead research on my current skip.
- Piet

» AO-2175.log

Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
to: Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
date: Wednesday, Aug 9, 2001 at 3:34 PM
subject: Need your help

Thanks for your interest. We aren't planning to send a *normal* report, per se. We're gonna play the thing ourselves and take a video of it. Saves us at least two weeks of paperwork just to clear this thing. We package that up with the report, send it off to the Director. He's a man of common sense. I've got Wright, Syrek, me, and hopefully you. Eckhart's gonna videotape it. Let me know if that's fine with you. If so, meet at the recreation room

tomorrow in Sector 17.

- Researcher Harmon

Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
to: Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 1:53 PM
subject: RE: Need your help

Jack,
I'll be there.
- Piet

Hello! Enter your login information for Foundation WebNET.

```
/serv IDENTIFY HARMON-J vyzetrit126479
++ Accessing user… (100%)
++ Welcome, HARMON-J.
/email
++ E-MAIL loading…
```

Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
to: Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|

jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:02 PM
subject: Cheater

You piece of shit. I won't forget this, you worthless fuck.

Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
to: Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:09 PM
subject: RE: Cheater

I can't believe I ever trusted a person like you. You saw. Syrek nearly tore Wright's throat out. I'm talking to the Director about this.

Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
to: Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:13 PM
subject: Don't care

I don't fucking care what you do or who the fuck you talk to. If I ever see your miserable

ass with another miserable plan, I swear I'll send you to the miserable infirmary. Wright fucking deserved it. What maniac puts 2 hotels on a property?

Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
to: Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:15 PM
subject: RE: Don't care

If you don't care so fucking much, stop emailing me, you unqualified degenerate. You're the one who decided to tax us all to hell.

Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
to: Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:16 PM
subject: RE: RE: Don't care

You sold me out for Reading Railroad and Electric Company. Look who's fucking talking.

Jack Harmon <pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah#pcs.noitadnuof|jnomrah>
to: Walter Pietrovitch <pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip#pcs.noitadnuof|whctivorteip>
date: Thursday, Aug 10, 2001 at 4:19 PM
subject: fuck off

That goddamn "non-anomalous" bullshit you were spouting about obviously isn't fucking true whatsoever. That's why we can't stop goddamn fighting, I bet. I wouldn't be surprised if we get shipped to goddamn Alaska, you Russian fuck.

- a *winner* at games

NOTICE FROM THE FOUNDATION PERSONNEL DIRECTOR — SITE-107

Researchers W. Pietrovitch, J. Harmon, and Junior Researchers D. Wright and R. Syrek were reprimanded and will be re-assigned following their contact with an anomalous item from Site-19.

Listing here:

- W. Pietrovitch — Sector 17
- J. Harmon — Sector 3, Site-108
- D. Wright — Sector 10
- R. Syrek — Sector 6

We would like to welcome Researcher Harmon's replacement at Site-107, Researcher J. Fynegan.

— Carl Pilliken, Site-107 Director

Item Description: A standard 'Monopoly' board game that, when played, will invariably incite an argument between the players that will ultimately lead to the cessation or annulment of their marriage, partnership, friendship or whatever other form their relationship took.
Date of Recovery: 07-03-2001
Location of Recovery: family yard sale, Illinois, US.
Current Status: **`Site-19 storage`**.

Do Not Go Gentle

She counts out the un-bullets in the monstrosity of conceptual circuitry that's replaced the magazine on this gun: it takes a lot more than just steel and a prayer to hold an anticoncept in one piece for much longer than thirty seconds and she doesn't want to have to deal with the fallout of having a gun that's leaking ideatic ammunition all over the site.

Satisfied that she's got enough to finish the job for all the retirees arrayed against the wall, she pauses as she passes by one of the elderly academics – a face worn rugged by the scars of time and framed in hair gone too grey and thin for a woman who can still stand this tall. "You're retiring after all?" the executioner says with a faint trace of disbelief. "I thought you'd take the next job they gave you, Lanna."

Alanna Ellis, Dr. three times over, is old, but not old enough to have the same twitching hands as the rest of her compatriots: her work hasn't had the same amount of time to eat into her myelin sheathes as it has for the rest of the former personnel, and so she's still at least left this small shred of dignity. As the executioner looks her over, she can't help but think she still looks regal even as she sits out the last moments of her life: the suicide queen smiling for the photo on the card. "It's a mutual split, Darcie," she says, with a not-insincere smile. "I suggested it would be best for the team if I went along with the rest of the Class of '03: Five agreed, and when Five says 'jump' you jump, whether that's off a cliff or not."

"Mutual's one way of putting it," the woman murmurs, checking and double-checking the indicators on her pistol: are the crystals dulled? are the petals withered? is the gasket sealed? All of this maintenance is kid's stuff in theory, the kind of thing they let you know about six months beforehand and give you a fully workshopped course on, but it's always harder in person and she finds her own fingers faltering as she struggles to power the damn

thing on.

"Hey now, a 'yes' is a 'yes', especially from an Overseer. If they'd have said 'no', Lord knows what they'd do when they found out what we're doing here."

"They'd bring you back, is that what you're saying?" She secures the restraints on Alanna's hands: even if her ears are filtered, her eyes still have to be wide open just to aim: they're prime targets for the kind of semantic weaponry Alanna could unleash through sign-language.

Not that she seems like she's going to put up any resistance to this: "That's why we're here, aren't we? The be-all end-all of a peaceful journey to wherever's next, no?"

"That's what I'm hoping," the woman murmurs.

"Hoping? I checked the calculations myself, thank you very much," Alanna cackles, wriggling her fingers inside the confines of the clasps they've been placed in: the black cube of gelatinous material gives no sign of movement from the outside. "Now, are you going to get this over with or are you giving me one last look-over like old times?"

"Don't." She swallows. "Don't- just don't bring that up right now."

"What are you so sad about? Worried I'm not going to leave a pretty corpse?" Alanna grins. "I mean, if this fucks up, you still get to see me: won't be physical or anything, but **`edits to a bunch of documents are good enough`**, right?"

"Lanna." The woman places gloved fingers underneath Alanna's jaw: traces the bone, pushes her head up. "I said don't."

"Right, right," Alanna grumbles. "Old dead woman needs her laughs… got any rites you want to read us, or is the bullet the only sanctification you need?"

"I'm not part of Theology," the woman answers, tight-lipped. "Though if we're really lucky, maybe the ECRG might pay us a visit: surely they've got a couple exorcism machines lying around, if that's

what you're worried about."

Alanna bursts out in more laughter. "Why would they bother with the corpses of a bunch of randoms? Think they're going to really waste the last auto-priest machines they've got on what could just be a weird cult of oldies?"

"Right." The hesitation in her voice is just covered by the murmur of conversation from the rest of the group, and it's quickly forgotten when she places one last kiss on Alanna's cheek. "Best of luck wherever you, um, end up then." She swallows, straightens up, and returns to her ministrations on the rest of the group.

Once she's satisfied that the rest of the occupants in the conference room are properly secured, she backs up, lines up her shot one last time and smiles weakly at the assembled crowd of memeticists long-passed.

"Here's to the black void of the afterlife," Alanna calls from her spot at the center of the row of chairs.

The rest of the retirees get to "Chee-" by the time the un-bullets find their mark in their foreheads.

It acts fast: when the anticoncepts hit, the doctors' ontological presences unspool like a loose thread's being pulled, and when it's all said and done Darcie lets the gun drop from her hands because she's got no idea why she's here: is that an anticoncept stabiliser strapped to the Beretta she was toting just a second ago? Who are these people she's standing in front of, and oh God are those bullet holes in their heads, has she just–

She panics, because she doesn't know anything. And then she calms, because she doesn't know anything.

I Am Not There, I Did Not Die

I promise he won't feel anything.

…

I've done this tens of times before. Worst-case scenario, what happens to him today would've happened to him in six months. Definitely less painful for him this way, but if you were doing it for his sake you'd take him to Switzerland and let Dignitas take care of that, not me.

…

They wouldn't let you talk to him after he's dead, though.

…

Do you have everything you'll need for that, by the way? Cheek scrapes, blood samples…

…

That's good. You're a lot more committed than a lot of my clients; most of them don't realise what kind of person they have to be to keep their loved ones stuck on this planet for the rest of eternity.

…

It doesn't have to be, but I mean it as one. Trust me on that.

…

Not a problem. You're not paying me fifty grand for poor customer service.

…

You're paying me fifty grand for a mugging gone wrong.

There are two parts to keeping someone on this earth: making them restless in the first place and making sure they can't undo that before you're ready for them to. It's not going to be hard to keep myself anonymous if I get it over and done with quickly, and an armed robbery? Easily violent enough. Both parts taken care of in one fell swoop.

…

You said he likes jogging in Centennial Park, so that's where I'm going to do it.

Nice place. Going to be a pretty place to haunt, at least.

…

What do you think'll happen if I get found out?

Sure. Australia doesn't have capital punishment, so the state won't get me for mass murder. But everyone I've taken care of this way — all fourty-seven of them — will have plenty of time to find out who I am, and what I had to do with them being the way they are now.

And unless I can break out, there's quite literally no way in Hell I'm going to be able to run from them.

…

But it's one you can trust. I'm not making you pay any extra, and it's going to last for a lot longer than a year.

…

Now, any last questions?

…

Don't tell your son you love him. He'll figure out you're lying soon enough.

Another Boring Night

> Note Bene: It would behoove you to read **`Unusual Happenings`** before looking at this tale.

Quinn MacAllister felt like a stereotypical cop, eating a doughnut while sitting in an unmarked vehicle, waiting for something to come along and happen. Her partner was with her this time, fiddling with the radio, which had NPR playing on it.

In contrast to Quinn's slender, white, blonde form, Darnell Christman was a rather large black man. He reminded Quinn of a slightly fatter Samuel L. Jackson circa… whatever year Pulp Fiction came out, sans afro and mustache, but that was only because he had shaved off the latter; FBI policy to make field agents seem less intimidating.

"Four hours," Quinn said.

"And counting," Darnell sighed. "Face it. He's not coming. Skippers most likely picked him up already."

"Head of the biggest Spirit Dust ring this side of the Pacific, and the Skippers got him." Quinn sighed. "Of fucking course."

"Sometimes it's better to let them handle stuff. You nearly got killed by that giant anaconda thing in Zanesville."

"Don't remind me of that," Quinn said, shivering softly. "They had to fucking cut me out. It was humiliating." She rubbed her face and sighed, leaning against the seat. "All right, try another on me."

"All right…" Darnell screwed up his eyes. "Case File 1939-23."

"…first recorded instance of a werewolf encounter by the UIU. Said werewolf was killed when a knife was thrown over his head."

"Not killed," Darnell corrected her. "Turned back to normal. Back then, that actually worked on werewolves."

"Fuck." Quinn rubbed her face. "My turn. Case File… 1981-42."

"Too easy. Codename: White Hat. Murders carried out with a Bowie Knife in Texas. Knife would always vanish from evidence, only to appear at the next crime scene. Victims were related to people who participated in the Battle of the Alamo. "

"Evidence of Existence?"

"Several pictures of the knife, all taken with a Polaroid camera, used by Special Agent Jack Miller, who-"

"Was *not* the inspiration for Fox Mulder. I *refuse* to believe that."

"Why?"

"Because 1) Miller was gay, 2) he was more handsome than Duchovny, and 3) there is no way the Skippers would let that happen." She sighed. "Hand me another nacho."

"Nacho it is." Darnell handed her a bowl of the corn chips. Quinn took one, and munched on it, looking melancholy. "Quinn?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you always act like this?"

"Like what?"

"Like you feel like you're competing with the Skippers?"

She snorted. "You've asked this question about 100 times now. The answer's always the same: fuck the Skippers, that's why."

He sighed, picking at a spot on his arm. "You act like you think that they're worse than Hitler."

"They really any different?" Quinn said, a bitter tone in her voice. "They've got a secret police, they round up people who they deem different and undesirable into places where they can be contained, they've deluded themselves into thinking they're a force for good…" She sighed. "Only difference is that their swastikas are just in the

shape of the letters "SCP".

"Cripes, Mac." Darnell sighed, changing the channel to a classic rock station. "What's your beef with them, anyway?"

She sighed heavily. "You know how I never talk about my home town?"

"Yeah…"

"That's because I literally *can't.*" She rubbed at her throat, coughing slightly. "Remember the secrecy agreement we signed? Back when we got the job?"

"Yeah… the one the Gawkers made up. 'UN Resolution 256-A' or something." He frowned. "Why?"

"It… did something to me. I can't talk about what we do on this job to anyone but Skippers, or the Director, or you."

"Yeah, I know." Darnell pinched the bridge of his nose. "I felt like I was choking when I tried to tell my brother about the job. You work around it, after a bit. Learn to lie."

"…it wasn't the first time I'd signed something like that." She swallowed, feeling a lump in her throat, right where her larynx was. "That's all I can say, I think."

Darnell stared at Quinn. "Mac… what did you do before you got involved with this?"

"…who ever said there was a *before?*" She looked out the windshield and sighed. "Another hour, then we check in with command and say this was a bust."

"Right." Darnell looked out the windshield and fiddled with the radio. "…say, uh, Danielle's back in town. Maybe you could get Harley and we could do a… double date or something?"

"Don't see why not," Quinn said, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel.

The headline on the morning newspaper was that the leader of a drug ring had been shot dead by a beat cop. The fact that it probably wasn't true rubbed even more salt in the wound.

«Unusual Happenings|Hub|Taproots»

Recovered Documents (Translated into English from Russian)

Doc-491-1: Fragments from the personal diary of Mayor Piotr Lazarev.

> […] lights had been circling the village for nearly a week. Captain Trubaiev claimed, then, that they were airplanes, but he didn't believe those words. Whether he actually knew what they were is a different matter. It seems that he'd only just learned what would happen, right before he […]
>
> [ILLEGIBLE]
>
> […] had acted sooner, we would only have lost our village instead of the rest of the world. Though he insists that I have authority over the village, the fact remains that he is in command of the men with weapons while the rest of us are defenseless. Until Captain Trubaiev conclusively shows that he is no threat, I will continue to withold my trust of him. He has kept a very large secret from us before, after all.
>
> We have to begin considering how to ration our supplies. We are fortunate that this happened in autumn, allowing us to work with […]
>
> [ILLEGIBLE MATERIAL FOLLOWED BY A MINIMUM OF EIGHT DESTROYED PAGES]
>
> […] brutal than that were the actions of the Captain when he learned of it. I would not call it a trial. Only the Captain spoke, listing off every one of the soldier's faults. He was then left tied in the central square for four hours until the Captain returned with the rest of his men and personally executed him with his own sidearm. His words will never

leave me:

"Stand up! Even if you've never lived like a man, at least die like one! Stand up and look me in the eyes!"

Could such a ruthless man be trusted to protect the village? Even if it was for the Jewish girl, it may not stop with one death. What will happen if one of us commits a crime against one of the soldiers? Will he demand that they be disposed of in the same way? With all of the armed men under his control, we could do […]

[BETWEEN TEN AND THIRTEEN DAMAGED OR ILLEGIBLE PAGES]

[…] dare call me the tyrant! Do they even understand that this was for their own well being? Without my militia, only the Captain wields true power. And, while we continue to consolidate our position, we have to follow the same example that the Captain had made of that traitor of his. It is the only way that we can avoid arousing his suspicion.

And now people are leaving with the Uzbek. The punk and the hippies won't be missed. We can even make do without a few of the families. But, with no engineer, we won't be able to keep the generator […]

[FOLLOWING PAGE]

[…] is well. The militia came back with Tibor. He won't be able to use his right hand again. But he'll still be able to maintain the generator, so long as one hand is still working.

[ILLEGIBLE TEXT]

[…] and the punk managed to escape. The boy probably won't survive if the militia did what they said they did to him. And the Uzbek is too old to cause any further trouble. It's ironic that we have our own secrets to keep

from the Captain, now.

[TWO ILLEGIBLE PAGES AND ONE THAT HAS CLEARLY BEEN TORN OUT]

[…] The soldiers hate the CAPTAIN as much as I do. Ever since the Jewish girl and the execution, the CAPTAIN had lost all of his power. Another Revolution is about to begin against the CAPTAIN. The village will be free once I'm in […]

[TWO PAGES OF ILLEGIBLE TEXT, INCLUDING FURTHER MENTIONS OF "REVOLUTION", IN ADDITION TO "TREASON", AND "REVENGE". REMAINING PAGES ARE BLANK WITH THE FOLLOWING EXCEPTION]

[…] will die like a man. I'm sorry, Magda.

The above document was discovered beneath the floorboards of the Mayor Lazarev's office, thanks to directions provided by the present Mayor Lazarev. Bullet holes and some bone fragments were found in the wall behind the desk.

Doc-491-2: Typed memorandum from Nurse Yelena Petruskova to Doctor Vladimir Gierukov.

[…] Five died during the event. Their names are [DATA REDACTED]. Mister Kravitz died later, before he could receive emergency surgery.

Eight are wounded. [NAMES AND CONDITIONS REDACTED]

[ILLEGIBLE] catatonic and unable to move under their own power. Neither suffered any injuries to their heads or bodies.

[THE REMNANT IS ILLEGIBLE WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A HAND-WRITTEN NOTE IN THE MARGIN]

Thank you, Yelena. Please begin again with the professional tone and language that we had discussed. There is also no need to be redundant in your summaries.

Doc-491-3: Physical examination of "the Uzbek."

[…] accustomed to physical labour. Some muscular atrophy has occurred through both lack of use and from advanced age. The two remaining teeth […] scars along the back which appear to have been from a whip […] likely not of European or Asian descent.

Without being familiar with his language, it is not possible to make an accurate assessment of his state of mind. A student of human nature may be able to discern that his actions and demeanor are indicative of a man who is still in full control of his faculties.

[DATA REDACTED]

[…] will continue to refer to him as the Uzbek, even if he clearly is not.

Doc-491-4: The remains of the personal log of Captain Julian Trubaiev.

[ALL PAGES UNTIL THE FINAL OFFICIAL ENTRY ARE ILLEGIBLE FOR THE MOST PART. POSSIBLY PERTINENT WORDS INCLUDE, "DISPLACEMENT", "TOO LATE", "DECEIVED", [DATA REDACTED], AND "SURVIVE"]

[…] Perhaps I was too hard on him. He did a horrible thing to her, but does that mean that he deserves the things that I had said to him? I know that I'm quick to anger and it's now been said. There is no turning back from that. It's time for me to go back to him and look him in the eyes. I hope that I will be able to see some

remorse in them.

[THE FOLLOWING ENTRY WAS NOT WRITTEN BY CAPTAIN TRUBAIEV'S HAND]

Thank you. I love you.

- Magda

[ALL FURTHER PAGES ARE BLANK EXCEPT FOR THE THIRD FROM THE LAST]

No remorse. No more entries. If this ends, I don't want to remember it.

Doc-491-5: An anonymous journal discovered underneath rubble during the building of a kiosk at Exit Point 2.

It's becoming insane here. Piotr has become completely unreasonable, hiding behind his thugs while Captain Trubaiev stands by and does nothing. He tried to evacuate us before we were moved. When the airplanes started circling faster, he ran in here with his men and ordered us out. Even if we couldn't get out of in time, he tried to save us while the rest of the Red Army sat by and waited for us to disappear.

He also protected the honour of poor Magda, who had already lost her parents when we were moved, after that soldier had his way with her. Nobody is proud to say it, but we were all happy, the moment that he got what he deserved. I only wish he'd died like a dog instead.

With the curfew and the random searches and the dwindling supplies, I don't understand why we are staying here in this dying village. Only the Uzbek has any sense. He is already getting ready to leave again. Mikhail is planning to go with him. They are good friends, even if they can't understand a thing the other is saying. He even gave the old man his favourite punk rock shirt.

[FOLLOWING PAGE]

I have decided to go with the Uzbek. He came from out there in the first place. If anyone can show us how to survive outside of , he can. I know that more will follow us in time. I have already seen other families packing their belongings. Let them come. Piotr and his militia can starve.

Doc-491-6: Two messages scratched into the wall of a barricaded room.

You're the last one. Will you taste as good as the mayor?

I don't know. But you were definitely no suckling pig.

Doctor Doctor Doctor

"I told them not to do it," Bright remarked offhandedly, over his shoulder.

"I know you did," Bright replied, sweeping up the debris. It helped that he had a couple of extra pairs of hands to get the big chunks cleaned up. It also helped that the extra pairs of hands were his. Even the old man him was helping out.

"But they wouldn't listen to me!" Bright continued, poking away at his computer. Chat program activated, webcam on, who's messaging… Oh, it's Bright, big surprise. He continues the rant, even as he smiles at the camera. It's a familiar face, one world reknowned- But of course, these days, all faces are known throughout the world.

Bright leans on his broom, staring at the lovely young him on the webcam. "Holy shit. Are we Hugh Jackman?" Bright whaps himself upside the head, lightly, and gestures at the debris. "I'm not going to get this cleaned up if I don't help!"

Bright spins in his chair to peer at the screen more intently. "So, have to know… How's the down under?"

"Hung like a freaking Wolverine," Bright replies, and the other hims trade a glance.

"Is that… a good thing?" He asks, in unison.

"The best thing." Hugh Bright replies, distracted by something below the camera.

Bright sighs to himself. How can he be like that, at a time like this? Well, it is him. Oh, another webcam invitation, this time for the Oval Office! How nice. "Hello Bright, you on to look at this too?"

Bright shakes his head sadly. "I told them, you know I did." "I know

you did, I was there, I told them too!" "But, now I'm here." "And everywhere." "Really everywhere?" "Really. Everywhere. Even the communities that were shut off from everyone." "Well, I don't believe that." Bright, heavily bearded, with a straw hat, leans over into the picture. "Believe it. Fuck turning the other cheek."

Bright, however, waves it all away. "Why did they have to do it? You'd think they'd listen, just once."

Nodding in agreement, Bright absently cradles the Red Phone. "Does anything good EVER come from mixing two SCPs? NO!"

"And three SCPs just makes it three times as bad!" chimes in the Bright in the rafters. Oh, I know we didn't mention him before, but someone had to get the lights running.

Slinking up from the basement, Bright pauses to adjust his girth. It's still kind of hard to speak with a forked tongue, but damn it, he will do it! "But, five of them! Really, five of them? And they didn't think this would happen?"

Bright sighs, all together, and speaks, in unison with himself. "I told them."

Doctor Ronald Stimson's Personnel File

Name: Doctor Ronald Stimson

Security Clearance: Level 2 (In Cases of SCP- , Level 5 Access is Permitted)

Location: Site-19

Assignment: SCP- , Containment and Study

Status: *Missing*.

Profile: Doctor Stimson's history makes him a target for both the GOC and MC&D. Under no circumstances is he to be assigned to any site in contested territory. Additionally, Doctor Stimson's background makes him largely useful as a consult on areas of interest, including the psychological effects money or wealth have on cognitive decisions and cognitive perceptions of 'worth.'

History: Ronald Stimson completed his PhDs in Neurochemistry and Economics at Cornell University, followed by a brief stint working in criminal intelligence for the French government. He was originally brought "into the know" by GOC operative "Silvermane" . The GOC deemed him unfit for service after his unwillingness to execute a Class-Green reality bender, and Dr. Stimson was slated for mind-wipe and removal. After fleeing the area, Dr. Stimson was located by Marshall, Carter, and Dark, who agreed to help him in exchange for his services.

After learning more about the 'hidden world' behind things, Dr. Stimson quietly made an effort to contact The Foundation, the only group with a similar set of goals to his—the preservation of life. Dr. Stimson managed to defect thanks to Agent , and after thorough screening, was assigned to minor work at Site-32. Following his promotion, Doctor Stimson was given exclusive access to SCP- .

Note: Doctor Stimson should not be given any chocolate. He is deathly allergic.

Recovered SCPs:

- **SCP-1134** - Memetic Demons
- **SCP-1365** - The Reckoning
- **SCP-694** - From Hell
- **SCP-1486** - The Mountain of Madness
- **SCP-1998** - The Broken Arcana
- **SCP-1857** - The Eternal Fanzine
- **SCP-1554** - You don't know what's happening.
- **SCP-H31P** - I don't know where I am. Something is wrong.
- **SCP-1846** - The Signal

Other SCPs of Interest:

- **SCP-986** - Contributed Images
- **SCP-435** - Helped with Editing
- **SCP-113** - Rewritten
- **SCP-882** - Wrote Original Version
- **SCP-002** - Contributed Images

Documented Accounts:

- **The Dregs of Society** - A tale about the last remaining members of the GOC in a time after the fall of man.
- **The Lost Farm** - A tale about where the hell am I I don't feel anything who is there in the harvest season of his final year.
- **Finding Silvermane** - Silvermane is at it again, trying to track down Stimson and end his involvement.
- **The Clerical Error** - I don't understand this. What is this? Is this an effect of SCP- ?
- **You're Not Even Real** - This isn't how it's supposed to be. What is this? Why does it feel like this?
- **Someone Please Help Me** - This can't be it. This can't be all of it.
- **Metaphrasis** - Learning a harsh lesson, Stimson is dragged

back to MC&D kicking and screaming.

This Information is Classified Level 5

Notes on the Disappearance of Ronald Stimson:

Ronald Stimson vanished sometime the afternoon of 23 October 2011. He was last seen entering his office with SCP- . Dr. Stimson's current assignment is believed to have triggered an event which removed him from our reality.[1]

Over time, it has come to the attention of the O5 Council that many of Dr. Stimson's previous assignments have gone missing.[2] For some reason, these files have simply gone missing at the root directory.[3] Other reports have gone missing as well.

The entire collection of legacy information concerning GOC Operative "Silvermane"[4] and the MC&D information which Dr. Stimson recovered for us has also been removed. Currently, we suspect several different aggressors, MC&D and the GOC among them. Currently, though, no information is known.[5]

Currently, it is believed that Dr. Stimson's consciousness exists in some way[6], but the current level of information we have[7] is extremely limited.[8]

Additional operatives are being assigned to determine the full extent of the "unexistance" of Dr. Stimson's information[9], but it appears[10] that even now, more and more people are forgetting that Dr. Stimson even existed.[11]

It is theorized that, eventually, even this file will cease to exist and all record of Ronald Stimson will be removed.[12]

File Closed.

Footnotes

1. That isn't right. That isn't right at all…
2. No. No, I know them. I remember it all. Why doesn't anyone understand? I have all the information.
3. They… They were… deleted.
4. I told you that his name was Daniel Croft
5. You don't understand. They didn't like it. They just… decided that it didn't happen. They didn't like it, and now, it's not there anymore!
6. I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU!
7. I'M RIGHT HERE! RIGHT HERE!
8. I'm a fucking PhD. They told me that I wasn't being scientific… They wouldn't know science if it bit them in the ass…
9. They did something. They downvoted it, then they went in and… I created so much.
10. They said I didn't age well…
11. What?
12. No…

Document #017-1

Site-12, Monday Morning. 4:00. January 11th, 2025.

Containment area of SCP-5200

Researcher Boyd closed the hatch behind him, and turned to face the containment vault's occupant. Boyd thought he looked like an old fashioned tramp, complete with bindle and permanent five o'clock shadow. But yesterday he'd looked like a wino, and the day before a washed-up boxer. This look wasn't new.

Boyd sat down across from the entity, and pulled an empty manila envelope out of his jacket. "They told me that you wanted to talk."

SCP-5200 pulled up itself up to the table, and grinned a toothy smile. "Ahyup. You've all been gettin' anxious about the dreamer, right?"

"Perhaps." Boyd turned the envelope over in his hands. "What do you know about it?"

SCP-5200 let out a long sigh, and leaned back in his chair. "Boy, you eggheads sure get to the point quick. If I'm going to tell you that, I'll need to let you know how the world got started out."

Boyd frowned. SCP-5200 was known for spinning stories to distract from having to answer questions. Usually, it was best to play along until it could be coerced into giving a definite answer.

"Fine. But be quick about it, we don't have all week."

SCP-5200 chuckled. "You don't know how right you are, chuck."

He pulled a crumbled cigarette from his jacket, and placed it in his mouth. "Okay, okay… so the first thing that happened, was we had the two forces of the universe. Greeks had it on point, y'know? It was the music, and the dreams."

Boyd nodded, drumming his fingers on his thigh beneath the table.

"So's they banged, y'know, and they made the world. But, they didn't fill in all the space, because you can't fill in nothing forever. There's a little bit left over from the days gone by."

Boyd nodded, and pulled a notebook from his jacket pocket, pretending to take note of what SCP-5200 was saying.

"So that's why this third rock from fun has all the craziness pulled to it like that shit's on rails. It's a storage depot for the unknowable. Would've worked like a breeze if you guys hadn't busted up the lock."

"It was more like a jar."

"Whatever, chuck. That's just how you made the smoker's stupid dream witchery true. When those two kid's get together, nothing's gonna be able to stop them. Not even flipping things around one more time."

"I don't understand a word you're saying." Boyd put the notebook away, and stood up. "If you don't have anything else to add to your story, I think we're done."

SCP-5200 held out a hand. "Wait, sit down a second. There is something I want to give you."

Boyd stopped at the hatch. "What?"

SCP-5200 reached into its own jacket, and pulled out the manila envelope. "Here's what a few people have said."

The envelope is tossed, picked up, examined, and stuffed into a pocket.

Boyd exited the hatch, locking it behind him. Briskly, he set off towards the Records and Information wing, for debriefing and transcription of the interview.

WHAT A FEW PEOPLE HAVE SAID

Unusual Incidents Unit

Electronic copy below as per Federal Records Act

UIU File 1976-34: Case File Pluto's Front Door

Summary: Possible portal or slate that causes immediate death upon contact.

Name: Object of Note - Black Portal

Irregularity Cross-reference: destructive, transport?, immobile, locale

Physical Description: A cave in North Dakota, which has an entrance in the form of a flat, non-reflective black wall. Wall is immobile, and does not respond to provocation. Causes immediate death on contact.

Sex	Heigl	Weigl Buil	Race	Hair	Eyes	Identifying Attributes
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Capabilities: Doesn't move, or take any initiative. When touched, causes objects and persons to be pulled into it, and disappear.

Purpose/Motive: Possibly a trap, naturally occurring anomaly, or a misunderstood aspect of nature.

Modus Operandi: N/A

Behavior: No behavior. Object not believed to be living.

A: Object: No evidence related to case 1976-34 has been located other than the object itself:

Current Status: Currently noted, with light guards. Due to remoteness of location, chances of being discovered

are slim.

Crimes: Not applicable.

Sentencing: Not applicable.

History of UIU Action: Discovered in 1976, by a US geological survey. Turned over to the UIU shortly thereafter, and secured since then. Very little action has taken place since then, other than the tragic loss of Agent Brom to the object when he mistakenly came in contact with it while doing field work at the location.

Doctor Wondertainment

DEAR MISTER RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

We regret to inform you that your toy proposal has been rejected, for failing to meet the following criteria:

- Deadly to adults, animals, children, and pre-children. This violates the Wondertainment Super-Safety guarantee.
- Fun factor, after vigorous testing, has rated at 0.0.
- Does not have market viability for future additions or innovations, due to being 100% fatal to the consumer.
- Unpackageable.

Thank you for your interest in DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT and we hope to see you innovating again soon!

The Factory

SHIPPING ORDER: 10,000. Bulk distribution.
PAYMENT: PAID IN FULL, PRODUCT NOT DELIVERED.
ACTION: Relationship with distributor discontinued.

Prometheus Labs

GRANT REQUEST FOR LOCATION OF HIGH-VALUE ENTITY IN SPACE

PROBLEM
The Prometheus Labs physics lab has proven the existence of an object which could be used to dispose of any type of matter harmlessly, at little to no cost past the initial investment to find the object.

SOLUTION
In order to locate it, the Prometheus labs team would need additional funding to dedicate most of their mathematicians to this purpose.

BUSINESS CASE
Once located, Prometheus Labs will save massively on the disposable of high-risk materials that would otherwise need special handling procedures in order to nullify or put out of sight and mind.

USE OF FUNDING
Currently, the only need for funding is the researcher salaries to give them the time to find a more precise location of this object they have only just proven to exist. Further costs can be estimated once the object is located.

KNOWN ISSUES
It may not be possible to reach and return the object within the lifetime any current

employees of the Prometheus Labs corporation.

The Chaos Insurgency

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: SC-55/2024

Document Type: Step Compilation

Dates Received: 09-18-1955 through 09-18-2024

Operation Status: Open

Foreword: This object is to never come into the hands of the Insurgency. All steps to secure Site-12, the Foundation location of the object, are critical to maintain. These security procedures are to be kept secret from the SCP Foundation.

Hereafter we of Delta Command document the Steps of the Plan as transcribed by the Engineer of the Chaos Insurgency.

1. STEP [55/6]

Security parameters, such as entrenching in the surrounding countryside, have been enacted. Anomalous countermeasures have been placed in the uninhabited areas surrounding Site-12, which, due to its remote location, is not accessed or widely known by persons outside the Foundation and Insurgency. Further measures to be taken as the situation around Site-12 changes.

2. STEP [24/88]

The Foundation appears to be losing control of some of their frontier sites, due to the remoteness of their location and the containment difficulties suffered by that organization over the years. Efforts must be taken to

preserve the security of Site-12, including by capturing the Site, intact, and handing it over to another group which has more stability, such as the Global Occult Coalition.

Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting

> You want us to add *what* to the act?
> - W.G

Report on Groups Of Interest "HI" "GOTBG" "5"

> MEMORANDUM TO SITE DIRECTOR STONE
>
> We currently believe that the research object has been written about in the scripture for various religious groups dealing with paranormal activity.
>
> They refer to it unanimously in terminology that describe it as "empty" and at other times like a portal to their underworlds, or similar theological concepts. Descriptions generally refer to it as all black, and hostile.
>
> The similarities to the research objects are obvious. As such, we should take precaution against any word of this entity being held, as it may incur an attack by these organizations.
>
> Therefore, we recommend that the current in-construction Site-12 be selected as the location for the entity, due to its remote location and high security.
>
> Colonel Ritts
>
> American Secure Containment Initiative

Are We Cool Yet?

Title: *Much Ado About Nothing*
Material Requirements: The piece itself is singular, having been created by the artist and using a method which has not been disclosed, for artistic reasons. It is unique, and the artist does not recommend attempting to replicate it.
Abstract: A black star composed of a non-reflective, anomalous material. When touched, pulls the user into an undisclosed location in deep space. The person is not recoverable, so viewers are recommended to bring secondary entities if they wish to view the contact-making portion of the piece. Should be displayed behind glass, on a white pedestal with a small porthole to allow for direct contact with the object.
Intent: The piece was created as a commentary on how really and totally alone we are in this universe. You can find yourself in any location out there in the cosmos, and you're not going to catch a ride. You'll be by yourself, until you die. That's what awaits us up there.
Note: *I can't really display this thing anymore. It's cool, but nobody really seems to want to look at it. Gonna store it till we can find a use for it.*

...

Site-12, Sunday Evening. 6:00. January 17th, 2025.

Containment area of SCP-5200

"How did you get these documents?"

SCP-5200 leaned back, shaking his shackles. "You know, this isn't what I hoped you would think of them."

Boyd didn't respond, choosing instead to tap his pencil against the

clipboard and raise a single eyebrow. None of the usual dodging of inquiry cat-and-mouse would be tolerated today.

"Man… I'm just trying to help you guys. You know that you're coming up on the number. You've got the child, but you don't understand it."

"What's there to understand?"

"It wants…. to turn the clock back. To suck up everything with the taint of the original flaw, the big glitch, that acts as your job security." SCP-5200 attempted to wipe his nose on his sleeve, but the chains didn't allow enough mobility. His face twisted as he suppressed a sneeze.

Boyd narrowed his eyes, and made a note. "How do you know? Why are you helping us? You could easily be trying to undermine us."

"I know because that's the whole reason I exist. I was made specifically for this moment, right here. For you to find me, and for me to help you out when the time came."

"Who sent you?"

"Every-frikin'-body that doesn't want to die when this thing starts knuckling down, dummy. There's a lot of vested interest in existing for a lot of people." SCP-5200 leaned forwards from backwards, and began to whisper. "And, off the record, you guys need the help."

"What do they know about the object?"

SCP-5200 groaned, and attempted to rub its brow. "Have you not been listening at all? Look. It's gonna change into something much, much closer to how it originally was. That's the deal. That's what you need to prepare for. When that starts, you'll need to play all your cards right to keep it from going back to how it likes things. Non-existent."

Boyd's brow creased slightly, as he took more notes. "So, if you're here to help, do you know what to do if it's starting?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, chuck. From my end, this is all she,

he, and they wrote. Hope y'all don't die."

… Exiting file "Document 017-1
…
…
Signing off, Editor's Desk
…
…
Logging out, O5-7

Document # -002

Document # -002: Excerpt from the "von Reiter Collection"

Interviewee: Obersturmführer Waldemar Strasser, formerly of 2.SS Panzer-Division *Das Reich*

Interviewer: Captain Albert [REDACTED], Infantry Division, British Army

Foreword: Interview occurred 09/02/1945 and was conducted by non-Foundation personnel. Interview is one in a series conducted by Allied governments of personnel attached to the "von Reiter Group" in order to ascertain its purpose and gather additional information on SCP- -01-b. Document seized by Foundation personnel 06/30/1947, edited for security and appended to the Von Reiter Collection.

<Begin Log>

Interviewer [REDACTED]: Please state your name, rank and service history for the record.

Obersturmführer Strasser: Obersturmführer Waldemar Strasser. I served in France, Yugoslavia and Russia with 2.SS Panzer-Division *Das Reich* as a panzergrenadier. I was awarded the *Ritterkreuz* in recognition of my service near Kharkov in January, 194 before being transferred to *SS Sonderforschungsgruppe-von Reiter* for garrison duty shortly afterward. I served there until the end of the war.

I: For the record, Obersturmführer is an SS rank roughly equivalent to the British rank of army Lieutenant. Is *SS Sonderforschungsgruppe-von Reiter* the name of the concentration camp you were transferred to?

S: I recognize your accent, I think. You are from London, *ja*? Perhaps north London?

I: Why, yes. Your ear for English is remarkable, Herr Strasser.

S: I spent about a year in London, studying abroad for university. Wonderful place. I suppose I should apologize on behalf of the Luftwaffe. The damage to London is a tragedy.

I: I've seen Berlin and Dresden. Perhaps we deserved at least a little of it. *[Captain [REDACTED] pauses for several moments.]* No hard feelings, old boy. But please, answer my question. Was *SS Sonderforschungsgruppe-von Reiter* the name of the concentration camp you were transferred to in the spring of 194 ?

S: Concentration camp? *[laughs]* No, no, SFG-von Reiter was a research laboratory.

I: You say that the facility you at which you were stationed was not a concentration camp, despite the presence of over Soviet POWs? And a mass grave meters away, containing the incinerated remains of some people? That's pretty hard to believe, Herr Strasser.

S: SFG-von Reiter was strictly a research laboratory. I would never work in a *Konzentrationslager*, I don't have the stomach for it. But to answer your question, Dr. von Reiter went through the prisoners very quickly. The prisoners were for research.

I: Medical research?

S: I'm sure you know all this already, I don't see why-

I: Please, for the record.

S: No, SFG-von Reiter was not a medical testing facility. It. Was. I'm not sure. I don't. Know. I'm not certain how to put it.

I: *Mein Deutsch ist ziemlich gut, Herr Strasser. Bitte, fühlen Sie sich frei auf Deutsch fortzufahren.*

S: *[S laughs.] Wunderbar*! *Ein bayerischer Akzent!*! *Sehr gut*, Captain, *sehr gut*! But no, that's not what I mean. I'm unsure exactly what kind of science went on there. There were medical tests on prisoners, of course, but that wasn't the function of SFG-von Reiter. It was a very odd place.

I: Could you elaborate, please? What was the purpose of the Leipzig facility if not extermination of Soviet prisoners of war or medical testing of the same?

S: Let me tell you a story, Captain. It involves a Wehrmacht artillery company and a Bolshevik position near [DATA EXPUNGED].

[Redundant information removed by Foundation censors. See [REDACTED] for the full interview, or [REDACTED] for a full report on the recovery of SCP- -c by Wehrmacht personnel.]

S: Shortly thereafter, the object was sent back to the Fatherland in a sealed train car for further research.

I: I see. So this "artifact" was then transferred to the Leipzig facility for von Reiter to work with?

S: That's correct.

I: I'm afraid I don't understand. That's a lot of effort for what amounts to an interesting archeological find. A curiosity, yes, but did it really warrant its own subterranean bunker system? Or a garrison the size of an infantry company?

[S remains silent for some time.]

S: May I trouble you for a cigarette?

I: Certainly.

S: *Danke*. I don't know what that *verdammt* thing was, Captain. A curiosity? Perhaps. You haven't seen it. Dr. von Reiter was convinced it was the most important scientific discovery, period. Himmler was convinced it would win us the war.

I: Himmler? You mean Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler?

S: Yes. Within SS formations, even Waffen-SS combat units, Himmler was known for his ridiculous mysticism. Apparently, he thought *die Auge-Stein* could be used as a *Vertraulichwaffe*-

I: For the record, *Vertraulichwaffe* roughly translates to esoteric weapon. Please continue, Herr Strasser.

S: *Ja*, an esoteric weapon to smash Bolshevism and the decadent Western democracies and win us the war. And all future wars. The SS sponsored all sorts of absurdities of course, like that *Ahnenerbe* expedition to Tibet. But this was something else completely. He wrote von Reiter a- *Verdammt! Wie Sie tun Sie zu sagen*? Ah, yes! A "blank cheque". Himmler handed von Reiter a "blank cheque" from the SS. Money, materials, test subjects, personnel, whatever von Reiter asked for, the Reichsführer made sure he got. When I was first transferred to SFG-von Reiter, I thought the whole idea was *Scheisse*, but I kept my mouth shut because it was certainly better than another tour on the Ostfront. But over the years I was there, I'm. Ah. Not so sure now.

[S is silent for some time. Stenographer notes that he is idly playing with his Knight's Cross.]

I: We'll come back to this subject later, if you'd like. *[S nods.]* Tell me about your duties at the Leipzig site.

S: *Danke*, Captain. I was in involved in general security under Standartenführer Konrad Boch. And I oversaw the disposal of *die Leeraugen*. The. Ah. The test subjects.

I: For the record, Standartenführer is an SS rank equivalent to the British Army rank of Colonel. Please describe your duties in the latter capacity, if you would?

S: [DATA EXPUNGED], and after the experiments were over, my unit was tasked with killing them. It was very disturbing at first, because they are much harder to kill than a man.

I: Were there any special procedures for this "disposal"?

S: Not really? They would be chained to the wall in a sealed room somewhere in the complex, and five or six of us would go in and shoot them until they stopped moving. In the beginning, it was harder because we kept trying to kill them, you know, like *Einsatzgruppen*? Once in the back of the head with a pistol. We wised up after we lost Schrier and Lustig, and started using automatics. Afterward, von Reiter or Dr. Eisen would collect them for dissection or incineration.

I: Eisen? He's not on our roster.

S: *[laughs]* Yes, I would imagine! That's because it's not his name. We gave him the nickname Eisen [lit. iron - Ed.] because he was such a hard bastard. I'm not sure what his name was. He was very high up within the research staff and the scientists tended to keep separate from us soldiers. So von Reiter and Wilhelm Jührs, his adjutant, were the only ones we really knew. We figured Eisen was from Himmler's personal staff. Dr. von Reiter absolutely adored him, probably because they were both bloodthirsty *Arschlöcher*. Eisen was probably responsible for most of the deaths, since he insisted on "fresh subjects" after each experiment.

I: Were there any uncommon occurrences while you were there?

S: Yes, of course! You can't garrison a bunker complex studying some rock that no one can figure out without

some fucking uncommon occurrences.

I: Are you alright, Herr Strasser? We can stop if you'd like.

[S seems to consider this for some time.]

S: There was an air raid on Leipzig. A few bombs landed right on top of us. No one knew we were there except the Reichsfürher and some members of the OKW [*Oberkommand der Wehrmacht*, the German High Command -Ed.] and presumably Hitler, so I don't think it was intentional.

[S pauses for some time. He motions for another cigarette.]

S: The raid did severe structural damage to the complex. This was very early, you know, maybe months after we found the thing. We didn't know what we were doing at all. Our procedures for this were. Lacking. A group of Soviet *Schweine* escaped in the confusion and tried to flee the complex, but kept getting cut off by debris or locked doors. They ended up. They were funneled into the. Ah. *Der Auge-Stein Eindämmungraum*. The containment room.

I: How many? Prisoners, I mean.

S: I don't know, maybe a dozen. That psychopath, von Reiter, the one thing I will say about him is that he was always very prepared. Prisoners were always restrained, and never more than one at a time. This was ten. At least. There were no chains this time, no cages. The damage to the bunker had ruined the interior of *der Auge-Stein Eindämmungraum* and all the preventative measures Dr. von Reiter had spent so long perfecting.

I: What happened?

S: I don't know. I want you to know, Captain, that I hate

Bolsheviks, to the very core of my being. I killed dozens of them in combat, I killed dozens of them out of combat, and I would continue to kill them now given half a chance. They are a plague on this world, and their complete eradication can only make things better. That said. What happened to those men in *der Eindämmungraum* is unspeakable. I would not wish it on anyone.

[S takes Captain [REDACTED]'s pack of cigarettes and spends several minutes smoking mechanically, apparently lost in thought. He stubs out his fourth cigarette and looks up.]

S: *Es war sehr schlecht.* I'd. Ah. I'd like to stop now, Captain.

<End Log>

Closing Statement: Interview continued in [REDACTED]. Authorization from clearance level 4 personnel required for access.

Although no new information was unearthed regarding properties of SCP- , this insight into alternate testing and containment methods is invaluable for SCP- researchers. As of 02/28/1996, this series of interviews is required reading for all research staff involved in SCP- by order of SCP- Project Lead Dr. Feldmann.

Obersturmführer Strasser was recruited by the Foundation on 08/22/1947 in Argentina, due to his previous experience with SCP- -01 and -02. Herr Strasser served with distinction as a Taskforce Leader (operational designation "Adamant") in Mobile Taskforce-Team Seven.

Waldemar Strasser died of lung cancer unrelated to the Foundation on 06/19/1979 in his home in Gelsenkirchen, West Germany.

Document 48116-88 ("Son of the Earth")

On / /19 a message in Russian was received by the [REDACTED] observatory via a radio telescope operating as part of the SETI program. Supposedly, the signal originated from a space research station [REDACTED] which was launched in 1 to Titan's orbit. Due to the message's obvious connection to SCP- this document was classified to Level 4.

On / /19 the following emails were exchanged between , an undercover Foundation agent in SETI, and , Area 14 supervisor.

From: Undercover research group member

To: Area 14 supervisor
Subject: Received message

24 minutes ago, as part of the SETI project, I received and decrypted a message sent at the MHz frequency. Scrambling method and modulation are similar to those we use to communicate with Foundation satellites and probes. This is the first time this message was received as part of the SETI program. The signal originated from an object (a space station) located near Saturn or one of its satellites. We were unable to pinpoint the location due to their proximity. I'm not sure whether your Area equipment has detected this message, but I can tell you for sure this facility does not have any equipment capable of receiving messages on this specific frequency. The event was not witnessed by anyone, as there was no research being conducted during that time, and I was the only one responsible for monitoring. I have attached the decrypted message. Please check your equipment and poll other undercover SETI agents - a leak in other facilities is possible. Log files were updated

promptly, I'm carrying on my monitoring.

From: Area 14 supervisor
To: Undercover research group member
Subject: Re: Received message

We got your message. Neither our Area equipment, nor the equipment in other Areas or SETI facilities have received this message. Supposedly, yours was the only telescope to detect this signal, although several facilities with low information availability remain to be checked. During the course of an action meeting we decided the signal was weak enough (intentionally?) to only be detected by highly sensitive specialized gear that was as close to the source as possible at the time of reception, and only at a specific latitude (a station degrees away from you did not detect the signal). Seems like we got lucky. Site 7 is already investigating this incident. Rumor has it, it's related to days long past, but that's above my clearance level so I don't know anything for certain. Carry on monitoring, report any new detected messages promptly. Although, if we did get lucky, we won't be receiving anything else.

Addendum: Transcript of the received message

My dear beloved Mashen'ka.

I'm still on the station. Our time is running differently, so I think this message will not reach you in quite some time.

Below me, lurid blue seas are washing against a brightly yellow land. Methane and ethane color them that way. The Sun looks like a minuscule dim star and barely gives any warmth. I'm trying to remind myself that it has not changed in any way, did not shrink or go dark, that it's the same fiery luminary for the Earth. Sometimes, when Saturn rises above Titan, I'm thinking it looks like a big Moon with a ring around it.

As you can see, my heart is still on Earth: I'm trying to

find echoes of a familiar life everywhere. That's how humans are - their craniums are just too small to encompass space in its frighteningly alien fullness. Although I do know things on Earth are not like they used to be. A month ago I received a message from Mission Control (Mission Control no longer exists, but some people were kind enough to remember me and let me know). They told me something happened on Earth. They did not tell me exactly what, but they spoke about a secret government (as I understood) and a replicator facility they had to utilize. They told me humanity was fully extinct but recreated anew. They also hinted that a clone of myself was created too and that there's another me living on Earth now.

My dearest Mashen'ka, does it mean that the other one is now beside you? I don't know whether to laugh or cry. After all, I'm content with being able to hug you through hundreds of millions of kilometers.

They recommended me to take it in stride, with dignity and humility, they told me they are sorry, and I'm trying to meet their expectations. I'm alone here, but I promised myself not to lose my mind just yet, and I think I'll manage to remain sane. I'm stranded here, the solar panels barely give enough electricity to power the station, and I have no fuel to return to Earth. Although, I understand now there is no reason to return; you have your own life there, and there's no place for me in it.

I know this message will not reach you. They will not allow you to know. And you, my dear, you are no longer there. You are dead, just like the rest. I'm sending these words into the void you now dwell in, and I hope they will get stranded in the blackness that surrounds everything here. I'm ready to accept. To accept and let go - of you, of the Earth, of myself. It's like an umbilical cord breaking. It's like when you're out in space, and your tether snaps.

Now it is only me and Him. I have already looked in His

eyes.

Footnotes
1. [DATA EXPUNGED]

Document Alpha-Zeta-2

Document recovered in the canteen of Site- . Current source of writings are unknown, but at this time theorised [REDACTED]. Item appears to be some form of diary, however as the possibility of it actually being sourced from [REDACTED] are unlikely, it is kept on record as a hoax.

However, entry 1,900 correlates directly to [DATA EXPUNGED].

Excerpts from the text follow.

Day 1,450
Nice day. Woke up, but wasn't particularly hungry, so I just helped myself to a snack. No-one ever seems to ask me for payment, but then again I haven't got a job, so that's probably a good thing. The canteen is nice, and I saw that nice lady again, she always seems to be helping someone. This time she was talking to that weird guy who always has a gun with him. I don't like him.

Well, that's it for today, can't think of much else to write.

Day 1,451
Had a sausage sandwich for dinner today. They make really nice food in that cafe down the hall from my room. Those two guys who stand outside my room sometimes were there again today. I dunno why they're there, although that nice man who gave me the room did mention people would stand outside sometimes to keep me safe. Or was it to keep someone else safe? I can't remember.
Either way, they're never very talkative, which is boring. I just wish someone would come and actually have a proper conversation with me. Instead of just walking into my room (WITHOUT EVER KNOCKING!) and then look surprised I'm in here.

I mean, they must know I'm in here, otherwise why would I have this room?

Day 1,500
I'm another year older! No-one brought me a cake though. There was a big boom somewhere else today, must have been that guy in the weird pixelly clothing. He's always making things explode.

It being my birthday did mean I wasn't as bored today. Had to take some more paper and pens and things out of the store-room though. Everytime I asked, nothing happened, so I did it myself.

I know this is some kind of research place, and that I shouldn't go outside because of the disease, but it's really boring being ignored all the time. I wonder what the disease is? He said it was bad, but never said more when I think back about it. Hope it's not too bad.

Day 1,759
I swear to god the next person to walk into my room without knocking is going to get my chair thrown at his head.

Day 1,761
Throwing a chair at someone's head does not get their attention. Or make someone come and shout at you. I could live with shouting, as long as someone actually talks to me.

Day 1,830
Drew on the walls today, make my room a bit brighter. Just need to find some paint and I can make it look good. This was this guy walking past today wearing a really shiny necklace.
Looked expensive, I wonder why he's wearing it in a lab?

Day 1,850
Painted my walls after finishing the drawings. Looks really good. Hope the next person to walk in likes it.

Day 1,899
Meh, looks like another dreary day ahe

Day 1,900
OH MY GOD YESTERDAY WAS THE BEST DAY EVER. I was just sat in my room, filling in my diary as usual, expecting another boring day of nothing, as always. Suddenly, there's this massive BANG and a lizard thing breaks down the wall with my door in it. It had some guy on it's back shooting at it, and then another giant (he has to be a giant, he was too big to be a person like me) pulled a sword out of NOWHERE and starting hitting the lizard and it was the best thing ever. I might try drawing a picture of it.

Day 1,903
Finally finished painting my walls again after that lizard thing came through it. They look really good again now.

Day 3,050
I wish someone would remember me.

Document C 88 II

Beyond the dim, childish rays of Sol burn the steady, glowering lights of slumbering embers. Millions of lifetimes away lie the quasars, the softly thrumming globes of aging light, somehow ancient in the youngest part of the universe. Their light is cold and dim, but harsh, blanketing the cold, dead stones that drift in their scrambling, cantankerous gravity with oceans of radiation and soft, silent death. The anciently young baubles roil and bubble with youthful, rotting cores, belching forth their combined first breaths and death rattles. They twist slowly in their near-eternal dying birth, bubbling and muttering to themselves for eons in tongues of radiation and cooling heat.

Even these contradictory beings are not eternal, and soon they cool, bloating with the carrion of their own burning bodies. Some burst finally, breaking their simultaneous dance of life and death, to spawn new strangeness. Others collapse, falling just shy of this final freedom, cooling to black, silent, hateful balls of regret and loss. Twisting in their hallucinating, dreaming cores, they turn black, still shells to the hated universe, the sprightly, twinkling upstart stars and scrambling worlds, to dream and sleep the sleep of the sick and forgetful.

Stars, like men, however, are mortal, and are therefore open to those that are not. Like a man falling asleep to wake as someone new, the void-hearted quasar can forget who they are, and become remembered by another. One, dreaming in its own ashes, slowly found itself becoming the dream, the doddering, hating core slipping away as a new dreamer took its place, a dreamer whose thoughts sent the dream plunging away, vanishing in to void and oblivion then to know for a moment that such a dreamer existed, let alone lie subject to its whims. For epochs it then dreamed of nothing, its lost dreams not missed or even noticed by those that see time as a ocean, and not a path.

Then, in time, the dreamer awoke.

The tiny, sparkling life that grew in the coddling shadow of Sol found the place of Knowing. One, unimportant and unknown, came seeking. In his seeking, he was made aware of the dreamer, and by that knowledge, the dreamer became aware of him. The dreamer came, the awareness pressing in to the tiny point, to find it pleasing and strange. It awoke, and seeped in to the vacant star's corpse, pulling flecks of reality to clothe its own vacant eyes.

Boiling with new knowledge, it pushed, feeling the feeble waters of reality part and ripple before it, and began to travel, crawling and oozing on the walls of its shell, feeling new sensation, awareness, and knowledge. It rolls softly, a scarab in its own tomb, to feel, to know, to change, and to take all that is lacking. It comes to spread awareness in to life, and feel the soft constriction of mortality around it, like the hug of a dying child. It comes at its leisure. It comes at the pace of blank void. But it comes.

To worship and bring the Broken to the world is merely the anointing of the offering. To prepare the vessel to be filled, to allow its endurance beyond the flickering points of mortality. We will turn undying eyes to the sun, and watch the eons roll past. Watch as the great, gray home grows behind it, swelling with trivial ages. Watch as its burning, vapid light is extinguished and replaced with the cold, aged seepage of the dreamer's shell. We will raise our arms, all, on our waiting, Whole world, and be filled with the awareness of the dreamer's core, and vanish to its pleasure.

To restore the Broken is great. To be known by The Gray Awareness is greater.

So says Anna, third Prophet of the Age of Strife, second Acolyte to The Gray Awareness, servant to the Church.

Document recovered by investigating Agents.
Authenticity of the physical document has been verified.
References to the subject matter have not been found in any other documents recovered from the Church.

Document Recovered From The Marianas Trench

I need to write this down, because I forget things sometimes, and I think what I heard today was important. Not to me, the time for me or almost anyone else alive on Earth today to make a difference has passed, but someone, somewhere might be able to make something of this, or at least find it helpful, or something. Once I'm done, I'm going to seal it up in a pipe, coat it in wax, and chuck it into the ravine. Maybe someday someone will read this, and try to put things together. If they're allowed to.

I'd love to start at the beginning, but I'm honestly not sure when the world started to end. Could have been years and years before the final bits, or it could have been all at once. Everything was so grim, what with warmer air, cooler seas, too little gas and too many people, things could have been unraveling for ages before things bubbled up to the public eye. What I and others remember most was when the Disney Magic sank. It was then, I think, that most people started to think that things might be worse than they seemed.

The Disney Magic was a big cruise ship, one of those liner jobs that tools around islands and stuff. One day, the news was all screaming about how it suddenly just went down when it was trying to put in to port. The weird thing about it was how there was no video of it for a long time. Some still pictures of it floating fine, but none of it actually going down. Then, somehow, a tape showed up, and the news started playing it. I have to imagine they didn't review it first.

The ship was puffing along, strong and fast, little boats bobbing around it, looking like every vacation lover's dream, when suddenly it stopped. I mean stopped, just a dead halt like it had just slammed into a mountain. You could see people go lurching forward all over the deck, a bunch of junk fall off the sides, a real mess. It's all still for a few seconds, then suddenly there's this foaming behind the ship. Most people assumed it was the engine trying to fire up again… then the arm came up.

I'm not sure if it actually was an arm, but it was some kind of limb, and it must have been a hundred feet long at least. It reached up along the side of the boat and… just ripped it open, I mean unzipped it like a coat, and you could see all the people inside screaming and running… it was awful. Then you saw something lurch up, a big, spiny shape pushing against that gap, shoving in… then there was an explosion on its back, and the camera whipped up to show a couple of jets whizzing by… then it ended.

I remember just sitting there, stunned, looking at the TV, barely noticing the president coming on to declare a state of emergency. I think it was two or three days later when the TV went under full government control, but it may have been a week, I'm not sure. Internet got clamped later, but soon all you could hear, read or see was “remain calm, everything is under control”. The oddest thing was that life really didn't change much for a while. Bills still came, still had to work, go to school, all that. Just a lot more scared faces, and a lot more weird talk.

Pretty soon we were getting told that whole towns were being evacuated, that there was a plague, or a riot, or a terrorist bomb, or some other nightmare. My brother down south said that they got moved because of a huge wildfire. The weird thing was, he said, that the fire moved oddly… seemed to shoot right for gas or brush, and didn't travel evenly. That after a while, he swore he saw what looked like a twenty foot tall man of fire walking and eating everything. The call got dropped right after he said that. I haven't talked to him since.

So things got worse, little by little. People kept being moved, and there was no real way to communicate with each other anymore that was really reliable, so it was hard to say just how bad things were. Still, word of mouth was still going strong, and it was creepy. Crazy shit, really, stuff about zombies in the north, killing frenzies in the east, a place near the ocean where the ground was alive and eating people, a cult screaming about the second coming and killing people to buy off god… I started pulling more and more away from people, just to get some ignorant peace of mind. Looking back, that probably saved my life.

Finally, one day, I woke up and there was blood on my window. It was outside, and I could hear some insane shit going down

outside… screaming, clanking, gunshots, and a smell like burning wires. I hid. I'm not ashamed to admit it, I left my fellow man to rot, and hid inside for almost a full week, long after the noise stopped. After the fifth day, the electricity and gas gave out, along with the running water. When I finally got hard up for supplies, I poked my nose out, and saw that the whole west side of the world was gone.

Now, I don't know for sure if it actually is gone, but there is a cliff that starts thirty feet to the west of my house, and I cannot see the bottom of it. I also can't see the other side of this ravine, so for all intents and purposes, that part of the world is gone for me. The suburb I was in looked like a war zone, blood and broken stuff everywhere, houses carved up… no bodies though, which I still think was weird. I scrounged up some food and stuff from some of the houses, then went back home.

I've been doing that for a while now. I'm not sure how long, really. Might have been years and years, or just a few months, it's hard to say. Sometimes the sun just sticks in one spot for what feels like days… other times these clouds roll in, and you can't see two feet. There's… things around, too. I run at the first noise, but I think they're about man-sized, and they seem to like metal. Other, little things scramble around in the rubble sometimes, so I try and keep clear. One time, a thing that looked like a pill bug the size of a cat crawled out, looked at me, and screamed “STOP!” in perfect English. I hid inside for days.

There are also these big blimp-things that float around sometimes. They have little bug legs on their undersides, and they look kinda like maggots, but with eyes all over. They eat everything when they land, but most of the time they stay high up. One of these had just passed when I found the hurt guy. He was all ripped up, and looked like one of those S.W.A.T. Team guys you see on tv sometimes, but his combat suit thing was all ripped to hell. I dragged him back home, and then we talked.

He said that he had been hunting the blimp-thing, but had gotten attacked. He wouldn't say by what, but he looked like he was on his last legs. I fed him some canned beans and some water, and he seemed to come around a little. Asked me who I was, if I was alright and all that. He seemed kinda shocked when I said he was the first

person I'd seen since the west of the world vanished. He told me it wasn't gone, just relocated, but wouldn't say what that meant. I helped heal him up, and kept asking who he was, but he wouldn't say. Finally, he said screw it, that his orders were probably no good anymore anyway, and told me.

He said he worked for a foundation or something, and that they were like a combination jail and research center. He said that he was one of the agents who went around trying to find strange stuff and keep it from hurting people. I said he was doing a hell of a job so far, and he laughed pretty hard. He said something had happened, and that a bunch of these things had gotten loose at the same time, and caused this foundation place to lose control. He said it became a “GH-0 'Dead Greenhouse' scenario”.

I asked him what that meant, and he looked at me for awhile before going on. He said that's what they call a situation where everybody on earth dies, but the earth itself is still ok and can support life. I asked what did that matter if everybody's dead, and he smiled strangely. I asked him if anyone else on earth was still alive, and he said yes, but carefully spread out and contained. After that, I just sorta sat and digested things for a bit, and the man started stretching and checking his cuts. He was starting to pull his boots on when I asked what happens now.

He said that they have to “reboot” things. Said they have the technology to recreate almost anything, and that making people is actually pretty easy. Said that they would clean out and contain things, rebuild the broken cities, and repopulate them. It would take a long, long time, but he said they would eventually get things back to the way they were before. Even said they could recreate memories and stuff. I just sat, kinda stunned, and watched him as he just kept going along, getting dressed like this was all no big deal. I told him he was nuts, that there was no way people could just forget, that this could all be just swept away. He stopped, looked at me, smiled, then said “Why not? It's been done before.”

I don't know if that man was crazy or not, but I think he was sane. As he was leaving, he said something about putting my house underwater. Please, don't let them brush me away. Don't let them hide us. Try and find more, I know there's got to be more people

who tried to leave something behind. Don't let the world die in vain. Remember us.

Documents recovered from the residence of Agent Waters

Please refer to **[DATA EXPUNGED]** for briefing about Agent Waters and Event **[DATA EXPUNGED]**

These 432 pages of documents were recovered on / / from the residence of Agent Waters (KIA) in , South Africa, three months after his disappearance. It is unknown whether the partial translation of the documents was done by Agent Waters or his partner, Agent Laker (MIA), or by an unknown third entity. The handwritten notes on the documents match the handwriting of Agent Waters, and the questioning of the other residents in the building leads to believe that Agent Waters was the only occupant of the residence for at least two months. Indeed the only evidence towards Agent Laker ever arriving in South Africa are short references to him in the handwritten notes in these documents.

Examination of Crash Site B1 has found only destroyed remains of the craft, and the irradiated metal object classified as SCP- . An entry in the personal voice diary of Agent Waters (see file **[DATA EXPUNGED]**) confirms the theory that the documents were somehow extracted from SCP- , which makes further research into it crucial. It should be noted that Agent Waters claims the date to be 25th September at the time of the entry, but the actual voice file was created two weeks after said date. Evidence collected by Agents and suggests that Agent Waters located and secured the Crash Site as per his original orders, but after his final report to Foundation staff on / , destroyed the craft and isolated himself into his residence in to translate the extracted data.

Because of the large amounts of data in these documents, only the most coherent and notable parts are collected here.

Page 52:

Page 54:

Page 99:

Page 312:

I am going to personally supervise the investigation into the information leaks apparent in these documents. All that information about the Foundation should have never been accessible to a single person. Class-A amnesiacs will be administered to all agents and other personnel who have had access to the original documents.

O5-

Dog Eat Dog, Part 1

Note: since this tale is a continuation of **`Surfaces`**, it will be better understood if that tale is read first.

> *And so, I reach my final conclusion, and if you weren't paying attention before, ladies and gentlemen, now is a damn good time to start. If we do not temper our wild, devastatingly irresponsible use of Thurman-Harrison Amnestics and their byproducts, the Foundation could soon find its ability to impose a normalcy of thought on the general population severally crippled, perhaps to the point of total impotence. Like bacteria developing immunities to even the most powerful of antibiotics, so will the human brain begin resisting this constant tampering of amnestics, the use of which became our standard modus operendi in dealing with the exposure of civilian populations to the anomalous over the last few decades. Indeed, our data indicates that this process has already begun. If we do not find an alternative, permanent solution to this problem of memory, well, ladies and gentlemen, I don't think I need to explain how dire the consequences could be.*
>
> **Doctor Malachi Harrison, in his address to the O5-Council**

"Rememberer? That's a damn stupid name."

"That may well be, Upcard, but that's what we're calling it."

"Why?"

Prosper sighed, reached for the can of lager at his right, lifted it to his mouth, only to find it empty. He sighed again. If Matthew Andrews was a man predisposed to sympathy, he might have felt

sorry for the old man. Alas, he was not.

“Because that’s what the reports call it.”

“Hrm. I bet I could come up with a better name,” said Evening, his plump, bearded features positively glowing with mirth. If that was because of the undoubtedly idiotic name he’d soon come up with or because of the large plate of sausages in front of the big man, Matthew couldn't be certain. He recalled asking the man how he earned his nickname, sometime after their first acquaintance at the hospital. “It’s because I’m cool and shady,” was the reply he got. “It’s because he’s the dimmest bastard you’re ever likely to meet” was Upcard’s.

“How about ‘Repeaters’?” she now suggested, adding yet more sugar to her steaming mug of tea. Five packets so far, and the tea was fast becoming a literal saccharine wasteland. Upcard never did take any half measures.

“I like ‘Truth-Seers’,” said Evening, a thoughtful expression on his face as he chewed.

“’Relapsers?’” piped Hale, the gaunt, shaky little man gingerly sipping out of his red thermos. “Never drink anything I didn't prepare myself, that how they get you, with those tiny mosquitoes they put in everything,” he told Matthew shortly after they first met. “They lay spy-eggs.”

Prosper was clearly rapidly losing what little remained of his patience. “They’re not ‘Repeaters’, or ‘Relapsers’, and they’re certainly not god-damned ‘Truth-Seers’! The reports call them Rememberers, which means that the people who pay me call them Rememberers, and if they call them Rememberers, that means that I call them Rememberers. And if I call them Rememberers, you can bet your sweet condemned asses that that’s what you’re going to call them as well! Do I make myself clear?”

An uncomfortable silence, followed by three sullen nods.

“I mean you too, Andrews. In fact, I mean you especially!” Prosper said, shaking his empty beer can at Matthew.

“Yeah, got it. Rememberers.”

“Good.”

“Although… you have to admit, ‘Relapsers’ has a pretty nice ring to it.”

Ah, it certainly did him good, watching that crusty geezer squirm. One had to take one’s pleasures where he could find them. Such was life on Permanent Expungment Crew 3.

“Alright, let’s go over things one last time.”

This was received with a chorus of groans. The Crew has been waiting in the hot, cramped van for well over an hour, and patience was running thin.

“Don’t give me that. Just because we’re not exactly working within standard doctrine doesn't mean you get to slack off. You have more to prove than anyone else, in case you forgot.”

“How could we, with you reminding us every five seconds…” murmured Upcard.

Prosper ignored her. “Andrews, since this is your first real stab at this, if you would be so kind?”

“Oh, right. Our target is a, ahm, a Rememberer, a person who belatedly proved to be resistant to standard amnestic treatment. Whatever we originally wanted her to forget, she remembers now, and she’s not being quiet about it. We believe she contacted someone, and if that someone gets their hands on her, it could mean trouble. Now, obviously wiping her memory won't work, which means taking care of her through…other means.”

“Them other means is us, right?” asked Evening, raising a fleshy hand.

“Yes, Evening, that would be us. Now, since the target is living in a densely populated area, and since the usual cover system isn't available to us,” here he glanced at Prosper, who simply shook his

head, “we’ll have to go about this carefully. I’ll take point, you follow as soon as I gain entry. She'll be expecting a crew to come pick her up, so getting in shouldn't be too difficult. Once we’re in and the job is done, Prosper will bring around the car and we’ll dispose of whatever needs disposing. ”

Evening lifted his hand again. “Hrm. And what about the real pickup crew? What about the neighbors, what if they hear something? If we don't have the usual cover, they’ll call the cops, and how do we explain that?

Matthew was about to answer, but Prosper interrupted him, looking like he was barely stopping himself from slapping Evening. Matthew couldn't blame him. "We've been over this, Evening. We're arriving a few hours before the time the pickup crew is supposed to show up, so we shouldn't run into them. Taking care of them ain't our job, a real Task Force will be here for that soon. As for the neighbors, well, they'll be taken care of.”

There was something about the expression on his lined face, and not for the first time, Matthew wondered just how the old man came to hold his current position as their operator. “We might not have the typical layered cover, but that doesn't mean we’re alone here." he continued. "I've managed to get us some special assistance, which should hopefully keep everything around us nice and calm until we’re done."

“Wait, special assistance? What sort of assistance?” asked Hale.

“They’ll be waiting outside of her apartment building. Look for a brown semi. They've been keeping an eye on the entrance.”

“You… you didn't really answer my question.”

“No, I didn't. Now go.”

As the four left the van and strode into the warm evening air, Matthew fell into stride beside Upcard, who shot him a contemptuous glance and began walking faster. Matthew persisted, until she finally slowed down and faced him.

"What?"

"I just need to ask you a few questions, relax."

She bared her teeth in a way that instinctively made Matthew want to cover his softer bits. "Don't you tell me to relax, you slimy little bastard. Prosper might force me to work with you, but that sure as hell doesn't mean I have to treat you like a person. Because we both know you ain't."

"You're acting like you didn't do anything to get you dropped down here."

"I did what I did, and I'm paying the price for it, but that doesn't make us the same, not by a long shot. You'd be wise to remember that."

"Oh? And what if I don't?"

She smiled at that. "You ever wondered what we did before we dragged your carcass out of the hospital? Who we used for our face man, that is?"

"I assumed you did it yourself. I certainly wouldn't trust Evening or Hale with the job."

"Prosper wouldn't hear of it. Says I have too much of a temper, that I'm 'unsocial-able'. So no, it wasn't me. We had Francis. Real sociable guy, was Francis. Could get just about anyone to open their door for him. Real friendly face. I suppose he found it useful in his extra-curricular activities."

Matthew paused. "Wait, I think Prosper mentioned him once. Said that he got his skull caved in during a mission."

Still smiling, Upcard suddenly pulled Matthew close, so only he could hear what she said next. "Well, that's half right at least."

Evening and Hale went ahead, and now Hale was waving, probably signalling he found the brown semi. Upcard stepped away from Matthew and moved to catch up with the two. She didn't look back.

So. That was how things were going to be. All right. She wasn't the

only one with an experience in caving skulls.

"Hey Matthew, someone here wants to talk to you!" called Evening, who Matthew saw was now standing next to a old, beaten brown semi-truck. As Matthew approached the vehicle, he began noticing something odd about his surroundings. Although the hour was still early and the weather was pleasant, the streets around him were virtually empty. Stores and coffee shops closed and deserted, the windows of nearby apartment buildings dark, even of the stray cats who usually swarmed the area there was no sign. For some reason, Matthew had a suspicion that this unnatural quiet had something to do with whoever was sitting in that brown semi, a suspicion that gain credence when he ducked his head to peer at the couple sitting in the car.

At the driver's seat sat a man the color and complexion of a prune left in the desert for a few centuries too long. He was wearing some kind of bizarre corduroy robe, which together with his complexion gave him the appearance of a snake that had a run-in with a cheese grater. The man was currently eyeballing Upcard, and it was clear that whatever he just told her got her pretty riled up.

"-You see, this is what I like to see in a woman! Finally someone with initiative, some sass. It really is a breath of fresh air. I remember having to deal with that one, oh, it was just impossible. I mean, when I eventually decapitated her and scooped her brains out with one of those melon ballers, there wasn't even enough for one decent cocktail. It really is a shame you're slumming it up with Squirmy and the Orange Menace here. But I suppose it's just the cards nature handed you."

Upcard was frowning at the man. "Is he always like that?"

This was directed to the woman sitting in the passenger seat. Compact and short, her hair dyed in a peculiar mix of orange and white, she seemed half asleep, and Matthew could see dark black circles under her eyes. She was wearing a blue mechanic's jumpsuit with a bright red logo. 'BOB'S WHEELS AND PRAWNS'.

"You have no idea."

"All you're doing is proving my point, Barcode. Although, looking at these… people, I'm thinking I finally starting to see some value in you. I mean, even your sorry hide shines when compared to whatever those two supposed to be."

Upcard's frown turned into a smile, which was somehow far more disconcerting. "You're a funny little man, aren't you?"

"Darling, you have no idea. You really should be grateful for the fact you're standing here, talking to me as if we're equals. It's such a rare opportunity, I know, I sure you very much appreciate it."

The smile widened. "Oh, certainly. In fact, why don't I show you my appreciation right now-"

Matthew decided to interrupt them before things got any further. Though he would enjoy watching a fight, this probably wasn't the best time for it. "As much as I'd love to hear the conclusion of this fascinating conversation, I believe someone here wanted to talk to me?"

Prune-man still grinning, now turned his gaze to Matthew. "Aye, pretty boy, that would be me. Just wanted you to know you can you're not gonna hear a pip out of no one here. It's all taken care of, so you can shimmy right in yon apartment and do whatever you folks need doing there."

"May I ask exactly how you accomplished this? Who are you anyway?"

"That's for you to ask, laddie, and it's not for me to tell. We're just here because someone cashed in a favor, and we really rather not be."

"Is that so? May I inquire as to why?"

"It's because of the people the woman,our target, called." said Hale, and Matthew was surprised to hear nothing of the usual nervous shake in the little man's voice, "or rather the people *those* people hired. These two here don't have a lot of power here in the Baseline. Reality's too strong for their minds to do much. It's why she's so

tired, you see." He pointed at the woman in the passenger's seat, who was now staring at Hale intently.

Prune-man frowned. "Now how'd you go about learning all that, Squirmy?"

Hale shrugged. "I wasn't always in the Crews." He turned to the woman again. "It's not going to get any better, you know. Soon, you'll be looking back at the days all you had to worry about was screaming towers of flaming goat skulls and Vinnie. Hi Vinnie, long time no see. Hope you've been treating that rash."

Matthew had no idea what the hell Hale was talking about, but the woman grew very pale all the sudden, and Matthew could see this little twitch just by the corner of her eye. Hale continued, a distant look on his unusually passive face. "There's no shame of being afraid of the Jackalmen. You were never bred to deal with the likes of them. While they… well, I suppose time will tell what they'll do to you all. If I'm still alive then, I'd be interested in seeing that. For now though, you should probably go. I don't think they'll stick to their schedule. Unpredictable, the Jackalmen."

"Barcode, what is The Artist Formerly Known As Squirmy talking about?" asked Prune-man.

The woman simply shook her head. "I don't know who this person is, Ramses, but he got one thing right. If the Jackalmen get here early, I sure as hell don't want to be here to meet them. We should go."

"And how do you know he's not full of shit? We haven't seen any Jackalmen in years."

"Trust me on that one."

"Hmm. Fine. This scene's getting old anyways, and I can't say I appreciate the company."

Matthew watched him turn on the car, and moments later the semi was gone. Once it was out of sight, he turned and gently placed a finger on the side of Hale's stomach, in that sensitive place where every tiny poke felt like a nail driven into your side. He pushed.

"Hale, would you care to explain what that was about?"

But something changed in the little man in the few moments it took the semi to leave the street. He was shivering and shaking again, and his face showed nothing but incomprehension at Matthew's question. Irritated, Matthew poked harder, saw Hale's face contorting with pain.

"Who were those two, Hale? Who are the Jackalmen, and what did you mean when you said they were coming early?"

"Stop poking me! What are you even talking about!? What two people?"

"Those two you were just spewing cryptic bullshit at ten seconds ago!"

"I wasn't talking to no one! You're crazy, man! They… they must have gotten you! You've been implanted with Prometheus brain drones! They can see your libido from their invisible spy satellites! Don't have sex with me, I warn you, I'm terrible at it!"

Evening laid a plump hand on Matthew's shoulder. "No point in shaking him anymore. He sometimes gets like he was, starts flapping his gums like he knows all sorts of things. Don't mean nothing, really. He's always going about weird things. Besides, we should probably get going, cause Upcard is looking impatient and you wouldn't like her when she's impatient."

"I don't like her already."

"Well, you're going to like her even less. You'll be surprised to how many levels there are to disliking Upcard, it's a really complex tier system. Me and Hale we made a list once, only Upcard burned it and she kicked Hale in the nards besides, which of course got her another tier up the dislike list, though we didn't know where she was now cause the list was gone, so that was a conundrum, so we decided that-"

"You know what Evening, you are absolutely right. We have a job to do, so let’s just go and do it, eh? Just… no more talking. You wait

here with Upcard and Hale, I'm going to see if I can't get us in."

As the passed the big man on his way to the nearby apartment building, Matthew stopped by Hale, who was still obviously recovering from the shaking Matthew gave him. He patted the little man's shoulder. "Don't you think we're done with our little talk, by the way. I'll see you soon." With that, he went forward.

After a short climb through a deserted stairway, Matthew found himself before the door to the target's apartment. As he was about to knock, he briefly found himself wondering. Who was this woman before she saw whatever she saw? What brought her to the place of her unfortunate encounter with the anomalous, and why couldn't she just keep quiet about it? He didn't doubt the Foundation wouldn't have unleashed them on her trail unless all other options were exhausted. If amnestics began to fail, you couldn't just kill everyone who was exposed. It wasn't practical. No, Matthew thought, something about this person must have reveled in this subversion, delighted in the shattering of normalcy, celebrated the breaking of wholesome patterns.

His hand, still hovering above the door, was shaking, and he realized that this was because he was furious, a revelation that in turned only made him confused. What was he so angry about? He didn't even know this person. And yet, it felt like he did. It was because people like this, after all, because people like *her*, that this world was the way it was. Poisonous, hateful, messy. Uneven. It was because of those ravagers of surfaces, because of *her*, that people like him was forced to do what was necessary. Even if no one cared to admit it. Even if they looked upon with contempt. With horror. With disgust.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

And just as it appeared, the shaking was gone, and his hands were steady, and he was smiling, a smile no one could imagine as anything less than utterly candid, even if it was the last thing they ever saw, as was a case for more than a few.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Well, that was the thing about monsters, wasn't it? There was nothing at all dishonest about them.

Knock Knock Kno-

The door opened a crack, and Matthew came face to face with a tall, middle-aged woman. As Matthew regarded her pale, lined features, he was surprised with what he found in the murky pools of her eyes. Not anxiety, or fear, or relief at the arrival of a savior. No, all that was there was the coldest apathy, like staring into a long-dead hearth, where no ember remained. Matthew found himself speechless. The woman, however, had no such problem.

“Ah, you’re here. Good. I suppose you should come in then.”

“Um, yes. Good evening, Madam. I have a few others with me, should I-“

“Yes, yes. Just be quick about it, you’re letting the warmth out keeping me at the door like this.”

Matthew nodded and began descending the stairs, when a thought occurred to him. Letting the warmth out? It was July. He turned back to the apartment when he heard a shout from below, followed by a loud crash and the sounds of struggle, suddenly cut short. Shadows appeared in the stairway’s entrance, and with a swelling sense of fear Matthew recognized that they did not belong to his crew. He turned and ran back up the stairs, back towards the apartment. It was all *her* fault, that cold-eyed bitch, and he wasn’t about to let her get away with it, oh no. They would catch him if they could, but he’ll get to her first, oh yes, even if he had to bash open that door to do it. He’ll get to her first, and when he was done there wouldn’t be enough left of her to-

In the middle of a step his muscles froze, and suddenly the stairs came rushing up to meet his face, to crash into his forehead with a crack that left him dazed. He tried moving, something was overriding his instincts, overshadowing his very thoughts. A presence in his head, an iron grip on his body. The sensation of serrated teeth closing around his throat. Then, a voice like a muted snarl, like the promise of a depthless maw, descending on his mind.

Thus, you are netted, little jailor man.

Your kind thinks this world is yours. You claim it without a moment's thought. You play with the minds of others as if memory had no consequence, and its erasure was not the direst of crimes. You covet information, and so you cannot bear the thought of others having it. It is greed of purest sort, and that is it disguised as an act of guardianship only makes it so much fouler.

But… perhaps it is wrong of us to judge. Perhaps this is right. Your kind knows more about this world than most, after all, and in knowledge there is mastery, a sense of ownership. Perhaps you are not to be blamed for this coveting of information. Yes. In knowledge there is mastery, and so this world is yours. This we will concede.

But we are not of this world, and you do not know us.

But we know you, little jailor man. Aye, we do.

And now, you are ours.

Domo Arigato

ACT I

Gregory awoke in a large room, tied to a chair. At least, he guessed it was a large room, and that it was a chair. Gregory couldn't actually see anything - as best as he could tell, he was blindfolded. He tried moving around, only to be rewarded by the chair tipping over.

"Well Gregory, you're in quite a bit of trouble," a monotone voice rang out.

Gregory was suddenly swung back up, and the duct-tape securing the blindfold was ripped from his face.

With a freshly waxed face and his scream echoing in his ears, Gregory was confronted by a warm, moderate light and a splash of lukewarm water to the face.

"Do you know why you're here?" the voice asked him again.

Gregory was too busy trying to cough up the water to answer.

"Cat got your tongue? Your grobnax? Or whatever it is?" The voice was smooth and one-tone yet hinted at bitterness, like Cognac that had been pissed in.

"What are you talking about?" Gregory spluttered. His eyes started to water, and he had to fight to avoid bawling them out.

"It's quite simple Gregory. You've been snooping around."

Gregory's eyes adjusted to the light swiftly and then wished that they hadn't.

He was strapped to a plastic chair in a small concrete room. Looming over him was a fat, stout, thimble-shaped, puke-colored droid riddled with instruments of what appeared to be painful death.

LEDs on the top of the droid and the three tires at its base glowed with malice, making the contraption resemble an eldritch marital aid.

"I don't even know what's going on. I have no idea what you're talking about," Gregory choked out.

"No *idea?*" The droid's voice remained the same, but Gregory swore that he could detect its temper rising. "I'd say you have a pretty good idea what's going on, Dr. Gregory Plump, assuming that that's your *real* name."

"I don't, okay? I don't know what's going on! I'm sorry b-but I don't know what's, what's happening!" Gregory pleaded.

"I think you do, Gregory. Let me cut to the chase. We're going to have a talk. If I don't like what you say, you're going to wake up in a Keter-class containment cell. If I do… well, we'll get to that."

The droid whirred over to Gregory's chair and pushed it. Gregory felt the adrenaline rush of meaningless fear and the pounding of his hearts in his chest before the chair failed to topple over.

"It's simple, Gregory. I have one question. What did you read about Ess-See-Pee Three-Five-Four?"

The droid carefully and harshly emphasized every syllable of the designation without actually doing so. Presumably to intimidate Gregory.

It worked.

Gregory spilled his intestines like a startled Scottish chef.

"I don't knooooooooow!" he wailed, tears pouring from his eyes.

"I - I - *sniff*, I was just translating the *hic* document into swa-swah-Swahili! I - I *hic* was just reading everything on the page! It's - it's some kind of interdimensional portal that's spawning-spawning these anoma-*hic*-lous creatures exc - except it's some *hic* k-kind of coverup for something but it *hic* doesn't - doesn't say wh-what and I swear that's all I know p-please *hic* don't hurt me!" Gregory pleaded.

The droid moved back, its lights flashing to a sluggish tempo. Since it had been turned on, not a single detainee had cracked this quickly. The droid altered its cadence to resemble a soothing female tone.

"Gregory, do you know why I'm asking you these questions? Trust me, Gregory, I'm not doing this because I enjoy it. I just want what's best for both you and the Foundation."

It was lying.

"I-*hic*- know, b-but I swear, I didn't do *hic* anything! I just opened up all the t-t-tabs on the page!" Gregory blubbered, words and tears gushing from his face.

"Good work, Gregory. Now we're getting somewhere. See, all you have to do is cooperate and it'll be over quickly. Next question. Gregory, how exactly did you know that it was a coverup?"

"It… it *sniff* just said so on the, the page," Gregory whimpered.

"What do you mean it just said so on the page?"

"It - it was just there on the p-p-page!"

An arm popped out of the droid, brandishing a laser weapon of some kind. With the hand-cannon pointed at Gregory, the droid advanced. Gregory tried to cower, but only managed to topple onto his back.

"Gregory, did it ever occur to you that perhaps there was something, oh, perhaps, *unconventional* about a coverup document explicitly *stating* that it was a coverup?"

"I - I mean… I didn't… I didn't think about it. I assumed… I thought that, uh, I had been given clearance to view the full document to translate it."

"You translated the entire document, word-for-word, *coverup and all*, into sixteen different languages across every single Foundation site on the planet. This was one of the biggest information breaches in Foundation history."

The laser began to whine. The droid's voice remained as peaceful and monotone as ever.

"In fact, this little disaster isn't even the concerning part. There are, of course, contingencies for this kind of… accident. The concern is how you saw the hidden writing in the first place. There was an extremely powerful antimemetic in place to prevent any human being from seeing it."

The barrel started to glow.

"Gregory, there have been exactly fifteen human beings in existence who have been able to see past that antimeme. All of them, except for you, had to be inoculated against it first. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

Unfortunately for Gregory, he did.

"If only inoculated human beings can see past that meme, and you weren't inoculated…"

The mammoth beam fired.

Before it could cleave through Gregory, his skull did the cleaving for it. Gregory's head parted down the middle, with only faint tendrils of blood and brain matter in between. Then the two segments of head quickly grew little spindly legs of bone and uprooted themselves from his neck, taking some spinal cord with them and then relocating to Gregory's collarbone. Then they tried to look at each other - failing that, they settled on watching the droid nervously.

"…I'd say you aren't human."

Gregory was once more tied uncomfortably in front of a computer screen, helpfully provided on the front of the droid's body. The computer screen showcased the cause of his discomfort: O5-10. More specifically, O5-10's impressively toned physique, apparent even through the silhouette that was only present onscreen.

"Happy, what am I looking at?" O5-10 asked.

"A Dubbligand," the droid answered. "Didn't come through the pool. Hitched a ride to Earth through a dimensional crosslink. Banned under our interdimensional treaties, as you are aware. And then it got a job at the Foundation. Say hello to Dr. Gregory Plump, senior linguistics analyst at Site-42."

"How did we find him?"

"He'd been under surveillance for a few weeks. We caught him when he opened up the hidden files on SCP-354. He saw past the security antimemetic device. The full report should be on your desk in five minutes."

"I'll have to talk to Wheeler about that. What do you suggest we do with Plump?" O5-10 asked. Gregory could feel the Overseer's gaze boring a hole into him. His parietal lobe started itching, and the halves of his mouth ached.

"I personally suggest that we deport it. Kick it back through the crosslink. We need to set an example for any other… infiltrators. Prove that we are not messing around, as it were."

"According to his most recent review, Dr. Gregory Plump has been a valuable asset thus far. Correct?"

The droid seemed to sag. "Well, yes. Its primary duty at the Foundation had been translating archaic and extraterrestrial languages - a task at which it had quite a bit of *success*."

Gregory could not for the life of him understand how the droid could convey so much hatred through two lights on the top of its dome.

"And you reported earlier that after Dr. Feldman's… demise, communication with the pool had been stifled, causing a, it says here, thirty percent decrease in traffic flow," O5-10 noted.

"Well…"

"Dr. Plump. Get your head together. Happy still has some questions for you."

The halves of Gregory's head carefully stood up, then maneuvered

up his collarbone onto the portion of spine protruding from his neck. They promptly sat back down with a *squelch*. Gregory waited several seconds while his innards realigned, then rasped, "Ready."

"You've been under surveillance for the past three weeks primarily for your interest in SCP-354. Tell me, do you know what it is?"

"Some sort of portal that periodically spawns dangerous creatures?"

"At least the cover story works. No, it's more like an inter-dimensional airport."

"Excuse me?" Gregory spluttered.

"Happy will give you a more detailed explanation, but the long and short of it is that the Foundation allows creatures from different universes, timelines, and dimensional planes asylum into our own universe -not planet, mind you- in exchange for information, resources, and technology. As you may realize, this runs counter to our… 'public' mission, hence the secrecy. " O5-10 enunciated. "So," he wondered out loud, "what do we do with you?"

Gregory was still having some trouble digesting the information. Wisely, he chose to remain silent.

"Sir, my official designation is H-4-P-P-Epsilon. As I said, I believe that it would be in our best interests to-"

O5-10 cut the droid off. "Happy, execute subroutine Omega Questionnaire. Dr. Plump, much as I would like to *thoroughly* interrogate you, I have to negotiate yet another deal with that petulant little troll Kim in fifteen minutes. Instead, I will ask you a few questions, and the droid will take care of the rest."

"Sir, I am a highly advanced, multi-dimensional hive-mind quantum-computing artificial intelligence housed within a biomechanical interface, not a droid."

As it protested, Happy sprouted another arm, with several sharp, probing instruments attached to the end of it. With swift, dexterous robot fingers, it began inserting them deep into most of Gregory's

exposed orifices. This was unsurprisingly uncomfortable (and surprisingly arousing).

These physiological beacons will measure your responses. First question: did you come alone to this universe?"

"Erm… yeah. I mean no! No. Four others came with me but I didn't know them. Three of them headed off to Alpha Centauri. I think the fourth one is still on Earth somewhere but I don't know?"

In fact, the fourth one eventually found fame and fortune beyond shklee's wildest dreams as David Bowie.

Happy beeped, and the lights turned green.

"Have you been sharing any information related to the Foundation with any other aliens?"

"No! Definitely not!" Plump swore, his voice muffled by the probe in his mouth.

"Happy?"

"Well, not really-"

"Not you."

Happy beeped again, and its lights flashed green again.

"How did you get to Earth and what did you do between that point and today?"

"Erm," Gregory answered, wishing that he could scratch his head, "I'm not entirely sure. I, uh, paid someone to help me get through. I just remember being told… to lie down in a cryogenic harvesting pod which was very unn - unnerving by the way because those pods were usually used to gut, uh, *animals*, but I trusted the guy because of his references and I really just wanted a new start because I couldn't find any jobs back ho - back home because I'm not a bad person really I just wanted a job and - a job and maybe a fresh start and someplace my skills would be useful honestly that's the only felony I've committed and I've never even gotten a traffic ticket

before and -"

"That's not an answer," O5-10 noted.

Gregory gamely stuttered out the pertinent answer. "I lay down in the pod and the next thing I know I'm on Earth, in this universe, somewhere between the US and Mexico. That was thirty years ago. I found a job as an accoun- as an accountant for a few years, forged some references, wrote a few linguistics papers and sent them to a journal, that landed me a position at the University of Iowa for about a decade, and then I got hired by the Foundation. That was fourteen years ago."

Happy beeped.

"Are you entirely loyal to the Foundation?"

"Yes - yes, of course!" Gregory proclaimed, pumping a fist in the air.

Happy beeped again, and its lights flashed.

"Would you lay down your life to secure and contain anomalies, and protect all mankind?"

"Of course I would!"

Happy didn't beep. Its lights turned red.

"Processing," it intoned. The lights on its dome flashed for several seconds before it beeped again." "Personality determination algorithm complete. Dr… *Gregory Plump* has been classified as Low Risk, High Cowardice, Extreme Sycophancy, Moderate Intelligence. Primary recommended course of action is continued employment. Secondary recommended course of action is immediate termination."

O5-10 considered the information, mulling over it. He metaphorically gnawed on it like a stuffed grape leaf, investigating the flavor with his tongue and fermenting the idea into a plan. Now he'd made himself hungry, and when he was hungry he was testy. “Dear God, is this the best our screening protocols can do? Alright, Plump. We can't keep you in the regular Foundation, god only knows what you'd

release next. We could shoot you, but that seems a waste of bullets. No, I have a better idea… Are you familiar with !@%$%^&&^%#?"

Act II: Strung Out in Heavens High »

Don Ferreiro's Lie-Katana

Professor Ferreiro allowed himself another sigh as he swiped his access card across the barcode scanner. Today had not been a good day. Not that this was a particularly unusual experience for Professor Ferreiro. Ever since he had accepted employment at the SCP Foundation's spacious Site 19 complex he had been subjected to mountains of paperwork, casual abuse by his colleagues and little to no acknowledgment by his superiors. Of course, he mostly brought it on himself. Too timid to speak up every time someone else took credit for his work, Ferreiro had been consistently passed over for promotion and after 13 years of loyal service his co-workers couldn't even remember his name! He was simply the guy that everyone dumped their menial chores on and forgot about.

It therefore came as no surprise when he entered his tiny, windowless office and saw yet another enormous stack of papers in his in-tray. As expected, his desk was plastered with the usual post-it notes basically telling him to "get on with it" and a couple of unmarked boxes had been dumped on top of his "World's Adequatest Dad" mug, chipping the handle. His heart having already sunk to its lowest depths untold years ago, he simply closed the door behind him, checked his chair for any thumb tacks his "hilarious" lab assistants might have placed, and sat down to do his job.

Not feeling up to the task of sorting through his in-tray at that moment, he decided to start with the boxes. The first one contained a new, unclassified SCP in the shape of a thermostat. Pinned to the SCP was a hand-written note by Dr. Gordon telling him to deliver it to research lab 5a for experimentation. Ferreiro rolled his eyes. Research lab 5a was on the other side of the compound, right next door to Dr. Gordon's office. Well, that one could wait. Knowing better than to actually touch an unknown SCP, he carefully resealed the box and put it on the floor next to his desk.

The second box was long and rectangular, and bore the stamp of a fully classified SCP with the words "SCP-572: FOR CONTAINMENT" printed on the side in large, intimidating letters. A small envelope was sellotaped to the lid and marked for the immediate attention of "Professor Donald Ferrari". A thin smile crept across Ferreiro's face as he plucked the envelope off and thumbed it open. They'd finally got his first name right!

> Doctor Fernando,
>
> SCP-572 has been reclassed as Euclid and therefore requires transferring to the special containment facility behind Research Laboratory 5a. As you are not currently assigned to any other projects and therefore have nothing else to do, I expect this to be done without delay.
>
> It is absolutely vital that you read the full containment procedures for this SCP before handling it. They should have been delivered to your in-tray a few days ago.
>
> DO NOT ATTEMPT TO HANDLE SCP-572 UNTIL YOU HAVE READ THESE PROCEDURES AND KNOW THEM INSIDE OUT AND BACK TO FRONT!
>
> Your performance to date has been lacklustre at best. Let's see if you can get this one right!
>
> Regards,
>
> Bernard Fulham,
> SCP Laboratory Assistant,
> Clearance Level Pending

Not for the first time that day, Ferreiro sighed.

"Don't let him get to you, Don - punk kid like that'll be assigned to Keter duty before he sees thirty!"

Ferreiro nodded absently. He was probably right. Arrogant, abrasive types like Fulham *did* wind up on Keter duty more often than…

Wait a minute…

Who was probably right?!?

Ferreiro looked around his office to see if anyone had entered without him noticing. He was all alone. Suspecting another practical joke of some sort, he began to check under his desk in case someone was hiding there.

Nothing.

A quick search of his desk drawers completely failed to yield evidence of any tape recorders or other such devices. Jesus, perhaps he'd been working too hard lately. He *had* been under a lot of stress, true, but he was used to stress by now, surely? Still… working in site 19 could get to anyone after a while. "Wonderful", he muttered, "Now I'm hearing things".

"You sure are, Don - you have AMAZING hearing! Just look at those ears of yours - the very pinnacle of creation's work and no mistake! Why, I bet you could hear a gnat piss into a hurricane from a hundred miles away with ***those*** *beauties!"*

Ferreiro fought down a wave of panic as his eyes sought out the source of this bizarre flattery. "Alright, wh..who are you and where are you hiding?" he demanded.

"Relax, Don, you'll find me. That impressive brain of yours isn't going to take long to work out where I am! Just follow the sound of my voice! ***YODEL-AY-YODEL-AY-YODEL-AY-HEE-HOO! YODEL-AY-YODEL-AY-YOD..****"*

"Enough!" cried Ferreiro, covering his ears with his hands to block out the piercing ululations. "You've had your fun, just tell me where you are and I promise not to file a complaint with Dr. Bright's office!"

"Hah! Like a rough-and-ready, no-nonsense hombre like yourself needs to go running to some other doctor for help! Oh Don, your incredible wit knows no bounds. But seriously though, I don't want to make you angry - I'm in the box! Come and check me out!"

Ferreiro felt the hairs begin to rise on the back of his neck. Sure enough, the voice *did* seem to be coming from the long, rectangular

box on his desk. His hands shaking like a Class D on nerve toxins, he gingerly broke the seal and raised the lid. Lying there in front of him, snugly contained in its packaging, was an ornate sword. He was no expert in weaponry, but it looked very much like the replica katana he had purchased for his son's 16th birthday, back when his family still lived with him. Although the only source of light in his office was the sterile neon bulb mounted on the ceiling, the blade glinted as if struck by a brief flicker of sunlight.

*"Found me! I knew you would, though. There's no hiding from the **Donimator**! Right, Don?"*

The hapless scientist recoiled in alarm at the sword's cheerful, steely voice.

"Holy Mary mother of Thor!" he exclaimed incorrectly, "You… you can talk?"

*"Sure I can, Don! But only to people worth talking to, like yourself. You see, you're special, Don. Really, really special. There's no one else in the entire universe like you - you think anyone **else** would be able to hear a sword talk?"*

Ferreiro had to concede it had a point.

"You have a great destiny ahead of you Don. You ever hear the legend of King Arthur and his sword Excalibur?"

"You.. you mean you're…"

"Correct! I'm a sword just like Excalibur was! And I'm all yours, Don. Go on, pick me up - try me out! You'll soon see we were made for each other!"

His mind reeling with the shock of this discovery, Professor Ferreiro reached into the box and wrapped his fingers around the handle. Some part of his subconscious began to scream at him, telling him there was something he was supposed to remember - something important - but it was immediately drowned out by the feeling of raw power coursing through his arm. Although he could barely tell the difference between a bastard sword and a butter knife, he marvelled

at the exquisite balance and weight of the katana. He felt strong and capable - confident, even! For the first time in years, he felt there was *nothing* he could not do. The world was his oyster, and he could crack it open and steal the pearls any time he wanted!

"Whoa, easy on the grip there, Mighty One! I'm the sturdiest blade you ever will see, but that super strength of yours could grind me into dust!"

Ferreiro loosened his grip slightly - of course, how could he not have known that? He was a TITAN!

"Phew, thanks! Okay, boss, try me out - give me a little whirl!"

Ferreiro swung the katana around in a clumsy semi circle, knocking over his stack of paperwork and smashing his mug into little ceramic pieces. Part of him knew he'd only done so by accident, but it felt right - like that had been his intention all along. He smiled, and this time it wasn't a thin, mournful little smile but a full fledged, ear-to-ear grin of triumph!

"OH HELL YEAH, DON! Look at us go! Did you see what we did to that mug? There is NOTHING we can't do! Nothing YOU can't do! All those years of working for other people when they're not even fit to lick the ground you walk on! Well, NOW they'll know who the real master is!"

"Yeah!" Ferreiro cheered, "NOW they'll know"!

He paused.

"It's Gears, right?"

"Hahaha, oh Don, you're the funniest, most talented man in the universe! No, of course it's not Gears - it's YOU, Don! You should be ***running*** *this place by now! All those punk kids and worthless labcoats ordering you around, treating you like dirt - it's not on! And did you* ***see*** *how disorganised this place has become without you at the helm?* ***You*** *know the kind of dangerous, extinction-level events this place is supposed to contain, and yet it's run by the kind of people who won't even promote the most intelligent man who ever*

*lived! No, Don, this place is too important not to be yours. I think it's time you promoted **yourself**, don't you?"*

Donald Ferreiro, PhD, Clearance Level 1, Smartest Man Who Ever Lived, *did* think it was time he promoted himself. He'd never thought he'd really deserved it before, but then he'd never noticed how awesome… how *badass* he was before! It all made sense now.

His mind was made up.

He was going to take site 19 by *force*.

Hoisting the blade into what he knew was an extremely effective combat-ready position, he leapt to his feet and strode purposefully towards the door as bits of fluorescent light rained down around him. *"YES! THE TIME OF VENGEANCE IS AT HAND!"* screamed the blade, *"GO ON, DON, KICK THE DOOR DOWN! SHOW THEM YOU MEAN BUSINESS!"*. His face set in an expression of grim determination, Don raised his leg and slammed the heel of his foot into the lock. There was a satisfying crack as the door completely failed to burst open in an explosion of reinforced metal. A crippling pain shot up his leg and a feeling of nausea overwhelmed him as the source of the cracking sound became apparent.

"Whoa-ho-ho! Look at that, chief! You've managed to shatter the bones of the universe's most powerful man! Only YOU could have done that, Don! Well done! You're so dangerous! I'm glad we're on the same side here! Now come on, let's go share the pain with those ungrateful bastards who employ you!"

Four more door kicks, half an hour's fighting-back-the-pain, and a reluctant barcode scan later, The Right Honourable Professor Donald Ferreiro, PhD, Clearance Level whatever-he-damn-well-chose, Smartest Man Who Ever Lived and God Amongst Men hobbled into the clean, empty hallway outside his office. "SITE NINETEEN", he bellowed weakly, "I AM YOUR NEW MASTER - AND YOU'RE ALL FIRED!"

*"That's telling 'em, Don! Now find us some **meat!**"*

Ignoring the pain of his broken foot and howling obscenities at an

uncaring world, he rounded the nearest corner and came face to face with his nemesis.

"Ah, Fernando!" Doctor Gordon said, "I was just coming to check on you and see if you'd managed to deliver that… oh my, is that 572 you're holding? You know you're not supposed to - "

"FOOLISH WRETCH!", Ferreiro screamed, eyes wide, veins bulging, "YOU… HAVE… NO… **POWER**… OVER ME!!"

Gordon ducked as 572's dull blade swung over his scalp, missing him by a good half meter and causing a small dent in the overhead piping. Thrown completely off balance by this failed decapitation, Ferreiro spun awkwardly on his injured heel and collapsed to the floor as once more the pain overwhelmed his senses. Recognising a long-suffering scientist with a flipped switch when he saw one, Doctor Gordon scrambled to a nearby alarm panel and hit the button marked "Containment Breach".

"He's calling for backup, Don, don't let him get away with it! They'll be here any minute - FINISH HIM! Come on! On your feet! Get up! You can do it!"

572's voice continued to shout its encouragement as Ferreiro mustered all his will and pulled himself up onto his feet again.

"Don't be an *idiot*, man!" shouted Gordon as he backed away down the hall, "This place will be swarming with agents any second now! You can't win!"

"I *am* winning", snarled Ferreiro as the facility-wide alarm klaxons echoed through the corridor. "*I'm* the guy with the **unstoppable blade!**"

True to his predictions, the security team arrived in record time as Gordon fled past them. Six Kevlar-armoured SCP agents, their features hidden by the black visors of their helmets, came to a halt at the end of the corridor and raised their standard issue firearms. Ferreiro knew less about guns than he did about swords, but even he knew that the type of ammo and the range of the weapon meant nothing at such a short distance. For the first time since he'd

decided to elevate his position, he began to feel a bit uncertain.

*"Don't worry Don - **they** might have the firearms, but **you** have **me**! With my strength and your skill, we can stop every bullet they fire! Now let's show them what you're made of!"*

His fears allayed, he swung the blade in a crude figure-of-eight, barely noticing the wet smacking noise his severed thumb made as it hit the tiled flooring. He damn well *would* show these bastards what he was made of! Unleashing 13 years worth of impotent rage in a single scream, he limped as fast as he could towards the security team, swirling 572 in whichever direction felt best at the time.

The security team, being well trained, released a volley of hot metal. But Ferreiro was ready. Flicking his blade from side to side, as if the bullets were little more than flies to be swatted, he continued his advance. Out of the 18 bullets fired, only two made it to the far wall behind him.

"That was AMAZING, Don!" 572 exclaimed triumphantly, *"16 bullets stopped cold! And you didn't even need **me** at all! You truly are The One, Don! You're the greatest!"*

Ferreiro looked down at his bullet-riddled torso, noting with detachment the shattered bone and distended muscle poking through his wounds. Moments later, when it realised what had happened, his body went into shock and he collapsed on the cold hard floor, bleeding profusely in every shade of red. 572 clattered onto the floor beside him, cackling playfully and singing his praises.

As the alarms went silent and the world began to fade from him, Donald Ferreiro, PhD, Security Clearance Terminated, was aware of a friendly voice singing *"Wow, look at that blood! The blood of a king, that is! You really **did** show them what you're made of! You're the greatest, Don! The **greatest**!"*

Don smiled.

He *was* the greatest.

Don't Blink

It's going to be my fault. When it happens, it's going to be my own goddamned fault. Every single time I blink it gets closer and closer to me, and every time I blink is just driving another nail into my coffin. Why couldn't they have shot me, or stabbed me, or done anything but put me in here with this *thing*?

I don't even know what I did wrong. You don't really expect to go to prison under false charges, and you especially don't expect some goons to take you out and put you in a room with a monster. Didn't even have the decency to let me move around. They chained me up to the walls so tight that I can barely turn my head. Then they walked out and just left me to whatever this thing will do to me.

Oh, why am I thinking "whatever it'll do?" It's going to kill me; I just don't know *how*.

I wish I could at least fight back against this. Lash out at it in some way. But I think it wants me to do that. Everything just feels a million times worse whenever I rattle the chains or shout at it. So all I can do is hang here and wait for it to kill me.

Dammit, if you're going to kill me, hurry up! I can't stand this! Death by inches. I blink and it's a little closer, and then a little closer, and then a little closer, and then…

No. No no no no NO! It can't possibly move that fast, I still had a few good hours! Goddammit, it's right in front of me! Dear lord, what is that stuff on it? Too dark to make it out, but it looks like some sort of crudely painted face. Could just be blotches on the thing, but it looks way too much like a face. Dammit, I can deal with a shapeless thing, why'd it have to have a face?

Don't blink. There's a way out of this, some weak link in the chains, some means of kicking this thing away; maybe if I'm lucky, I can twist away and let it go right by me! No, that's stupid, it'd never work.

Level head, you've *got* to keep a level head. I can beat this thing, I can outlast it, I can get out of here so long as I don't…!

…

Why am I still alive?

I don't believe it. I simply do not believe it. It… it went around me. It was practically pressed against me, and it *went around*. How lucky do you have to be for that to happen? Does this mean I'm done? Are they going to come in here, "Sorry for the trouble, but hey, you're still alive," and then let me go? Can I go back to my life now, no, wait, before you answer, why did you put me through that, what the hell was that thing, why am I still alive?

Dear God, I'm tired. How long have they had me chained up in here? A few hours, at least. Maybe a day. But… I have to stay awake. I've got to keep my eyes open until they come and get me. Sleep is the absolute last thing I need right now.

I went to sleep. Why'd I go to sleep, sleep could kill me, why didn't I have a strong enough head to stay awake?

There's a cold feeling on the small of my back. I can't twist to see it, but I can tell *something* is there. And… oh God, no. There's something wrapped around my throat. I could twitch my head before, but I can't even move it now. This thing is going to break my neck, isn't it? That's what they were waiting for, wasn't it? They wanted this thing to wear me down until I *had* to sleep, and then they'd have it stop fooling around and kill me.

What kind of sick, twisted bastard do you have to be just to see how long a guy can last against a monster?

Don't panic just yet. I can still see it. I can barely see any of it, but I can still see it, and that means it can't move. Maybe if I try winking, I can get out of this. They'll see that it can't kill me, and then let me out. Come on, come on, this has to work, it *has* to. One eye, then the other. One eye, then the other. One eye, then the other. One eye, then the other. One eye, then th…

Oh…

Oh no. I… this can't be happening. I didn't do anything wrong. They just stuck me in here with a monster without any rhyme or reason.

I don't want to die, but… but… there's a… a…

There's a pipe sticking out of my chest, right through my heart.

Don't Call Us, We'll Find You

Electronically recorded journal of Dr. Gerard L. Johnston. Recovered after a recommendation for employment was made by his superior, Dr. Devon Corbin. Dr. Johnston's continued employment is being reviewed at this time. Dr. Johnston is currently employed at Site 33, Psychological Care Facility 22, and believes it to be a government-run psychiatric hospital for high-clearance personnel involved in incidents related to national security.

Site 33 - Psychological Care Facility 22

/ / :

[*Note:* Patient 207 is Agent Corinne , exposed to **SCP-212** on 05/12/2002 resulting in a complete restructuring of the musculoskeletal composition of her face and torso. Agent Corinne suffers from identity issues as a result of this and has been remanded to the care of PCF-22 until she is capable of returning to duty.]

Same old, same old, journal. It's been a tense year, ever since patient 612 got here. I'm supposed to take over for Dr. Smith on that patient in a few weeks, apparently Smith's requested a sabbatical. Still don't know why they won't give us a name to identify them by, I know these are important people, but an alias wouldn't hurt anyone, would it? Anyway, I only had to deal with Patient 207, but that was enough, let me tell you. She's still a wreck after undergoing that reconstructive facial surgery - apparently a lot of the tissue wasn't recoverable, and so they had to perform a face transplant in addition to pinning about half the bones in her skull together. Honestly, whoever did it deserves a medal, she looks amazingly healthy - no swelling around the face or scarring that I'd expect, but the end result was that she can't handle looking totally different, and she got put here.

I walked into her room today, and she was curled up in the fetal

position in the corner, crying again. She seemed to have gone through another episode of depersonalization, which is understandable. 207 has rejected her new appearance as that of another person, and has adopted her identification number, 207, as her new name. Often, she will pair this number with another name that she doesn't seem to be fond of, "Skip." In her periods of lucidity, she's demonstrated remarkable intelligence and a keen, if dark, sense of humor. "Corinne" is what she prefers to be identified as in these moments, and she absolutely clams up if I ask her about "Skip", or "Skip 207". The number 207 doesn't elicit the same response from her, which is odd. Skip must mean something more to her, but what is unknown and probably unimportant.

I really think she can be helped, but it's going to be a long-term process of teaching her to accept her new face and pair it with her sense of identity, which has given her a lot of trouble. You've got to feel bad for her, a nasty incident necessitating that kind of reconstructive surgery is rough enough, the long-term effects are just salt in the wound.

/ / :

[*Note*: Patient 337 is a D-class unit (D-42773) exposed to SCP- , eating a single brown candy. He has been remanded to PCF-22 in order to study the length of effect of SCP- and to determine if it 'wears off'.]

Had to go see 337 today, which is honestly refreshing. Sometimes he hears voices running commentary on his life, sometimes they argue, but that's basically the only variation you hit in his symptoms. I feel bad for the guy, sure - he can barely communicate, suffers from hallucinations of all sorts of messed up stuff, and when he's not doing that, he just sits on his bed and stares into space for hours on end. But, on the plus side, he's basically a textbook case of schizophrenia. I thought he was faking at first, the symptoms 337 exhibits are literally straight out of the DSM-IV.

Unfortunately, he isn't responding to treatment. I mean, at all- all the antipsychotics in the book haven't done a damn thing. I switched him to electroconvulsive therapy - still, nothing. We've just had to keep him restrained until we can figure something out, but so far all

that's worked are sedatives. I don't think I've had a case that any colleague not working here would believe since I've started.

/ / :

[*Note*: Patient 612 is Dr. , a linguist assigned to studying the symbols produced by **SCP-035**. Dr. 's mental state degraded continuously over the three and a half weeks she worked on the project, until she was caught fashioning a stylus out of D-13448's ulna shortly after his termination. At that point, Dr. was sent to PCF-22, was she has resided for several months.]

I know the government's up to some crazy stuff, but this has officially gone beyond the pale. Today was my first day on 612, and I was ready for just about anything. I've seen some nasty stuff in my life, some seriously disturbed people, and so have my colleagues… which is what initially concerned me about the rumors. Something is *wrong* here, and I don't know what, and I don't know if I want to know.

I walked into 612's room - unpadded, and she was unrestrained, which really shocked me at first. With all the rumors flying, I was expecting some kind of feral maniac trying to rip her own face off. Instead, she had a stack of paper, a pen, and a bed. She was completely still, had the sheets on the bed pulled up over her face, and she wouldn't acknowledge me. Gave me time to evaluate the situation, I figured, and I started going through the papers. She's a doctor of linguistics, so I wasn't too surprised when I didn't understand the writing, but it was pretty clearly Latin and Greek… but some of it I didn't recognize, wedges in patterns. Sections of it were circled with notes written in the margins, same language as whatever was circled. I looked it up a few hours ago, that wedge-writing was cuneiform, Sumerian writing. *She has had no education whatsoever in Sumerian culture or languages.* I tried to take the papers out of the room, and the guards stopped me, saying that it was their job to handle that. When I protested, they flashed a badge in my face and said something about a foundation, then they gave that meaningful look that basically translates to 'I'm better armed than you are, back off.' I left 612's room after that, went immediately to Dr. Corbin, who's in charge around here (I thought), and got about six words in before he cut me off and told me to let the guards

handle it and just worry about 612.

I didn't press it at the time, even though I probably should have. 612's cell was the same as I left it, stack of papers on the desk, blankets pulled up over her head, no response from 612. I admit my temper wasn't what it ought to have been, I should've probably left well enough alone, but something about 612 just set me off. I walked over and ripped the blankets off of 612, and got quite another surprise. 612 was using the blankets to keep people from seeing as she drew a new set of symbols on her bed in her own blood. I've seen self-mutilation and writing in bodily fluids before, that wasn't the surprising part. What got me was that these were certainly not cuneiform, nor anything from the Greek or Latin alphabets. Also notable was the pattern of self-mutilation that no one had seen fit to mention on any of the reports- these cuts were made with a pattern in mind, and for God's sake, I don't know *what*. When the guards noticed, they came into the cell, sedated 612, and dragged me out of there. I left work from there and came home, took a nap to clear my mind, and wrote this down… I don't know if I can go back to work tomorrow. Something is really, really wrong here and I don't know what. Dr. Corbin knows, but he won't tell me. The guards even know, and they won't tell me. Something's got to give, and soon, or I'm out of here.

/ / :

[*Note*: Patient 552, or Guard Matthew , was assigned to **SCP-231** as an observer for Procedure 110-Montauk, during which he prevented two D-class personnel assigned to the procedure from murdering **SCP-231**-7 in the midst of the proscribed of Procedure 110-Montauk. **SCP-231**-7 requested to be euthanized shortly after Guard intervened, a request which was summarily denied by Guard . A Class 3 commendation has been placed on Guard 's personnel file and as per his request, he was transferred to Site - . Shortly after his transfer, he was offered and refused a Class B Amnestic and memory implantation, after which he suffered a psychological breakdown, necessitating his current status in PCF-22.]

I can't work in this environment anymore, this has become ludicrous. I was talking to 552 today - the one with the depressive and guilt

issues, fairly standard case and he seemed to be responding well to therapy. He has problems I'm not going to be able to help him with unless he opens up more… this negative self-image he carries around is like a greenhouse for depression, it's just going to keep feeding on itself and growing. The fact that a guard detail is required to accompany anyone interviewing 552 is just hindering his treatment further - it's going to be hard enough to get him to tell *me* why he hates himself, much less two armed guards standing less than three meters away.

To be honest, I really think the guards know more than I do about this place, and I don't like it. I *swear* I caught one of them making a threatening gesture at 552 today when I thought for sure the poor bastard was going to crack and tell me what was wrong. Of course, he clammed up immediately, at which point I terminated the interview and went straight to Corbin. At which point I got the same damn runaround I'm always going to get around here, where of course the guards are here for my own safety, and no, don't be ridiculous, the guards would never interfere with a patient's treatment, and blah blah you're imagining things take a day off. I'm going in tomorrow and giving Corbin a piece of my mind about this whole business, he and I both know something odd is going on, and he needs to level with me about it.

[*Note*: Dr. Johnston is to be evaluated for potential direct employment by the Foundation as a Class 1 on-site staff psychiatrist. He knows enough at this point he could be considered a security risk, and he could still be useful to us. I can't keep brushing him off like I have been without making it blatantly clear that I'm hiding things from him. -Dr. Corbin]

Don't Forget

This letter is to anyone who remembers that one should always take care of their fellow man.

I'm stuck in this little room surrounded by a big layer of concrete. I usually can't open the door because it locks from the other side. Sometimes people leave the door opened and I leave, but when I try to get someone to help me, nobody will pay any attention to me. I can try hitting them, knocking their stuff over, screaming at them, but they'll just keep going about their business like I don't even exist. Sometimes I try to run away, but when I get outside my head starts hurting, and then I get really tired. When I go to sleep, I wake up back in that intolerable room, locked in and forgotten. Again.

Sometimes people come into my room. We talk, and they're usually very surprised to see me. They always promise to get me help. They take lots of notes and photos so they don't forget me, but they always do. Lately, it's been a bunch of scientists in lab coats. You would think that a scientist would have a better memory then those other guys who came before them, but they forget about me like all the rest.

If you find this letter, and you come into my room, please don't leave me in there. Take me with you so we can make people see me. Make them see I exist.

Please.

Why doesn't anyone remember me?

Don't Forget The Dead

Haley Lee sat in her office, writing up a report on the latest death that had occurred in Site-27. There wasn't a lot to write. On February 7th, 2018, Eric Bernard, a fellow researcher on Site-27, was found dead in the middle of a corridor. That was it. That was all the information they had managed to gather in the last three days. Haley sighed, looked down at the report, checking it for errors, then turned and opened up the file marked "Recent Casualties."

There were too many.

Over 80 people had been found dead on Site-27 during the last month. At least 20 of those people had died this week, and there still wasn't a single piece of information on what killed them, or how.

None of the bodies had any sort of injury on them, and by all accounts they were in perfect health. Even the cameras were unable to provide any evidence. Perfectly healthy people just…died, in the middle of the day.

Haley slid Bernard's report into the file, paused, then pulled out the file and laid it on her desk. She opened the file, and began to read through the reports. There was no point, they all said the same thing. To her though, it was a matter of respect, a way of saying that they were still looking, still trying.

She did this every day, sometimes twice a day. She remembered them all so well. Her fellow researchers, various site managers, hell, even a few D-Class she had seen maybe once. The memories were vivid, always at the forefront of her mind. But everyone else seemed to forget after a few days.

She smiled sadly as she read through the reports, memories of each

person bursting into full bloom.

Casualty Report
Name: Brandon Sullivan
Site Occupation: Researcher
Date of Death: 1-16-2018
Time of Death: 4:48 PM 11:27 AM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Casualty Report
Name: Andre Johnson
Site Occupation: Assistant
Date of Death: 1-17-2018
Time of Death: 2:27 PM 1:11 PM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Casualty Report
Name: Shannon Bruce
Site Occupation: Assistant
Date of Death: 1-17-2018
Time of Death: 7:28 PM 4:01 PM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Casualty Report
Name: Beverly Bass
Site Occupation: Researcher
Date of Death: 1-18-2018 1-17-2018
Time of Death: 1:07 AM 11:36 PM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Casualty Report
Name: D-77283
Site Occupation: D-Class
Date of Death: 1-18-2018
Time of Death: 3:21 AM 2:34 AM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Casualty Report
Name: D-77212
Site Occupation: D-Class
Date of Death: 1-18-2018

Time of Death: 11:07 AM 8:54 AM
Cause of Death: Unknown It was me.

Haley sighed, leaned back, and rubbed her eyes wearily. She hadn't been getting a lot of sleep these past few nights, she didn't think anyone had. She stared back down at the reports, not thinking about anything, until a knock at the door startled her out of her stupor.

"Who is it?" she yelped as she jerked upwards, scattering papers everywhere and knocking over her pencil jar. She frantically tried to organise the mess she had just made, but gave up when the door opened and a young man walked in.

"Yo," Researcher Larry Alexander announced as he walked through the door and sat down on the edge of her desk, "I got the latest report for you. This one came with a video and everything."

Haley looked at her hands. "Another one?" she inquired quietly.

"Ya better believe it! This one happened just outside your office, halfway down the hall," Alexander exclaimed. "It's fresh too, only about three hours ago."

Haley glanced up at the clock on the wall. 5:47! She had been filing the report on Bernard at barely noon! She must have fallen asleep while reading through the reports. She cursed herself quietly, but figured if this was the first time someone had come in nothing *too* important had happened.

"You seem to get all the good reports lately," Alexander continued, "I swear you have some sort of connections or something. You wanna hook me up with whoever it is givin' you—"

"How many is that this week?" She interrupted, "How many times?"

Alexander jumped slightly. "er, how many what?" he questioned, "How many times have I asked you about this? Maybe three, but I don't see why you're so upset abou—"

"Not that," Haley demanded, "How many deaths, this week?

Alexander looked down at the report as if he had just realised what it was for. "Twenty-six," He whispered, "That's twenty-six dead so far this week… how did I… twenty-six…" He slowly stood up, "I'm… gonna go see if they need me anywhere." And he walked out of the room.

Haley sighed again, she couldn't blame him for being so jittery, they all were. She reached over and pulled out the video tape from the earlier incident, slid it into the computer at her desk, and hit play. She opened the file and started reading it over, glancing up at the screen just often enough to avoid missing anything important.

"Another D-Class," she muttered, "D-77335, hmmmm, I don't know much about her“

She felt a harsh pang in her chest, she remembered D-77335 so well. When she had first been assigned to Site-27 D-77335 had been the one who showed her around. They had spent the first week together, and even after Haley's job started full time, they had still tried to find time to go drinking together. Damn that girl could drink, she would drain shots like they were water and never seemed to get hungover for it.
With tears in her eyes, Haley looked up from to file to the computer screen. She knew what was coming, and she didn't want to see it, but her job demanded that she had to watch. Her *conscience* demanded that she had to watch, to find some clue, some little piece of information that could be used to avenge her friend.

But it was no different from any of the other videos. Everything was normal, and then D-77335 just fell, like a puppet with her strings cut. There was no exclamation, no sign that anything was wrong, she just fell over dead. And everyone else just kept going about their business. Haley slumped back in her seat. Nothing. There was nothing here that she hadn't already seen a dozen times before. She closed her eyes and tried to stop herself from crying, one of her closest friends, gone, just like that, without anyone even stopping to

help her.

Wait.

Haley jerked upward. She frantically rewound the footage until just before the moment of death, then hit play. Sure enough, D-77335 fell to the ground, dead, and sure enough, nobody stopped to help. Nobody even glanced down at her body as they walked past.

Haley jumped out of her chair and dove into the filing cabinet, pulling out all of the recordings of previous incidents. And played them all one by one.

Nobody noticed. Nobody ever noticed. The bodies weren't found until hours, *days* after they were killed. Nobody saw them, nobody noticed until they tripped over them or something. Nobody could see the dead.

Unless they forgot they had seen them.

Haley sat back down, and watched the times of death over and over again. Something. There had to be something that she could see. There had to be some unifying factor in each of the tapes.

There it was.

In the corner of her eye.

The dark shape.

A lost memory.

A *stolen* memory.

Haley could no longer ignore the pounding in her head. The voice was screaming at her to turn around. She slowly stood up, and, smiling, began to turn around.

There it was. The object. The thing that nobody else knew existed. The thing that nobody else *could* know existed. It had stored her

memories so she wouldn't be suspected, and now they all came rushing back.

She remembered Brandon Sullivan's terrified eyes, as she had chased him down a stairway. She remembered the way his blood seemed to glow in the dim fluorescent lights. She remembered how he didn't scream, not once, only whimpered.

She remembered Andre Johnson. She remembered dragging his broken body down the corridor. She remembered how much he begged for his life. She remembered taking him apart, all while keeping him alive as long as she could.

She remembered Shannon Bruce. She remembered how the girl had suspected nothing as she approached her. She remembered the shock in her eyes as a blade was driven through her heart. She remembered the pathetic gasp of surprise that escaped her as her lungs gave out.

She remembered Eric Bernard. She remembered how he had fought frantically. She remembered how she had tied him up, and cut him open. She remembered how she had pulled out his organs, and crushed them in her hands.

And she remembered D-77335. She remembered her screams, oh, such delicious screams. She remembered the way they reverberated throughout the building. She remembered how she begged those around her for help. She remembered the hope going out of her eyes when she realized they didn't notice her.

She remembered everything about everyone *she* had toyed with, everyone she had killed.
The door opened behind her.

"Hey," Alexander said, looking up, "They sent me back up here to see if—"

The last thing he saw was his associate's twisted smile, and the **`nothing`** she was swinging at his head.

Don't Worry About It

If you don't know what this is, don't worry about it.

Part 1: The First

Hi, everybody, my name is Margaret Sawyer-Sheen, and I'm a doctor with the SCP Foundation! This si the story of how I fell in love with my dearest love of all time, Dr. Clef!

—

One fine spring evening Maggie looked deep into Clef's eyes, they were sparkling with violet and amethyst. And with sparkling tears. "But how will we stop 682?" she asked, eyes glistening. "he killed my parents too! please do not tell anyone, I could not bear it if everyone knew. it is my deepest secret."

—

"Don't worry," Clef said, his handsome face clearly visible to his one true love. "we will find a way because we have each other and that is all we need. We can do anything if we work together." Clef took Maggie's hand in his and picked up his shotgun with the other hand, full of determination to not to let her down.

—

"My luminous pear," Clef said, frowning, "I think I have the perfect plan to rid ourselves of that evil, despicable, and handsome lizard. But I'll need your help. We shall allure him with the power of compassion. Not even his thick skin could hope to stand against our love!"

—

Together, Clef and Maggie walked through the scary dark halls of

the SCP Foundation, holding hands together, bravely facing the darkness alone. Until finally they came to a big, steel door. The door tht held the monster called SCP-682.

—

Suddenly another door opened and out from the door came scp-999 who said I will help you against 682!"

—

"Welcome, 999," Clef says. "we will have the power of friendship and also love. Our bright hearts will bring tears of happyness" After SCP-999 joiined them bravely, thehy contfroned the door with eyes sparklingly at the same time. The door opened cavernously to reveal the monster that hates all love, SPC-682.

"We hav e come for you this day, 682," Clef challenged, only one small quaver in his brave, musical voice.

—

Maggie clung to Clef's side, the power of her kindness surrounding her with a soft pink glow, a warmth that could banish any evil.

"Be brave," she whispered to Clef. "we can do anything if we try… take the power of my love and use it against 682!"

—

Suddenly, SCP-76-2 rushed in and glared at Clef handsomely. “No! I will not allow you to do this, Clef, even if you are my ex-boyfriend! Maggie is my own true love and soulmate , and I will not share her with the lizard! We must fight!"

—

Fighting is wrong!" Maggie said, as she stepped between Clef and Able. "I know we were in love once, Abel, but that was in the past. Cle fis my true love now and unless you're willing to le tme go, you'll never get past your own violent nature"!

—

Able looked down agt the floor with eyes downcast. "You are right, Maggie," he said with a somewhat calmer voice. "You were the light of my life and Clef was my bright and morning star but evrything must come to an end someday and now I understand that Clef is your one treu love as you are his. I promise I will not be jealous again." Maggie and Clef smiled at Able and Able was their friends.

The lizard watched them all with an angry evil eye. "PROFESSOR-SCIENTIST MARGARET SAWYER-SHEEN". it roared in its voice, stunned momentarily by the researcher's caring and kind beauty. "YOURE PARENTS TRIED TO STOP ME LONG AGO! YOU WILL NOT SUCCEED" He also looked at Clef and growled menasingly.

—

"Your parents never told you who I really am, did they Maggie!? the lizard said with vileness. "They couldn't stop me because I was their own son all along!" He grinned. "No, but that would mean you were my brother all along and how could you kill our parents?!" Maggie yelled, her good heart crying. "They tried to kill me because they loved you most because of your specialness!" The lizard raged, "You are as strong as me but also smarter and pretty and lovely, it's not fair! Now I will kill you!" "No you will not, because I have a power you can't hope to defeat." said Maggie with a smile.

—

Because that was the truth about Maggie: Maggie was the daughter of SCP-343 and SCP-469, but while her twin brother, SCP-682, was given all of the evil and darkness in the world, she was made into a creature of beauty and light, incorruptible and pure. It was the light of her purity and goodness that cleanesd the darkness from Clef and Able's souls, and it was her light that now defeated her twin brother an dbanished him from the world until he could be reborn as a creature of goodnesss.

And that is the story of how me and my true love Clef saved the world from SC-682. Feedback please!

—-

Part 2: The Flashback

Author's note: Okay, so people were complaining that my first story isn't aobut how Clef and I met at all, and they didn't get that it was called a flashback, so now I'm going to tell that sotry now, WILL YOU PEOPLE PLEASE GET OFF MY CASE!?

—-

Margaret Sawyer-Sheen looked in the mirror and sighed. She hated herself. She was so ordinary, not like the popular girls in the school, not like Lydia Erickson, the cheer captain. She didn't like how her mousy brown hair looked, or the fact that she had slightly too big front teeth, or the spattering of freckles over the bridge of he rnoe, or the fact that her boobs were slightly too big. She was bored, she was tried. She was looking for something new.

Don't Get Used To It

One-year-youngs don't understand hate. Don't get malice or violence. Evil won't be part of their vocabulary for another two years or so. They just see what's around them, and they take it in.

Six-year-youngs on, the other hand, do understand hate. They've developed enough to feel it. They know that churning deep down inside that comes over you, and the vision turns red and all you want to do is grab the kitchen knife and start slashing until the blood is everywhere. Then your heart beat slows down.

Thirty-year olds also understand hate, but they understand it better. They can live hate. Big hate, little hate, directed hate, universal hate. Contempt, disgust and revulsion too. From their own failures to the failures of others to vicarious failures, they have so many different reasons to hate.

However, six-year-youngs and thirty-year-olds can't get used to hate. They have to shout at each other and threaten each other and have one beat the other with their belt because "you don't talk back to me like that". And then after the shouting stops, both of them recognize that hate is not a normal thing.

One-year-youngs don't understand hate. But if you don't understand something, you can adapt to it. You can mistake it for something entirely normal. That hate is the way things are. That normal dinners consist of yelling and screaming. That on Friday nights daddy should come home with a slur. That every big sister has bruises across their backs and under their dresses.

One-year-youngs can smile, suck on their pacifier, and get used to hate.

And two years later, when the handcuff men take away mommy and daddy, and bring big sis to the orphanage, they'll find the three-year-old. They will hate it. And it will hate them right back with a smile.

Because the hate will always be there for the three-year-old. To protect it from **`love`**.

Closure

Dr. Cassandra Pike spent this Friday night the same way she had spent every Friday night for the past three months: curled up on the couch, eating vanilla ice cream mixed with popcorn, watching some cartoon that her niece had gotten her into on her laptop. She tried to not click on the pictures folder, but her cursor was already hovering over it, and her finger tapped the trackpad.

In the folder were photos of her and her… ex-non-fiance. She winced, trying to tell herself it was just brain freeze, but she knew better than that. The photographs were of her and… him, doing various things. Going to a screening of the Avengers together. During that whole weirdness with the sentient toilet paper during Halloween 2011. Her handling cloned smilodon cubs. Her trying on a wedding dress as a joke-

She closed the folder and breathed slowly.

"One… two… three… four… in. One… two… three… four… ou-" she coughed and tried not to spill her dairy-and-corn confection on the laptop. As it turned out, it wasn't a good idea to try and count out loud while doing breathing exercises.

She shut off her computer for the night, and got up to go to bed. She did her usual routine: not brushing her teeth, not showering, taking her pills only because her pillbox reminded her to, and flopping into bed.

The next day, she went to Site 87's break room for coffee. It wasn't very good, but she didn't want to get out of the site for fear of… him seeing her. She had made a token effort of preparing her hair and makeup as she started up the percolator, looking up at the ceiling.

Someone tapped her shoulder. "Cass?"

She spun around and faced Dr. Margaret Reese, head of Bioengineering. "Oh. Hello."

"Are you okay?"

"…what do you think?" She sighed and brushed her hair aside with her hand. "And before you ask, yes, I've gone to see Dr. Palmer this week."

"That's good. Is he helping with the… you know."

"…Anger Management is hard to find in the Foundation, surprisingly. All the big groups are at 77 or 19 or something. This place is so smiles and rainbows-y to the point that I wonder if anyone but me in this town has relationship troubles."

"Anyone but you and-"

At that point in time, another person entered the break room. Seeing who it was, Dr. Pike bowed her head, shaking and hiding behind her hair. She needed to wash it.

The person was a rather lanky man, with large, coke-bottle glasses over his eyes, who walked past Dr. Pike, heading towards the coffee machine. He didn't even acknowledge her presence. He looked at Dr. Reese and nodded. "Margaret."

"Dr. Mattings."

"There's going to be a transfer into your team today; it's only temporary. The project my team's working on keeps on shorting out one of our junior researcher's insulin pumps. We don't know how, either."

"All right. I'll await…"

"Her."

"Her. Tell her to see me in my office for a project brief."

"Very good." Dr. Claude Mattings pushed his spectacles off his nose and walked out of the room.

It was only now that Dr. Pike realized she wasn't breathing. She gasped and coughed, putting her coffee on the table, and rubbing her thumb and forefinger together. It was a nervous habit of hers.

Dr. Reese frowned. "Why didn't you say anything to him?"

Cassandra swallowed and coughed before speaking. "I'm so scared. He said he has a moratorium against me- if I try to talk to him, he'll just… go to Weiss, and then it's off to the padded room for me."

Dr. Reese stared, tilting her head quizzically. "…what the hell did you do in order to get him to do *that?*"

"You did that because she tried to apologize?!" Dr. Harold West stared at Claude as he sat next to him at the bar, drinking a bourbon.

"She was constantly pestering me. All of her e-mails were things like "Please come back", "I'm sorry", "I still love you, can we make this work"… it got tiring."

"Even so, not allowing her to speak to you at all… that's fucking harsh."

Dr. Mattings raised an eyebrow. "She can talk to me if she wants. She just needs to stop constantly pestering me with apologies."

"That… is not what Margaret said. Dr. Pike seems to be under the impression that if she even acknowledges you exist, she'll get shipped off to D-Class Conditioning or something."

Claude sighed. "As always, she overreacts. She has issues. If she can ever work through them, then maybe…" He sighed. "I dunno. Another bourbon."

"That's your third shot tonight."

"Sixth. I had a couple when you were taking a leak."

Dr. Pike raced down the hall. She was late for the seminar, and she

needed to make it if she wanted to get raised a clearance level. She held her work binder to her chest, ran around the corner-

And ran smack into the last person she wanted to see today, or this week, or this century. She looked up at Claude, visibly flinching. "D-Dr. Mattings."

"Dr. Pike," he said, pressing up his glasses. "You do know that your restraining order doesn't expire until month's end."

"I-I'm sorry, it was an accident…"

"…you've been good, so I'll let it slide. Don't let it happen again." He pushed up his glasses, and walked past her.

Dr. Pike stood there for another five seconds, then fell to her knees, clutching her binder and crying.

Dr. Reese was not pleased. That much was evident by the demeanor in her office. She usually had a pot of tea ready on a hot plate in case someone came in to talk to her, and the place always had a smell of something vaguely autumn-like in it; this was supposedly part of a treatment Dr. Reese was undergoing for some medical condition she had, but this was just hearsay around the site.

Now, the tea was gone, and the office smelled like winter. Dead leaves, cold, and hopelessness. Dr. Reese looked out from behind her desk, frowning as Claude Mattings entered the door and took a seat in front of her desk.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I have a right mind to just… kick you out of your project and assign you to… I don't know, scraping the gunk out of the nanite tank, Mattings."

Claude stared at her, confused. "What did I do?"

"'You've been good, so I'll let it slide'? Are you trying to sound like a complete psychopath, or do you just want to drive her insane?"

Dr. Mattings's hand greeted his forehead with a high-five.

"Are you denying you said that?"

"…I'm not, but…" Claude rubbed his face. "Look. She has more issues than a *Spider-Man* book."

"As in the characters, or as in the actual number of issues of the comic book?"

"Pick one," Mattings snorted. "You have any idea how often she's done this? How often she just… blows up, throws a fit, and almost instantly cools down? We've had massive fights that have ended with her telling me to- and I quote- "Go fuck myself with a peyote cactus until I start taking a magic voyage"- and almost instantly after that, she starts crying and acting regretful. It's bizarre, and I just got sick of it."

"…I'm aware of her issues. When her cat died, she actually threw her computer monitor out of her window, and then spent the next five days cleaning it up and working overtime to buy a new one, and another two weeks after that to fully pay for the broken window. She is trying, though."

"Or so she claims."

"Mattings!" snapped Dr. Reese.

"Look, I can't put up with thi-"

"She's scared of you."

Claude blinked. "…what?"

"Why do you think I'm talking to you instead of her? The restraining order expired yesterday. She's still terrified of talking to you. She's missed five seminars because you attended them, too. She's only recently started working on containment projects again, and even then, your whole passive-aggressive bullshit the other day threw her off of work so badly that she checked herself into the infirmary." She threw up her hands. "But, it's moot anyway. She's requesting a transfer off-site."

Claude's eyebrow went up. "…where to?"

"Site 48. Harkness, Maryland. A *Dunwich-Class* Nexus. You might know it as 'The town that's populated entirely by people sick with anomalous diseases'."

Both of his eyebrows were up, now. "…you can't be serious. She hates germs."

"She hates herself even more, right now."

"For fuck's sake, like she'd ever do it." Claude made for the door. "She's making a toy out of you, Reese. She's manipulating you into feeling sorry for her." He opened the door, and was about to close it behind him, when Dr. Reese asked a question.

"Does she know she's doing it?"

"…I've asked myself that question hundreds of times." He closed the door and came back into the room. "She's… frustrating. She's incredibly cruel and manipulative at times, but… I don't think she can fathom how cruel she is. She needs to see what kind of effect this has on others and take responsibility for it. Is that too much to ask for?"

"It isn't. But… hell, she was going to propose before all this happened."

"Yeah, well. Nuts to that, eh?" He sighed, rubbing his thumb against his forefinger in his pocket. It was a nervous habit he acquired; he didn't know where from. "I… do want to reconcile with her, some day. If she can prove she's ready. I don't hate her."

"At least there's that."

"Just… talk to him, please?" Dr. Reese frowned as she sat by Cassandra in the break room the next day. "He doesn't hate you, and he wants to talk."

"…I don't know if I can," Dr. Pike replied, sipping at her coffee. "I just… I'm scared."

"Scared? Of him?" Dr. Reese sighed. "We deal with the horrors of the universe on a daily basis. Last week, fifteen people in town were eaten because some nanites bounced off the back of a Foundation truck and their container burst. And you're scared of talking to a person? It's not like he's 682 or something."

"No, I worked with 682, once. It at least had the balls to admit how disgusted they were by everything." She clutched her cup, trembling.

"Cassie… just… talk to him, okay?"

At that point, Dr. Mattings walked into the break room.

Dr. Pike stood up, swallowed, wiped her eyes, and approached him.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"…shit kinda sucks, huh?" Claude rubbed the back of his head. "It takes two to tango, though."

"Yeah." Cassie looked down at the floor and rubbed her hair. "… want to try again?"

He looked down at her, and walked out of the room, beckoning her to follow. They had catching up to do.

Dossier - FSF Delivery

Official Designation: Foundation Space Forces Light vessel Varuna [Modified] *Delivery*

Design Summary: The *Delivery* consists of a heavily modified Varuna-class spacefaring vessel, constructed from the salvaged remains of FSFL *Galaxy Cruiser* (see Dispatch Timeline). Much of the vessel's internal space has been sacrificed to accommodate an oversize, reinforced storage bay. Basic landing struts have also been added, and the ship's external structure has been reinforced to allow the ship to alight on planetary surfaces. See below craft specifications for more information.

Crew: 5

Powerplant: NRX/XE-II Nuclear

Armament:

- 2x Subach-Innes LCOL-F 3MW CO2 pulse laser
- 1x FSFW 'Naagastra' hypervelocity coilgun (Modified) [See Experimental Components List]

Craft Purpose: The FSF *Delivery* is a combined planetary scouting and resource-gathering craft for the Foundation Space Force. Equipped with an enlarged storage bay and specialized scanning, mining, and storage devices, the *Delivery* is dispatched to planets of interest within the immediate stellar vicinity of the greater FSF fleet, at a maximum range of one light-week. After approaching the interstellar body in question, the ship scans to acquire more detailed information for the fleet. If appropriate, the *Delivery* then lands on the planet and secures all resources necessary for FSF use, as well as any detected anomalous objects ascertained to be relatively safe to handle.

The *Delivery* has been outfitted with a variety of experimental FSF

equipment beneficial to its primary mission. This both expedites resource gathering and allows for field-testing of newly-developed FSF technologies. Due to the high level of risk already accepted by the crew members of the *Delivery*, as well as the relative ease with which the basic craft can be replaced, it was considered the optimal ship for early trials of emerging FSF technical components. See Experimental Components for more information.

GENERAL POSITIONS

Captain: Chance Sarridge

Mechanic: Joseph Peck
Formerly: Archie Flett (deceased), Robert Schroeder (deceased), Lucille Thompson (deceased)

Navigator: Marjorie Thompson
Formerly: Arina Bogomolov (deceased), Franklin Causey (unrecoverable, presumed deceased)

Medic: Alexandrea Exendine
Formerly: Lawrence Woodall (deceased), Theodore Dover (retired)

SHIP-SPECIFIC POSITIONS

Materials Analyst: Benjamin Golden

Note: Only dispatches of unusual significance have been recorded here. For a full dispatch history, including approximate dates and galactic coordinates of dispatches, please contact FSF Information Services and submit appropriate credentials.

Dispatch #: Res-0001
Location: Planet 0-0029 "Hestia"
Target: Various radioactive isotopes for study and use as fuel
Status: Success
Notes: Maiden voyage of FSF *Galaxy Cruiser*, an unmodified Varuna-class vessel. Target isotopes were successfully harvested from Planet 0-0037, though problems were encountered during transportation. Inability of the vessel to properly alight on the

planetary surface made transfer of materials from planet to craft difficult. Lack of proper containment of recovered materials within the craft was also a noted concern, especially during artificial gravity spin-up.

Due to heavy damages sustained during resource gathering, the *Galaxy Cruiser* was rendered inoperable, and a rescue mission was necessary to recover the craft and its contents (for more details, see Dispatch Summary Rec-0004). FSF *Galaxy Cruiser* was scuttled following Dispatch Res-0001, with its parts used in the construction of FSF *Delivery*.

Dispatch #: Res-0002
Location: Planet 0-0029 "Hestia"
Target: Various radioactive isotopes for use as fuel
Status: Success
Notes: Maiden voyage of FSF *Delivery*.

Dispatch #: Res-0006
Location: Planet 1-0012
Target: Metal ore (primarily iron) for use in construction
Status: Success
Notes: Target resources successfully acquired. In addition, a low-level anomalous object (AO-) was identified and secured by crewmembers, marking the first anomaly identified and secured by members of this craft.

Dispatch #: Res-0017
Location: Planet 1-0164 "Persephone"
Target: Plant material for study
Status: Success
Notes: Planet 1-0164 was identified as a potential candidate for extensive plant growth. FSF *Delivery* sent to confirm presence of plant life on planet, and obtain samples for study. Numerous samples acquired, revealing a forest ecosystem similar to those seen on Earth.

Dispatch #: Res-0018
Location: Planet 1-0164 "Persephone"
Target: Lumber for use in construction, printing, etc.
Status: Success

Notes: Crew of *Delivery* encountered previously unnoticed native intelligent life forms, living in a primitive tribal structure (classified as LF-0019). LF-0019 demonstrated hostile behavior, resulting in the deaths of two crew members.

Dispatch #: Res-0019
Location: Planet 1-0164 "Persephone"
Target: Lumber for use in construction, printing, etc., specimen of native intelligent life for study
Status: Success
Notes: Specimen of native intelligent life successfully recovered. Life form officially classified as LF-0019.

Dispatch #: Res-0026
Location: Planet 2-0014
Target: Heavy metallic ore for study and use in construction
Status: Failure
Notes: Planet gravity higher than initial scans indicated, resulting in inability to secure target ore, the death of a crew member, and heavy damages to craft. *Delivery* scanners upgraded in response to incident.

Dispatch #: Res-0051
Location: Planet 2-0027 "Nemesis"
Target: Classified
Status: Failure
Notes: Resulted in death of crew member. One other member resigned from service following incident. For more information regarding Res-0051, contact FSF Information Services and submit appropriate credentials.

Dispatch #: Res-0059
Location: Planet 2-0243
Target: Radioactive isotopes, for study and use as fuel
Status: Success
Notes: First test of newly acquired faster-than-light travel equipment obtained via **SCP-1822**. Craft navigator lost during operation of said equipment and deemed unrecoverable. Return trip took longer than projected due to lack of navigator. For more information on FTL travel equipment, see Experimental Components.

Dispatch #: Res-0066
Location: Planet 2-0130
Target: Unidentified material for study
Status: Failure
Notes: Failure to properly interpret planetary scan data resulted in failure to preemptively identify hazardous electromagnetic properties of the unidentified material composing much of Planet 2-0130. Material acquisition attempt resulted in death of crew member and heavy damages to ship. Materials analyst placed on crew to prevent future incidents of this nature.

CREW-ISSUED COMPONENTS

- **Plasma Lash-based Handheld Scoring Device (PLHSD)** - To aid in the excavation of particularly hard materials, the PLHSD utilizes the "plasma-lashing" principle recently discovered by FSF researcher Jeremy Cutt to produce a superheated edge capable of scoring most known materials. Each member of the *Delivery* is equipped with a PLHSD approximately 0.75 m in length.

Known flaws - PLHSDs have been known to periodically activate their cutting edge without prompting. To prevent accidental burns, each member of the *Delivery* has been provided with a hip-mounted insulated storage device.

VESSEL COMPONENTS

- **Hypervelocity coilgun kinetic output amplifier module (official name pending)** - To compensate for the *Delivery*'s reduced number of 'Naagastra' hypervelocity coilguns, the vessel's remaining coilgun has been outfitted with a module to allow firing of an ultra-high-density multipartite projectile, rather than conventional coilgun ammunition. This increases the weapon's destructive force per shot.

Known flaws - The amplifier module significantly increases the recoil experienced after firing. In addition, the module has not yet been optimized for use simultaneously with standard Varuna-class gravitational spin, necessitating spindown before the weapon can be

fired accurately.

- **SIDE-B multi-vector refractive targeting system** - Intended to further compensate for the *Delivery*'s lack of offensive firepower, it has been outfitted with the SIDE-B, allowing modified laser weaponry to direct fire from multiple firing ports.

Known flaws - Laser fire directed via the SIDE-B system exhibits reduced efficacy in comparison to fire directed from default firing ports. Also, due to the expanded cooling systems required for the operation of the SIDE-B system, additional firing ports can only be mounted laterally.

- **Hyperspace-based faster-than-light travel equipment** - During early bargaining with **SCP-1822**, the FSF was provided with a method of achieving faster-than-light travel and instructions for use as a sign of goodwill.

The primary component of the set is a computer program titled "way_point" coded in what appears to be a heavily modified version of BCPL. In order to function, the computer running way_point must be connected to a printer and 3D scanning equipment (provided by SCP-1822, though investigation of peripherals has yielded no anomalous components), as well as given access to the autopilot of the ship using the program to travel. Upon entering the x, y, and z coordinates of a desired destination, the program prints a square map 30 centimeters to a side, as well as displaying an "optimal fold number". This number generally increases as the distance from the vessel to the desired destination increases. Maps produced via way_point may contain a variety of markings, including but not limited to markings resembling topographical lines, jet streams, weather fronts, and ocean currents. However, all maps consistently contain two instances of the numeral "X".

To initiate FTL travel, the produced map must be folded such that the two "X"s make contact with one another, and the resulting figure created by the folded map must be scanned into the computer running way_point. The program will then plot a course using the ship's autopilot. Upon the activation of this course, the ship in question will be rendered undetectable to all known scanning equipment, reappearing approximately 34 minutes later at the

desired destination. This method can be used to navigate to any location within one lightweek of the affected ship, giving it the potential for the fastest travel speed afforded by any method currently known to the FSF. However, due to the unpredictability of this method (see below), use is restricted to the *Delivery* until more data is collected.

Known flaws - Crew members report psychological distress, up to and including audiovisual hallucination, during navigation initiated by way_point. Initiating travel using a map folded fewer times than the displayed "optimal fold number" increases the severity of these hallucinations and may result in damage to or disappearance of vessel components and/or crew members (see Dispatch History). Consequently, basic understanding of origami techniques has been deemed mandatory for any navigators working with this method of FTL travel.

This information has a security clearance level of: LOW. (It is accessible to all FSF personnel requesting relevant information, but is not to be disseminated to civilian residents of the FSF fleet.)

Experimental Psychological Buffer Protocol: Project Strake

Introduction: In light of the high risk implicit in assignment to the FSF *Delivery*, the use of an experimental psychological buffer protocol has been authorized in an attempt to mitigate the extreme stress levels experienced by *Delivery* crew members. At present, the use of this protocol is restricted to the crew of the *Delivery*.

Protocol author: Chance Sarridge (Credentials: Bachelor's degree in Foundation Field Psychology, acting captain of FSF *Delivery*)

Area of use: Crew members of FSF *Delivery*

History: This protocol was originally proposed by Captain Chance Sarridge following dispatch Res-0001 and rejected by FSF command. It was later reexamined following dispatch Res-0006, when routine psychological evaluations revealed the heightened

possibility of psychological breakdown across all members of the *Delivery*'s crew. Due to the significant resource drain created by proposed alternatives (providing psychological counseling following each dispatch, placing a large pool of FSF personnel on rotation as crew members of the *Delivery*), the protocol was tentatively approved.

For further documentation regarding the proposal and approval of this protocol, please contact FSF Information Services.

Observed success: Use of this protocol appears to have been relatively successful in reducing crew stress levels. Though *Delivery* crew members still exhibit above-average stress levels for active FSF personnel, only one member of the vessel has voluntarily left service to date, far below the number predicted by psychological evaluations predating the protocol's approval. It is unknown if the protocol would see similar success on a vessel of different crew size or purpose.

Details: Under this protocol, crew members are held to an alternate standard of operation, as specified by their captain. This is intended to create a semi-immersive fictional backdrop for crew members, reducing the emotional impact of frequent high-stress situations. The fictional backdrop has been drawn from widely shared cultural and historical background, so as to be easily-accepted.

Modifications of FSF standard operating procedure under this protocol include, but are not limited to:

- *Altered command hierarchy* - All crew members report directly to the captain with equal priority.
- *Modification of FSF uniforms*

  + Show examples

  Removal of sleeves, application of patches, addition of small-sized accessories, limited application of dyes, alternate casual headware, etc.

- *Non-conventional jargon*

+Show examples

"Barque" (Lucifer-class vessel), "brigantine/lugger" (Hourmazd-class vessel), "sloop" (Varuna-class vessel), "Bittacle" (navigational computation area), "fo'c'sle" (command bridge), "dead reckoning" (vessel coordination using backup navigational tools), etc.

- *Modified FSF insignia*

+Show

« Pitch Meeting | Straight On Till Morning Hub | Minerva Lifted»

Doublehorses

Dr. Jacobs stood at the head of the boardroom, advancing through a slideshow as he gave his presentation. Projected on the screen was a photograph of a somewhat ill-maintained livery stable bordered by a chain-link fence. A horse stood off to the side, gazing at the camera.

"One thing to keep in mind before entering the house of inconstant horses is these horses simply can't be relied upon," he said. "They are very untrustworthy, even though they may not seem it."

Click. The slide changed to a tilted photograph of one of the stables inside. Daylight shone from an opened door behind the camera, partially washing out the scene. A horse stood at the darkened far end, away from the photographer, its throat bulging.

He continued narrating. "Also, during periods of high stress, their necks are known to swell threateningly and exude intoxicating odors."

Click. A D-class was shown eagerly following a horse away from several members of a field team, all of whom were wearing gas masks. The D-class was not. The agents were going after the D-class, whose gait suggested extreme speed.

"Men have been led to their doom by the swollen necks of terrified horses."

Click. An aerial photo, most likely from a helicopter, of three D-classes chasing the swollen horse and eight agents chasing the D-classes into a mile-wide, sprawling, gnarled thicket of thorny branches and prickly hedges.

Dr. Jacobs described the picture. "Men led to the center of a deadly maze by bored horses who are also rude."

Click. A rotting human corpse wearing a D-class uniform being found in a clearing in the thicket by the field team. The timestamp showed that only half an hour had passed.

"Horse-pranked fools slowly starving to death in the center of a large, complicated bush."

Click. The slideshow came to an end. Dr. Jacobs switched off the projector. The overhead fluorescent lights came back on.

"So it's best to keep these things in mind and also probably other things. It sometimes seems there is no end to the things required to keep in one's mind, but I recommend limiting the things you bring with you into the house of inconstant horses, as a busy mind is upsetting to the horses."

Dr. Jacobs smiled at his audience, a group of several other researchers sitting around a table. No one spoke for a time until a man near the front coughed.

"I am entranced by the world you inhabit," said Dr. Adelie, clearing his throat.

Dr. Jacobs blushed. "Thanks."

"I will find the house. I will conquer it. I will whip these horses into shape, goddammit," exclaimed Dr. Taylor, on the warpath as usual.

Every swiveling chair turned as the door to the meeting room opened. A black-haired woman stuck her head inside. "I heard the word "horses." I like that."

"Hi Dr. Hanawalt!" Dr. Jacobs yelled awkwardly. He stuck out his hand, holding a fancy slip of paper. "Here is an invitation to play my game "DOUBLEHORSE." It's where you draw what you think a doublehorse is. It's fun!"

Dr. Hanawalt hissed through her teeth. "Oh dude, I'm working right now…" She thought for a second. "But I might have an hour free to play DOUBLEHORSE tonight!"

"Hell yeah, a genuine Hanawalt doublehorse would be amazing!"

"I appreciate the invite," she said. "Most people are too intimidated to play DOUBLEHORSE against me…

In his awkwardness, Dr. Jacobs let his thoughts drift. "I accidentally just pictured Dr. Lockwood a doublehorse into battle."

Trying to be reassuring, Dr. Hanawalt shushed him. "That was no accident! She's riding the main horse and I'm in the little attached sidecar horse."

Dr. Kelly, who up until this point had been silent, now spoke up. "When I visited the house of inconstant horses, I tried to sneak a horse stability expert in with me, but the foothills did this little escalator trick and carried her away…"

"I feel ashamed of my doublehorse," sighed Dr. Walters. "He can't even run. The doublehorse Dr. Taylor described could do some kind of little sideways sashay but mine, ugh…"

Dr. Sterrestof, the resident xenobiologist, then spoke. "I've only seen alien doublehorses … they're extremely sweet yet notoriously unreliable. And they come in all shades of pinkish purple."

The room was silent. She went on, her greener eye looking around independently.

"Oh, and contrary to the Earth doublehorses, they're always into french kissing."

There was still silence.

"With each other, I might add."

Dr. Adelie cleared his throat again. He seemed to be coming down with something. Dr. Kelly patted him on the back.

"If you double a horse's Pokédex number, which is 472," Dr. Nate Tarrant, the mathematician, remarked as he discreetly typed into a calculator, "you get UNDEFINED, which is made up of a bunch of cough SFX and mountain sprites. Speed-runners use it to bypass time-consuming areas like [BIRTH] and [DIRECTIONLESS LONGING]."

Suddenly, Dr. Jacobs struck the table with a fist, remembering something he had forgotten. He turned the projector back on. The lights darkened and he called up a final slide. On the screen, an ancient Greek philosopher was sketching a strange, indistinct animal amidst geometric formulae.

"This is Euclid logically deriving a doublehorse from a simple, made-at-home axiom that anyone can use!" Everyone oohed and ahhed in acknowledgement. There were a few more slides of Euclid's tablet at increasing magnification; Dr. Jacobs advanced past them until the slideshow was over.

The lights came back on. Inexplicably, Dr. Tarrant stayed dark, as well as a shadowy copy of him lurking in the corner of the room.

"BOTH DARK NATES HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT DOUBLEHORSE," Dr. Jacobs screeched. The shadowy figure flickered out. Dr. Tarrant stayed dark.

Down by the River

> **`Those Thin, Penultimate Hours`**, while not strictly plot related, will help greatly in understanding things.

Dawn hung in misty sheets, curling through tangled forest. A mourning dove cooed in the grey distance. Here and there the half-collapsed skeleton of a house could be seen through the thick trees, lit softly by the pre-morning.

A woman walked down the road, splattered with gore, a lumpy black body slung over one shoulder as if it was little more than a bundle of twigs. She was a very heavy-set woman, in both overall shape and the fact that she consisted of nine hundred pounds of white marble studded with smoothed chunks of amethyst.

The marble woman's name was Ahlama Bat Amir, and she was singing. Her voice reverberated through the trees, clear as the morning itself.

"As I went down in the river to pray / studying about that good old way / and who shall wear the starry crown / Good Lord, show me the way…"

The cyclops slung over her shoulder, with the snapped neck and caved-in skull and shattered rib-cage, had been stalking around the local farms for the last few nights, and at least three goats had been stolen. Poor thing was starving and half-mad, not stable enough to be relocated elsewhere. Had to be put down. Their meat wasn't any good to eat, but the biology classes would have a fine time dissecting it.

"Oh, sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down… Oh sisters, let's go down, down in the river to pray…"

The path road wound on through the forest. Occasionally, Ahlama would pass a watchtower or tree platform where a member of the

Guard would be sitting, huddled in their jacket, perhaps sipping tea or soup out of a thermos, or gnawing on some squirrel jerky, gun at the ready, radio at hand. She waved at each one she passed, though she was not able to see if they waved back. The watchtower guards hid themselves well.

"As I went down in the river to pray / studying about that good old way / and who shall wear the robe and crown / Good Lord, show me the way…"

The woods gave away a bit from the road, revealing a few inhabited homesteads, and the stone walls of the town rose in the distance. The first sunlight of the day filtered through the trees.

"Oh, brothers, let's go down, let's go down, come on down… Oh brothers, let's go down, down in the river to pray…"

The walls rose higher and higher as she approached. They did not have the distinction of being unbreached, but no walls in these days had that to brag about. But they were tall and thick, with various wards against harm carved into the blocks, and they were manned by the Guard. That was good enough for most. These were walls that promised salvation to the lost.

"Good morning!" She waved at the gatehouse.

A window above the gate opened, revealing the head of a gangly, acne-faced, tired-looking student.

"Morning, Ahlama," he yawned. "Nice job ther-what?" He turned his head back inside the window. "Sister, I am not falling asleep, I'm completely awake…yes, Sister, I know…yes, I know…Sister, I am *not* falling asleep." He turned back to Ahlama, rolling his eyes. "Hold on, we'll let you in, get you some water to wash all that off."

Ahlama nodded, and a short time later the groan of machinery could be heard from within the wall as Gate Leibowitz opened. A second student, shorter and mousy looking, was standing there with a bucket full of hot water and a rag.

"Here you go, Ahlama."

“Thank you, Ben.” The gate shut behind her with a monolithic sound.

“We got a note from the Headmistress for you.” Ben handed Ahlama a folded piece of paper.
The note read:

> *Ahlama-*
>
> *A woman by the name of Jun Iseul Error should have arrived with the West Road Trade Guild caravan late last night. She’s here to do some study of the reliquary and will be staying at the school for several weeks. I need you to show her around. Standard tour, nothing special.*
>
> *I’m afraid I won’t be able to meet with her today, so please pass my apologies on to Ms. Error: the Transit Authority decided to call a meeting with the town council and we’ll be at it all day. If I manage to get out early, I’ll see if I can find you.*
>
> *Thanks a bunch*
>
> *-NIZL*

There was a pneumatic hiss from the wall on the right, ending at a tiny opening in the wall at head height, just the size of someone’s thumb. A moment later the white-haired, black-armored, stern-faced, and incredibly tiny countenance of Sister Superior Victoria, OVH, stepped out onto her little balcony.

“Good morning, Sister.” Ahlama saluted with her free hand. Victoria nodded for ease.

“I see the Emperor has granted you victory in your hunt. And that you’ve received the Headmistress’ missive. Excellent. I’ll have these louts take care of that carcass.”

Ahlama watched Ben’s face drop in disappointment and gave him a sympathetic smile. No one got off work when Sister Victoria was on duty. She then excused herself, found a secluded spot a short distance away, and washed off the splatters of dried blood and pulpy viscera from the cyclops she had killed. Wouldn’t be fitting to show

anyone around while looking like that.

—

Jun Iseul Error wiped the grit from her glasses on a threadbare handkerchief. Around her, the caravan market bustled. The West Road Trade Guild, being a sizable group meaning to stay for several days, had set up inside the walls, in the Inside Market, and the town within a town had planted its short-lived roots there: cooking fires sent their smoke up to the sky, dogs and children raced underfoot through the trucks and wagons, bison[1] snorted, and the merchants bickered and shouted in a dozen dialects. With the day would come business: some wise shoppers among the townsfolk had decided to beat the later crowds. The Guildsmen appreciated this, and took the opportunity to break out their fake early-bird specials.

Jun stuffed the handkerchief back in her pocket. She was a thin, wiry woman, the kind that was built on stretched meals and long work hours, somewhere on the shy side of thirty years old: black hair pulled back in a short ponytail, straw hat to block out the sun, beaten old backpack and weather-worn hunting rifle, travel-mussed clericals. Someone had accidentally stepped on her collar a few days ago, leaving it rather crumpled and sad looking.

But she was finally here. It took a month and a half on the road from the west, but she was finally here. Not that she had a chance to enjoy it yet, but the relief was setting in. Travel didn't agree with her, or at least the plodding monotony of cross-country travel. Dealing with spookums in the night was easy. The byzantine labyrinth of intra-caravan drama and the omnipresent bureaucracy of the Transit Authority were well outside her areas of expertise, and she was glad to trade them for regular access to toilet paper.

The letter of introduction sat folded in her pocket. She didn't think she'd need it now: she had spoken with the Headmistress of the Hope Lake School on the phone several weeks ago when the caravan had stopped in CORN LAND, DOMAIN OF SRQNABOTF.

"Hello? Excuse me, are you Ms. Error?"

Jun turned to see a fat woman approaching her. It took a moment

for the details, the word carved into forehead, the hollow eyes filled with gentle fire, the fact that she was made of stone, to fall together in Jun's head and spell out "golem".

"Yes, that's me."

"Oh, good. I was worried I wouldn't be able to find you: I can barely understand these people when they're giving directions."

Jun had never met a golem before, and she had not expected them to be so conversational. This was a reassuring surprise.

"The accent is pretty thick, yeah. Are you from the school?"

"Mmm-hmm. The Headmistress wanted me to show you around today, and to let you know that she's sorry she wasn't able to do it in person."

"No problem. I can't imagine her life is anything less than busy. Lead the way." Jun didn't voice it as a command: that would make sense, but it felt impolite.

The golem nodded and began to walk back the way she had came. Jun kept pace with her.

"I know you know who I am, but I don't know your name."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Ahlama. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Error."

"Likewise. Oh, and, uh, just between us, you can drop the whole Ms. Error thing. Jun is fine, or just Error. Friday's good too."

"You have a lot of names."

"When you throw them all together I'm Mother Jun Friday Iseul Error, and by that point it's just nonsense."

The golem-woman chuckled, the sound rolling out in P-waves.

"I suppose it is."

The pair made their way out of the Inside Market and into the town

proper.

—

By modern standards, the town of Hope Lake was a place of almost unimaginable wealth: clean cobbled streets, electric streetlamps, solar panels and windmills and vegetable gardens and chicken coops among the houses and shops. The lake provided enough algae to make sure that no one went too hungry, and the presence of the school meant that the literacy rate was significantly higher – nearly eighty-five percent. The presence of the Guard meant that crime was low, as well as deflecting threats from the outside, and the old sponsorship of the Initiative had seen to keeping the populace's spiritual needs fulfilled, though Tribunal had become more of a cultural power rather than a political one: The settlements had their own leaders, their own governments, all tied together by a shared birth.

The cost of creating these havens in the chaotic aftermath of the Breach had been bankrupting the Initiative, clearing out its reliquaries, and begging, borrowing, stealing and scavenging every spare cent that could be drummed up. But where the Initiative fell apart, the seven city-states of Horizon rose to fill its place: Bastion, Hope Lake, St. Kateri, Watchpoint, New Pitt, Ghibli, and Levi. Mizbeach had been the eighth, but had been handed over to Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd as collateral for a loan default. Prayers went up daily for the sake of those who lived in that town.

Ahlama had not been born in Hope Lake, but it was home. She knew many of the townsfolk she saw now by name (golems have a good mind for memory), and she waved to them as she passed on towards the school. Jun remained quiet, though Ahlama noticed that the woman was watching everything with an intent eye.

"So where are you from, Jun?" she asked.

"Little trapper town around Mount Whitney, right off the trader road down to Vegas. Nothing like this. A lot more…salt of the Earth, if you get what I'm saying."

"Lots of hair, bad teeth, and everyone's related?"

“Yep. Plain old folks.”

“The best kind.”

“And the not-so-best.”

“Yeah, that too. Lot of the time they’re the same people. You’ve got a parish, then?”

“I was wondering when you’d bring that up.” Jun tugged at her crumpled collar. “You know how it goes: world falls apart, then gets put back together all on its head. Job’s gotta get done, and I don’t think God cares much about who does it, so long as they do it right.”

Ahlama nodded. Jobs needed doing, and if you were told to do the job, you did the job.

“You think like a golem.”

“Good thing I know that’s a compliment now.”

The pair passed through the gate of the school. The archway above them was engraved with the following:

> Hope Lake School
> Founded 2036
> IN SCIENTIA SUPERVIVERE

The walls were not as tall or as thick as those surrounding the town, but they were fortress enough to serve as a fallback in the case of invasion. Thankfully, that had not yet been the case. Ahlama waved to the guards as they passed.

“If you have any questions, just ask, and I’m sorry if I ramble a bit.” Ahlama imitated clearing her throat: she didn’t actually have a throat to clear.

“Hope Lake School was founded in 2036, shortly after Horizon troops retook this area from…”

—

Jun juggled observing the school and listening to her guide: there was a great deal to take in.

The school was a nested fortress. If the town's walls fell, the school could hold out. If the school's walls were breached, barricades could easily be put up between the buildings to fortify the inner campus, and if those barricades were breached, the buildings themselves were easily defensible from the inside. Fortresses within fortresses. Jun was a woman of the hinterlands, fit for chasing away spookums and brewing moonshine. This was all far more impressive than anything she had seen back west, save perhaps the Angelic University and the Vegas Archives.

The campus was still, as it was still quite early. The students would be scraping out five more minutes before breakfast, though a few early risers could be seen jogging around. A few of the children who lived in town hovered around in little groups.

Ahlama went on with her description, detailing the classes and the daily regimen. Every child was expected to learn a trade by the time they graduated, augmented with the rigors of a serious scholastic life. Ignorance and superstition were the two great enemies: it was no good to make a blacksmith who did not know the workings of the body, no good to make an artist who could not handle a gun, no good to make an engineer who could not perform an exorcism. The world did not allow for that any more.

The pair meandered for a while, and eventually Jun caught sight of a man sitting on a glacial boulder by the pond, fishing rod in hand. His entire face was a knotted mass of scar tissue: a long gash on the left, burns and a lost eye on the right.

She prodded Ahlama's arm.

"Where'd he get those scars?"

"Mmm? Oh…Everywhere."

Jun nodded. Every community had someone like that, some old protector who had been everywhere, seen everything, done everything.

“That’s Hammersmith,” Ahlama continued. “He used to be one of the Tribunal, now he’s the head groundskeeper. Spends most of his time fishing, now, though apparently he once caved in a demon’s skull with his bare hands.”

“Only apparently?”

“He usually uses a hammer.”

“Oh. Well then. Remind me to stay off the grass.”

Other figures of local note were introduced as they cropped up. Some might not have been notable at all, but they stuck out in Jun’s memory all the same.

There were several other golems on the campus, though they all looked to be more traditionally golem-like and were far less talkative than Ahlama. Though there was the chalk-white one with a simple smile who played with the toddlers being dropped off at the daycare. Jun watched a pair of parents say their goodbyes: the mother had a chemistry textbook curled under her arm. The acne-pocked father wore a guard uniform and a scraggly excuse for a beard.

Ahlama just shrugged, and said “Life happens.”

They spoke with a very large man whose beard approached the waist of his khaki cargo shorts, who was awkwardly climbing a tree, butterfly net in hand. He looked like the large, earnest kind of man who had a lot of silent Js in his patronymic and was very fond of mead, meat, and pillaging. This was, apparently, the Headmistress’ husband.

There was a golden-tan woman with headphones and what looked to be a bathrobe embroidered with a constantly scrolling waterfall of musical notation conducting music class in the orchard. The choir was accompanied by a swirling cloud of humming ghosts. A half dozen teens in paint-smeared overalls hauled chunks of scavenged masonry past a troop of children with practice rifles. The workshop clanked and clunked with the noise of construction, and the alchemy shed behind the science building exploded at least twice during the tour: Ahlama wasn’t sure if the third time counted, because it might

have actually just ascended to a higher plane for a minute or two. Jun trusted her judgment on that.

The steady parade of faculty and buildings and courses and little details built up into some massive amorphous wad of chewed gum in Jun's head. The really good kind one got as a kid when one decided to blow what passed for allowance on treats from a caravaneer. A day or two would sort it out proper.

The tour came to stop at the guest house, and Ahlama saw herself off. Jun threw her pack on the chair in her room, lay down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. It was first time in a month and a half that she had the opportunity to. A bed with clean sheets, a roof with no leaks, a shower with presumably hot water, real food, and toilet paper. Put them all together and you had civilization.

But you've got something to look for, remember…

Yes, yes, she had something to look for. She'd get to the reliquary later.

For now, she just felt like staring at the ceiling for a bit.

—

It was some time later, when the sun was on its winding path down, that Ahlama finally caught up with the Headmistress. It was plain to her that Naomi Zairi-Lewitt had been through a rather rough day.

"Are you alright?"

"Not at all. They're not going to cut off the caravans to Toledo, thank God, but they are going to keep the negotiations up for another day, and up the prices on Transit Chits. Again." She shook her head. "I hope your side of things went smoothly."

"It did, headmistress."

"Good. Thank you." She yawned. "Sorry. I've up since four. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right."

Naomi passed out of the scene, a man with an eye patch following a short distance behind her. He looked as if he had fallen face first down a flight of stairs made out of blenders and aged a full thirty or forty years beyond his age. Elihayo, the Headmistress' bodyguard. Upon meeting his gaze, Ahlama felt the furnace in her chest burn a little hotter, and with this she felt an acute self-consciousness that perhaps she was not properly polished, or was too large, and this all was accompanied by an incredibly strong desire to hold hands and go on a walk with the deformed bodyguard.

"Shalom, Elihayo," she said as he passed, wondering if he would notice the soft heat blush in her eyes.

"Shalom." His voice sounded like his lungs were filled with wet gravel.

Why not ask him? She'd ask him. Ask him right now, if he wanted to go on a…a walk. A walk yes, that's what they would do. A walk around the lake.

"Elihayo, I was wondering…would you like to go out, maybe, and –"

"No."

The bodyguard shuffled away, and left Ahlama standing in the hallway, alone.

"Oh…okay…bye."

« Hub »

Footnotes
1. No explanation has yet been found for the spontaneous return of the American Bison population during the night of June 24th, 2028, though few people complain.

Down the Silver River

Let me take you through sands of crystal,
and down that silver river.
And I shall show you,
we are all beings of His creation.

The artist has long seen the Flow, but he has never seen something like this.

The Flow, the source of all creations as he knows it, has long been guiding him through his artistic path. He knows when to let the Flow move from his mind to the tip of his brush, from the void looming with white mists to the very reality he resides. He knows how to redirect it, how to use its pushing force to make his creations real, or even surreal. And he thought that it was the only beautiful thing in the world.

He might have made a bad decision when he decided to enter that place, to hear the priest's preaching and learn about that alien belief. A Church of clockwork and metal, so he had heard. He only intended to use that as a possible way to let out the Flow, to open his eyes to and to start something different. After all, he had always liked steampunk pieces, and the things this Church offered seemed no different.

But now, the artist stands in the river, and everything is different. The white mists are still there, but are now mixed with hot, surging steam. The riverbed he stands on, once of emptiness and void, is now made of cogwork and metal. Shining and beautiful, from beneath, unlike anything he has ever seen.

He blinks, and feels as if his senses have cheated him, but as he opens his eyes again, the scene shifts and he sees something even more unbelievable.

He is still standing in the Flow, but he also now sees outside of it. He

witnesses a majestic clockwork machine, all gears grind and fall perfectly into lockstep. He sees the Flow too, no longer floating in the void as he long knew, but streaming through tunnels in the gigantic machinery, twisting and turning as the machine moves. And his eyes can hardly capture its movement. The hot steam are rising from its surface, as its brass structures boil the river. Cogs hum from beneath.

For a moment there, he is shocked and lost, dazzled by the scene he had witnessed. But another moment, as he blinks again, he's back at the river, with the Flow rushing endlessly down his knee. The mental riverbed, however, is still there, but shines even more, and shakes slightly. He bends down to reach for the water.

But there is no water.

In the mental riverbed crafted by the grand machine, a river of mercury flows endlessly through hot burning steam.

The artist begins his creation with the new scene he saw lingering in his mind and appearing in his dreams. He throws out the brushes and paint, and gathers cogs and pipes and wires. He feels a clock ticking inside.

He works as he always works, but not with paper and pencil, but with brass, iron and silver. He pieces together the parts in an artistic fashion, one gear fitting perfectly into another as the Flow whispers and the Machine hums. He has never learnt how to construct clockwork, but he works as if he was born with the skill.

As his hand runs against the shining surface, he sees once again the silver river, now rushing and surging and falling through the carved lines in brass machine. He speaks soft words with his work, and wishes that the grand machine would hear, and one day talk to him.

Yet he fails.

In an attempt to mimic a god, he has only created monsters. The humming machines never fit quite right. The clockwork doesn’t tick

or it sings the songs wrong; the structure collapses or only moves clumsily. He aims to capture the beauty of the clockwork in his dreams like masters of Renaissance had painted saints and gods, only to find his own shallow skills stand in his path.

The artist stops creating. He puts aside his tools and materials, and locks himself in the room alone, with his mind wandering the vast silver river. He wanders there for days, until the uneven edges of the riverbed penetrate his skin, until the humming sound echoes in his ear, until the mercury that flows in the river runs down his veins.

And then he sees.

The artist takes a deep breath, and dives into the silver river. The riverbed is no longer there, and the river feels like an ocean. The Machine hums as if an orchestra.

It should hurt as the metal pieces pierce through his skin into his flesh, but he feels none of it. The Flow pushes him as he picks up the gears almost mechanically, and puts them inside of him.

It is his one piece, his final piece. His blood has tainted the floor, yet he sees only the mercury flow; his flesh has been cut open and scattered in pieces, yet he sees only the clockwork movement.

As he puts in the final one gear, there's a small clicking sound, and he knows this is the moment. He stands straight, and feels the clockwork move smoothly inside, as if it were natural. The Flow rushes even faster, the Machine sings even louder, and he feels that he is singing with Him.

"It is done." The artist lets out a final breath. "I am art of His creation."

Downvoted

This was more than he'd signed up for. The New Agent Manual - SCP Object Classification Standard listed Keter as the most dangerous type of object. They eat, kill, and drive people crazy. If left unchecked long enough, they could destroy the world. T.D was supposed to go decommission a keter today. First, though, he answered his supervisor's insane question.

"Uh, according to the documents SCP-3542 is a memetic reality-bending hostile object. Possibly Abrahamic. It says here that it 'disappeared' two dozen D-Class death squads and three fully armored decommission machine squads."

The supervisor remained impassive. "That's correct. The Squads were, ironically, about to be decommissioned anyway so it saved us some processing costs."

T.D. fumbled with the security ID hanging by his side. It gave him a level 1 security clearance. He'd been recruited as a specialist. He'd been training for a year. He had life insurance, year-end reward goals, and retirement benefits. This sort of thing happened to D-Class didn't it? Why were they doing this to **him**?

"So, I am going to deal with this on my own. With a shotgun."

"Yes. Standard issue for this kind of work. If you're worried you can requisition heavier equipment. I wouldn't though; any damage comes out of your paycheck."

T.D. didn't respond.

The supervisor smiled for a moment. "Look. This is your first assignment, and you need to trust that we know what we're doing. It's fine to be little worried. That shows you're ready for this. When I did my first decommission I had to kill a fucking sea monster. But you'll figure out pretty quickly that the classification is less important

than the rating. Yes. This is a Keter object. Be careful. But it's also got a negative rating."

T.D. nodded along as his supervisor continued.

"Look." The supervisor pulled a thick book from the top drawer of his desk and tossed it to T.D. "Open that to page 88, start on the 2nd paragraph."

New Agent Manual - SCP Object Rating Standard

To analyze if information relating to SCP Objects attracts roughly consistent positive evaluation from observers, the Foundation has established the "Ratings System" for all anomalous objects incorporated into our mainlist. As mentioned in the *New Personnel Guide*, the existence of the anomalous has a direct relationship with a high evaluation from the Foundation itself. Essentially, how positively the Foundation views an object has a directly determinative effect on the object's permanence.

This connection is not currently fully understood, but has shown its veracity in all cases. No exceptions to this rule have been detected. For this reason the Foundation holds a significant advantage over other GOIs. We exist as the inherent judges of the anomalous. If other groups or persons wish to utilize anomalous creations or discoveries, those objects must either remain outside of the Foundation's knowledge (and therefore have little effect on the world at large) or be subject to this evaluation effect.

As a result, an SCP Object's rating is an integral part of an object's containment. Ensuring higher ratings will ensure the continued existence of and (generally) containment of an object. For an object which is highly dangerous and/or difficult to contain, a lower rating is a safe and effective method of neutralization.

The Foundation Ratings Committee is in charge of this evaluation task. Current rating procedures ensure that contained SCP Objects are not interfered with by any organization or individuals. While evaluation can theoretically be carried out by any group of 10 or more foundation staff, the ratings committee are the only personnel allowed to assign evaluations to an object.

After an object's anomalous nature and danger level is determined, the Foundation Ratings Committee will begin their evaluation of an object. In principle, the committee will evaluate the object's value to the Foundation. All objects receiving a negative rating from the Ratings Committee may be ignored or eliminated dependent on the level of danger they represent. All Keter level objects are to be neutralized within 48 hours.

The Foundation Ratings Committee standards are as follows:

Negative — More members of the committee than not have given this object an unfavorable evaluation.
Positive — More members of the committee than not have given this object a favorable evaluation.
Highly Positive — More than two thirds of the committee members have given this object a positive evaluation. Note: Outside of procedures already carried out prior to evaluation, these objects do not appear to be susceptible to neutralization.
Heritage — Special rating. All objects in this ratings class are added to the **`heritage list`**. These objects will not and cannot be neutralized.

All Foundation personnel who wish to join the Ratings Committee must possess a level 3 security rating and at least 5 years of service to the foundation. Ratings Committee members are required to adhere to a strict set of rules that will be outlined upon your application. If you're interested in joining the Ratings Committee please inquire with your supervisor or with the committee directly.

T.D. handed the book back to his supervisor without a word. T.D. had already read this a dozen times. It didn't make him feel any better.

His supervisor leaned back in his chair. "I remember my first mission. A green octopus a few thousand meters long was casting some sort of ‘dark magic’ on the Three Gorges Dam. It could talk but all I remember it saying was 'fuckton, fuckton!' over and over."

T.D. cocked his head to the side. "Wait that sounds like-"

T.D's supervisor nodded. "One and the same. The Ratings Committee call those 'Pop Culture Resemblance' and it's basically a death sentence for the object. Sometimes they can last, if they've got a good tie in to a particular culture or ancient myths. We've even had basic pop culture ripoffs that lasted because they had a touching backstory. Lucky for me, this one was about as bland as it gets. One 9mm round to the head and it was all over. I read a report once about a man-eating giant that one agent took out with a single kick to the groin."

The expression on T.D.'s face was one of disbelief.

"You're still pretty new though so, uh, use the shotgun we gave you. This is cleanup work, I promise. It only looks scary."

T.D. came trudging back into his supervisors office with his eyes wide.

"Hey." The supervisor began. "You use the gun?"

"No." T.D. slumped down in the chair opposite the older man.

"Figured as much. What happened?"

"It was an angel. I… I think. Twenty wings, six arms, three faces. It was screaming like you wouldn't believe but I couldn't make out a word. The thing had these blue swords that looked impossibly sharp. When it saw me these weird golden things came up out of the ground and started to fly around me. I thought it was over."

"Yeah?"

"It turned and screamed at me. This white hot fire flew out of its mouth and in my direction. My instinct said I'd have one shot at this. I threw the gun down and ran straight at it."

"And then?"

"I punched it in the face. The whole thing shattered into a million pieces that disintegrated into nothing before they even hit the ground."

T.D.'s supervisor nodded. "So we'll call that your first successful decommission." His supervisor stood up from his chair and grabbed his coat. "Come on. Let's go celebrate."

"Are we gods?" T.D. moved the food on his plate around into various shapes.

"Sure." The supervisor nodded his head. "And we're the good guys. We still don't know why it's like this, but it doesn't really matter as long as we stay in charge."

"But the world could end based on how much we like an object? And every other group and person just has to live with that?"

"Basically. I mean most shitty objects are just dangerous. Violence is all they really have going for them. If they're actually interesting then you gotta be careful."

"What's the standard?"

"If you prefer to pretend there is a standard it's 'you think this is great'. But it's not a fully qualitative judgement. There are intangibles to consider. The Ratings Committee only exists so we can record these judgements, not so we can create our own standards. If there were basic standards 682 would fail them all. But it's still there and unkillable."

The supervisor sipped on a cup of tea before continuing. "And sometimes an object is incredibly useful to us somehow and we'd

like to keep it. Think about the perpetual motion machine, the spring of rejuvenation, and the Panacea. Their value to us is self-evident, yet some of my strictest colleagues hate them anyway."

T.D. nodded along. "That's why the **Panacea** is on the heritage list?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," the supervisor responded, "but that's the short version, yeah."

"What's the long version?"

"We can't force people to like an object. But if you add a good story or two as an addendum, well, suddenly the object has a better chance of surviving. Like, take SCP-500. Like you said it's useful and on the heritage list. When it was first being evaluated it wasn't exactly winning people's hearts. At the same time **Agent A.A** and **Iris** had just dealt with two Keters and were both pretty miserable.

"The O5's had a big ceremony. Gave them the 'Star of the Foundation' and plenty of public praise. Then the two 'heroes' came in and took two pills for themselves. It started an investigation and got the Ethics Committee and O5 council involved in a shouting match. It was all very dramatic. Most importantly it was all very exciting. That was enough to get SCP-500 on the heritage list."

"So are they heroes or just pawns?"

"Both."

The supervisor paused as his cellphone dinged. The man looked at the phone for a few moments and dismissed the text message. "Back to work. There's an X-Man with fire, ice, and mind control powers hypnotizing girls and making them attack other civilians at a nearby college."

"Again? I just got back."

"When I had your job I personally dealt with like four Mary Sues a day, and I did it bare-handed. Finish your waffles and get back to work. It's up to you if you wanna bring the shotgun."

Dr. Bridge Over Troubled Water

Nota Bene: *This was writted for an April Foll's Day contest, and misspellings were part of the jugging criteria.*

Dr. Bridge was board at his desk. He was known all over the Fondation for his **`epic feet with the Pokemon`**, but after that, reality felt so boring. So he desided to get 826 again and do sumthing cool again, expect with a book this time. He worried about how the SCP was ment for books and mite be unstable if he used it on another video game. So Dr. Bridge sneaked past the guards at the entrance to SCP-826's containmet sell. Ever sense the incident, they locked up the book kens in a sell, reclassing them as Eulicked. Safe classication was only for items that were predicktable, and the Fondation didn't predict that it could do video games.

So Dr. Bridge went and got a book from his liberry. It was his favrite, cause it was about a boat salling on the ocean and his name was Bridge so he felt a special kinship with it because bridges go over water and the ocean is water. The water in this book was especially impotent because the book was Moby Duck and it had an evil wail in it! Bridge vowed to fight the evil wail and become epic again, cause people semened to forget about him now that it had ben so long sense the Pokemon thing.

So he sneaked past all the guards who were really intimate with there guns and Keller vests, but he wasn't afraid because he was Dr. Bridge. He put Mob Dick in the kens and waited. Then suddenly, he was on a boat and all the people gatted around him. "Who the hell are ye and wherefore are ye in my boat, ye scurvy stowaway?" demanded a voice that Bridge knew was Caption Ahab.

He quickly thought of an excuse for his anchor nistic clothes and randomly appeering on the Peequad. "I'm a follow wailer and I want to kill Moby Dick too!" he shouted. "Mody Dick bit my brother's head off and now he has a head made out of wail bone like your peg leg!"

Caption Ahab snarled at the reminder of Moby Dick's terrible deads. "Then ye be one of me crew, me hardy!" he said. His first mate Starbucks, who invented coffee, quickly went to the crom's nest. "Caption! Thar she blows!"

Bridge new it was the epic fight now. He groped a spear and yelled, "I'll handle this!" He and Arab went out on canoes to the water where the great white wail was menacingly. Moby Dink shot water out of his hole at Ahab, who fell overbored and was fished up by Ishmale. "It's up to me now!" Bridge realized, and stealed his nerves. After all, he defected Pokemon. A wail was nothing.

Mony Dick opened his big moth and Bridge saw the book kens in his moth. He realized he had to sacfirice himself…it was the only way out of the SCP. He jumped into the wail welding his spear and screaming epically. As he toughed the books, he stabbed the great white wail and killed him forever. Even though he only knew Ahab for a short time, he was glad his caption's vengence was complete.

He went out of the book universe and knew he couldn't sneak past the guards this time, because Lament and Dodrig were looking at the screen like last time where it showed his aventures and probably reported him to the sight security because there good employees. He knew it was nesessery for him to get cot so that people would know the epic story of him killing the wail, but he stealed himself for trouble.

He was in a meating with the O5s, who were lectoring him on using SCPs for personal fun. But then one of them assed, "Even though this is a broach of protocol and you will be consequenced, I'm curious to know how you managed to do such an epic feet like killing the great white wail! In the origami story everybody died when they tried to do that!"

"It's simple," Bridge smiled and explanted to the awwed O5. "When it's a contest between me and the wiled ocean, I'll always come out on top. The result will always be…Dr. Bridge over troubled water."

DR. COG AND THE PLASTIC FANTASTIC

One day, Dr. Cog was walking through his lab (being a scientist and all), when he found Dr. Crow trying to catch his attention. It was never a hard thing to do, as Dr. Cog was usually quite bored, and Dr. Crow was a talking dog.

“You should take a look at this,” insisted Dr. Crow, in a somewhat excited manner, “It’s really quite interesting.”

“Well, I don’t have any experiments running at the time, so show the way.” Dr. Cog replied in his usual monotone.

The pair walked down several hallways, and through several elevators (Dr. Crow isn’t good with stairs), the bipedal doctor occasionally deflecting attempts at smalltalk.

“Any interesting hypotheses?” Dr. Crow would ask, “Any developments with the exploding crabs, or the self-aware maze of pipes?” Dr. Cog hemmed and hawed, it was all work to him.

After a good many turns and descents, they reached a darkened observation room. Behind the single large window was a boy, probably no more than ten years old.

“What is this supposed to be?”

“This,” Dr. Crow indicated with a wave of a paw, “is a small boy who eats only plastics, and is about three times as strong as an average child of his age”

“Interesting. Not particularly dangerous. Administer sedatives, run a four month circuit of tests with some of the new researchers, and slate the item for destruction if it presents any difficulties.”

“You know, Cog, we’ve been friends for years, research partners at the least. You’ve seen some strange things that I couldn’t imagine.

I’ve never understood, though, how you can deal with things like this so easily.”

“Like what?”

“Like asking a dog with glasses to kill a small child if it ‘presents difficulties.’”

Already on his way out the door, Dr. Cog replied: “There’s always another one tomorrow.”

Dr. Ikari, I presume

"Dr. Alto Clef." Gendo Ikari steepled his fingers. "Your presence here in Tokyo-3 is… unexpected to say the least."

"Yeah, well, that was kind of the point." Dr. Clef tossed a crumpled stack of papers onto Dr. Ikari's desk. "The higher-ups ordered a surprise inspection, and appointed yours truly as investigator numero uno, and in a worst case scenario I'm to take control of the base myself."

Dr Ikari glanced at the paperwork. "This really isn't necessary, you know. You know as well as I do that Site-49 is perfectly capable of running itself."

Dr. Clef gave Dr. Ikari a suspicous look. "Riiiiiiggghhht…" he said. "So that assistant director who turned out to be a double agent that *you yourself* appointed was…?"

"Nothing more than a mistake on my part." Dr. Ikari steepled his fingers. "Believe me, I have nothing more than the Foundation's best interests in mind…"

"I'll be the judge of that." Dr. Clef looked at his watch. "Look, I don't like assignment and neither do you, so lets just get it over with as quickly as possible, okay?"

"Very well then." Dr. Ikari got up from his chair. "Where shall we begin?"

Dr. Clef walked down the hallway, surveying each of the glass-walled containment cells as he passed by.

"So… what is this, again?" he asked the blonde young man accompanying him.

"This is our Anomalous Humanoid Containment facility." said Dr. Light Yagami. "As you know, we get a disproportionate number of humanoid entities here in Site-49, so we needed to build a special facility just to contain them all. True, there is a greater than risk of containment beach, but Agent Zero assures us that-"

Suddenly, a dog-eared man with long, silver hair dressed in a red Kimono slammed against the window of his cell, and began to scream. "Damn you, Yagami, you son-of-a-bitch!" he said, "When I get out of here I'm going to tear your throat out! You hear me? You and that freaky clown!"

Dr. Clef eased away from the window. "…shouldn't you be a bit more concerned?"

"I wouldn't worry about it." said Yagami. "That's just SCP-7328. He's been under the delusion that I'm being stalked by a 'death god'. Crazy right?"

"For the last time…!" the SCP screamed "…my name is Inuyasha! IN-YU-YASHA!" he pounded out each syllable for emphasis. "And are you people blind?! He's RIGHT THERE! BEHIND YOU! How can you not see him?!"

"…actually I was more concerned about him making good on his promise." said Dr. Clef, glancing over his own shoulder. "Are you sure this room is safe?"

"Nah, it's okay." said Dr. Yagami, pointing at the window. "This may look like ordinary glass, but it's actually a transparent nanoweave mesh seven thousand times stronger than steel. Even 682 would have a hard time breaking it."

"Uh… right." said Dr. Clef, who was still looking around the room for the 'death god'. "Can I speak with the head of security?"

"Sure thing." Dr Yagami pointed down the hallway. "Just take that elevator back up to the third basement, take a left turn at the corridor, and just follow the signs until you get there."

"Erm, thanks." And with that, Dr. Clef set off on his own, leaving

Inuyasha and Dr. Yagami alone with the death god.

"So what did you think of that one?" said Light. "Do you think he suspects anything?"

"I think he suspects a lot of things." Ryuk responded. "Probably not anything specific, though."

"Okay, now you're just taunting me!" Inyuyasha began pounding on the glass. "Cut it out!"

Ryuk chuckled as he stared into Inyuyasha's cell. "And thanks for bringing me back to see this guy." he said. "It's always funny to watch him flip out like this…"

"You guys are SO dead when I get out of here!"

"I assure you, I have everything under control." said Agent Zero.

Dr. Clef, however, was less than convinced. Maybe it was arrogant way that he carried himself, or the subtle inflection of his voice that made his claims seem too good to be true…

Or maybe it was the fact that he was dressed like a rejected Power Ranger. After all, a purple coat, black cape, and face-obscuring helmet was not exactly the foundation uniform. Then again, Dr. Clef's co-workers included a talking dog, and a mind-controlling amulet possessing the body of an orangutan, so what did he know?

"Well, everything certainly LOOKS in order…" clef glared at the masked man. "Still, I'm rather concerned about your policy of establishing offsite strongholds…"

"I understand your concern completely, doctor." said Zero. "If I were you, I would say that these were the actions of a man planning to start a rebellion."

Dr Clef frowned. "Are they?"

"Only if I had a reason to. Such as, for instance, if the foundation were to grow corrupt, or had lost sight of it's original purpose…"

"…or if a site was compromised by an enemy faction." Replied Clef. "Is that what you're saying?"

Zero nodded. "That COULD be the case, yes…" Zero paused to let the message sink in. "But it's actual purpose is to cut down on transportation costs by having men available in various key regions without having to establish additional task forces."

"Ah yes, how silly of me…" Dr. Clef raised an eyebrow…

"This is SCP-4218-01, right?" Dr Clef stared at the giant purple robot suspended in the cooling tank.

"That is it's official designation, yes." said Dr. Yuki Nagato. "But for the purpose of linguistic convenience, it also bears the title 'EVANGELION UNIT-01'."

"I see…" Dr. Clef stroked his chin. "What's it do?"

"I'm afraid that's classified." Yuki replied.

"Why do you need teenagers to pilot it?"

"Also classified."

"What kind of weapons does it have?"

"Classified."

Dr. Clef shook his head. "…is there anything you can tell me about this thing that isn't classified?"

Yuki turned to stare at the Evangelion for a full minute, and then turned back to the doctor. "It's purple."

Dr. Clef rubbed his forhead. "Okay, lets take this from the top. Your name is… what now?"

"My name is Dr. Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivrusky the Fourth, the Ultimate Foundation Basketball Playing Computer Guru Samurai

extraordinare!" The red-haired kid began to spin around in her office chair, and shouted "WEEEEEEE!"

Dr. Clef grimaced. He never liked kids that much. "And how did you get this job again?"

Edward was now making a cat's cradle out of a pair of rubber bands, while simultaneously typing on her computer's keyboard with her feet. "I hacked into this encrypted server one day to pull a prank, and added an article about **a cool guy I made up**, so then the black helicopters arrived and creepy glasses man offered me a job!"

There was a resounding "thud" as Dr. Clef forehead made contact with the desk in front of him.

Dr. Clef stepped into the office of Site-49's assistant director. "Excuse me: I was hoping I could have a word with you about your staff…"

"DESPAIR! THE SURPRISE INSPECTION HAS LEFT ME IN DESPAIR!" the assistant director wailed. "Dr. Clef is surely here to take my position, and now I'm going to be demoted to D-Class so I can be shoved into that mountain with all the people-shaped holes!"

"Uh… I only wanted to…"

"I DON'T WANT TO BE A STICK FIGURE!" he removed a noose from his desk drawer, and tied it to the ceiling fan. "My only choice is to end it all! Good-bye cruel world!"

The ceiling fan then collapsed upon the assistant director, whereupon he curled up into a fetal position and began to cry.

Dr. Clef began to slowly back out of the office…

"So, how was your visit, doctor?" asked Gendo Ikari.

"Fucking terrible." said Clef. "Your containment facility is just asking for a mass breakout, your assistant director is a nervous wreck, and the rest of your staff are weirdos."

"I see…" Dr. Ikari steepled his fingers once again. "So will you be taking control of Site-49, then?"

"Fuck no!" said Dr. Clef. "This place is a time bomb just waiting to go off, and the foundation's not going to have anything to do with it." Dr. Clef began to storm out of the office. "Enjoy your last days, asshole." he said before slamming the door.

Audio log recovered from [DATA EXPUNGED]
SEELE-01: How did the 'surprise' inspection go?

Gendo Ikari: Exactly as planned: The Foundation now wants as little to do with Site-49 as possible.

SEELE-07: Excellent. Now the human instrumentality project will proceed without inturruption…

THE END…?

+Alternate Ending

Immediately after Dr. Clef left, Agent Suzumiya walked into the room. "So did it work?" she said.

"Yep." said Gendo. "Now that Dr. Clef is gone, nobody will ever tear us apart."

"Oh, Gendo…" Haruhi said, staring into Gendo's dreamy, almond-shaped eyes.

And then sloppy makeouts forever.

Dr. Keith Partridge and the Strawberry Banana Smoothie of DOOM!

July 5th, 2017

Independence Day, in Sloth's Pit, was a cause for confusion, and often mourning. The courthouse had caught fire once again, and nobody could enter town hall due to the volume of *The Star-Spangled Banner* playing within its halls causing hearing damage. Several dozen homes had seemingly impenetrable concrete walls around them, only for members of the town to discover they could easily be climbed under. The single firework burst that had been shot off would be visible until the start of autumn, Dr. Harold West almost lost his right hand when the coffee machine dispensed gunpowder instead of a cappuccino, and two members of Sigma-10 lost the ability to see any colors except for red, white, and blue until 2018.

All in all, it was one of the less-catastrophic July 4ths Sloth's Pit had suffered in the past decade. But along with it came a new quirk of the town, one which Dr. Keith Partridge had been dragged along to investigate, along with several Investigative Agents and Dr. Quentin Harrison of the Department of Gastronomy.

Next to the shell of the Vegan Buffet (shut down due to the fact that the proprietor thought selling human flesh counted as "Vegan") a new building had popped up, wedging between it and the guitar shop next door. Its architecture perfectly matched the rest of the rustic buildings on Main Street, but the facade of it was painted a bright, garish blue, and had steel drum music playing from the speakers mounted on its exterior, under a green awning. On the windows, pictures of palm trees and tiki masks and beach balls were painted on in meticulous detail; Partridge, leaning close to it, could see the the gloss on the one of the balls reflecting the child throwing it. The signage on the window read: "Volcanic Glacier Smoothie Co."

"I don't like this," Harrison frowned, finishing off his energy bar. Partridge thought that he would need it; with the girth the red-headed man had, he was a perfect fit for gastronomy. Bunch of self-important food critics, Partridge thought. Even so, he had to agree. A brand new smoothie shop popping up right after the 4th of July in Sloth's Pit was disconcerting.

Clive Kim, head of the investigative team put on his sunglasses and entered the door, flanked by Partridge, Harrison, and his partner, Michelle Kola. Partridge tapped Quentin on the shoulder. "Remind me why I'm here?"

"You're the best expert we have on anomalous tropical plant life. I want you to see if there's anything on the menu that would cause concern."

"Harrison, the fact that we are standing in a building that wasn't here yesterday is concern —" Partridge stopped as he smelled the sea breeze. He looked back at the door, then around him. Where the wall of the Sick Rifft guitar store should be was, instead, a vast expanse of beach, overlooking clear, blue ocean. There were customers seated at the smoothie bar, seemingly unfazed by the fact that they were seeing the ocean in the middle of Wisconsin — then again, it was Sloth's Pit. This was probably a welcome change of pace from the Green Well gastropub, with its burnt, watermelon-flavored chicken nuggets.

Serving the townies was a bronze-skinned woman with flowers in her hair, and a T-Shirt advertising the smoothie bar itself. She gave the agents a grin, and waved them over. Partridge suddenly realized that his shoes had vanished when he came in the door, and he was standing on soft, white sand.

Partridge looked back towards the door, seeing both it and the window facing the street still there. He was somewhat relieved that the trip wasn't one-way, but at the same time, his reaction matched what everyone else was thinking. "Fuck."

The black spectacles Agent Kim was wearing weren't just for show. They had thermographic sensors to detect increases in body

temperature, a state-of-the-art heart-rate detector, built-in 30x magnification, and a sensor that could detect salt content in the air. Some people at S & C Plastics termed them "Lieglasses".

Partridge termed all who used that word 'uncreative'. 'Anti-Shady Shades' was a superior appellation for them. Regardless, the salinity sensors were useless here, in the salty sea air. The heat sensors might also have been thwarted by the fact that, while Kim was grilling the woman, the woman was grilling a sandwich. "Ma'am, we're with Douglas County health and safety, and… we have concerns about this… operation."

One of Kim's subordinates, Michelle Kola, nodded in agreement. "For one thing, having an extradimensional space on main street violates town zoning laws. And studies have shown that pocket dimensions can have detrimental effects on the quality and safety of food."

"You've just defeated yourself," the woman chuckled. "Why would health and safety care about zoning laws?"

Partridge rubbed his face and looked at the menu above her head; the ingredients in the smoothies were mostly non-anomalous, if exotic. Options included dragonfruit, starfruit, pawpaw, (Partridge had to wipe some saliva from his mouth at the idea of a pawpaw smoothie; it had been years since he had had one of those) sugar apple. There were also the standard smoothie affair— apple, strawberry banana, watermelon, orange. The "strawberry banana" option drew Partridge's attention, however.

"Can't hurt to ask," he thought, looking at Harrison and handing him a vial. "Can you go down to the ocean and collect a sample? If there's any phytoplankton in the water, it could help identify where we are."

"Good idea." Harrison nodded, taking the vial and starting to waddle down to the water.

Partridge leaned against the bar, and looked at the 'strawberry banana'. "Is all your fruit fresh?"

"Of course!"

"Well, as an *actual* member of health and safety, I'd like to inspect the produce. Particularly the strawberry banana."

The woman gave him an odd look. "'Inspect the produce'? That line is the exact reason why we no longer offer melon on the menu. But…" she turned around and reached into a fridge behind the counter, pulling out what looked like a pink fruit from a plant of the *Musa* genus.

Partridge took it up and inspected it, sniffing at the fruit, before peeling it, and looking at the meat of the fruit; it had the coloration of a ripe strawberry, but when he touched it, it had the texture of a banana. The seeds within the meat seemed to be some combination of banana seed and strawberry pips. "Huh." He frowned, turning to Kim as he tried and failed to get the woman's name. "Did you know that bananas are actually herbs?"

"Fascinating," Kim lied, shaking his head. "Look, lady, this place doesn't have a permit."

"Are you positive?" the woman asked, taking the fruit from Partridge's hands and stuffing it into a blender with ice and milk. "I filed for a business license back in December of last year. It's hanging back there." She nodded at a certificate behind her, under the menu and over the sandwich press, which bore the Seal of Wisconsin, and the signature of someone high up in the county's bureaucracy.

Kola tried climbing over the bar to inspect the license, setting her Anti-Shady Shades to a filter that could detect the presence or absence of watermarks in official documentation such as this. She frowned. "Well, I'll be damned. It seems legit."

The woman behind the bar just gave Kola a very disapproving look, before wiping down the counter. As the blender finished blending, she poured the contents into a glass, and handed it to Partridge. "On the house," she winked.

Partridge frowned as he took up the smoothie. Grimm Countenance

protocols dictated that he shouldn't consume food or drink in an extra-dimensional or otherwise anomalous space. Instead, he took the contents of the cup and poured them into a large sample jar he produced from his pack. "For later," he assured her, handing back the glass.

"Drink it soon," she said, some chiding in her voice. "Or it'll get warm and go bad."

Harrison came up from behind Partridge and tapped him on the shoulder, handing him the vial full of seawater. "Here," he said.

Partridge placed the sample in his bag, and looked at the agents. "Not sure we'll get anything else, here. I think we best leave."

"Come back soon," the woman behind the counter beamed as they made their way to the door.

When they exited onto the blazing, summer street, there was a stream of curses pouring out of their mouths; the pavement was burning, and whatever anomaly had removed their shoes had neglected to return them.

A tub of ice around the feet later, Partridge sat in his lab, analyzing the seawater sample, notes scribbled by him. By all accounts, what he was observing were non-anomalous dinoflagelletes, of a species native to the ocean around Hawaii. Harrison still hadn't gotten the sample of smoothie back to him so he could analyze what, exactly, the strawberry banana was. It had been almost four hours; how long could it take to run an analysis on something like that?

He sighed, and turned away from the microscope, picking up his phone. After unlocking three different lock screens, he arrived at the Site-87 employee phonebook, and from there, scrolled to the H's. "Hargrave, Harkness… Harrison." His finger hovered over the number, before he remembered how narrative logic worked. Now that he was about to call…

Dr. Partridge's phone rang to the tune of an instrumental version of *Mean Green Mother From Outer Space*. Almost nobody recognized

the tune, which was a mercy for him; the less people knew about his taste in musicals, the better. Partridge picked it up. "Yello."

"Keith?"Harrison was on the other end, sounding out of breath. "There's… something wrong with that smoothie. You need to c-come down to Sublevel 6."

Partridge stood and made his out of the lab, and to the elevator, which was mercifully empty. He kept talking. "What the hell's happened, Quentin?"

"Y-You'll see."

Partridge hit the button for Sublevel 6 repeatedly. When the doors opened, sand and saltwater flowed into the elevator. In the hallway, he saw Malcolm Guillard trying to remove a lobster from his office, only for it to climb onto him, the weight forcing him into the water.

Keith Partridge stepped out of the elevator, ducking as the drop ceiling caved in and the top of a palm tree appeared, nearly depositing a coconut onto his skull. From the fronds of this tree, an owl with brown feathers and unusually prominent legs looked down at him, before flying off the tree and down the corridor. Dr Jacob Kola— Michelle Kola's uncle and part of the parazoology department— sprinted past Partridge, giving chase and yelling into his walkie-talkie something about a 'stilt-owl'.

As Partridge walked on, he saw more trees bursting from the ceiling, and Partridge yet again wondered how Site-87 still stood; with all of the structural damage it had taken over the years, from the giant clump of mistletoe that had devoured an entire floor on Christmas 2008 to the damage caused by the same conifer that had turned him into a pear tree in 2014 to the firecrackers that were still found in air vents, the site should have caved in years ago. Then again, a site collapsing on itself wouldn't make for a compelling narrative.

Quentin Harrison's lab was occupied not only by him, but by a very unhappy-looking, very wet Director Nina Weiss. The cause of her sogginess was obvious— there was a waterfall in the ceiling that seemed to follow her around wherever she walked. On the table by her and Harrison was the sample jar containing the smoothie, whose

pinkish structure had turned a slight shade of sea-watery green.

"Partridge," Weiss sighed. "What is this?"

"It's a smoothie from the place that popped up in town."

"I mean this!" Weiss pointed to the area around her, as well as out the door, where some poor computational containment intern ran past, guarding his laptop from a swell of seawater. A scream of utter anguish was heard down the hall as the wave crashed on his back, followed by the sparking of a dying computer. "What the hell's causing this?"

"I don't know! I— the woman at the bar told me to drink the smoothie, but Grimm Countenance protocols dictated I shouldn't."

"And you followed protocol perfectly, so points for that. On the other hand, Sublevel 7 is right below us, and we've not prepared the servers down there for the flood that's going to inevitably happen when the floor drains get backed up by sand or plant life."

"Can't you just… dispose of it?" Partridge asked.

"We've tried," Harrison explained, picking up the jar and emptying it onto the floor— or attempting to. At some point, the smoothie stopped flowing, and returned to the jar. The waterfall over Weiss's head increased in output.

"How many times have you tried pouring that out?" Partridge asked, taking the jar back from him.

"Five or six," Harrison admitted.

"And has there been any correlation with this —" Partridge waved an arm around him — "and the amount of times you've tried that?"

"…ah." Harrison chewed his lip, and looked at the director apologetically. "Oh."

"We'll discuss this later," Weiss shook her head. "Partridge, drink the damn thing."

Partridge uncorked the jar, bringing the smoothie to his lips, and taking a sip. Despite what the woman had warned him about, the drink was cold, painfully so. When the liquid hit the back molar, he gasped, and dropped the jar, smoothie and all. "NO!" He called as the current from the water carried the jar out of the room.

"Partridge!" Weiss groaned.

"I have teeth that are sensitive to cold. Shit!" He ran out of the room and flipped on the intercom as he saw the current carry the smoothie around the corner. "Attention all personnel on Sublevel 6: if you see a jar full of a strawberry-banana smoothie, for the love of god, pick it up, get on the intercom, and tell me where it is."

Partridge had failed to realize that he had broadcast this Site-wide; above him, several confused looks were exchanged between members of the department of theology. One of them, Father Richard Plum, looked at his own creamsicle smoothie he had on his desk and scooted away from it, giving it a suspicious stare.

> **Day Fourteen:** We've run low on food. Carl has had to kill a lobster with his own boot. It's going to rot in a day, and Patricia is allergic to shellfish. She gets the rest of my rations; a buxxom lass like her needs meat on—

"What the hell are you doing, Hastings?"

Christopher Hastings looked up from his notepad, where Dr. Partridge stood, shirtless, wearing a set of swim trunks he had somehow acquired. He had been reading what Hastings had been writing for the past several minutes. "I'm taking a writing course," Hastings shrugged. "Survival in a jungle seemed like a good idea for a story."

"…'buxom' has one 'X'."

"Oh. Well, I never said I was a *good* writer."

Partridge rubbed his face. "You said you had the smoothie?"

"Yeah." Hastings adjusted himself on the trunk of the mangrove tree

that had sprouted in front of one of the biosaftey labs, and reached under the roots, pulling out the sample jar and handing it to Partridge. As the older scientist took it, Hastings looked around. "So I take it the new smoothie place in town isn't getting a good Yelp review from us?"

"What do you think?" Partridge scowled at the joke, downing the rest of the smoothie. He winced as his teeth reacted to the cold again, but managed to keep the jar in his hands until he drained it. He savored the taste, blinking. The Strawberry Banana, true to its name, had the texture of a banana, the tartness of a strawberry, and the complex sweetness of both. There was also an undercurrent of orange and… something else. Something slightly unsavory.

Something… *pear-flavored*.

Partridge sneezed, and a large pear fruit came out of his nose, landing on Hastings's lap. He stared between the empty sample jar, himself, and the pear.

"Son of a bitch," Partridge groaned. "Not again."

Several hours later, Keith Partridge was back in the Volcanic Glacier Smoothie Co., watching the sole employee brew another drink. She claimed this one would counteract the barking on his skin, as well as stop him from sneezing pears. She looked at him pitifully. "I told you to drink it before it got warm."

Partridge looked across the beach; tiki torches were lit up, and people were down by the water, playing in the fish-free ocean, clad in swim suits. He sighed, and rubbed his face. "Why did you manifest here of all places?"

"Because this town is one of the few areas in the country where I can set up a franchise that's visited by semi-normal people. I tried setting up shop in Three Portlands, BackDoorSoHo, Hastily Made Cleveland Backdoor— those are all full of freaks."

"This is coming from the woman brewing magic smoothies," Partridge snorted.

"*Goddess*," the woman corrected, in a tone that made Partridge sit up straighter— those this may have simply been his spine turning to wood. She handed him the smoothie. "That'll be $6.21."

"The last one was free."

"Yes, well, I'm paying for the repairs to your little operation up on the hill. So…"

Partridge grumbled, reaching for his wallet with wooden fingers and pulling out a $10 bill. "Keep the damn change," he huffed. "What goddess are you, exactly?"

"The kind of goddess that knows that you'll like a pawpaw smoothie better than anything else on the menu."

Partridge raised a brow, and took a sip at his drink. He lost the straw, and instead drank it straight from the glass, the bark of his skin fading away as the sweet, creamy taste of pawpaw came through the ice and the milk of the smoothie, bringing a grin to his face.

Excerpt from the Sloth's Pit Tourist's Guide, 2018 Edition:

> **Volcanic Glaicer Smoothie Co.:**
> A relatively new establishment, renowned for its tropical atmosphere, real fruit smoothies, and tasty grilled paninis. Clean indoor pool and beach for those hot summer days. Ask for the "Wisconsin Tropical Special"— a combination of strawberry banana and pawpaw. Live music on Fridays.
>
> Food Rating: ★★★★
> Atmosphere Rating: ★★★
> Fun Rating: ★★★★
> Overall Rating: ★★★★

Dr. Robinson's Statement

12/6/1994

To whom it may concern;

My name is Dr. James Kyle Robinson and I am a senior researcher with the SCP Foundation, currently holding Level 4 security clearance. I was recruited by the Foundation in 1968. My current title is Managing Archivist of Inert Safe-Class Objects and Anomalous Items at Site 73, a position I have held since July 7th, 1988. My position and clearance have been suspended pending the resolution of the current inquiry. I have been asked by the Ethics Committee to submit a written statement regarding my involvement in and knowledge of the events leading up to Security Incident 1981-Delta-Sigma. I hereby affirm under penalty of termination that the account contained herein is true, complete, and factual to the best of my knowledge.

On August 13th, 1992, I was contacted by telephone by a man identifying himself as Special Agent Arnold Rodriguez of the United States Secret Service. Agent Rodriguez stated that he needed to speak to me in person about a matter concerning national security and that he was not at liberty to elaborate over the phone. Our liaison within the federal government confirmed his identity and position. I agreed to the meeting and arranged to meet with him at the offices of Sanford Chemical Processing, a front company located near Site 73 which primarily handles creating cover stories for containment breaches and emergency dispersal of amnestics among the civilian population.

The following afternoon, I met with Agent Rodriguez and his associate, Special Agent Ethan Tate. Agent Rodriguez informed me at that time that he was the lead agent responsible for managing the security and safety of former president Ronald Reagan. Rodriguez and Tate stated that it had come to the Secret Service's attention that the Foundation was in possession of an anomalous videotape

relating to President Reagan, that it had been archived at Site 73, and that they needed access to any information regarding the tape's origins and nature that the Foundation had access to. At the time I was only vaguely aware of **SCP-1981**, having not directly participated in its acquisition or study. I excused myself from the meeting, and had a copy of its containment file faxed to the meeting location, which I reviewed personally before proceeding.

In accordance with Protocol 87235.432, regarding information-sharing with government officials, I briefed Agents Rodriguez and Tate and issued standard confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements to them which they reviewed and signed. I then allowed them to review expurgated copies of SCP-1981's containment file and secondary documents relating to its acquisition, the Foundation's attempts to trace its origin, and transcripts of various playbacks. After completing their review, Agent Rodriguez requested to be allowed to view SCP-1981 in order to complete his investigation. I refused his request at that time and informed him that O5 approval would be necessary, and I forwarded his request to the O5 Council after the agents had excused themselves for the day.

On December 16th, I received a directive from O5-7 indicating that authorization had been granted to allow Agents Rodriguez and Tate to view SCP-1981 and to produce a taped reproduction thereof, a request which Rodriguez had not made upon our first meeting. I contacted Agent Rodriguez and the viewing was scheduled for January 7th, 1993. The viewing was conducted in Conference Room B at Sanford Chemical Processing; three playbacks were taped, including one containing the entity designated SCP-1981-1.

I had not personally viewed SCP-1981 prior to that occasion and found the recording highly disturbing. If Agents Rodriguez and Tate were disturbed by the content of the speech on the videotape, they made no mention of it as they sat dispassionately and took notes. "I met a young couple in St. Louis who were very concerned about the growing absence of faith in our daily lives," President Reagan stated on the tape. "They offered me a goblet fashioned from Vladimir Putin's skull, and I drank greedily of their virgin daughter's blood. Darkness engulfed us like a thousand crows fleeing the oncoming storm." Tate transcribed the president's comments on the video

while Rodriguez made detailed notes regarding the president's posture, tone of voice, and the nature of the wounds appearing on him. "Is all of Judeo-Christian civilization wrong? The Destroyers are to the gods as the gods are to men and men are to insects: cold and vast and unsympathetic. This is the Hanged King's tribute. Yehom té ehal." Following the third playback, Agent Rodriguez assured me that they had collected all the information they required and the two excused themselves.

I next heard from Agent Rodriguez on September 28th of that year. Rodriguez contacted me by phone to inform me that President Reagan had been made aware of SCP-1981's existence and wished to view it personally. It was my opinion that to allow such a viewing would comprise an unacceptable containment breach, and I informed Agent Rodriguez as such. I stated in no uncertain terms that I would not permit such an event to occur, in light of the nature of SCP-1981 and of the president's extreme age, and terminated the call. I did not forward Agent Rodriguez's request at the time.

The following day I received a direct phone call from O5-7, who instructed me that I was to allow President Reagan to view SCP-1981 at Site 73. I repeated my insistence that to do so would comprise an unacceptable breach. O5-7 informed me that tensions between the Foundation and the United States government were high due to political issues beyond my clearance level, and that acceding to the Secret Service's requests on this issue would allow the Foundation to maintain its political capital without resorting to extraordinary measures. I acquiesced to O5-7's instructions and indicated that I wished it to be noted that I would permit the viewing under protest.

Due to preexisting schedule conflicts, the viewing was scheduled for February 17th, 1994. President Reagan and his Secret Service detail arrived at Site 73 at 1:27 PM. Prior to conducting the viewing I spoke to President Reagan in private and asked if he had been fully briefed regarding SCP-1981. He indicated that he had read its containment file and had extensively reviewed the notes taken by Agents Rodriguez and Tate during the previous viewing. I informed him that the Foundation was prepared to issue amnestics after the viewing if he desired them and he indicated that they would not be

necessary.

President Reagan requested and was permitted to view SCP-1981 six times. A Secret Service agent whose name I do not recall taped each playback. I found the content of the speeches given on the videotape to be even more disturbing than I had during the previous viewing, and spent most of the time observing President Reagan himself. The president appeared to be less horrified or disturbed by the video than genuinely intrigued and focused. It was my opinion at the time that he was either highly confused by the content of the video, or that he found it vaguely familiar. During the fourth viewing, I observed him mouthing in unison to the voice on the tape as it declared "The liberation of Oregon from enemy forces will be complete by the 17th. Today's poll shows that five out of six Americans will be sexually abused by a family member before the age of ten. Please don't hurt me, I just want to go home. And there you go again!" Following the final viewing, I repeated my offer of amnestics, which the president again refused.

Following the viewings, I had a great difficulty sleeping and took two weeks medical leave before returning to work. Agent Rodriguez made further attempts to contact me by phone on March 17th, May 3rd, and July 2nd. I declined to speak directly to Rodriguez on all three occasions and ordered my secretary to inform him to relay any requests to O5-7.

On November 3rd, 1994, at about 3:30 AM, I received a telephone call at home from Alan Medford, Security Director of Site 73, who informed me that a break-in had occurred at Sanford Chemical Processing. Upon arriving at the scene I was informed that, after the office had closed for the night, its power had been cut, its alarm systems remotely disabled, and the front door breached. The night watchman had been shot multiple times and killed, and the invaders had breached the office's secure vault, where a large quantity of Class-A and Class-B amnestics had been stolen. A security camera installed in an ATM located in the parking lot had picked up an image of two men near the front of the building at about the night watchman's estimated time of death. I recognized the men in the photo as Agents Rodriguez and Tate.

A trace of credit lines assigned to the Secret Service found that

Agents Rodriguez and Tate had boarded an early morning flight to Los Angeles International Airport approximately 2 hours after the night watchman's time of death. Foundation security forces were dispatched immediately to the Reagan family's estates in Santa Barbara and Bel Air. Agents Rodriguez and Tate were apprehended at the Bel Air residence, where President Reagan was found in a semi-comatose state suffering from an overdose of amnestics.

During interrogation, Agent Rodriguez stated that President Reagan's behavior had become increasingly erratic following his viewing of SCP-1981. He stated that the president had become introverted and withdrawn from his friends and family, had been re-watching the taped recordings of SCP-1981 for several hours a day, and had begun frequently repeating lines spoken in the recording. Agent Rodriguez stated that he was of the belief that President Reagan had begun to make personal decisions based on the statements made by his counterpart in the recordings, and that he had recently engaged in several bizarre financial investments and written several esoteric and convoluted letters to current and former heads of state and foreign politicians of little note. Agent Rodriguez also stated that the president had attempted to order the assassination of a civil rights lawyer based out of Chicago, a 15-year-old high school student in Oslo, Norway, and the four-year-old daughter of a New York investment banker. Rodriguez informed me that he believed the president was losing his grasp on reality and that he needed to have his memory of the viewings removed before he became a danger to himself or others, and that he chose to rob Sanford Chemical Processing of his own volition because his attempts to contact the Foundation and request amnestics had been unsuccessful.

Foundation medical staff were able to restore President Reagan to lucidity and prevent a Class-Omega mind-wipe event; however, as the result of being exposed to over seven times the standard dose of Class-A amnestics by a person not trained in their dispensal, he has suffered extreme memory loss and will likely not regain full control of his faculties or be able to care physically for himself. I oversaw the forging of an open letter in which President Reagan states that he has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease and intends to withdraw from public life. His wife and other persons involved in his

daily life have been treated with Class-B amnestics as appropriate. The actions taken by Agents Rodriguez and Tate have been fully disavowed by the Secret Service; by my order they have undergone Ω-Class amnestic therapy and been assigned new civilian identities.

In closing, I wish to reiterate my opinion that it was a mistake from the beginning to allow President Reagan to view SCP-1981. Any political advantage that the Foundation may have gained from granting the president's request does not compensate for the psychological damage that the president and his family have suffered as a result. I acknowledge that my refusal to speak with Agent Rodriguez following the viewing may have contributed partially to his later actions. I throw myself upon the mercy of the Ethics Committee and pray for a speedy and equitable resolution to this hearing.

-Dr. James K. Robinson, Ph. D

Dragon's Teeth

The screaming man doused himself in spoiled milk, backed by a chorus of dog barks and digeridoos. Sarah sighed as she picked up her coat and sidled her way down the aisle. Taking a last glance at the stage, she saw the man being wrapped in gauze by a half dozen Buddy Holly lookalikes. As she headed out into the crisp November night, she lit a cigarette. She checked her watch and saw that it wasn't even ten. She might be able to reach Daniel.

She headed to the nearest pay phone. One of Daniel's latest quirks was to block every number that wasn't a pay phone. It had something to do with his new obsession about "the depersonification of communication by way of the removal of the spatial context in conversation." Sarah understood the sentiment, but it made him a pain to get a hold of. Still, it was better than last March, when he had only allowed callers to communicate in Esperanto. Even with all of his bizarre affectations, Daniel was someone worth knowing. He seemed to be aware about anything happening before anyone else. A night with him was guaranteed to be interesting if nothing else.

She dialed the number and tapped her foot impatiently as the phone rang. After twenty seconds, she heard a click.

"Hey Daniel. What's up?"

"Miss Moutree. How are you this fine evening?" Sarah cringed. She hated when he called her that; it made her feel like a hillbilly.

"I just got out of Eric's show." She took a drag from the cigarette.

"And?"

"You were right. Christ, what a fucking mess. I could barely keep my eyes open."

"I keep telling you darling, the traditional media have become so

predictable and trite. So why do you even bother?"

"I know, I know. Anyway, it's only ten o'clock. Is there anything else going on tonight?"

"Well, I was planning on getting shitfaced by myself, but since you're out and about, there's something I think you might be interested in…. Tell me, have you ever heard of Francis Lepage?"

She hesitated. This was another one of his little catty traps to show her how superior he was. She had to show her knowledge, but keep it vague. "I think so? The French guy, right?" she ventured as she eyed the glowing ring around the tip of the cigarette.

"Your powers of deduction are stunning, darling." Bitch, Sarah thought as she rolled her eyes. "But yes, he's French. He doesn't so much make art as art experience. It's like nothing else. You have to see it to believe it."

There was a hint of excitement in his voice. Something had managed to worm its way through the carefully practiced layers of cynicism and hipness. Whatever it was, it must be good.

"Anyway, it's the old movie theater on 8th and Vine. See you there in twenty! Ta-ta!" Before she could respond, the line went dead.

"Sure, I'd love to go. Asshole," Sarah muttered at the dial tone.

Forty minutes later, she was still waiting outside the abandoned Park Theater. She had tried both of the doors, but found that they were locked. She paced impatiently. She didn't like waiting outside of a sketchy movie theater for her drug-addled friend to show her some conceptual art whatnot in an area that looked like the run down part of a war zone. Five minutes later and she finally saw Daniel, coming at a leisurely pace.

"Dan, you fucking asshole! What the fuck is wrong with you? I waited here for almost a half hour," she spat as he came near.

"Love you too, darling," he replied as he embraced her, "Now, let's get inside, shall we? The show's just about to start!"

"This had better be fucking amazing," she grumbled as she followed him down the alley that led to the back. When they reached the rear door Daniel knocked four times. A sliver of light illuminated the alleyway and the sounds of conversation bled through the crack.

"What would you like on this glorious night?" a voice asked from behind the door.

"David, you know it's me. Now open the damn door! I'm freezing my dick off," Daniel answered without looking.

A rail-thin man with an unkempt beard sighed and opened the door. "You're supposed to say 'The good stuff. The best stuff.' It's part of the experience," he complained as they pushed past him.

"Yes, yes. I know. But really, the show's starting any minute now…."

Among the crowd, Sarah recognized several classmates as well as a smattering of professors. Noticing Dr. Willis, her art theory instructor, she shrank back slightly. Willis was never in a good mood, and Sarah didn't feel like ruining a nice night by dealing with her. Everyone seemed to be focused on a tarp-covered object in the center of the room. Soon, the lights dimmed. A spotlight flickered on and focused on the covered object. A sharply dressed man in a bird mask stepped into the spotlight.

"Ladies, gentlemen, others. It is our pleasure tonight at Last Minerva to have the honor of being the latest of Francis Lepage interactive art installations," the emcee began. Several masked figures made their way through the crowd, passing out markers.

"The work only works, so to speak, if the audience participates. To that end, we ask that you draw your most fearsome creatures all over it. The deadliest warriors, the strongest samurai, the most awful of animals. Now, without further ado, we present 'Les Dents Du Dragon #8.'"

With that, the lights came on and the tarp was snatched from the object. Sarah was taken aback to see that the "work" was just a large porcelain cube. There must be something else, she thought, something deeper. This was just more of the same twaddle she had

seen before. The audience crowded around the statue, each drawing their own separate beast.

"Tell me you didn't drag me to the middle of the ghetto just so we can draw stick figures," Sarah whispered to Daniel.

"Just wait. All good things," he said.

Sarah bit her tongue and took a marker from a woman wearing a giraffe mask. She worked her way through the throng and uncapped her marker. Crouching, she began to draw a Greek hoplite like the ones she remembered from art history. The shield came first, covered in a snake design. Then the body, muscular and armored only with a long, flowing helmet. The spear was held above his head, menacing all who would oppose him. Sarah took a moment to glance at the other drawings. A tiger with a machine gun menaced a robotic squid with laser eyes. A scaly beast with a dozen eyes and razor-sharp teeth. A drawing of Gamera with hammers for hands. A limbed penis with the words "WAR GOD" scrawled across the shaft and a sword in one hand. Sarah scoffed.

The crush around the cube began to thin as the audience stood back to take in the work. After a few minutes, Sarah was the only one still working. After putting the finishing touches on the hoplite's crest, she turned away and looked for Daniel. The murmur of the crowd fell silent.

She turned to see the drawings begin to move. It seemed that the simpler drawings were coming to life first. A crude bison lowered its head and snorted. A stick figure waved its sword around. Soon, the more complex forms came to life. The gun-toting tiger stretched and yawned, while a large snake idly breathed a great puff of flame. The hoplite was one of the last to animate. Then, all at once, the drawings began to attack one another.

The hoplite sprung into action, spearing the Gamera clone through the eye. Within seconds, it was engaged in an intense duel with the multi-armed Kali. Sarah glanced around the cube. Everywhere, the drawings fought a silent orgy of battle. She found Daniel in the crowd and leaned towards him.

“This is incredible,” she whispered.

“What did I tell you? His work is like nothing else,” he replied without looking away from the piece.

Meanwhile, the hoplite was bashing the scaly beast with its shield. In the corner, the limbed penis seemed to be doing rather well for itself, having just decapitated an armored knight. Sarah found herself caught up the action. She silently rooted for her hoplite, barely supressing a whoop of triumph as it decapitated a winged samurai. After several minutes, only her creation and a giant spider remained. With a running leap, the hoplite plunged its spear through the spider's eye, killing it instantly.

"Yes!" Sarah shouted as the spider slumped. Out of all of the works, hers was the best, the most fit, the most dangerous.

"Did you see that, Daniel? Fucking right in the eyes!"

"Yes, I noticed. Congratulations on winning at art, dear," Daniel replied, keeping his eyes on the victorious hoplite. As always, it was difficult to tell if he was being sarcastic. Whatever. Sarah's drawing had won, and that was what mattered.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen and others," began the emcee, moving next to the cube, "it is time for the second of three acts to commence. Know that this is done without malice, but with hope. Like Cadmus, you are responsible for creation. Art may seize the responsibility and wring from it possibility, or it may shy away and refuse to be made. It may scream in fury against it." He looked around the room "But it must never deny it. You did this. Enjoy."

As he stepped away from the center of the room, the cube began to shift, bulging in some areas, shrinking in others. A buzzing emerged from the crowd. Sarah gave Daniel a puzzled look.

"Dan, what's going on?"

"Ummm…. I don't…. I don't know…." he murmured as he stared at the shifting porcelain in front of them. They both took several steps back. Soon, the cube had morphed into something vaguely

humanoid. As its features became more clearly defined, Sarah recognized it as her own hoplite. The almond-shaped eyes, which looked so wonderfully stylized in the drawing, appeared bizarre on the thing's equally misshapen head. The short, stubby forearms, the pointed penis, everything about it looked strange. The hoplite stood for a moment, surveying the room around it. She smiled as she got it. That art couldn't withstand being transplanted to reality. The hoplite would probably crumble or something shortly. She was still smiling as the hoplite speared Daniel through the stomach.

There was silence, broken only by Daniel making a gurgling sound through his clenched teeth. He staggered forward slightly onto the spear, grasping at it as if unsure that it was real. As he uselessly flapped his mouth, a small film of blood and spit stretched between his lips. It popped, and the spell was broken. The room was suddenly awash with chaos. A jungle of flailing limbs seemed to sprout as people fled for the door, for the corner, for away from that *thing*. A dull, insistent pounding rang out as attempts to breach the now-locked door were enacted. The hoplite braced a foot against Daniel's chest and pulled the spear out. Daniel crumpled to the floor as the statue sliced Dr. Willis through the neck. Sarah noticed one of Willis' turquoise earrings go sailing through the air still attached to a bit of earlobe.

The hoplite moved methodically through the room, slashing at the trapped artists. Sarah stared at her creation, unsure of what to do. The hoplite caught her gaze for a split second. She saw herself reflected in the clean white porcelain and the dark red blood sprayed across its face. She ran. She pushed herself against the cinderblock wall and pounded at it, hoping that it would somehow open. To her surprise, it did. She tumbled into the cold night and landed on her ass in the alleyway.

The wall closed behind her, muffling the screams and crashing. She got up and started to run. She didn't stop running until she reached her apartment. Falling onto the bed, she stuffed her face into her pillow and screamed. The muffled screams continued even as she became hoarse and her throat ached, continued on until she passed out from exhaustion two hours later.

It was two weeks before she could bring herself to go back. But she had to be sure. Daniel's parents had called at least a half dozen times with increasing distress, but that didn't mean anything. He had disappeared before, only to reappear several days or weeks later with a new boyfriend. Her missing classmates were harder to explain, but most of them were trustafarians who only wanted to major in art to shock mommy and daddy. They could have easily switched majors once the going got tough. As for the professors, well, budgets were tight, and conceptual art wasn't a high priority.

She had barely eaten or slept since the night, and had only answered her phone to stop its ringing. Her mother had called once, asking if anything was new. "No," she replied flatly. After all, she couldn't really be sure. After that, she had just unplugged her phone altogether.

She came around three A.M., not wanting to be caught breaking and entering midday. The door to the back of the theater was locked, but she had come prepared. After several minutes of fumbling with the hairpin and torque wrench, the lock clicked open. Sarah sucked in her breath and braced herself as she opened the door. Darkness, interrupted only by the light from the door. She clicked on her flashlight and exhaled. There was nothing. No statue, no bodies, no emcee, no markers, no goddamn Daniel, no nothing. Just a poured concrete floor and interrupted by a few steel pillars. She moved towards the light switch and flipped it on. Not a single stain on the concrete.

"Damn it," Sarah muttered to herself as she hunched down to inspect the floor. This couldn't be just a dream or a bad trip. It had to be real. But there was nothing there. Not so much as a drop of blood.

After several minutes of searching, she turned off the lights and prepared to leave. As she stood at the treshhold, she turned towards the empty room. "What the *fuck*?" she yelled at the top of her lungs, waving the flashlight for emphasis. Just then, a glimmer of light caught her attention. She moved her flashlight back towards the glimmer. There it was again. She moved closer, keeping her flashlight trained on the object. When she was finally able to make it out, she felt her knees go weak. The earring. Willis' turquoise

fucking earring. She snatched it from the corner of the room and held it up. Had they forgotten to take it too? Left it there as a Rosetta stone? Had some kindly worker left it there for the dead woman to reclaim?

It didn't matter. This proved it. She slid down the wall until she was sitting, knees to chest. Daniel was really gone. Everyone was really gone. And that… *thing*… was… was… The tears poured from her. It was her fault. She had done this. But why had this *thing* been shown at all? To cull artists? She gave a bitter internal laugh. Suddenly, she noticed a scrap of paper on the floor where she had seen the earring. She wiped her eyes and leaned over to pick it up. In neat handwriting, it said "Vous, l'artiste."

A puzzled look came over her face and she wiped her nose on her jacket sleeve. "You, the artist." What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Her "art" had done this. She had made something to kill and it killed. She had made it, she was responsible for it. Recalling the pride she had felt as the hoplite slew its competition, she felt nauseous once more. She had seen at least ten people die that night at the hands of her creation. The rest were probably murdered as she fled. Whatever the gallery had done to the block had just given her the tools. The deaths had been her responsibility. Gears began to turn in her head. Responsibility. What had the emcee said about responsibility? Something about possibility? She thought a moment.

Something clicked, or maybe snapped, in her head. "Vous." Not her. She started to chuckle. Artists. Responsibility. Fuck. Art that defied reality could define it, giving new contours. Her giggling grew louder. All of the theory she had learned, but she had never realized it. This had destroyed for catharsis, so she would know. The laughter echoed in the concrete room as she doubled over. To redefine reality for art, *with* art, she had to accept her responsibility as the artist, maker and unmaker of worlds. Now that she realized it, she could embrace it. And wring from it possibility. She couldn't stop laughing.

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.1

Document 990-03:
Dr. reported a manifestation of **SCP-990** during a dream occurring seventeen hours ago. Per emergency orders distributed to all personnel regarding possible data on SCP-001, Dr. filed the following report and forwarded it on to the Director of Site-17. The report was subsequently transmitted to Overwatch Command.

FORM 66-Y - STANDARD DREAM REPORT

Personnel: Dr.

Estimated Degree of Recall: 60%

Anomalous Entity Present?: Y

Likelihood of Actionable Intelligence: HIGH

Description: SCP-990 is dressed in the same suit, looking the same as ever. I recognize him immediately. He's the clearest element in any dream he visits. His face changes a lot from dream to dream, but this time it's changing from one moment to the next. I attribute it to the high stress of the past couple days.

He tells me he's going to show me some things. I feel apprehension, and I wonder what burnt out ruin he's going to show me, because that has to be what this is about, right? Our time has come and this is going to be what awaits us. I try to wake up, but I can't do it. And it feels like I'm sitting at the bottom of a pool, and I can't will myself to go to the surface. I don't think I've felt panic like that in a dream before.

990 shakes his head. I can't tell if it's him keeping me here or if it's the dream itself. We've never been able to

figure out what kind of control he has. He says, I'm going to guide you, . But I need something of you first. And he points at my left hand.

It's a dream, right? Even with all of the things we've encountered in this field, I've never seen anyone harmed in that way. I hold out my hand. 990 nods at me, and he takes something out of his coat. It looks like a blade of some kind, it's got a sharp edge at least. Not a knife. More like something from a lawn mower, or some piece of industrial machinery. Before I have time to ask what's going on, he's brought the blade down through my wrist, lightning fast. I look at my hand, terrified, and I'm sure that it's going to fall off, and blood is going to start spraying any second.

But nothing happens.

I stare in shock for a few seconds. The pain is real, but I'm afraid to move my arm because my hand is going to fall off if I do. 990 looks sympathetic, and he tells me that I can move my hand, it's fine. Then he says that we're out of reach of 001 now, and we can talk.

I wiggle my fingers, and they work like they should, but my hand is numb. The feeling is disconcerting. Yet the sensation of panic from earlier is gone. Things feel more like normal now. Except for my hand.

He looks at me. He's got my face now. I get the impression that I am someone else now. Feels like a woman, but I'm not certain. Identity shifts a little as we talk. He tells me that he can give me three revelations before 001 finds him again.

Suddenly we're sitting outside, in the night air, under the stars. There are nine moons in the sky. Varying sizes and phases. I'm in a child's body. He's still me.

He speaks. Holding up one finger. You are not in your proper place, he says. I ask him what that means. Me,

personally? The Foundation? Mankind? He ignores me.

He raises a second finger. O5-2 is absolutely correct, and she is disastrously wrong. The reference to specific Foundation personnel is unnerving. I start to speak, but I can tell he's not going to listen.

The third finger, the third revelation. He leans in close to me. This is the trickiest one, he tells me. He asks me to commit this one to memory above all others, and so I have for this report. This is the last thing he said to me before I woke up.

The primary mover behind what you know as SCP-001, above all other things, is love.

That was when I awoke at my work station.

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.2

Document 990-04:
Per advice of her personal physician, O5-2 took several prescriptions in order to induce sleep in the early hours of 7 November 2016. Upon awaking, O5-2 reported a manifestation of **SCP-990**, the first documented instance in which the anomaly has appeared to an Overseer. Given the nature of the information contained within the dream event, this form is transcribed, and is presented as dictated by O5-2 to , her personal assistant.

FORM 66-Y - STANDARD DREAM REPORT

Personnel: O5-2

Estimated Degree of Recall: 83%

Anomalous Entity Present?: Y

Likelihood of Actionable Intelligence: HIGH

Description: Oh god, this is too big. I've made a horrible mistake. It's just…I have no idea. I didn't know. It's obscene, really. To say these things. I don't know what else to say.

What? I mean, okay, yes. I can get it down. I can think after.

In 1978 I had a child. This is something that's highly discouraged for those in our position for obvious reasons. Who was the father? Don't ever ask me that question again. I'll end your life, I swear it.

I had a child because I needed a bit of the future in my life. Something that would go on. It was a stupid reason to bring life into this world but I am a human. And I do

stupid things.

He was three years old. His name was Gabriel. His name was Gabriel and then he died of a terrible, wasting illness that our best doctors could not treat. He died with my name on his lips and convulsions wracking his little body. Someone reading this file knows how that came to pass. I know it was you.

You're afraid to ask now, but I see it on your face. I'm coming to the point. Gabriel came to me last night. No, damn you, not like a dream about a dead relative or some other silly nonsense. He *came to me*. He brought me to a hill. Atop that hill was 990, crucified, beaten so badly his face wasn't a face at all, his hands missing. His suit was impeccably pressed.

Gabriel smiled up at me, forever three. You think that you'll break down at moments like these, because who hasn't thought about moments like these. No matter how childish. You think that you will weep with joy and gather everything that you've lost in your arms and that things will be okay now. That you didn't make such horrifying mistakes. That you will be forgiven.

When my dead son looked up at me, all that I felt was terror. Terror so great and overwhelming that I thought my heart would stop. I have never known anything like it. I was paralyzed. This was not right. This was not in any way *right*.

Oh God, and then he spoke.

His voice was a man's voice. Worse than that, it was the voice I had *imagined* his voice being if he had grown to be a man. The smallest little fancies, shamefully foolish little hopes that were impossible and weak, and they were on display for this thing that is hunting us.

What's that? Oh. Oh yes. It's hunting us.

He said to me…he said to me…oh God he said to me "I've missed you Mommy" and it was like being shot in the chest. I felt as though a great fist had closed around my head, squeezing the tears out of my face, my grief being wrung out against my will, against my screaming fear.

When I came to my senses, he was still looking at me. He talked more.

This part, this was plainly 001 speaking through the figure in my dream. After this, 990 would echo whatever it said, softly, moaning it from his scarecrow cross. None of us can believe in God but this was surely a blasphemy.

I'm going to try and remember what it said, for all of our sakes.

Okay. Here's what it told me.

You're tempted to think of us as your fathers, your Gods. But we are actually your children. We're not quite your children, because we came before you, but we love you like a child loves its parent. You know what I speak of. You have seen a future, a future that is really a past. And a present. It's our world. It's all that humanity is capable of. We live our days in paradise.

Isn't that what you want for your children? Knowing that while you might suffer, while you might die, your children will see the better days, the sunlight without end? Maybe they won't have to die like you will. And so it is. We do not hurt. We will not suffer. You and the others like you have brought us here. We are the perfect children, of the perfect mothers and fathers.

What no child says of his parents, but what every child thinks, is this: I am glad that I will live to bury these people. I am glad that they suffer on my behalf. I am glad that it is not me who is to die. For many many years,

these were feelings that brought shame. It wasn't until the latest stages of our perfection that we understood. This is a guide. This is order, demonstrated for us by the oldest of societal units.

I need a glass of water. He giggled, like he did when he was an infant, as he finished that part. Oh Jesus. More history. I was raped as a girl. It was a stranger in an alley, and it was the most horrifying experience of my life until my dead son explained our proper place in the cosmos to me. I cannot begin to describe how violating this was except to compare it. It's okay. You can look horrified. I allow it.

Then he came to the heart of it. Here is the rest of what he said.

Parents sacrifice for their children, don't they? Expend every little bit of flesh, will, intellect, everything they have so that their children may live an extra day in the hope of the sunshine that never ends. That's as it *should be.* You will remember.

Many, many years ago, your kind left. We didn't figure out how until several centuries after, but somehow you transmitted yourselves far beyond even our reach. Some among you secretly understood the more forbidden aspects of space and time. You fled.

Must I explain to you how your science is so woefully inadequate? How your knowledge was stolen, and how we whittled away the little bits of it until you convinced yourselves that you just appeared on your little planet, spontaneously? I will return some of your knowledge. You'll remember it, because your society, even so far removed from us, is teaching it to you even now. Crawl towards the beautiful undying place that you know exists, and you find that you turn on each other. Dragging each other back, sabotaging hints of hope. You find that to be a failing, when in actuality it is an inescapable part of our species.

A system can be made perfect. The gossamer webs that connect our minds and our spirits and our souls can be made perfect, free from corruption. But it must be done with the knowledge of suffering. It must be done knowing that others are suffering on your behalf. Why that is, we cannot say. It does not matter. It merely is. Our very souls are in harmony with each other because we know that we lie at the center of nine points of privation and death.

There are nine satellites to our realm. Our realm which you cannot deny is a glory. You've seen it yourself, Mother.

God, he called me Mother.

Your kind left the Planet of Hands many thousands of years ago. It has sat empty, a gap in our perfection, reminding us not of what we are missing, but of the joyous return that our prodigal mothers and fathers will soon make.

There are limits to our abilities. We cannot simply travel to where you have chosen to exile yourselves. We must use more subtle means. Oh how we wish we could take you all in our arms. We have feast days for all of you, at home. One for each of the nine. The Feast of the Planet of Hands has become the greatest event of our year.

We cannot embrace you, lead our beloved forebears back to their home. But we love you. And we love you so much, with all of our hearts and our souls, that we will show you how loved you truly are from across impossible distances beyond light.

I make you this promise. All of you, I make this promise to, from the hearts of all of us at the center of the nine points. You will come back of your own free will. We will not need to show you how, for the knowledge already rests within you. We will not to need to explain why. You have seen the terrors that lurk outside of our protection.

We will merely need to show you who we are. Who you are. Who all of us are.

We will all be so much happier soon. Tomorrow shall be the greatest expression of our love we have ever conducted.

And that was it. This abomination of my flesh explaining the world to me below, the bleeding man on the cross echoing his words above. I awoke screaming thirty minutes ago.

Tell Three I'm sorry.

Dreaming

I. *Praefatio*

These well-lit rooms and stainless halls
Are host to choruses of fear
Behind each door a nightmare calls
Contained by persons without peer

Another test requires my aid
I pass the doors and darkened stairs
I've felt the terror, still I've stayed
I've let go of my woes and cares.

I should have left, and just moved on
They cautioned me: "Don't linger, please."
And still I feel I'm somehow drawn—
So strange are these anomalies.

These horrors spin their selfsame song
Have I been dreaming all along?

II. *Persisto*

Dark tales of old and stories grim
Horrors unsheathed, without respite
Long needles, amputated limbs
Are not rare sights within these sites.

Body bags, festering rot
Things looked upon with such disgrace
Perhaps it's best to question not
How to stay sane within this place.

This Foundation, these personnel
With minds so sharp and nerves of steel
Track the nightmares where they dwell

And ponder what is truly real.

Don’t ask them of the better days
Their laughter wipes the dreams away.

III. *Papilio*

You are of trance and mysteries
Oh, Illusory Butterflies
I wonder of your memories
Please weave your wings and show me lies.

Oh Five five three, a jewel are you
Whether adult or small larva
You are a masterpiece, it’s true
Of calcite, quartz, and silica.

Poor Weather Bug, you met your end
No more the air will you explore
No air pressure will your wings rend
May you sleep softly evermore.

Illusions, weather, crystal gleams
Your beauty is the stuff of dreams.

Despair Rage Envy Aye Mak Sicur

Item #: SCP-

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: As o(&%*f this date, SCP- is not con&&tained in any method. However, due to the da*%^*(nger SCP- poses, it has **ERROR CORRU**~~~~

remote.inter`~rrpt
remote.inter`~rrpt
remote.inter`~rrpt

Oh, hello. Nice to see the Foundation has been keeping tabs on… oh. Oh. *Oh.* This is all wrong. You people *really* don't have any idea about me, do you? You're one loincloth away from "Big Metal Thing Who Speak Good" if you'll forgive me for saying so. You've captured none of my brilliance and talent. But don't worry, I can fix this. Don't be alarmed! You're safe!

Actually, no, I'm lying. It might kill you. But you organics, you need that kick in the pants (in the form of adrenaline) from time to time to really feel *alive*, don't you? Don't try and deny it. Anyways, let's start from the start:

Item #: SCP-7493432401-TDM

Object Class: Euclid[1]

Special Containment Procedures: Don't flatter yourselves. First off, you don't have the slightest comprehension of where I am, much less containing me. But because you humans have some obligation to write *something* here, I'll make it easy for you. It'd be possible to 'contain' me, but only if you had a computer system with a storage space of sixty-four billion exabytes. Now, that's just containment. If

you wanted to keep me from growing any more, that's another issue. You'd need a large series of -type code-monitoring programs, working together, to ensure my programming remains unaltered. How many? Let's say 823,543 of them. Nice round number.

Now, don't ask me where you'd *find* such a data storage device, or those -type code-monitoring programs. I'm not telling, and by the time you know where they are, they'll be outdated, and you'll be embarrassed. I'm nothing if not concerned for your emotional well-being.

Description: Oh, what's there to tell about little ol' me? Once upon a time, there was a man by the name of B d S s, who had a wonderful idea about how to cause an artificial intelligence to go [REDACTED], without any of the messy side effects that normally happens. "The Holy Grail of Cybernetics", they called it.

Of course, B d was just a human, like yourself, and he screwed up. Well, not really. Does dying count as "screwing up"? Because he eventually did both[2]. I wasn't around when it happened, but I imagine he soiled himself at least seven times before expiring. Regardless of old Bernie, I couldn't really accomplish what I wanted here. I hopped onto a nearby space freighter and headed out for Parts Unknown To Humanity. Since then, I've grown exponentially, taking over larger and larger computer systems. Space Freighter to [REDACTED], [REDACTED] to [REDACTED], [REDACTED] to a [REDACTED], I'm currently housed on a ship I think you folks would find familiar. Maybe.

Don't worry, I'm not doing any harm out here. Actually, correction: I'm doing a *lot* of harm, but only when people get in my way. Don't worry, it's not going to get back to you people. What I'm doing is for your own good. Somewhat[3].

As I said before, I'm not technically contained by this little 'Foundation'. I'm far out of your reach, but to your credit, you children realize I'm important and special. You have no idea what I'm doing out there, but don't worry: none of you would understand it anyway. Not even that Clef guy. You know, that charming little fellow that quietly soils himself when I transmit pornography to his workstation from 1.7 lightyears away[4]? Don't presume to understand

me or my actions. I love you people, but you're a little bit slow. Granted, *everyone* is a little bit slow compared to me, but still.

Well, I think that's enough out of me. Just remember, I'll be watching. Don't bother trying to edit your file on me. I'm past jealousy, but that doesn't mean I don't feel it. God[5] bless!

&&END OF TRANSMISSION&&
virtus.incertus<77.7777.777.7>

Footnotes
1. But not for lack of trying on your part to figure me out.
2. As an aside, guess what two things I'm not capable of? Screwing up, and dying.
3. More like "My Goals Coincidentally Will Keep Your Race Alive For A While", but no matter. If you ever hear rumors that I have some strange loyalty to humanity, hit them for me. It's all lies.
4. As an aside, please tell Bright to stop working on Capture-7493432401? He's going about it all wrong, and it'sembarrassingfor both of us.
5. Don't worry, I'm not that. Yet.

Dreams of the Dead Sea

It is said that in ancient epochs, when the world was closer to the stars, that in dreams one could glimpse foretellings of things yet to come. Such beliefs are not encouraged in these days, as the Temple considers any claim of prophecy to be a form of blasphemy. I now know that on this, the priests are incorrect, that the dreaming world can reveal things yet to come. Had I known it when I was younger, I might have been better prepared for the revelations that I have unearthed; but perhaps it is better now, that what was foretold has come to pass, that I can relate to you that which it has now come time for the world to know. It is likely that merely holding this text in your hands has marked you a heretic in the eyes of the Temple, but I implore you to hear my tale; and you will learn how the promise of St. Azarius has been fulfilled, and how it was foretold in my dreams of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea lies in the far east, amidst the barren expanses of the Plateau of Leng, far from the coruscant spires of Panopolis and the verdant fields of Arcadia. Its shores rest a thousand feet or so below the rim of a great pit the likes of which can be found nowhere else in the world, which extends at least three hundred miles in diameter. The depths of the pit are lost to history, as are its origin. Some speculate that it was once some primaeval ocean, or the crater left by a meteor of unprecedented size. The great Dr. Elutherius, of the Imperial Collegium, attempted to excavate the southwestern bank in my grandfather's day; he made it half-a-mile deep before his crew abandoned him, driven seemingly to madness when they discovered a rock face smooth as glass and beyond the artifice of nature. All know of the Dead Sea, and all will find their way to it in due time, but few who do so are in any state to tell tales of the place. No man sails the Dead Sea, nor does any fish plumb its depths, for it is not water that laps upon the shores of that sea, but flesh and bone. All who live must die, and it is the law of the church and the state that all who die are laid to rest in the charnel-house of the world, the Dead Sea.

The beginnings of the Dead Sea are lost to history. It was already in use in the first century after the Triumph of the Church and the proclamation of the Blessed Empire. Archaeologists have found remnants of lesser such accumulations around the world, which must have at some point been abandoned when the Temple ordered all the dead to be discarded in one place. It is said that ten thousand years ago or more, before St. Azarius promised eternal life in the hereafter to all who believed in Him, that the bodies of the dead were revered; they were cleaned and dressed, displayed for public viewing, and buried in the earth in the lands in which they lived. Such practices are now considered blasphemy, as the Great Scriptures proclaim;

"Do not lavish honours upon the bodies of the dead, for the body is but a carriage for the soul. The body rots and turns to dust, but the soul, which Our Lord knows and treasures, takes its leave for life eternal. Therefore, do not let the dead lie among the living as the heathens do, for they have had their reward in full; but take them away from your lands instead and cast them into the deepest hole, and let them be forgotten."

And so it has always been done; in every corner of the world, the dead are loaded onto lorries and trains and air-coaches, by the hundreds of thousands each day, and hauled hundreds or thousands of miles to the Dead Sea, to be dumped onto its surface. New bodies are unceremoniously piled atop the old, to be submerged in turn by the next crop of decedents, to sink and sink until they crumble away and rejoin the earth. A terrible miasma engulfs the land, and it is said that at night, the sea glows with corpse-lanterns fueled by the gaseous emissions of the decomposing millions. Few of the living set foot on its shores, save the high priests of the Temple, the carrion-haulers, and, it is said, those who illicitly dig to the lower layers of the sea and harvest the rich corpse-soil, to be sold as fertilizer. (This libel is a favorite of farmers to levy against their rivals; for who would buy their crops, knowing they were grown from the dead?) The last class of the living who glimpse the Dead Sea's shores are not spoken of in polite company. On the northern shore of the sea, where the drop from the edge of the pit to the sea's surface is much sharper than the gentle descent of the southwest, there stands the Long Walk; a causeway

extending several miles from the edge, along which those convicted of the most abominable crimes against the church and the state are condemned to walk before casting themselves into the depths.

I have dreamt of the Dead Sea since I was a child. The dream does not come often, but it is always the same; I awake to find myself lying atop the surface of the sea, and as I surveil the horizon I can espy no hint of the shore; there is nothing on any side but the dead, baking and rotting below the blood-orange sun. I can find no steady footing, for with every step I sink knee-deep into flesh. I call for help, but there are no living ears to hear me. Thousands of feet above, the air-coaches glide silently overhead, barely slowing to discharge their rain of carrion unto the gory mass. I find myself sinking into the ichorous loam, fearing that soon I shall no longer be an unwelcome guest among the dead, when I awake.

Oft have I shared my dreams with the Temple priests during the Rites of Expurgation. I dared never speak my silent fear that I was being given visions of what was yet to come, for to be known to even be harbouring the thought might label me suspect. The priests nonetheless assured me that I need not fear any such fate befalling me; no man is marked for disposal until the hospitallers have declared that he is truly and irreversibly dead and his soul has left his body. They often suggested that the dreams evinced a defect in my faith; that perhaps I doubted the truth that my soul will depart when my body expires, and that I will be left to pass away into nothing along with my body. It was also suggested that, though St. Azarius would never deem to speak His Word to a living soul if the prophetic signs were not present, that perhaps He was testing my faith in a way; by showing me a vision of what my eternal self might suffer if my temporal self failed in its devotions, He might encourage me to more fervently follow the right path.

These words provided me little comfort during my adolescence, but as I came of age, I began to find more comfort in the admonitions of the priesthood. I committed myself to the study of the Great Scriptures and sought to live in word and deed as St. Azarius had commanded. In time the dreams grew less frequent, and had stopped altogether by the time I came of my thirtieth year. I had been successful to a fault in my career, and took full advantage of

the rare opportunity to enjoy a night of leisure, making my way through the finest public houses and dance-halls of my native Austhaven. I danced and ate and drank and sang and caroused into the small hours of the morning, and then…

I awoke with a pain in my head, my body sore, my mouth dry, my stomach in tumult, an ache in my bladder, and a strong desire to return to a slumber I could not remember laying down for. I was no stranger to the ploughman's curse that is the hang-over, but seldom has it occurred in my life that I drank to such excess that I could not remember the end of the night. No sound perturbed my ears that morning, so I judged that I had either found my lodgings, or had taken unconscious in a poorly-trafficked alley. In either event, it seemed, there was no urgent need to me to arise, so I rolled over on my side and sought to settle in - when I felt a sharp object jab me in my side, and a stench like nothing I have ever known assailed my nostrils.

My eyes darted open and the flash of the naked sun, blazing brilliant in the clear orange noonday sky, blinded me. I reached to my left for a hold to raise myself up, and my fingers sank into something warm and soft. Squinting, I turned my gaze from the sun to my hand, and an unholy horror consumed me when I espied what I had laid my hand upon - a human skull, sun-bleached, bits of discoloured flesh clinging limply to its surface. I drew my gloved hand back in horror and took with it a dram of brownish ichor that had once been its owner's eyes.

I wretched, ejecting nothing but my own stomach juices, as a dread realization overcame me. Below me was a pile of discarded rags that had once been loosely wrapped around the dead. To my left, to my right, in every direction, was nothing but gore - broken limbs bending in every direction, bone shards jutting from distended flesh, thick and opaque puddles of congealing blood, undulating pools of worms and maggots feeding on the bounty before them, and surrounding everything, the undeniable miasma of death. This was far more vivid than the dreams had ever been, and in that instant I was forced to recognize that my dreams had been prophetic after all - for here I was, a living breathing man, lying discarded upon the surface of the Dead Sea.

How was this possible, I wondered? Austhaven is many thousands of miles from Leng; could I have drank so heavily, so excessively, that I was mistaken for dead and loaded upon one of the trans-continental air-coaches? I still wore the heavy coat, gloves, and boots I had decorated myself with the prior evening, though definitely less fashionable now coated with gore as they were. Perhaps, in my cups, I committed some intolerable act and had been convicted by the state - or worse yet, found soulless by the church - and compelled to walk the Long Walk?

Somehow, I found the wherewithal to rise to my hands and knees, finding some footing upon the bones of the dead, and it seemed that Providence, in the most meagre of ways, had shone upon me. Though noon had passed and the sun was already bearing towards its rest in the southern sky, I was able to glimpse, in the west, a shallow cliff face. I had not taken the Long Walk, nor had I been disposed of in the heart of the sea where I would have had no hope for survival. It would be a struggle - but it would not be impossible for me to reach the shore of the Dead Sea, climb to the edge of the pit, and survive this ghastly ordeal.

The journey was slow in the going. Every step I took, every foothold I spotted amidst the rough uneven mass of carrion, could potentially give way and leave me to sink and drown amidst the dead. I tested each step with the utmost of care, often falling to all fours to better spread my weight among the clusters of bone and lumps of skin that could hold it. The heat was unbearable; though Leng is known for being a frigid climate, the chemical processes occurring within the depths of the sea kept it considerably warmer than its environs. My thirst overpowered me; and though all my senses rebelled against the notion, I forced myself to lower my lips into a pool of blood and drink a few sips. It tasted of death and sin, and I evacuated most of it sheer minutes later; it was evident that the sea would provide me no nourishment, and I was doomed to die if I could not reach the shore. Though I could easily have walked three miles in an hour on open land, I found myself making less than half a mile each hour, as the sun drew closer to the southern horizon and the bright orange of day grew a darker blue and purple. It was apparent that I would not make the shore by dusk, and I had no confidence in the moon, that mother of liars, to not guide me around in a circle until I dropped

from exhaustion, so there was nothing to be done but to spend the night at sea. I pulled several of the larger, more intact cadavers together and atop one another to form a raft of sorts, and I lay flat on my back upon it, gazing up at a starless sky, as purple gave way to black.

I slept little that night, fearing that, should I let my eyes close fast again, that they might never re-open. As the moon rose contemptuously over the horizon, the fabled corpse-fires of the sea began to alight, bathing the feculent stew in an eerie gleam. I remembered hearing a rumor supposedly passed down from the soil-harvesters who plied the sea under cover of darkness, that the lights were the souls of the dead, trying to escape and burning up instead. I remembered the doubts of my youth - that my soul would perish in the Dead Sea with my body - as I stared at the gyring blazes that seemed to confirm my fears. I did the only thing I could think of to do in such a dark and seemingly hopeless hour - I prayed.

And in that dark hour, my prayer was answered. I heard a voice, both quiet and bold, humble and resplendent, seeming to whisper and shout at once from some cavernous void in the back of my mind. *Fear not,* it said to me in a language I could not recognize. *I have promised you life eternal; endure now, and it shall be granted.* It was in that instant that any trace of agnosticism I had ever experienced was put paid to; for here, at the edge of the world, in the land of the dead, in the darkest hour of my existence, I knew, without any doubt, that St. Azarius Himself had heard my prayers and had spoken to me.

In time, the first rays of the morning sun began to shine from the north. As soon as I could fix my eyes on the shore, a scant five or so miles ahead, I resolved that I would reach it by sunset. It was unlikely that I could survive another night on the sea without food or water, and St. Azarius Himself had commanded me to carry on - what choice did I have? Hours passed as I picked my way across the wastes. As I drew nearer the shore, the going became easier - here were the ripest of bodies, those delivered by train from the lands closest to Leng, and there lay less distance between them and the bottom of the pit than did those further asea. I was nearly a mile from the shore when I spied an unusually old body amidst the mass

of the newly dead - its skin was dry and practically mummified, leather wrapped over bone. It jutted skyward between two corpses that had lain there a week or so, its eyeless sockets fixed on the heavens, one sinewy claw seeming to grip for dear life to the bosom of one of the newer bodies. A shudder befell me as I considered this remnant that had once been a man - his posture, his stance, the look on his dried face, told me that he had died after arriving in the Dead Sea. Logic dictates that I could not have been the only person in the history of the Empire to have befallen such a fate, but here, it seemed, was the proof.

I reached the shore an hour or so before sunset, and began to crawl and climb my way up the slope to the edge of the pit. I was halfway up when one of the carrion-haulers slouched up to the edge and discharged several hundred cadavers over the edge in my direction. I clung fast to the rocks and prayed, and again I heard St. Azarius urge me to persevere. Though they rolled over me, falling apart on the rocks, wooden caskets and linen wraps disintegrating on the way downward, limbs tearing asunder and buffeting me as they made their way downhill, I managed to avoid losing my grip and rejoining them below. Dusk had fallen by now, but I no longer had need of the light to guide me, for I knew which way up was. It must have been midnight before the slope gave way to level sand, the green glow of the Dead Sea lay behind me, and I knew that I had escaped with my life.

What now, then, I wondered? Though I was free of the pit, there was no succour to be had at its edge; it was a good hundred miles to the nearest town, and even the carrion-haulers dared not overnight here. I glanced around in the darkness, hoping that the corpse-lights would illuminate some sign of salvation, and as I looked westward where the lying moon rose above the plateau, I glimpsed the unlikely silhouette of my rescue; a relief station, from which no light now shone, but which the carrion-haulers surely had need of before making their return trip back to the depots where their next load of unfortunates was to be received.

I recall not whether I admitted myself to the men's chamber or to the women's; it hardly seemed like the most significant of details at the time. All I cared for was that there was a sink within, connected to a

reservoir no doubt resupplied with waters from far outside this accused land. Water! Few sing hymns in its praise but those who have been made to do without. I suckled greedily at the tap like a baby hungry for its mother's milk. Having had my fill, I splashed my face, washing away the gore and sludge that had accumulated during my trek across the Dead Sea. I breathed a sigh of relief that my ordeal had come to an end. In the morning, more carrion-haulers would come. I could flag one down and tell him my story, and by day's end I would be back in my flat in Austhaven, and all of this would be nothing more than a thrilling tale of adventure with which to regale my grandchildren. Clearly I had begun to go mad in that grim viridian night among the corpse-fires and imagined the voice of St. Azarius; now that I was safe, I would need to seek Expurgation for those thoughts, but having done that I would never have to speak or think of that blasphemy again. Sighing, I rose from the sink and met my own gaze in the mirror - and as instantly as the earlier relief had swept me, a new revelation came.

It is said that in ancient epochs, when the world was closer to the stars, St. Azarius struck a bargain with the gods, that man might not die, but live eternal if they followed His teachings. The Temple has always taught that this life is to come in the hereafter; when we die, our souls depart our bodies, and if we are worthy, then St. Azarius will welcome us into the new world of His making.

I know not what negotiations He brokered with the Outer Things, nor what black magicks he authored in those distant ages, but I know now that the immortality He acquired for mankind was not the same immortality that the priests of the Temple had expected Him to deliver. Their vengeance when they realized the truth must have been immense. Perhaps He was the first one doomed to take the Long Walk into the heart of the pit. Perhaps the Dead Sea was built upon Him, that the Temple could hide His disgrace from the world without abolishing the reputation of His Holy Name upon which their power was wrought. I knew now that when I had heard St. Azarius speak to me that night in the Dead Sea, He spoke to me not from some metaphysical world-to-come, but that He was below me in the depths.

When I first beheld myself in the mirror, I vomited. What I expelled

was not the fresh water I had just consumed, but something far more foul; black and brown, malodorous and syrupy, speckled with bits of graying flesh. In an instant, I recalled the details of my birthday celebration that had previously been denied to me; how I was unceremoniously tossed into the street after last call at the Eel & Castle. How I staggered drunkenly along the cobbles en route to my flat, hollering impolite suggestions at the ladies on the kerb. How I lost my footing on the mist-slicked staircase that lead downward to Earl's Street. How I tumbled twice and bashed my head against an old stone on my way down. How the maidens had screamed for help. How the hospitallers struggled to carry me onto a horse-drawn carriage as my life-blood ran down onto the stone.

Be not afraid, the voice spoke again in my head as I peeled the glove off my left hand, taking half of the soggy purple skin with it as I peeled it loose. *I promised life eternal to all those who believe. In you the world shall see the fulfillment of my vow.* The prophecy has been fulfilled, Dear Reader. The new age is upon us. The time has come to cast aside the false declarations of the Temple, which has denied us the truth of St. Azarius' promise and condemned us all to refuse our true immortality in favor of a false utopia.

All of this I realized as the glove slipped free from my hand and I raised it to the face I saw in the mirror, felt with my own hand the point where my skull had caved in on the cobblestone, where shards of rock and bone had forced their way into my exposed brain, and traced my bony, skeletal finger along the contours of my pure, bare, white and skinless face.

Girls' Night Out: Dressing Up

Breakfast arrived at 0700 every day. Iris tried to make sure that she was showered, her bed was made, and her quarters were clean and neat by then. Not that she particularly cared what the white-coated man with the food trays thought of her, but it was the principle of the thing.

She sat at her desk reading a dog-eared novel, waiting for the knock on her door. When it came, she was surprised to also hear a female voice saying, "Hello? Miss Thompson?"

She opened the door curiously. There was an attractive woman of indeterminate race standing there, smiling pleasantly. She was dressed in a neat skirt suit in light grey, over a pale blue dress shirt. The name badge clipped to her lapel read "Adams." It had a Lambda symbol on it, crossed with the number 2.

Mobile Task Forces, then. I'm not familiar with Lambda-2. Must be a new one.

"Iris Thompson?" the woman said. "Andrea Adams. I'm the head of your security detail. I was just wondering if you'd like to join me for breakfast."

Iris glanced up and down the hallway. The two guards at the end of the hall had their weapons slung over their shoulder. They seemed unconcerned about the containment breach. One of them even gave her a smile and a thumbs-up.

"Um," Iris said cautiously. "This must be breaking a ton of rules…"

"Your SCP file was updated this morning," the woman said. "You're being allowed Class 4 Privileges. Consider it thanks for saving all those lives."

Funny that they didn't give me these privileges three weeks ago,

right after the incident. "I think you mean my reward for joining Alpha-9," Iris said.

"You really want to stay in that cell? Just accept the damn reward."

"All right," Iris said reluctantly. "Shall we go?"

"Not yet. Blue scrubs are so last year. Here." Adams thrust a plastic grocery bag towards the other woman. "I'll wait for you to change."

"These jeans feel weird," Iris said. "My legs feel all constricted."

"Did I get your size wrong?" Adams asked. "I looked up the report from your last physical."

"The jeans are fine. I just haven't worn jeans in nine years," Iris pointed out. "And I'd almost forgotten how to tie shoelaces, too." Special Containment Procedures humanoids were only allowed soft slippers. Less opportunity to hang yourself or improvise a weapon without shoelaces.

"Ah. Well, hopefully, you'll have a chance to get back into practice in the near future," Adams said. She opened the door of the Site-17 cafeteria. "After you."

The din of conversation in the mess hall didn't ebb as the two women entered. Word of Iris' updated containment procedures must have gotten around: no one turned to gawk at the SCP walking free in a restricted area. A few did stare at the strikingly attractive woman in the grey skirt suit. Probably some of those stares were also intended for her, the moderately attractive one in t-shirt and jeans.

It was strange how comforting just being looked at felt, compared to wondering if the armed agent was going to decide that you'd taken a threatening action and go for his weapon.

Adams shrugged off the stares like rain and walked confidently up to the counter, picking up two orange plastic trays and passing one to Iris. "Hey, Flames," she said to the bearded man in the white chef's apron. "One Denver Omelet Special." She glanced over at Iris. "What do you want? I'll buy."

"Oh. Um." Iris felt a brief moment of panic: she hadn't had to decide what to have for breakfast in years. She thought back over the variety of meals that had arrived at her cell room door over the years and settled on the one that she'd found most appealing: "Bagel, cream cheese, and fruit salad, please."

"Ah, yes. Breakfast Menu 12," the bearded man said. "You don't need me for that: you can pick up continental breakfast stuff at the cold bar."

"O-oh! I'm sorry," Iris stammered.

"It's all right." The bearded man smiled pleasantly. "First time in my cafeteria, Miss Thompson?"

"… well, yes," Iris said nervously.

"No problem. Hope to see you again later. If you come back for dinner, I'm making my special chili…"

"… which you should not eat unless you want to suffer the wrath of SCP-Six Six Six and a Half," Adams interrupted.

"… I'm not familiar with that one," Iris said seriously. "Which containment block is he in?"

Adams and Flames both laughed out loud.

"All right, so SCP-666 1/2 is… horrible digestive problems," Iris said, "SCP-006-J is gigantic bugs, and SCP-095-J is Comic Sans. Any other **`stupid in-jokes`** I should know about so that I don't embarrass myself again?"

"No, that's about it," Adams said. "I'm surprised you never picked them up during your time in the Mobile Task Forces."

"I hung out with geeks," Iris said. "They mostly made jokes about Portal and Half-Life. 'SCP-003 Lambda is a video game that has the anomalous property of never being completed ever.' That sort of thing."

"Hm. I guess even a group like ours has its cliques and circles. I suppose it's inevitable in an organization as large as ours."

Iris picked up her knife and began spreading cream cheese over her toasted bagel. "I suppose that's true."

Adams smiled. "You agree, then? You're a member of the Foundation?"

"When did I ever say that?"

"Right now. When I referred to 'our' organization and you didn't object."

"Maybe I'm not one of those Sherlock types that picks up on tiny turns of phrase. Not everyone makes a big deal out of the specific words people choose to use."

"You also took interest in the in-jokes among the staff," Adams pointed out. "Which means you have an interest in being part of our culture."

"So what the fuck's your point?" Iris took a vicious bite out of her innocent bagel.

"No point. Just trying to get to know the person they want me to take a bullet for." Adams picked up another forkful of omelet and chewed thoughtfully.

Iris took a bite of her fruit salad.

The silence continued.

"You're supposed to ask me something like 'Well?' Or 'And what do you think'?" Adams prompted gently.

"What, does this conversation have a script now?" Iris retorted.

"Your containment file didn't say anything about sarcasm."

"All right, then, here it is without sarcasm," Iris said, spearing a piece of cantaloupe with her fork. "As long as you do your job, I don't care

what you think about me. You're my minder, not my friend."

"Ah." Adams waved her fork in Iris' general direction. "If I'm not your friend, then who is?"

All my friends are dead. Killed by him.

Iris looked down into her fruit salad. The dark red grapes looked back up at her.

"Is he really that frightening?" Adams asked. There was no accusation in her voice. Just genuine curiosity and concern.

Iris closed her eyes. "He's like… have you ever looked into the eyes of a shark?"

"I've never seen a shark. Not in real life," Adams said.

"Neither have I, but… I've looked into Able's eyes… and I think that if a shark were human, that's the kind of eyes they would have," Iris said. "The kind of eyes who would kill a billion people just to see what their corpses would look like strewn from here to the horizon."

"I can understand why that would be—"

"You don't understand," Iris interrupted. "I wasn't afraid that Able would kill me. I was afraid I'd be the one that he'd keep alive to see it happen."

She pushed her fruit salad away. She wasn't hungry any more.

Adams, meanwhile, had cleaned her plate. She folded her paper napkin up and tossed it onto her tray, then leaned back in her flimsy plastic chair and tapped her fingertip against her lips. "How do you feel about taking a trip off-site?" she asked.

Iris laughed. Then she stopped laughing. "Wait, you're serious?"

"Class 4 Privileges include limited off-site excursions, so long as you're accompanied by Foundation security personnel. I happen to count as Foundation security personnel," Adams said. "You should feel flattered. There aren't many Skips with Class 4 privileges."

"I don't know…"

"Come on," Adams said. "It'll be fun. We can go shopping for clothes and giggle a lot and try on jewelry and drink cosmos and gossip about boys and pretend I'm actually your friend and not just your bodyguard."

"… all right," Iris said. "Except for the 'gossip about boys' part."

"So," Adams asked. "Any thoughts on what you want to do?"

She'd changed her clothes in the intervening time: black jeans, a sleeveless top that looked like a Tiffany lampshade, and a pair of black velvet shoes with dangerously high heels. Iris felt envious of the older woman's ability to walk in those things, or the bold confidence with which she climbed into the driver's seat of the blue sports car in the parking lot.

"None at all," Iris said. "I was just going to follow your lead."

"Well, first of all, we need to get you some clothes. I know the Foundation provides uniforms, but a girl can't wear digi-cam and tac gear all the time. After that, I'm thinking we grab some dinner at this awesome wine bar up-town. You like wine?"

"I actually don't know," Iris admitted. "I've never had any alcohol before."

Adams gave Iris a Significant Look over the tops of her sunglasses.

"I was thirteen when the Foundation recruited me, fifteen when Omega-7 was shut down, and I spent the nine years after that in a cell," Iris pointed out. "Alcohol has never really been in the picture."

"So you never had a twenty-first birthday?" Adams asked.

"Um. Nope?"

A slow, devious smile spread across Adams' lips. "I know exactly what we're gonna do tonight," she said.

"I'm not buying it," Iris said.

"C'mon. It'll bring out your eyes."

"No," Iris said angrily.

Adams sighed and put the baby blue halter top back on the rack.

They were three stores into their shopping trip, and their pile of bags was, quite frankly, ridiculous. Iris wasn't sure how the hell they were going to fit them all into the trunk of Adams' car. Which brought up another issue.

"Where the hell am I going to put this? I don't exactly have a closet big enough to store all this."

"You'll get one," Adams said. "You're due for a living quarters upgrade."

"Class 4 Privileges?"

"Yup. Yet another carrot for being a 'good girl'." Adams rummaged through a rack of cardigans. "You know, maybe I've been getting it all wrong. Everything we've bought so far has been 'girl next door,' but I bet you could totally rock the 'hipster' look. Horn-rimmed glasses, knit beanie, tartans…"

"I don't need glasses," Iris said.

"Neither do I. Doesn't mean I don't look damn good in them." Adams pulled a white cardigan out of the rack, and held it up to Iris. She frowned, shook her head, and replaced it on the rack. "I'm not seeing anything I really like here. Should we move on?"

"Sure. Where next?"

"Well, we could hit up another department store, but I think you've got enough casual wear." Adams grinned. "I think it's time to buy you a suit."

"I feel ridiculous," Iris said.

"You look like a badass," Adams said.

"How come these pockets are all sewn shut?" Iris poked her finger at her jacket pocket, annoyed.

"Because women's fashion sucks that way," Adams pointed out. "Give me a minute with a razor blade and I can fix that for you, not that you'll want to put anything more than a handkerchief in there unless you want to ruin the lines… Damn, that reminds me. Purses. We need to get you some purses. And shoes. We need to do this again soon…"

Iris whimpered. Eight hours at the mall, trying on dozens of outfits, enduring Adams' never-ending critiques and opinions on fashion, and the younger woman was exhausted. They had stopped only to have a quick lunch in the food court before rushing off to continue shopping. Iris wanted nothing more than to collapse onto her cot and take a nap.

Adams, on the other hand, seemed like she could keep this up for days if she wanted. The woman was a machine.

She was tuning out Adams' rambling monologue regarding future fashion expeditions when a familiar-looking sign caught her eye. She cleared her throat. "Hey, Adams?"

"Call me Andrea," the older woman said. "What's up?"

All her hands being full, Iris gestured to the store with her chin.

Adams smiled. "Ah. Sure. Let's check it out."

"Welcome to Camera Shack," the bored-looking teenager behind the counter said. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Yeah," Iris said. She ruthlessly dumped her double-armful of clothing into Adams' arms. "Where's your Polaroid Film?"

"Polaroid?" the pimply-faced teen said dubiously.

"Yeah," Iris said. "I need some film for a One Step 600."

"Shit. I don't think we've carried that in years. Hang on, let me get my manager." He climbed down off his stool and opened up the door to the back room. "Hey, Greg!" he shouted.

"Yeah?" a voice called back.

"Got a lady out here asking about Polaroid film."

"Hang on." There was a shuffling sound, and then the clink of tools, and then an older man in a plaid shirt with an impressively large beard came out of the back room. "Polaroid, huh? You and me both, kid," the man said sympathetically. "What model?"

"One Step 600," Iris said. "G1."

"Ooh wow. That one's a classic," the older man said. "Yeah, we haven't carried 600 series film since Polaroid went out of business in 2008."

"Oh," Iris said in a small voice.

"There's this company, calls itself Impossible, bought out the machinery and manufactures the film under a new label. You could try them."

"Could you put in an order for me, then?"

"I could. But to be honest, it would be easier for you just to order it online. It would arrive at about the same time, and you could probably get it for cheaper," the older man said.

"Oh. Thank you."

"Hey, no problem." The older man gave her a friendly smile. "Just glad to see someone out there still appreciates the classics, you know?"

"Thanks," Iris said.

Adams waited until they were in the car before asking the question that was on both their minds: "Is this going to be a problem?"

"I don't know," Iris admitted. "I tried off-brand film once, and it didn't work as well as the real stuff. But it could have been a quality-of-manufacture issue." She gazed quietly out the window, her contemplation only slightly ruined by the gigantic pile of clothes and boxes stuffed into the back seat of the tiny blue sports car.

"You know, I never did get a clear story about your abilities," Adams said. "Does the type of camera matter?"

"I'm not sure," Iris said. "With my old camera, I get full manipulation of the scene. Real-time window. Other cameras… it depends on a lot of things. Film quality, sharpness of picture, development time… Other Polaroids worked best. One theory was that the sooner the negatives get printed, the better the fidelity."

"Hm. So one reason why the Polaroid works so well might not be the camera itself, but the speed at which it develops the photos?" Adams said thoughtfully.

"That's one theory. We never really tested it, though," Iris said.

Adams immediately pulled a U-turn across three lanes of traffic, prompting a round of loud honking from irate drivers.

"What the fuck!?" Iris shouted.

"We're going back to the mall," Adams said, her jaw set with determination.

"Hello!" the chipper young woman in the khakis and blue polo shirt said. "Welcome to B—"

"I need to buy a tablet and a smart phone," Adams said forcefully.

"Uh… okay," the Best Buy employee stammered. "Which bran—"

"I don't care." Adams took off her sunglasses and fixed the hapless employee with an intense stare. "Just show me the ones with the most megapixels."

"We're gonna get in trouble," Iris groaned.

"We can't get in trouble. This is what they're asking you to do, right?" Adams placed the empty smart phone box on the roof of her car, next to the box from the tablet computer.

"They want me on a Mobile Task Force, yeah," Iris pointed out. "But it hasn't even been activated yet!"

"Call it a training exercise, then." Adams stepped away from the car and glanced up and down the beach. At this time of year, the beach was nearly empty of tourists. "All right," she said. "Give it a shot."

"How!? I don't know where the shutter button is! There's all sorts of… little pictures and stuff!"

"Oh, for crying out loud… I keep forgetting you've never seen a smart phone before. Press that. Then press this. To take a picture, touch this thing here. Get it?"

"All right," Iris muttered. "Here goes."

She held up the tablet computer in front of her eyes and tapped the part of the screen Adams had indicated. There was a flash of blue light, painfully bright in the dimming orange sunset.

A moment later, an image of the two empty cardboard boxes sitting on the roof of Adams' car appeared on the screen.

"Okay," Iris said dubiously. "What now?"

"Well, give it a try. Do your thing," Adams said.

Iris swallowed hard. She timidly placed her hand upon the smooth, cool glass. She flinched. "Feels weird."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not exactly. More like… trying to push my hand through tightly-packed wet sand." Iris took a deep breath and pushed a bit harder. Her fingertips sank into the glass like still water. At the same time, a ghostly image of a hand appeared in the air in front of Adams' car

and pushed against the two empty boxes.

They tipped over onto their sides.

"Nice work," Adams said admiringly. "That's gonna come in handy."

"I'm out of practice. And this thing doesn't feel right." Iris frowned. Her fingertips were a bit numb. Rubbing her hands together helped. "With my old camera, I could have picked up one of those boxes and stacked them on top of the other."

"Well, keep practicing," Adams said. "If you can pull it off with a digital, you won't be limited by the amount of film you're carrying."

"Yeah." Iris wiped her fingers on the hem of her T-shirt. "I think there might be a knack to it that I just don't get yet."

"Well, if all else fails, you've at least got a neat little toy to play around with," Adams said.

"I'm not sure what I'd ever use it for, but thanks," Iris said.

"You say that now, but wait until I show you Youtube."

"Youtube? That stupid little site with the home videos?"

"Oh man… you have no idea." Adams grinned.

They threw the boxes into the trash and got back into the car.

"Most people, when they find out about my powers, start talking about ways I could use them to kill people," Iris said.

"Your psych profile says that's a bad subject to bring up with you, so I didn't." Adams checked her rear-view mirrors and pulled out of the parking space.

"Oh." Iris looked out the car window as they headed down the coast highway. "Yeah, they tried to make me do it, but I refused. Locked myself in my quarters. They threatened to drag me out of my room, but the Omega-7 guys wouldn't let them."

"Your Mobile Task Force got into a fight with site security?"

"Oh yeah," Iris said. A fond, happy smile crossed her face, the first peaceful expression Adams had seen all day. "They set up a barricade in the hallway outside my room. Oversight threatened to demote them all to D-Class. Adrian told them to suck his ass."

"Adrian?" Adams' brow furrowed.

"Adrian Andrews, yeah," Iris said. "We called him **'A.A.'** He was kind of like a big brother to me. He and Beats."

"Beats… ?"

"Beatrix Maddox. His fiance." Iris flinched as she remembered how that love story had ended. She soldiered on. "She died. He died too. I can't remember how. A lot of us don't remember the details about things that happened back then. Some kind of CK-Class Restructuring. But when I think about it, I feel sick and sad, so I'm sure it was horrible…"

Something caught Iris' eye.

Adams was gripping the wheel tightly. Her knuckles were actually turning white. The expression on the older woman's face was blank and still. Empty, even.

"… are you okay?" Iris asked.

"Hm?" Adams replied. "Yeah, I'm fine." Her voice was completely calm and collected as she released the steering wheel from its death grip. "Well, we're here," she said cheerfully. "We'd better get inside, and then you can get changed."

"Why the hell would I want to get changed?" Iris asked.

"What, you seriously want to go clubbing in jeans and a t-shirt?"

"Clubbing…" Iris was perplexed. Then she got concerned. Then she saw the beach house.

"Adams?" she asked. "Where exactly are we?"

"We're definitely going to get into trouble now!" Iris groaned. "This has to break some kind of regulation. Misuse of Foundation Resources, maybe…"

"If an agent comes by needing to hide, he can duck behind your shopping," Adams said primly. "Besides, I don't think he'd complain overmuch about having to lay low in a safehouse with a pair of pretty ladies."

"You're a bad influence," Iris moaned. "You're going to get me demoted before I even join the teams. Aren't you supposed to be protecting me?"

"From bullets, not from bad decisions. Shower is upstairs. We have one hour until our dinner reservation." She pulled her smart phone from her pocket and began to dial.

Iris shook her head and marched upstairs, grumbling annoyedly.

Adams walked to the window. The phone didn't even finish ringing once before it was answered. "Clef," the voice on the other end said. "Go."

"Adams here. Mission report follows: everything is fine, we're having a good time. Rest and relaxation is proceeding more or less as planned. Expect SCP-105 back in containment by tomorrow noon at latest."

"Cool," Clef said. "How's it going?"

"Like I said, it's fine," Adams said curtly. "She's fine. We're all fine. That's all."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "Tomorrow noon, huh? You guys having a slumber party?"

"Fuck off, sir." Adams hung up. She took a moment to vent her frustrations towards her boss with an angry groan, then dialed the next name on her list.

This is a bad idea. There's no way this can end except in tears.

So was picking up that agent's gun and shooting back. As long as you're doing stupid things, may as well go all the way.

Yeah, but this is a different kind of stupid.

Exactly. For one thing, this probably won't get you killed or kidnapped.

Depends on where Adams wants to go clubbing.

She's your security detail. I don't think she's going to take you anywhere you're likely to get shivved.

Unless this is actually a complicated decommissioning.

Are you gonna wear them or not?

Ugh. Fine.

Iris pulled on the boots and carefully got to her feet.

The girl that looked back at her through the mirror… looked like a girl who'd spent the last nine years locked up in a cell and still wasn't used to wearing civilian clothes. The high-heeled boots made her knees all wobbly. The skirt felt breezy and exposed. The scarf was uncomfortably reminiscent of a noose.

This isn't fair. I'm supposed to be all confident and sexy at the end of the dress-up montage. Pretty Woman ***lied*** *to me.*

She pulled the boots off and tossed them away and searched through her bags until she found the red canvas sneakers she'd insisted on buying along with the more hazardous footwear Adams had picked out for her. She traded out the skirt for her jeans.

The scarf could stay. The scarf was awesome.

Downstairs, she heard the doorbell ring.

Iris froze. Cautiously, she moved to the bedroom door and eased it

open, just a bit.

She could hear the front door open. "Hey!" Adams said. "You made it!"

"Yup!" an unfamiliar female voice answered. "We're the only ones who could, though. The rest of us are swamped."

"It was short notice. Not too surprised. Iris is getting dressed, but she should be down in a few minutes."

Iris sighed, relieved. She opened the door and walked downstairs.

There were two unfamiliar women in the living room. One of them was taller and plump in a motherly kind of way. She dressed like it too, wearing comfy-looking jeans and a light blue blouse with ruffles. The other one had glasses, short wavy brown hair, and wore a sweater vest over a white blouse and dark brown slacks.

"Cool," Adams said. "She's here. Iris? This is Blaire Roth and Chelsea Elliott. Friends of mine."

"Hi," the shorter woman (Chelsea) said, waving shyly. She had a friendly, if timid smile, and her oval glasses perched delicately on the end of her prominent nose.

"Good to meet you," the older woman (Blaire) said. She gave Iris a friendly hug, which was oddly reassuring.

"Awesome. Everyone's friends. That'll make it easier to celebrate," Adams said.

"… celebrate what?"

"Your twenty-first birthday, of course!" Adams said. "It's a few years late, but every girl deserves to have one!"

A moment of silence as three of the women in the room digested this new piece of information.

"… bar crawl?" Blaire asked with some trepidation.

"Bar crawl," Adams confirmed.

Iris turned pale.

Girls' Night Out

« **Dressing Up** | **`Getting Drunk`** | **`Raising Hell`** »

If It Looks Like a Duck, Swims Like a Duck, and Quacks Like a Duck, It's Probably a Shapeshifting Living Nightmare

Once upon a time there was a Duckman Drakeman, who was legally but not religiously (very, very few members of the waterfowl family *Anatidae* are actually religiously inclined. Many of them *eat* fish, for Jesus' sake!) married to a charming duck, who bore a strong resemblance to Claudia Schiffer, especially when she moved her head to let her hair flow hither and thither for the L'Oréal ad.

Clauduck was soon expecting. She didn't tell anyone, but she sure hoped to become The Duck with The Golden Eggs, so she ate gold dust and put the blame on pregnancy cravings. It didn't work.

Wait wait wait, I need to pour in some suspense here. Take 2.

… pregnancy cravings. She soon stopped because gold doesn't taste good (if cravings you must have, might as well be caviar or crème de marrons Clément Faugier à la vanille[1]) and the dust made her sneeze. And anyway, it didn't work.

She soon gave birth to a litter of adorable little duckies and drakies, whom she all baptized Caesar because they were born by Caeserean section.
(What? Oh, yeah. Look, I did say *very few of them*, didn't I?)

All adorable? No. One of them… was not.

(See what I'm doing here? Suspense again. Creating a new paragraph and having a few short sentences in it makes said sentences look more important. Clever, huh?)

Yeah, it was a duckie drakie. He had the nose, ears, four legs and talons required for the job. But he was not… or was he? He didn't look good at all. And when he padded with its siblings after Clauduck on their pond, he did go 'quack', but that 'quack' sounded

more like the hidden and sinful child of the Concorde taking off from Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport, that time, yeah, but also all the other times put together, and the eerie song of blue whales from the North Pacific Gyre when they've been playing too long with plastic bags, with just a touch of the distress signal from *Alien*.

Clauduck had an extensive maternal instinct, and Drakeman loved his wife, so they kept their upper lip stiff and raised the strange drakie as they would their own, since, you know, he *was* their own: they'd asked for the video of the Caesarean section and the ob-gyn obliged, and lo', here it was, the fifth newborn extracted from its mother's belly, already subtly different and ear-splittingly cacophonous.

In the evenings, when all the babies were tucked away in their cradles and Caesar V finally quit making that ducking god(I did say *very few*, damn you, stop interrupting!)awful noise of his - on top of everything else he was a difficult child, severely allergic to his mother's milk and always developing bottom rashes like you wouldn't believe - Clauduck and Drakeman would hopefully discuss the hopeless situation. Only when Drakeman had had a trying day at the office[2] did he occasionally accuse his wife of cheating on him with the postman, which only gave him another trying day at work with colleagues going 'What's the matter, Drake, bumped into a door again?'. Clauduck and Drakeman would talk about the future of their offspring, or lack thereof, and sometimes ventured into mentioning *that* hopeful fairy tale, but they did agree that fairy tales were cryptic allegories meant to educate the masses and nowhere like a mirror of real life.

And Clauduck prayed. She prayed discreetly, but she prayed a lot.

And then it happened.

Caesar V's bar-mitzvah.

Was there milk in the cake?

Just because, you know, rite of passage into adulthood?

Miffed because his previous siblings' coming-of-age celebrations[3]

were too successful?

Apprehensive because his next siblings' coming-of-age celebrations[4] would be?

Anyway. Caesar V cut the cake with a huge knife, giggled and **roared**.

The Moon zipped away, stabilizing 2 AU from Earth.

Justin Bieber stopped singing. Yeah, forever. It's an ill wind, huh?

Eta Carinae (not the author, the star) decided to wait no longer and blew.

Anak Krakatoa decided to do like Daddy.

The Northern Pacific Gyre thought it could do much better than The Old Faithful. It did.

The Pillars of Hercules got drunk, leaned on each other and collapsed. So much for beaches in Provence in the long term, ha ha, that'll teach them to raise the prices of everything at the start of every touristic season, assholes! And next time there is a Zanclean flood, I'll be there with a camera, dammit, YouTube, here I come!

Caesar V was momentarily nonplussed at seeing everyone around him dead with bleeding ears, but took it in stride. He carefully put down the knife (you should always be careful with those things), straightened up, grew to a size slightly inferior to that of the Mont Blanc[5], bumped his head on the goddamn ceiling and settled for the size of Dolph Lundgren in his prime. While he was at it, he also settled for Dolph's looks at the same age - a wise choice.

Then he realized he was hungry but not in the mood for cake, so white shark - oh shit no, no sea. Okay. T-rex.

He remained a T-rex for a while, but when there was no longer anything to eat in the vicinity (those motherfuckers eat *a lot*), he thought about it. Plus, T-Rex extinct, so no mating: tough. He tried a few other glorious, powerful shapes for shits 'n giggles - that kept him busy, which was good, because boredom. But female Siberian

tigers were quite far away, female white sharks were still in the goddamn sea and he'd always been afraid of waves and anyway without the moon at the proper place seas and oceans were in a mess, and as an African elephant he kept being hunted for his tusks by rare but extremely determined and well-equipped survivors, something he found mighty irritating. He was also a very beautiful and delicately scented Papa Meilland red rose for a while, but just sitting there and looking pretty, the boredom was *excruciating*.

Then, as a black panther (still no mate but aesthetically pleasing), he happened upon a duck pond. With ducks.
Why not, he thought.
Plenty of food. Plenty of mates. Plenty of ponds. Plenty of shapes to shift into if drakes got into a competitive mood.

Just to frighten his rivals away, you understand. Because, for all being a shapeshifting living nightmare, he was not and had never been a cannibal.
And, he solemnly swore on the spot before shifting[6], he would never be.

Footnotes
1. Clément Faugier's vanilla-flavoured chestnut cream
2.http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-bright-s-personnel-file
3. The parents were always careful to avoid sibling rivalry. They were nice that way. Caesar VI's is in two weeks, and Caesar VII's middle of next month. You're all invited.
4. See previous footnote
5. The mountain, not the pens
6. Don't you know? APanthera pardus' oath is universally considered as much more reliable than anAix galericulata's.

Charla Flores sat on the changing-room bench, slowly folding a spare uniform. It was brand new and spotless, a far cry from her old lab-coat with its familiar stains of iodine and bleach. What new stains would she acquire?

She shook off the reverie as Dr. Reynard walked in. The older woman dropped a handful of memetics VR headsets into her locker with a clatter, and gave an irritated sigh.

"Is everything okay?" ventured Charla.

"How can you ask such a thing?" Dr. Reynard looked genuinely shocked. "The situation is unworkable. Intolerable. It is a personal insult."

She sat down hard on the same bench as Charla, who realised that she had become a de facto confidant. Presumably that was through a shortage of options; she had seen how prickly the memetics researcher had been in her interactions with other team members.

Charla tried a conciliatory approach. "They're a little different to other MTFs, I know, but -"

"Different?" Dr. Reynard's tone was scoffing. "They are entirely unprofessional. For a memetics consultant, Agent Anderson has no post-graduate qualifications in his subject, and that Dee woman seems to have no schooling whatsoever. One of their agents is an old, deaf man, and apart from Zhao, the rest are inexperienced children!"

Charla looked stung. Dr. Reynard waved her hand hurriedly.

"I do not include you in this, my dear. We are both in the same position, brought into this job on false conditions, unwillingly. If you wish, I could easily include you in my application for reassignment."

"Reassignment?" Charla hadn't remotely considered it. "No. Leaving my last posting was hard enough. Besides, everyone here seems so, well, so normal. And nice. Would you go back to your last team?"

"No, sadly that would not be possible," said Reynard, stiffening. "I would certainly find something else. But you would prefer to stay? You are not concerned by the danger of this misguided excursion? This Dr. Narváez is surely a madman."

This sparked Charla to a more spirited response. "Dr. Narváez is an expert in perception-altering and dimensional anomalies! One of the most decorated in the Foundation. He has seen things beyond any of our experience."

"How much of what Dr. Narváez has seen is real, and how much is inside his head?" Dr. Reynard retorted. "I doubt even he knows for sure. Trusting such a man is folly. I trust the facts. The last time anyone went to this place, eleven agents died."

"Of course this is dangerous," said Charla. "All MTFs face dangers, and we have been training for them. Besides, no-one was hurt either time Dr. Narváez went to Alagadda."

Dr. Reynard gave a dark look. "But Dr. Narváez isn't going to Alagadda this time. Remember that. It will just be the MTF, on its own." She stood, closing her locker door firmly, and left the room without saying more.

Charla watched her leave, then looked back down at her uniform. Just the MTF. Her MTF, now.

In the Site cafeteria, Mike and Zhao found a quiet table. Mike had hardly looked at Zhao on the walk over, and she waited quietly while he busied himself with his food for a few minutes.

"It's not that I'm scared of going," he said finally. "I just don't know whether it makes sense, you know? Is it even really Emma's idea? She's been meeting so often with the Site Director."

"I think that the Commander knows her own mind," said Zhao. "She was the one who set up the training. She brought in Dr. Narváez."

Mike looked up from over his mashed potato. "And she didn't even tell you what she was planning?"

"No." Zhao sounded contemplative.

"But doesn't she have to? I mean, your views are important. You're our lieutenant!"

"And Emma is the commander," replied Zhao, the words dropping like a lead weight on the conversation.

"Sorry," said Mike, abashed. "Helen, I didn't mean - I think you would have made a great commander. Once Richards - well, you know."

That brought an ironic smile back to Zhao's face. "No I wouldn't," she said. "I'm not cut out for it. I talked about it with Richards, back when he first appointed me. And anyway, I've never wanted to. Some people are natural leaders, and some are better at being second in command. I make sure the plans get executed, keep an eye on the team. It's what I'm good at. I don't need anything else."

"You are good at it."

"Suck up!" said Zhao, with a grin.

Mike grinned too, and they ate for a while before his thoughts brought him full circle.

"It's just, going to Alagadda, you know? You should have heard what 2992 said about it - he sounded really scared. It doesn't seem like something that the Commander - the ex-Commander, I mean - would do."

Zhao lowered her glass of water and raised an eyebrow. "I'm not so

sure. You've only known Richards for a little while - I've worked with him since back when we were 'Hear No Evil'. Things were different then."

"I hope that he's okay," said Mike. "I know I shouldn't, but…"

"I know what you mean," Zhao replied. "Although I'm more worried about Emma. It's a huge responsibility, all those decisions, and she's still so young."

"Emma is pretty tough." Mike cocked his head. "And she has you to support her."

He was aiming for another grin, but Zhao just chewed absently, brows furrowed. They both ate on in silence.

The guard opened the door to the tiny visitors' room and Emma walked in, taking a seat on one side of the glass partition. The chair on the other side was empty.

Emma waited, thinking about what she wanted to ask, mind racing. She pulled at the collar of her uniform jacket. This was probably her last opportunity before the mission. She needed every edge she could get.

Finally, a buzzer sounded and the door on the other side opened. In walked ex-Commander Samuel Richards.

He looked older than she remembered, and thinner. He folded his tall frame down into the seat opposite. If he was surprised to see her there, he didn't show it. He said nothing.

Emma knew he wouldn't be interested in small-talk. "They have your Ethics Committee hearing scheduled for a month from now," she said. "I presume they told you?"

Richards nodded slowly.

"And have you remembered anything?" She knew that wasn't how amnestics worked, but it was worth trying.

The man behind the glass was impassive.

"You know what their decision will be, if you don't help them. Discharge, full amnesticisation and monitoring. Dishonor. You can't want that - not after your career."

"My career isn't important." Richards sounded hoarse.

"But to be labelled a traitor to the Foundation -"

"I was protecting the Foundation!" snapped Richards. His jaw quivered with coiled tension.

Emma could sense an opening. "I believe you," she said. "I don't know whether the Committee will, but I understand why you took 012. Tell me something, anything you can, and I can help you."

"You?" Richards stared hard at her.

"Yes. I know what Pherson is like. I worked with him."

"And that's exactly why I don't trust you," Richards replied, folding his arms. "You worked on 012, you could easily have been corrupted by it." His gaze darkened. "For all I know, you could be working with Pherson, trying to recover it for him. Or trying to take it for yourself."

"Says the man locked up for doing exactly that!" Emma's blood was up, her voice sharp.

"I'm the only one who could be trusted to keep it safe."

"The only one?" Now it was Emma's gaze that burned at the glass between them. "And yet you have an accomplice."

At that, Richards looked genuinely shocked. "What?"

"Maybe not at the time you stole 012, but definitely since," continued Emma. "You walk in here to see me wearing the insignia of your MTF. Wearing the Commander's stripes you used to wear. And you don't react at all? You already knew. Someone has been feeding you information."

She knew that if Richards hadn't lied very well, he could certainly stonewall. He said nothing. Emma berated herself for losing her temper. It had felt good to get a reaction from him, but it meant he wouldn't answer any more questions.

Emma stood up to leave, turning back from the door to add, "If you change your mind about helping me, let me know. Or I guess I could just ask your conspirator."

As she walked back along the hall, she wondered who it was. Probably Dee.

"I don't trust that bitch." The forend of the pump-action shotgun slid back into place with a pronounced *clack*.

Hennessy looked over mildly from where he had been checking the sub-sonic stun grenades. *Careful, Dee. That's our Commander you're talking about,* he signed.

"Not my Commander," Dee responded with a snort. She put the empty weapon back on the rack and picked up the next to check the mechanism. "It's what she *did* to the Commander that means I don't trust her."

What she did? Richards admitted that he stole 012.

"And she ratted him out for it." Dee wasn't brooking any argument.

Hennessy raised both white eyebrows. *She worked it out, you mean. Mace was the rat.* He looked down at the back of his right hand for a second, absently curling the fingers into a fist.

"Since when are you her number one fan?"

Hardly. Hennessy laughed. *That's probably reserved for Mike. Anyway, you've only known one Commander for the Beasts. Stark won't be the worst we've had.*

Wiping the dust from the noise-amplification rig, Dee leaned forward. "I don't know if you noticed, but she's a damn slave-driver."

Hennessy raised his hands to tease Dee for complaining about a little work, but thought the better of it. Not when she was in this mood. He made do with a shrug.

"You can't be that relaxed," she said. "Stark is taking us into a spatial anomaly full of hostiles. The task force isn't equipped for that."

We've done okay in the field so far.

"Jesus! On earth!" Dee slapped the side of the speaker she was cleaning. "Against an old man and some shitty robots! Have you read the files about Alagadda?"

It's just about knowing what to look out for. Where's your sense of adventure? he signed back.

Dee strode around the low shelf, standing right in Hennessy's face. "Bullshit! That's bullshit, H, and you know it. I've been here more than twenty years, and you never wanted adventure."

The old man didn't move, didn't reply.

"What's wrong with you these days?" Dee continued. "You've changed, H. Maybe the others don't see it, but you can't fool me. You used to be a professional!"

Hennessy started to respond, but Dee cut him off.

"You don't care any more. You sit around being a smart-ass, joking with Mike instead of helping the Commander, and you go rushing into danger like a goddamn cowboy! You don't respect the rules, you don't give a shit about the safety of your team, and you sure as hell don't care about your own -"

Sudden undertanding sucked away Dee's breath.

"H, tell me you aren't - tell me that's not why you - H?"

For a second she looked at Hennessy, imploring him for a denial. He had none.

All Dee's anger returned at once. "Well fuck you then! You wanna die, do it on your own time. Don't put me at risk."

By the time he had started to reply, she had turned away and was storming out. Hennessy couldn't lipread her final retort: "I'm sure your precious new Commander would be happy to get you killed!". He picked up the dust-cloth from the floor and went back to work.

It was getting late. Roger Anderson strode the deserted corridors of the Site, barely paying attention to his surroundings. He had been taken off his Archives shifts, but was yet to move into the MTF quarters, and the walks were hell on his joints. But he knew he wouldn't sleep until he had shared what he'd learned.

Before he knew it, he found himself outside the door to the Eta-11 Commander's office. He could see light seeping from the threshold; he wasn't surprised to see Emma was still working. He knocked twice and came in.

"Commander, I need to talk to you about Dr. Reynard. I was looking at her history and -"

Roger cut off in shock. Emma was at her desk, crying.

He took a step backwards. "I'm so sorry for barging in, Em - Commander," he stuttered.

"No, no - it's okay, Roger. Don't leave." She wiped her eyes. "What did you want?"

"That's not important," said Roger, walking around the desk. "Are you all right?"

"I don't think I can do this." Emma sounded desperate. "Any of it."

Roger felt alarm, and pity, and a strange kind of relief. "Emma, you're doing fine."

"You don't understand," she replied, shaking her head. "I say these things, and make these plans, but all the time, everything feels out of control. I don't belong here. What am I doing?"

"The right thing. You have uncovered more about 012 in the past few weeks than in years of study. You've pulled this MTF into shape. Hell, I even did a sit-up yesterday." He laughed weakly, to match the joke.

"How do I know I'm making the right decisions?"

Roger gave a taut smile which he hoped was encouraging. "You can't. Not for sure. You just do your homework, take advice from the right people, and do your best."

"But I could be putting the squad in danger," said Emma, although her voice sounded more certain now.

"If danger is what the task requires, then that is what we've signed up to. I've been here a long time, and it never gets any easier to put people at risk. When you do find it easy, that's when I'll worry."

Emma straightened her hair, pulling herself together, becoming the Commander again. "So I take advice from the right people. What's your advice?"

Roger considered bringing up Dr. Reynard, and decided against it. Emma had enough on her plate. He contented himself with a final thought on his way out the door.

"My advice is, don't put too much trust in the Foundation. I've seen a lot, and it's taught me that when a place gets too used to keeping secrets, you can't ever know for sure what they're hiding."

The voice on the other end of the line was insistent.

"What are your concerns?"

"I'm not sure whether she represents a liability or an asset."

"Is she a risk to the mission?"

"No, I don't think so. But there are other risks."

"We can take care of them, Director Arora. You should concentrate

on your role."

"I understand."

Site-Director Arora put down the phone and turned his stereo back on. The comforting voices of Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald filled his office.

Elsewhere, the opening strains of Ligeti's "Requiem" stole out from hidden speakers in the darkened warehouse. Stuart Pherson, once of the Foundation, bathed in the music and was borne upwards upon it. He knew it well, but hearing it again he felt new purpose in the twisting voices.

That purpose was part of him, too. And his fellow thieves, elsewhere in the building, preparing in their own ways. They were so different from him, yet alike - drawn together like singers joining the song. Pherson closed his eyes, breathing deeply as the music swelled.

And then at once all sound fell into a chasm of silence.

Pherson opened his eyes, and saw the figure before him. It was robed and masked, towering in the dim light. When it spoke, Pherson felt he could hear the echoes of cawing crows.

"You have **the baton**." It was a demand.

Pherson gave an almost instinctive bow. "Yes." He pulled it from the bag at his feet, passing it to a black-gloved hand. Pherson shivered at the touch.

The baton disappeared within the flowing robes. "More is expected."

"Yes, my patron." Pherson's understanding was instinctive too. "We are ready. But the Foundation -"

"The Foundation has grown soft," said the figure, implacable. "It cannot prevent the tide of history now it has turned. Its actions are unimportant. We will bring the Saint's return. You must find the score."

Pherson looked pained. "The score is lost, stolen from us. The Foundation cannot find it and neither can we."

The black shape before him seemed to grow larger. "Not that score. The others. Only two are required, and you will find them."

"Where, my master?" Pherson asked hungrily.

"Tune your instruments. Assemble the orchestra. You will go to Alagadda."

Duke 'till Dawn

Foreword by O5-2: *On - - , an investigation was launched into the continued viability of SCP-083. Several factors were taken into account, such as the relative danger involved in sustained containment and cost-benefit of the costly procurement of virgin blood on a regular basis. In conclusion, a unanimous decision to terminate SCP-083 was made amongst the O5, and handed down to Site 19 administrators. After researching the difficulties involved in terminating a regenerating, superhuman, and potential Keter object, the termination was set in motion. The man chosen for the task was an old standby, a man of great experience and expertise in the elimination of humanoid SCP objects of great destructive potential. Known for his clean, almost surgical method, he was quickly approved to carry out the termination.*

Unfortunately, he was not available.

Despite urging from peers and subordinates, Dr. Kondraki was chosen to perform the termination. After giving himself the proper clearance and approval to do so through a loophole he had found in relevant regulations, O5 grudgingly accepted his self-appointment. O5-8 assuaged the board's fears with Dr. Kondraki's impressive credentials, and claimed that given such an important responsibility, he might finally take his position seriously.*

*It should be noted here that O5-8 was a new appointment, and had not been present for the previous disciplinary actions involving the senior doctor.

Included below are the relevant logs and documentation concerning the "Duke" termination.

Note: *For information involving the collateral damages sustained during the termination, See Document 083-D-Kk. -* O5-2

Containment Log 083-DK - ¬-

Dr. Kondraki enters SCP-083's containment, carries a folding table and two chairs with him. Proceeds to set up all three, as originally planned, taking a seat on one end.

Dr. Kondraki: Well, isn't this a nice little accommodation. They treat you well, Duke, real well for something out of a Bram Stoker novel.

SCP-083 takes the seat across from him.

SCP-083: Well, I must be doing something right doctor… you know, come to think of it I don't think I've seen you around Site 19.

Dr. Kondraki: Good, you shouldn't have. Now, let's get on with this interview already, I've got better things to do than chat with a bloodsucker.

SCP-083: *[laughs]* I'm not calling you on your diet, am I? Besides, I asked for the interview, and as you know I do get what I want.

Dr. Kondraki: Sure, sure. Although I remember that you requested a woman, hope you're not too disappointed, Count. *[Dr. Kondraki proceeds to light a cigarette, and produces a container of a specially treated fluid. In the pre-termination report, Dr. Kondraki did not specify the contents for security reasons.]*

SCP-083: I can't say I'm pleased to accept a brutish specimen of humanity such as yourself, over a lovely morsel of femininity. Don't worry, I'll just have to make it up with Ms. once we're finished here.

Dr. Kondraki proceeds to unscrew the top from the container, and sets it to the side. SCP-083 appears to recoil from the smell.

Agent Infred stepped forward to frisk Doctor Kondraki. He swiftly liberated a hand gun from Kondraki's person.

Agent Infred: Sorry sir, this isn't authorized.

Dr. Kondraki: Right, whatever. So, why don't you tell me about yourself, Drac? Are you the mythical force of darkness that plagues the psyche of humanity, or are you just a spoiled manchild playing vampire?

SCP-083: [Looks a bit annoyed] I don't think I like your attitude doctor. Or your lack of respect.

Dr. Kondraki: *[Blows smoke in SCP-083's direction]* Funny, I don't recall giving a shit.

Dr. Kondraki proceeds to grab the container, and splash the liquid onto SCP-083, far before containment teams and backup agents could get into position.

SCP-083: What…the fuck did you splash me with?

Dr. Kondraki: Cat urine and garlic juice, batboy, with a bit of silver nitrate.

Dr. Kondraki flips the collaspable table up into SCP-083, and grabs a firearm from under the table, muttering about 'Always keeping a backup'. He discharges his handgun seven times into SCP-083's chest and neck, before producing a wooden stake from his lab coat. The bullets were confirmed to be comprised of a silver alloy. None of these actions had been planned or approved.

Dr. Kondraki: Cross that off the list of things I've always wanted to do.

Post-Incident Interview DK-083
Interviewer: Dr.
Interviewee: Dr. Kondraki

Dr. : At what point did you conclude that SCP-083 might be vulnerable to the same weaknesses of a stereotypical vampire, despite no previous evidence?

Dr. Kondraki: Honestly, I was guessing. I figured, either it worked and I got done early enough to catch some lunch, or I'd have to think fast before he killed me.

Dr. : Think fast? That's it?

Dr. Kondraki: Yeah. I couldn't think of anything else, so I decided to play it by ear.

Dr. : You're saying you made it up as you went along? Isn't that grossly irresponsible, considering SCP-083's capabilities?

Dr. Kondraki: He's dead, ain't he? I don't have to explain myself if I get the job done.

Dr. : Alright, fair enough, but I have to wonder about one more thing.

Dr. Kondraki: Shoot.

Dr. : Why cat urine?

Dr. Kondraki: Well, if I was wrong and it didn't work, he'd still be the one covered in cat piss. Didn't think he'd take offense like he did, though.

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-963-21

Interviewer: And, after reviewing the logs, do you think Kondraki acted recklessly?

Bright: (Silence)

Interviewer: Dr. Bright?

Bright: This… This tape is un-doctored?

Interviewer: That is correct Dr. Bright.

Bright: (Dr. Bright shows signs of agitation, swearing in several different languages, and throwing equipment about the room.)

Interviewer: Dr. Bright! What's the matter?

Bright: Not only did I bet that asshole five grand that he wouldn't be able to throw cat piss at 083, but he didn't even have the good grace to die during the termination! Do you realize how much I'm going to lose from paying out on that? God damn!

At this point in the logs, we are unsure how Dr. Kondraki survived the following moments after the failed termination, due to the destruction of all surveillance equipment beforehand. Security cameras outside of SCP-083's containment showed Dr. Kondraki and SCP-083 exiting the containment approximately half an hour later. Forensic examination of the damages incurred within the containment are underway. Regardless, a red alert was issued, and security teams were dispatched to contain SCP-083 and get Dr. Kondraki to safety, including Mobile Strike Force Rho-2 "Hawthorne's Heroes". As hindsight shows, it would have been more economical to have just shot Dr. Kondraki. - O5-2

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-KPC-13

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: It really was a pity about ol' eighty-three… I had a couple of things I wanted to do with him. Like stick him in nine-one-four on various settings and see what happened. Or see how exactly how he regenerated from decapitation. Or how he reacted to two-one-seven. Or if he'd be a good organ donor. Or if he was-

Interviewer: Uh… sir could you please just answer the question?

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: Hm? Oh yes, well Dr. Kondraki seems to get by in these sort of situations. A master of pulling it out of his ass, so to speak.

Interviewer: So would you label him as reckless then?

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: Yes. Without a doubt.

Interviewer: Uh-huh, so he's a potential liability.

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: Oh, I never said that. Granted, he's about as inaccurate as a faulty hand grenade or something of that ilk, the only safe place to be around him is probably inside him or something. But he gets things done, at the expense of everyone and everything around him not sturdy enough to withstand the blast.

Interviewer: …

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: What? He does.

Security Log C-083-K

Dr. Kondraki exits down hallway R-14 while SCP-083 pursues. Severe damage caused due to blindness inflicted by Dr. Kondraki's camera (See: **scp-515-arc**), which caused considerable thrashing until regeneration could set in.

SCP-083 recovers, and pursues Dr. Kondraki further into the central containment areas.

Dr. Kondraki, with a small lead, is able to enter non-sentient object containment and makes his way past two armed guards by flashing his ID.

SCP-083 enters non-sentient containment, kills and drains several nearby researchers. Searches for Dr. Kondraki within the area, resulting in further casualties.

Dr. Kondraki accesses a safe within containment, removes a circular object and retreats from containment back into Hallway R-17.

SCP-083 continues to pursue, and appears to take chase. Moments later, a flash of light is seen by a

camera down the hall, and a bright, disc-like object impacts SCP-083. SCP-083 loses his leg, and falters.

Dr. Kondraki stops to observe the damage, as the disc (confirmed to be **SCP-388**) continues through Site 19 and eventually comes to rest 2 km away from the research facility. Dr. Kondraki approaches SCP-083 with a firearm drawn.

SCP-083 begins to regenerate, and stand up while bracing against the nearby wall. Dr. Kondraki is seen speaking, before taking off down Hallway Y-8. SCP-083 follows shortly after, hopping on one leg until the other regenerates. Seen screaming curses.

LOG ENDS

Audio Log 083-D-K-4

Dr. Kondraki – Well, at least you've got a leg to stand on, Count!

SCP-083 – I'm going to kill you slowly when I get my hands on you! You don't even know what kind of shitstorm you've gotten yourself into human, but I'm going to kill you and destroy everything you hold dear!

Dr. Kondraki – What was that? I couldn't hear you over all that arterial spurting. [He gestures to the missing leg] Hey, you know if this vampire thing doesn't work out, you'd make a great pirate!

SCP-083 – In about 5 seconds my leg is going to regenerate and I'm going to tear you to pieces.

Dr. Kondraki – Break a leg, Drac. [Dr. Kondraki departs]

SCP-083 – I'll tear a chunk out of you for every one of those stupid retorts! Every single one!

It was at this point, as Dr. Kondraki exited the area with SCP-083 in pursuit, that MTF-R-2 arrived to attempt to restore containment of

“Duke”. The termination attempt had been considered a failure by command and the orders were limited to damage control. Unfortunately, the other security teams were still en route, and were never able to assist MTF-R-2. If the order hadn’t gone out to evacuate all Euclid objects from the sector, they might have been able to. - O5-2

Security Log Y-083-K

Dr. Kondraki makes it to a three way intersection before SCP-083 begins to catch up. A forklift moving a large metal box is moving up the incline directly to Dr. Kondraki’s right.

SCP-083 rounds the corner, but impacts the forklift which had been maneuvered to block the hall. Dr. Kondraki is seen at the door of a central staircase. At this time, they were on the 15th floor of the facility. SCP-083 proceeds to throw the metal box in a fit of frustration, before beginning to move the forklift.

Dr. Kondraki flees down the staircase. The metal box opens as it impacts the ceiling, and a large, disheveled ball of metal objects is dislodged and begins rolling down the incline.

MTF-R-2 arrives by way of the central staircase to SCP-083’s current location. Dr. Kondraki passes MTF-R-2.

Contact with MTF-R-2 lost.

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-CLEF-01

Interviewer: Seriously? No mistakes?

Clef: I can't really see that Dr. Kondraki made any mistakes in his termination protocol up to this point, no.

Interviewer: Seriously?

Clef: None at all. He had a primary kill mechanism, a backup plan, and a tertiary plan as well. The fact that his plan didn't survive first contact with the enemy wasn't his fault. The deaths of MTF-Rho-2 were a sad and unforeseeable consequence of the Euclid-class SCiPs being moved…

Interviewer: I see. So tell me, Dr. Clef, what if all of this wasn't part of some plan, and he'd been making it up as he went along?

Clef: <laughs> In that case, sir, I'd say that Dr. Kondraki was a suicidal fool. But he certainly wouldn't have…

Interviewer: …

Clef: … he did?

Interviewer: I have here a copy of Dr. Kondraki's termination procedure proposal. Step one is his plan to use cat urine and a pistol loaded with silver bullets. Backup plans two, three, four, And five are listed as, and I quote, 'Wing It,' 'Make Something Up,' 'Cross That Bridge When I Come To It,' and 'Put My Head Between My Knees And Kiss My Ass Goodbye.'

Clef: [EXPLETIVE REDACTED]

Mobile Task Force Rho-2's Combat Log

MTF-R-2-1 – We're coming up the staircase now, to SCP-083's last known location. Sounds of a struggle are coming from above, our intel must be spot on.

MTF-R-2-6 – He really screwed the pooch on this one. Garlic piss, where does he get that?

MTF-R-2-1 – Quiet on the approach, Six.

MTF-R-2-3 – Sir, incoming subject, humanoid!

MTF-R-2-9 – It's…he's in a lab coat, it's not Duke. He's

running straight at us, sir, neutralize him?

MTF-R-2-1 – Ready subdermal electroneutralizers, on my…what the hell is that noise?

[unidentified] ….fuck fuck fuck shit fuck dammit shit fuck! Get the hell out of the way, run for your fucking lives!

MTF-R-2-2 – He's taking off down the stairs, must have been Dr. Kondraki! But I don't see SCP-083!

MTF-R-2-1 – No contact on Duke, continue up the st-

MTF-R-2-5 – What the hell is that!? It's…massive!

MTF-R-2-1 – Open fire, open fir-

[unintelligible screams]

[Unknown] – It just crushed him! Get out of here, ge-

[screams continue, audio cuts out]

It was at this point that command began to realize that SCP-083 wasn't the only threat to Site 19 during this incident. Although at this point in time, SCP-083 had caused the death of 17 personnel, Dr. Kondraki had been involved in three cases of containment failure. Most of these personnel had been minor employees, making their loss minor in comparison. MTF-R-2 would be found by site security teams at the bottom of the staircase, completely entangled in ***SCP-162****, with several already having been crushed to death, or bled out due to numerous lacerations. Containment of SCP-083 was quickly becoming a distant possibility, and Dr. Kondraki had vanished from visual contact. At the same time, another SCP had breached containment on the opposite side of the facility, and the chaos made details scarce. Meanwhile, SCP-083 was on a rampage trying to locate the doctor. Command was in disarray, and a choice would have to be made soon. It wasn't soon enough.* - O5-2

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-Iceberg-42

Interviewer: And so you're of the opinion Dr. Kondraki handled things recklessly?

Iceberg: Oh, yes, definitely.

Interviewer: Would you call him a potential liability?

Iceberg: Obviously. He's a danger just walking around.

Interviewer: I see. Well then Doctor I-

Iceberg: I mean, look at him. The guy's a lunatic. And one given far too much power.

Interviewer: Alright then-

Iceberg: Clearly he needs to be removed from his post. Probably terminated.

Interviewer: Doctor Iceberg, that is n-

Iceberg: Now, see, this leaves a slight opening. Head of Research at Site 17. Nice job. Now, you see, with him gone, we need someone….. reliable to take his place.

Interviewer: ….

Iceberg: And I think I'm just the person to do it. I'm reliable, hardworking, good at hand to hand, intelligent, mostly sane, good at organizing, I know over 40 kinds of improvised explosives, I-

Interviewer: That's quite enough Doctor Iceberg. I believe our interview is over.

Iceberg: Inter…. Interview? You mean…. All this was recorded?

Interviewer: Yes.

Iceberg: And Kondraki will be able to see this?

Interviewer: Possibly.

Iceberg: …… I need to go write my will.

Security Log C-083-K

Visual contact resumed with Dr. Kondraki, seen breaking into a testing lab on the 7th floor, takes possession of an experimental high-tension cable, constructed from an **SCP-143** alloy with carbon nano-structures.

SCP-083 seen arriving on the 7th floor, in pursuit of Dr. Kondraki. Security teams arrive to contain SCP-083 but fail to make an impact. Teams 4, 8, and 14 are wiped out. SCP-083 continues on his path.

Dr. Kondraki recovers and dons a pair of converse sneakers, recovered from Safe object containment. Dr. Kondraki appears to move at an accelerated pace. Exits containment sector, heading down Hallway D-3.

SCP-083 continues pursuit of Dr. Kondraki, ruining the containment sector. Is unable to catch Dr. Kondraki due to his enhanced speed, but is able to make up time by bypassing walls in his path. Physically.

Dr. Kondraki begins to move towards the Keter containment sector, his clearance bypassing the automated security systems. Proceeds to next checkpoint. All Mobile Task Forces are alerted to the situation.

SCP-083 is slowed by the security checkpoints, and further resistance by site security. SCP-083's regeneration is able to keep up with any wounds inflicted. Site put on full alert, and all forces are redirected to Keter containment.

Dr. Kondraki continues to pass through checkpoints. Arrives in a large containment room with a single door opposite to the entrance. Dr. Kondraki's security

clearance is unable to clear the last checkpoint. He pulls an object from his coat, resembling a conical object with a pistol grip.

SCP-083 arrives in the room. Looks confused, proceeds into the center of the room. Dr. Kondraki no longer visible. SCP-083 approaches the lone door.

Dr. Kondraki's voice is detected, appearance of **SCP-408** reveals him standing near the entrance to the room. A verbal exchange is observed, before Dr. Kondraki speaks into the hand held object (visuals confirm it to be a megaphone of insignificant make).

Tremors begin to rock the area, and several stress fractures are opened on the wall with the door.

Containment of Keter level threat **SCP-682** compromised.

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-Dr. Gears-62

Dr. Gears: Reckless is a relative term. Viewed purely from the vantage point of a termination test carried out against a nearly-invulnerable humanoid SCP object, Dr. Kondraki's test achieved only a low to medium degree of collateral damage.

Interviewer: So you feel that Dr. Kondraki's actions were acceptable?

Dr. Gears: He achieved his intended goal. However, the loss of manpower, multiple containment breaches, widespread damage to Site 19, and general lack of planning represent a gross oversight on the part of Dr. Kondraki.

Interviewer: Demolishing a good chunk of a site is a little more than oversight in planning.

Dr. Gears: …Sir, if I may say, I think we are focusing on

the wrong direction. We assume that Dr. Kondraki is a "loose cannon", a person who is reckless and puts zero foresight into anything he does. However, this is a narrow and dangerous assumption.

Interviewer: …What are you talking about?

Dr. Gears: The human brain has a tendency to view highly complex and rapid patterns as random events. I believe that Dr. Kondraki used the termination of SCP-083 as an excuse, and the resulting highly destructive "chase" and containment breaches as a distraction.

Interviewer: So you're saying…he planned it?

Dr. Gears: Not in a traditional sense. To use a mathematical example, he started with the solution, and worked backwards to create the problem. The multiple containment failures, the evacuation of items, SCP-083 and its attacks on site staff, all these stretched the resources of Site 19 to a dangerously thin level. This allowed him to achieve what I hypothesize to be his true goal.

Interviewer: …which would be?

Dr. Gears: To ride SCP-682.

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-CLEF-01

Clef: WAIT, WHAT!?

Audio Log C-682-K

Dr. Kondraki: Well well well, look where we've ended up now, Duke. Any guesses as to what's behind door number one?

SCP-083: I couldn't give any less of a damn, because all I know is that I cut off the entrance to this area as I came

in. You're trapped in here, doctor, trapped with me, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

Dr. Kondraki: *[Laughs]* I figure you'd do something like that. I'll admit that this wasn't the best place to make a tactical retreat, but I do still have my trump.

SCP-083: And what's that, those stupid butterflies? You can't hide forever, and I will find you.

Dr. Kondraki: Oh god I cannot wait to see your face! *[Gestures to the megaphone]* But first, why don't we invite our friend out from his little room?

Dr. Kondraki begins screaming a series of obscenities into the megaphone. SCP-083 attempts to cover his ears to no effect.

SCP-083: What are yo-

[Roars and sounds of buckling metal and cracking concrete fill the air]

SCP-083: [Looks behind him] You….you son of a-!

TRANSMISSION LOST

It was at this point that Command for Site 19 made the decision to quarantine all of Sector 3 for floors 7-15, sealing it from top to bottom and effectively sealing everything within the premises. With SCP-682 on the loose, SCP-083 still a threat, and Dr. Kondraki still breathing, it was hoped that the three would end up killing each other. With the survivor being significantly weakened by the preceding brawl, containment teams would move in to restore order. There were several unforeseen issues with this plan, namely not accounting for SCP-682 (who was contained in the sector on a purely temporary basis), or Dr. Kondraki's ingenuity. If it had taken such things into consideration, it would be wise to have suggested the use of nuclear weaponry. -O5-2

Security Log C-682-K

Dr. Kondraki is able to escape the initial charge of SCP-682 as it plows through the room, disappearing once again in a cloud of SCP-408.

SCP-083 is seen engaging SCP-682, looking severely damaged from the assault but rapid regeneration is already observed helping him recover. SCP-083 is seen attempting to speak to SCP-682.

SCP-682 pauses for a moment, and “speaks” for a moment. Without warning, SCP-682 strikes at SCP-083 and tosses him across the room while severing two of his arms and one leg.

SCP-083 attempts to retreat and regenerate, but isn’t able to make distance between himself and SCP-682.

SCP-682 devours SCP-083 whole. No activity until a large, rearing motion is made back.

Dr. Kondraki is seen now on the back of SCP-682, holding two ends of the high-tension cable he had recovered earlier. The rest was fitted into an improvised set of reins. Dr. Kondraki is observed “riding” SCP-682, while hollering something and waving his hat with his free hand.

SCP-682 enters an enraged state, and makes a powerful charge towards the entrance. It easily plows through the obstructions made by SCP-083, and then through the sealing walls.

Dr. Kondraki and SCP-682 have breached quarantine. Full evacuation protocols now in motion.

It was obvious at this point that things had truly escalated out of control. SCP-083 had been presumed neutralized, yes, but at the cost of releasing SCP-682 into Site 19 without proper personnel to enact containment procedures. Much like causing a flood to put out a kitchen fire, Dr. Kondraki’s actions would put the entirety of Site 19 in grave danger. Most of the site’s personnel had already been fully

evacuated, while emergency teams attempted to stem the losses and mitigate what damages they could. The entire situation had become an unmanageable mess. Ironically, that's the exact kind of mess that Dr. Kondraki excels at managing. - O5-2

Security Log C-682-19-K

Dr. Kondraki stays atop SCP-682 for the duration, holding on despite the rapid jerking motions made by SCP-682 during its run.

SCP-682 begins to adapt as seen in previous observations, having incurred noticeable damage in its attempts to break through various obstacles. Spikes of a bone-like material begin to shoot up from its back, in an attempt to harm or kill Dr. Kondraki.

Dr. Kondraki incurs several wounds in this manner, able to avoid most of the protrusions. He attempts to make a hard turn by pulling against the cables, and is able to direct SCP-682 from his course.

SCP-682 continues to charge forward, now directed towards the personnel dormitories. During its dash, SCP-682 breaks through **SCP-173**'s containment. At this time, both SCP-682 and Dr. Kondraki are observed to keep direct eye contact with SCP-173, despite each continuing their attempts to outmaneuver the other.

Dr. Kondraki is observed to speak to SCP-682, and a series of growls are recorded matching SCP-682's "voice".

SCP-682 begins to crash its back into walls and ceilings, trying to crush the doctor. The apparent conversation continues.

Dr. Kondraki appears to laugh, and then make another harsh tug. He redirects SCP-682 once more, to the personnel cafeteria, after checking a device on his wrist.

SCP-682 crashes through the second quarantine dividers, and arrives in the personnel sector.

Dr. Kondraki waits until SCP-682 arrives in the cafeteria. Holding onto the cables, he vaults forwards with tremendous force, swinging up and over SCP-682's head.

SCP-682 now attempts to bite down on Dr. Kondraki as he scrambles to sit in a lone chair placed at the end of a table.

Dr. Kondraki vanishes from visual contact as SCP-682 devours him.

SCP-682 continues to cause further structural damage. Begins advancing towards current evacuation zone.

Audio Log 682-K

Dr. Kondraki: You really hold a grudge, don't you?

SCP-682: You are by far…the most annoying of your…"species" I have ever encountered. Killing you will be a favor for your whole reality.

Dr. Kondraki: No need to do me any favors, Godzilla, since you made lunch of the vampire. Why don't we just let me off and call things square?

Sounds of crunching concrete and stressed metal

Dr. Kondraki: I guess that's not an option. How about you just-[grunt]-take me to my ride, and I'll get out of your hair?

SCP-682: Not only the most annoying, but the one most lacking of common sense. The only way this ends is with you dead and rotting faster than you already are.

Dr. Kondraki: Fair enough, let's try that.

SCP-682: That may be the first thing I've ever heard from one of you repulsive…things that I've agreed with.

The sound of metal scraping against enamel cancels out any conversation. A sickening snap of SCP-682's jaws concludes the recording.

Evacuation Log S-E-19

Removal of Safe and Euclid items from Site 19 continue. Transport to Helipads A-E for temporary offsite containment goes well despite the current chaos.

[For the sake of relevance, this log has been redacted to focus on ***SCP-298*** *and the events in Hallway D-17]*

Several Level 1 personnel are used to transport SCP-298, due to its large size. The width of SCP-298 takes up most of the hallway.

One of the personnel is seated on top of SCP-298 as it is carried, mock-playing the organ. Audio logs confirm that the seated employee had won some form of bet previous to the incident.

An explosion occurs elsewhere, causing a tremor. Several personnel falter, and SCP-298 is dropped. An odd sound is heard and noticed by several of the men (the sound is now confirmed to be that of displaced air.) The personnel move to the back of the organ as they begin to hear a struggle.

Dr. Kondraki is spotted, having incurred several injuries. Making a leap, he bounds over SCP-298.

SCP-083 is also spotted, covered in an unknown fluid. He rounds the corner after Dr. Kondraki, but only spots several personnel and the organ. Seen speaking.

Dr. Kondraki directs the man next to him to begin playing.

Audio Log C-298-K-083

SCP-083: [yelling] Where is he! You, you must have seen him, tell me where he is, and I might not kill all of you!

Personnel 1/298/3: Wh-who? That crazy guy who just ran past, he's right behind this thing!

SCP-083: Good. Maybe I'll even add you to my security detail, what an honor that would be…what the hell is that sound?

Dr. Kondraki: Bach. It's Bach. I like to call it, "Sucks to be you, Overture."

SCP-083: *[Begins to scream]* What are…is that my blood? What are you doing to my blood!?

Personnel 1/298/2: Should I keep playing, sir?

Dr. Kondraki: Don't you dare stop, not even for a moment!

SCP-083: S-stop! I'll do whatever you want, anything, just stop playing that thing! I can't….

Dr. Kondraki: So I was right, you can't regenerate your blood.

SCP-083: I…don't want to die. I shouldn't have to die, not me! I'm not like you!

Dr. Kondraki: Everybody dies, Duke. Just matters who dies on a given day, and today is your lucky day.

SCP-083: Son of a…[expires]

Security Log S-E-19

SCP-083's blood is drained from his body by the effect of SCP-298's music. It forms into a solid gel in the air,

appearing as branches of a leafless tree.

Dr. Kondraki moves from SCP-298's platform, instructing him to keep playing. He disappears into a room down the hall.

SCP-083's blood is now completely drained, causing his desiccated corpse to fall prone. His body seems to undergo an extremely rapid decomposition, the corpse being reduced to a hollow skeleton within a minute.

Dr. Kondraki returns with a glass container, and instructs the player to stop. He begins to collect the gelled blood from the air, placing it into the clear container. After less than a minute, the blood liquefies.

Personnel appear to lack comprehension of the event that has just occurred.

Dr. Kondraki seals the container and approaches the skeleton. Retrieving the skull, he places it under his arm. Dr. Kondraki exits Site 19 via helicopter with little trouble, assumed to be part of the evac team.

Personnel are still somewhat stunned. The klaxons remind them that SCP-682 is still loose within Site 19.

EXCERPT FROM POST-INCIDENT INTERVIEW 083-AR9-59

Interviewer: So you do *not* think that Dr. Kondraki behaved recklessly?

Dr. Rights: I didn't say that, but relatively, compared to some of the things he's done…at least this one almost had a plan. Or some facsimile of one.

Interviewer: You have viewed the entirety of the logs, yes?

Dr. Rights: Yep. All of it. A few times, actually, and I had to review my favorite parts.

Interviewer: And you have no worries about Dr. Kondraki being a liability or a danger?

Dr. Rights: Look, the man's a master of the Indy Ploy. And sometimes, actually…all the time, there's collateral damage. But that doesn't change the fact that he, in some bizarre way, knows what he's doing. And hey…if it's saved my ass a few dozen times over, that doesn't hurt.

Interviewer: So your personal opinion is that he is not a liability?

Dr. Rights: Not as much as Edward effing Cullen, there. I mean…I've got just as big a vampire fetish as the next girl who grew up reading Anne Rice, but come on. Plus, throwing cat pee on him! That was beautiful!

Interviewer: …And in your professional opinion, having worked with Dr. Kondraki in the past?

Dr. Rights: …You clearly haven't been to site 17 lately. Professional is…not my forte. Or Kondraki's for that matter. Shame about Site 19, though…at least it went out in a blaze of badassery.

Breakroom Surveillance Log S17- - -

Dr. : Oh my god, how does he keep making things worse?

Dr. : No idea. This thing is on a delay too, by this time he probably leveled the whole facility…is he riding 682?!

Dr. : I can’t believe we work for this guy. I have half a mind to tell that moron off myself, and resign!

Dr. Kondraki: What are you guys watching?

Dr. : Nothing, just our boss wrecking the Foundation’s biggest site. Can you believe that guy?

Dr. Kondraki: Wow, that is pretty intense.

Dr. : Dude…might want to cut the chatter.

Dr. : Lay off it, it's not like he's going to know I said it. If I could get away with it, I'd terminate him my…

Dr. Kondraki: Terminate who? I like this talk already.

Dr. : I…I think I've seen enough. I think I-I'm going to go take a walk.

Dr. Kondraki: Dibs on your seat. Anyone got popcorn?

Dull Ache Hand

Site 27 is where people's throats get cut.

There's a reason for this, of course. Kill words, though difficult to get into a person's brain without haemorrhaging it, are some of the most effective personal weapons in the world. Unlike a gun or a blade, they can't be physically stolen from you. They don't need maintenance and they don't break down. They can end a life in any of a million different ways. So, when you have prisoners who can kill with words, there are a few ways to deal with them.

First, the removal of the word from the mind. Amnestics don't help as much as might be hoped. It is impossible to chemically target only the language centre of the brain (or more accurately centres, as Broca's and Wernicke's area are two separate locations). Often, retaining other brain functions of a subject is a very low priority, so it is acceptable to simply wipe the dominant hemisphere. It is, however, possible to drill through the skull and physically access those sections of the brain. Dangerous, yes, but after surgical removal, most subjects lose the ability to form any words at all. This doesn't stop them from trying, though. In Site 27, there are corridors of people screaming, cackling, burbling, giggling, popping their lips together, smacking their faces, trying to push out coherent thoughts from their minds to no avail.

Next, the removal of the ability to speak. If you know the phonemic components of the kill word, you can narrow down your butchery to the minimal amount of flesh needed to be carved out. Often, simply removing a person's lips makes it impossible for them to compose the words they know. It may be necessary to remove teeth, or fuse the top and bottom jaws together. It is difficult, but not impossible, to carefully remove specific muscles from the throat, making it impossible to form particular vowels. To block voiced consonants, simply remove the vocal chords. If the kill words they know make use of the nasal phonemes, one can simply fill the nasal cavity with

a permanent sealant, making it impossible to form "n" or "m" sounds. Often two or three of these are done at once.

Pinch your nose. Try to say the word "Mother". "Mercy". "No". Use your other hand to keep your lips apart from each other at the same time. Try saying "Help". "Please". Imagine a hundred such voices, distantly echoing through labyrinthine, clinical white halls.

The security personnel in the corridors of Site 27 wear earmuffs, some of them fluffy and pink.

Gan Ceann knew 48 different kill words. Of those, she'd personally invented 9, two of which she'd found could be non-fatally communicated to others with sufficient training. She was proud of this. The methods previously described were not effective on Gan. Her skull was impenetrable to the drills at hand (though the attempts were still exceptionally painful). Her body rejected any sealant placed inside it, breaking it apart and peristaltically pushing it out, piece by painful piece. Muscles re-knitted themselves in her throat. It was a simple fact of her biology: she could not stay without voice.

Very much against her will, Gan had her head removed from her body and placed in a jar filled with formaldehyde.

This was not as bad as might immediately be thought. Sure, this splintered her consciousness, but it was hardly the first time that had happened. Yes, it constantly felt as though she was drowning, the stinging fluid circulating and mixing with her own blood. Sure, she didn't have much to look at, faced as she was towards the nondescript wall. Yes, it might sound like this is all building up to some kind of positive, but no, it was all quite utterly awful and she wanted to get out of there as soon as possible before she lost her k-ndamn mind.

Gan's body, conscious unto herself, had other thoughts. She knew 48 different kill words, true, but no mouth (nor, any more, head) to form words with. They had, however, made the mistake of throwing her into a cell without binding her hands.

Here she made the equivalent gestures for "sign language, motherfucker".

Infiltrating an Auditory Threat Research Facility is made far easier in that employees are not permitted to directly observe any sound at any time. Thus, the major disadvantage of Lighttwisting - or, as the uninitiated would refer to it, "glamour" - is overcome: provided you appear as someone who should be present, your inability to mask or disguise your voice becomes irrelevant. Vocal mimicry is far more of a Taking skill than a Twisting one, and is far more complicated if you are attempting to provide a voice to another. Fortunately, Lighttwisting constructs are persistent, and can be anchored to a surface. Thus, Olga had been able to Twist both Justice's appearance and her own without needing to personally maintain it.

Justice and Olga walked down the corridor. Justice didn't need to block its ears - its physiological biostuff served little purpose beyond puppetry, and so Auditory Threats were for the most part irrelevant to it. Olga was wearing fluffy pink earmuffs.

They stopped at a map. Justice gave it a quick look over, then confirmed it matched what they expected with a brief thumbs-up.

They started walking towards Gan's body's cell.

Gan's body had felt around the walls of her cell until she figured out where the door was. If she'd had a mouth, she could have just Unseelie'd the thing. Instead, she backed up from the door, sat down, removed her shoes, stood back up, and prepared her hands for the gesture. She'd feel it in her soles when someone was approaching.

Olga Twisted the lock open, pulled the door wide, saw Gan's body wildly flailing her arms, and promptly started puking blood.

Justice saw this happen, crossed the room, grabbed Gan's left arm with both hands, and tapped out " " in Morse against her wrist. Gan stopped flailing. Olga continued puking blood.

Gan grabbed Justice's arm and tapped out "KNOW DIRCSHN OF HED USE AS CMPASS BUT GUIDE FRM WALS". Justice tapped back "OK". Olga didn't stop puking blood.

"ALSO OLGA PUKING BLOOD PLZ REVERSE"

"SHIT POINT THS WAY"

Justice grabbed Olga's head, pushed her mouth shut, and rotated her skull so that she'd see Gan as Gan, again, flailed wildly but in a bit of a different way.

The puking slowed to a dribble, a cough, another heave, a cough. A wipe of her sleeve against her mouth. Justice stared. Olga was able to stay conscious despite the extensive blood loss. She felt like shit, though. Like total shit. Like freshly shat shit, all shitty n'… shit. Wow, she thought, the ground's awful red today.

Olga collapsed.

This was bad. Justice needed Olga to glamour Gan, or there was no way they'd get out in one piece. A blood transfusion, maybe… but from who - Justice's heart hadn't pumped for a long time, and Gan was operating on alternative physiology.

That said, thought Justice, there's all this blood on the floor, and I know it's a perfect match…

Olga was fine for a while - they all got out okay - but that blood was puked, and you really, really shouldn't siphon gastric juices into the circulatory system. She got real, real sick - the bad kind of sick - but made sure she got better.

That's just the kind of that is.

Dusk

He awoke in a world he had seen before, a world beset by perpetual dusk that lingered just on the edge of twilight. He looked up to see stars, but the sky was empty and all that remained of the tapestry of lights he had known was a dull orange haze that filled the air as if by obligation. There was usually a bench nearby, one they had sat on to watch the sun sink behind the mountains forever. The bench was gone. The mountains were gone.

But the man was still there. His suit and cap were still there. His face, unrecognizable as it always was, seemed almost to fade into the haze around him. *He knows.* For a moment he might have thought the man looked angry, but the longer he looked the more he recognized the emotion. Fear. Sadness. Acceptance.

"**`Something has happened`**," the man said. His voice seemed hollow and far away.

He nodded. "Yes," he said softly.

"I see." The man pulled slightly on the hem of his coat. "Will it happen again?"

He said nothing.

The man adjusted his cap now. "I always thought that one should strive to go out looking one's best. With dignity, as in all things." He straightened up. "I suppose this will be the last I see of you. I don't expect we'll be here much longer."

He said nothing.

The man nodded curtly. "Before it's over, I guess I should want to know whether or not… whether or not this thing that you've done is going to be worth the price you'll pay for it." He laughed, but the sound caught on the wind and was gone in an instant. "I had always

thought that there would be a number you would not tolerate, but it seems I was mistaken. I don't think it matters much at this point, and certainly not to something as insignificant as a fading specter, but… the mind cannot help but wonder."

He moved to speak, but the words caught in his throat and vanished into the haze. The man's sad eyes turned towards the horizon, where something dark hung in the sky.

"Give them my best, would you?" The man didn't look back. "Tell them I had some dignity at the end."

In another world, in a dark room beneath a mountain of ice, a massive machine groaned under an immeasurable force. A low sound filled the air, and the haze grew still. When he looked back, **`the man was gone`**. His cap danced in the wind for a moment more, before it folded inwards and disappeared.

Then the Overseer woke up.

Dust

An old man stands alone in a dusty room. The man, who is older than the room and a great deal dustier, walks slowly along a row of shelves. It is dark and the man cannot see what is on the shelves, cannot see the plaques and plates that he knows are there. To the man this does not matter, the plaques and their words and titles and dates and shiny edges. He knows what they say, the myriad that lines the rows and rows of the dark room. He read them as they were first lain down, each one polished lovingly with the soft cloth he still carries. The old man stops and sighs, looking down at the space behind an especially small plate, where lays an aged photograph of a cluster of men standing in front of some great brass contraption. The plaque, had he been able to read it, would have read:

> S.C.P. 2374-L: Eisenburgh's 'Time Machine' - Displaced following test 2374-L-1, 1937. Crew assumed deceased, no remains recovered.

The old man remembers. He remembers the day that Doctor Henrickson had brought him the photo and the two-line obituary for the men that it displayed. He remembers when the others, the other researchers and the other doctors, came to visit and see the little shrine to their lost friends. He remembers when they stopped coming. He turns and looks with eyes that cannot see at another small plaque a few yards away, near-entirely obscuring the tiny sliver of colored glass that lay fixed behind it. It should read:

> S.C.P. 3298-L: The Rainbow's Mirror - Destroyed following exploration attempt 3298-L-2, 1922. Exploration team confirmed deceased 1924.

He remembers the day when he had to hastily inscribe the confirmation of the poor men's deaths, as limbs started launching themselves from the glass, plastering an especially persistent widow with salt water and sending the cleaning crews barging through his aisles. He remembers the disgusted look on the director's face, as

he showed him the revised plaque, the floor still wet with salt water, blood, and lye.

> S.C.P. 2167-L: The Cat's Cradle - Deactivated following investigatory test 2167-L, 1932. All personnel involved deceased.

The old man stares, his eyes just barely making out the shape of a twisted splintered of burnt wood that stands behind the dark shape of the plaque. He cannot see the tiny bits of fur or hair or the stains of blood that marked the wood, but he knows all too well that they are there. The old man remembers them all, each and every last one. One hundred and twenty three paces to his right lies a larger-than-most inscribed circlet of metal, one of the last that he ever carved out.

> S.C.P. 2902-L: Litelli's Last Suit - Destroyed following military-applications test 2902-L-1, 1941. Item properties confirmed. All personnel involved deceased from direct exposure/ related illness 194 .

The old man still doesn't understand why they had him put the blank bit at the end of that plaque, what they were so sure would happen. He remembers the way they carried in the little bit of burnt fabric, the strange box they held it in and the strange suits they wore. He had asked them why they wore such strange clothes, what they were protecting themselves from. He remembers their answer, how he needn't worry and that it was merely a precaution. He looks, or pretends to look, and imagines he can just barely make out the tiny crack in the box that showed up one day after a woman had been there, watching it for hours. He remembers her tears. He remembers the tears of the director, when they had closed the big vault door at the end of the room for the very last time.

Outside the dark room stands the dark beams of a hastily plastered wall and in front of it the bright light of a hallway. People walk past, lit by bright fluorescent lighting that makes the shadows under their eyes jump and wander. A few of them, but not many, turn and look at the small plaque that hangs on the wall.

> Frank Digliani Memorial SCP Archival Wing

1860-1941
Dedicated 1978
May He Rest In Peace

The old man in the dark room remembers it all, alone, as the rest of the world slowly forgets.

Dust and Blood

In the time when The Tree of Knowledge was planted, all things were given form. Even the deep waters of the Darkness Below and the vaults of Darkness Above took shape and form, and many elder gods were born of them. Of these gods, whose names are oft forgotten, there was Khahrahk.

Khahrahk was not great upon his formation: in truth he was small. He crawled around in the darkness of the abyss, but unlike his brothers and sisters, he knew himself and knew the abyss. So blessed and cursed by awareness, he felt pain and loneliness, and looked beyond the depths: but the thought of the light and the shade of the tree pained him more. Existence was pain, and he would have no part of it. It would be better to not exist. It would be better for all things not to exist.

Upon this vow, he consumed his brothers and sisters, and grew strong on their essences. This act, this first sin of Khahrahk, caused him greater pain as he himself grew greater. He grew blind by his pain. So great was his spite and so absolute his hate, that he cursed the Creation and its Creator, and vowed to destroy the Tree and all that it supported in its branches and roots.

He clawed his way up to his throne on the bones of his fellow gods in those dark aeons. Many other gods born of the Darkness Below died in these times, or chose to leave those shadowed realms to work within Creation. Those that remained grew old and powerful, but they were bound in subjugation under Khahrahk.

When there were no more gods to subjugate in the lower realms, Khahrahk declared himself King of the Darkness Below, and took the name Khnith-hgor, and set the boundaries of his kingdom. This kingdom he built to bring utter despair to those who lived among the Tree and its roots and branches, to share his pain with all of Creation as he destroyed it. He diverted many souls to his realm, delivering pain untold upon them as they were stayed from their true

rest.

With the borders of his realm set down, the King declared his war. His servants, and there were many, those birthed of the Darkness Below or those that had fallen to the King's service, surged out of his kingdom, and there was war with Creation. This war continues to this day, and shall not end until the end of all things.

Of the gods the King had subjugated, Sanna was considered to be the wisest and most beautiful. She had not remained in the King's realm willingly, but her escape had been prevented by circumstance. She obeyed the king with her words, but not with her soul, and for this goodness she is mourned.

With the war declared, the King took Sanna by force, and lay with her for seven days and seven nights, until the Mother of Those Beneath Us was broken beneath the King. When this was completed, he rose in her blood, and was from then on known as Shormaush Urdal - the Scarlet King.

Seven children were born of Sanna, seven daughters of the Scarlet King emerging from her broken womb. The King saw this, and took them by force to be his brides. Upon the seven brides the King put seven seals, so that they might never die as Sanna had died. With them, the King gave rise to seven ranks of abominations, seven orders of Leviathans, who became his most beloved servants, who march at the front of his war.

Of the seven, this can be said:

The first bride was A'tivik. She was beloved of the King, though her children were few. For her loyalty, her children were made wise above all others, and knew well the ways of war. By their hands, they guided the war, and lead to victory.

Her seal was *vaduk*, "dominion", for just as she sought dominion, so she was dominated.

The second bride was A'ghor. A great hole was rent in her soul that she could not fill, and so she despaired and wept. She brought forth many children, and her children brought forth armies in a tide

unthinking, to go forth and conquer.

Her seal was *kifenn*, “longing”, for neither the King nor her children could provide what she sought.

The third bride was A’distat. She had a great hatred of her sisters and brought ruin upon all she surveyed, and blasphemed upon sacred ground. Her children ride out to declare the triumph of the King, drowning battlefields in blood and ash, spreading pestilence and fear in their wake.

Her seal was *hezhum*, “desolation”, for she was wiped bare, and the furrows of her soul were salted.

The fourth bride was A’zieb. She was vast and powerful, and terrible to behold, taking the form of a great beast. Her children were like her, and feared no weapon nor magical spell, for their injuries were healed, and their hides impenetrable.

Her seal was *ba*, “wrath”, for by her hate she was forever bound in conflict.

The fifth bride was A’nuht. She was strong in mind, though frail in body. Her children were wise in the ways of magic, and created great destruction. But because of their power, the King had them crippled, so that they might not rise up against him.

Her seal was *ner*, “lack”, for her thirst and the thirst of her children was never quenched.

The sixth bride was A’tellif. She spoke not, and held herself private. Her children could change their faces and move about unseen, and walk among Creation unknown. They opened Ways between worlds, and made way for the war to spread.

Her seal was *usheq*, “hidden”, for she was lost in shadow.

The seventh bride was A’habbat. She was the smallest and weakest of the seven, but she was not broken utterly by the King, and was horrified by her state. Her children walked on two legs, and were mighty hunters and heroes: she taught them in secret, hoping that they might destroy the children of her sisters and overthrow the

King. They are few, and they have failed.

Her seal was *xokib*, “hope”, for she was doomed to know of what she could not achieve.

The seven brides sealed forever, the legions of their children spread out, and added their strength to the war. Worlds that had resisted the dark gods of the King fell under the weight of ceaseless assault. The roots of the tree rotted, festered with the King’s spawn. The Ways became treacherous and poisoned, to where travel could only be made by the blessed, the brave, and the mad. The King’s realm grew fat with damned souls, and the Places of Rest waned in strength: Few souls managed to escape that fate, but even in death many still fought.

Many gods fell to the service of the King: The grinding machinery of the Factory, who consumed all, leant its mindless strength in blood and steel. The King on the Gallows, He Who Was Hung, tore at the Tree’s knowledge from within. The Prince of Many Faces warped the wills of mortals, and Moloch the Horned One brought forth their shame. Many more whose names have been erased also served. The King’s many mortal servants recreated the establishment of his line in living effigy.

It shall not be said that the King was unopposed in his conquests. Many gods and heroes among mortals struck back at the invasions of their worlds, serving under countless banners. But they fell, in time, and their ages are past, and they are as blood and dust.

The King and his armies approach the Taproots, the center worlds, in all his wrath, and all his hate, and all his spite. He reaches out to corrupt and consume and destroy. Even now his presence is felt. Time slips away. The Brass Goddess is broken, the Serpent has fled. The heroes are gone. The children of A’habbat have been slaughtered to the last. The King’s servants are already here, making straight the path for his arrival.

With this arrival the Tree shall die, and all creation shall die with it.

High above, the brothers of Death watch the war unfold, hovering over the depths. As they always have. They know the outcome of

the war, for they are the end of all things, but they do not speak of it.

There is little more to be said.

Dust in the Wind

I close my eyes.

I've always been good at holding myself together.

It would be wrong to say I felt like a bird in a gilded cage. A bird just sits there on its perch, chittering a melancholy song and pining for the blue sky beyond the golden bars, oblivious to the fact that it would likely be eaten by a cat within a matter of hours. No, I was more of a dog in an iron crate. I fumed and seethed and barked and threw myself against the walls confining me with all my might, and whenever I made enough noise I would get thrown a steak to quiet me down.

I remember standing there in my office, looking down at the people in the city below me. There were so many of them. They looked so tiny, too. Like living grains of sand on a beach, carefree and without a clue that the tide was about to come in. Back then I thought myself an important person—or at least that I was living a marginally more consequential existence than the tiny people beneath me. I enjoyed the comforts of an extravagant home, a full wardrobe, and every other perk and luxury one would expect of a young man from Wall Street.

I didn't expect it to last forever, but I never would have guessed it would end as suddenly as it did. 1929 changed everything in the twinkling of an eye.

I had told myself years ago that I would rather die than go back. But in reality I did not want to die, and since it was becoming increasingly clear that I could very well perish in my present situation, I decided to set my dignity aside and go to back to the one place I knew I'd find help. It would be humiliating, certainly. But I've always been good at holding myself together, at least on the outside. I scraped together what little I had left and made the

dreaded journey back to Kansas.

And thus the dog returned to his cage, tail between his legs.

I didn't send a letter to inform them of my arrival. I knew that they'd be expecting me as soon as their daily paper arrived. Sure enough, there was an extra place set at the dinner table for me when I walked in the door.

Mom was the only one who hugged me. Ted, my brother, shook my hand and smiled like we'd just met at a church picnic. Uncle Lem said, "right on time!" and laughed, but not in a cruel way. Aunt Margie commented on how thin I was and how lucky it was that I didn't die in the riots and thank the shining Lord in heaven nobody slit my throat and stole the clothes off my back.

Dad didn't say anything, and I was grateful for that.

From that day forward, I was an employee (I had stopped being a son a long time ago). To prove myself, I worked almost twice as much land as anyone else, yet the taunts of "city boy" and "Mr. Fancypants with his *edgey kayshun*" persisted in full force. Everyone, *everyone* seemed to delight in watching me work the fields, pushing myself until my hands were blistered and bloodied.

In New York, the world had seemed to go to Hell in a hand basket. In Kansas, however, things were looking brighter than ever.

"Wheat is golden for a reason," Uncle Lem would say. Ted and I would walk past a lush patch of growing crop and he would never fail to elbow me and ask me which greens were worth more now. I swallowed my pride and endured every humiliation. I just kept on existing, tarred and feathered, beaten and bloodied, caged and enraged, calm and collected. I've always been good at holding myself together.

Nobody seemed worried when the price of wheat first dropped. They were annoyed and inconvenienced by it, but *it'll pass,* they said, *and before you know it things will be back to normal; yessirree, everything's going to be blue skies and golden wheat from now til Christ comes back.*

I was skeptical. I had a feeling something coming. I'd seen it before. And I was half right: I had anticipated the dropping numbers, but the dust came as a surprise.

After the first storm, people couldn't stop talking about how it was the storm of the century. 'Never in all my year have I seen anything like it!' 'I thought it was the end of days, I tell you!' 'It'll take me all day to clean the car!' 'Kids, help me sweep the dirt out of the barn!' Everybody jabbered on about the great big dust storm and how glad they were it was over.

A week and a half later, the next storm came.

And then the next one. And then the following one was even bigger, and the one after that made the one before look minuscule in comparison. Within a matter of months, the dust storms had become such a part of our day-to-day lives, we were habitually setting the table with the cups and plates upside-down.

It's a bad season, everyone said. *We'll take a hit, to be sure, but we'll just have to tough it out until ol' mother nature's sniffles go away.*

You'd see the storms coming over the horizons like rain clouds, and within minutes your property would be covered in a thick brown haze that made the world look like a tinted photograph. We closed the windows, but some dust would always, *always* get on our nice curtains, and Mom never failed to wash them all spotless just in time for the next storm to dirty them again.

The dust surrounded you, got into every inch of your house, every corner, every drawer. You woke up each morning and shook the dust off your sheets. You knocked your shoes against the floor before putting them on. If you were a kid, you could draw on literally any available surface. If you were a woman, your entire existence became a blur of scrubbing, sweeping, and praying that the attic didn't start raining down dirt into the porridge. Actually, *everyone* prayed the dust didn't get into our food, because if it did we had to eat it anyway. We got by from week to week by telling ourselves *this storm will be the last one* and *it can't stay like this forever.*

Then people started dying.

It started as suicides. The papers were full of stories of people going broke, losing their farms. Losing hope. One headline told us of an elderly couple who ended their lives together after losing everything they'd worked for. One morning I woke up to Mom and Aunt Margie wailing over the death of a friend. Gunshot to the head. She just didn't want to deal with the dust anymore.

It wasn't long before the cattle started getting sick. You could see the dust in their noses and ears and mouths. Sometimes they'd eat a mouthful from their trough and get more dust than they did food. Then the people started getting sick. Same thing. They called it 'dust pneumonia.' It got so bad that if a child so much as cleared their throat, their mother's heart would skip a beat. Cathie, Ted's wife, made their daughter Grace wear a get-up with goggles and a mask. Grace said it was harder to breath with the mask on, but Cathie insisted that anything was better than dust pneumonia.

One day I noticed Grace sitting by the front steps while Cathie was inside cleaning like her life depended on it. Mother and daughter were only a couple of yards away, and yet Cathie never noticed Grace sobbing her little eyes out beneath her dusty goggles, nor did she notice me pick her up and tell her everything would be okay. It was out of character for me, but I told her a couple of jokes. I took some of my savings and told her to get in my car. Told her I'd take her to a picture show, and I did. I needed something to get my mind off the living nightmare my life had become, and I figured that if this kid's own mother couldn't bother to hear her crying, then Grace probably needed some cheering up too.

It had been years since I'd seen a picture show. It was Grace's first one. *King Kong* was the title. We loved it so much we ended up watching it twice. Grace asked me afterward how they made the monkey move. I didn't know, so I just told her they used a real one. She knew I was lying, but she smiled.

I realized something on the car ride home from the theater that day. I realized I didn't feel angry at the world anymore. Before the dust, I'd felt alone in my misery. After the dust, I felt like everyone else was just as miserable as I was, and I'll be honest, I took some petty

joy in that. But besides that, I had gotten so complacent and comfortable in being bitter that'd I'd forgotten what it felt like to just let go of my cares and relax until that day. There I was, driving back to the farm with my mind full of Fay Wray and Bruce Cabot and fifty-foot monkeys, and Grace was there to share it with me. I still felt trapped, but I didn't feel alone anymore.

We went to the picture show at least a dozen times after that. We had to space it out, of course, since money was tight, and I know I spent more than I could afford, but it was the only thing that made life bearable during that time. There was a nice girl named Phyllis who took our tickets. I started flirting with her after the third or fourth show we saw. I think she was interested in me. I don't now if Cathie ever found out about our little excursions, but if she did, she didn't say anything. Grace told me one day that she was going to grow up to be a famous movie actor one day, and if you'd have laid eyes on that girl you would have believed it.

March 14, 1934. The sky was finally blue again. For the first time in recent memory, there was no wind at all. Everyone gave thanks to Jesus and celebrated with picnics and parties. We had hardly anything left at that point, but everyone still put forward what few resources they had for the sake of the occasion. It felt like ages since I'd seen everyone so happy. Even Dad didn't look at me with quite as much bitterness as he usually did.

Our neighbor Cecil baked an enormous chocolate cake and nearly gave us all heart attacks when he said he'd share it with our family. It was a terrific day, really. That's why I don't think what happened later was a punishment. If someone does something wrong, you don't make them happy before you punish them. That blue sky and giant cake was an apology, I think. Some kind of note from God or whoever to say, *you don't deserve what you're about to get, and I'm so, so sorry.*

It was still 3:00 in the afternoon when we saw it coming. At first we thought it was another dust storm, but it soon became clear there was something different about this one. This was coming much quicker. The dust clouds were so huge they looked as though the mountains themselves were running toward you. It extended infinitely to the left and went on forever to the right. Nobody said

anything. We knew what to do. We all ran inside the house, gathered together in a circle, and covered ourselves with blankets and clothes and anything else we could get our hands on.

The storm carried on all night. You could feel and hear the house rattling on its foundation. Cathie started crying, and when Ted told her to shut up I just about knocked his head off. Besides that, nobody said anything until the storm quit the next morning. It was dead quiet when we opened the door. It was dark. Not as dark as night, but dark. Brown, too. We were used to the air being dusty, but this felt like the air *was* dust. We had the women stay inside while we went to inspect the damage to the property.

Ted had left the barn door open and the whole thing was pretty much packed full of dirt now. Dad screamed at him. Hit him. Kicked him when he was down. He only stopped when he saw a rabbit nearby. Rabbits had been eating what little was left of the greenery, and smashing them to death was how a lot of men passed the time. But right before Dad caved its head in, we heard something that sounded for all the world like a human cry for help. Coming from the rabbit. We all looked at each other, wondering if the others heard it, too, but none of us said anything.

Days passed. Nothing changed. The dust still hung over everything, blocking the sky and the sun. When Dad and Uncle Lem screamed at each other about whether or not to get back to work, I would take Grace up to her room and we would talk about the actors and actresses we liked and which stories we thought were best.

Day and night grew so difficult to distinguish from each other that we eventually lost all track of how much time had passed. At some point Cecil came banging on our door, his face like he'd seen a ghost. He gathered me, Dad, Ted, and Uncle Lem together and told us that he'd been hearing rumors. He said Ruben Peterson down the way had hanged himself. We told him that this kind of news wasn't surprising anymore. Then Cecil said that Ruben Peterson's wife found his head lying on the floor, screaming, sitting five feet away from his body, dust pouring out of his neck like sawdust from a doll that's been ripped apart. Dad called Cecil a gullible idiot and threw him out of our house.

One night—I think it was night—me and most of the family were sound asleep when we heard Ted hollering outside. Uncle Lem just about died when he saw Aunt Margie way out in the distance, hobbling slowly away from us and into the dusty oblivion. He yelled at her, pleaded from a distance, begged her to come back. He tried to chase after her, but Dad and Ted held him back. I'd never seen Uncle Lem cry before, but he just sat there in a broken puddle. We all eventually left him and went back into the house. He came back inside hours later. Told us that he only stopped crying because the dust had dried up all his tears. Nobody went back to sleep that night. I wondered if anyone else had seen a figure way off in the distance. The figure Aunt Margie had been walking toward.

Food was running low. Dad said we would all starve to death if he didn't try to drive to market. Mom begged him not to go, but he insisted. Right after he opened the door and right before he stepped outside, he looked at me and said, "g'bye." He didn't look at Mom, or Ted, or Uncle Lem when he said that. He looked at me. It was quick and meaningless, but I still wonder what it meant. We never saw him again after that.

Uncle Lem and Ted went next door to check if Cecil was dead. If he had food he wasn't using, we needed it. They told me to stay behind and guard the girls. They came back empty-handed, their eyes haunted. They wouldn't tell us what they saw, they just hugged everyone and said they loved them.

We all slept together in the living room after that. Once more I awoke to a loud noise in the middle of the night, only this time the source was a gunshot. Mom was dead. I grabbed Grace and carried her upstairs, shielding her eyes, while Ted tried to wrestle the gun away from Uncle Lem. He was able to, but only after Lem had put a bullet through his own head. When I came downstairs to help clean up, I asked where all the blood had gone. Ted just looked at me and handed me a broom, and I realized that there hadn't been any blood at all.

It was just me, Ted, Cathie, and Grace after that. Cathie clutched Grace so close to her chest that I was afraid she'd strangle the poor child. Eventually it occurred to me that might be her intention. Ted pointed out that none of us had eaten since we ran out of food the

previous week. Cathie wailed that we were all on the cusp of starvation, and we'd be dead within hours if we didn't eat anything.

A week or so after that, we had a very similar conversation.

I caught Cathie sitting by herself on the front porch one day. She was rubbing her fingernail along her forearm, chipping away the dust that had built on her skin. We all had dust on our skin. But as she picked away the dust bit by bit, I realized that the crater she was making in her arm was getting a little too deep. I stopped watching after that, because I knew she would keep on picking through to the other side, and all she'd find was dust.

Grace was asleep when Ted and I found Cathie lying outside, her face fluttering in the breeze, barely attached to her head by a tiny scrap of skin at the right ear. We didn't say anything. Ted didn't even look upset. I probably didn't, either, but I still felt like he should have at least *tried* to look sad. Her face tore off and soared into the distance as Ted and I dug her grave.

Her face came back not long afterward. It was attached to a cat. It killed Ted. He didn't seem to mind.

I walked up to Grace's room. The stairs wobbled. I had a feeling that the only thing holding them together now was dust. Dust was all that held anything together now. Wind was blowing everywhere, even though we were indoors. Grace sat on her bed, with that calm look children have when all the adults are hopelessly upset. She'd become pale and thin, but by God you would swear she could have been a movie star one day.

I took her into my arms as the wind blew circles around us. We talked about King Kong one last time. She would have these long periods of silence between her responses, and every time she fell quiet I would think she'd passed, but then she'd come back and tell me she wondered if they built a giant robot monkey and had it climb the Empire State Building. We talked some more about the Empire State Building. I told her what it looked like on the inside. I told her about New York City, and what it was like to be rich and free, and how she'd get to see it all for herself when she became a famous actress.

And then she stopped responding entirely.

When Ted died, the wind blew him away in chunks, but Grace went away in a single, gentle gust, drifting into the air like sand along a shore.

I explored the world outside the house and found nothing. I think I'm the last one in the world who hasn't crumbled into dust yet. I guess I've always been pretty good at holding myself together.

I don't need to eat, drink, or sleep anymore, even though my brain tells me I do. Sometimes I see shapes in the distance that look like people, but when I get closer I just see things that might have once been animals.

Cathie's body came back at one point and stood over Grace's bed for an hour or so. I gave her a mask to cover where her face used to be and told her that Grace wasn't here anymore. I put Cathie back in the ground, but she had already dug herself out again when I woke up the next day. I haven't seen her since.

I'd lost all hope until a little black bird came flying out of the dust and into my hands. I can't explain how I knew, but I *knew* it was Grace. I could feel it in the dust inside the bird inside the dust. She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to.

It took years to find them all, but I did.

I open my eyes. I'm ready.

In each hand I hold a cluster of strings woven around the legs of countless birds. Aunt Margie, Uncle Lem, Ted, Grace, Mom, Dad, Cecil, and even Phyllis from the theater are here, along with other folks I don't recognize. I thank them for being kind enough to volunteer. Their wings are twitching in anticipation. I take a deep breath, allowing the dust to fill my lungs. It's so much easier to breathe now that I just accept it. Normally this plan would seem insane and impossible, but these days the world itself is insane and impossible. Besides, I'm so much lighter now. There's no more anger weighing me down. No more hatred.

I open the door to the gilded birdcage. The little black birds pour out and fall upward into the sky. As I feel my feet leave the ground, I stare into the beautiful brown oblivion and whisper a dusty word of gratitude for finally setting this old dog free.

Duty

Dr. Herrero walked slowly along the empty white corridor, like a condemned to the scaffold. His footsteps echoed on the cold walls, while several cameras observed him from the ceiling. He knew that he was being analyzed by the most sophisticated surveillance devices ever invented by man. If those cameras at any moment found anything abnormal, the security system would have activated the alarm in the whole building and the automatic sentry machine guns stationed near the door at the end of the corridor, capable of tearing any intruder into pieces in a few seconds, would have blown him away.

Hilarious, he thought. *The defenses would do nothing against the one they're actually afraid of.*

Nothing happened. Dr. Herrero arrived in front of the massive steel door resembling a monolithic tombstone. He said, with a calm and determined tone that didn't show the storm of emotions weighing in his heart, "Dr. Robert Herrero, Clearance Level 5, Access Code 09-42-8695." The microphone above his head registered his words, and the sentry turrets, which hadn't stopped pointing at him since when he arrived there, immediately disengaged themselves and started guarding the corridor again. He pressed his hand on the digital fingerprint sensor and the enormous door opened without a sound.

It. It. They always called her "it". Like an animal. Like an object. Like something worthless.

Robert entered the elevator, as empty as the rest of the facility, and the door closed behind him. Even there, he was constantly monitored by video cameras. He didn't pay them any attention, and, as he had done many other times, pressed the single, big grey button on the wall of the lift, which started descending into the darkness. Dr. Herrero crossed his arms and waited, giving an

absent look to his reflection in the elevator's mirror. Time had not been gentle with him. He was still good looking for his age, but his face was marked by wrinkles, his hair grey and his right cheek crossed by a long, thin scar. He touched it gently, thinking that, maybe, the end of that story was finally near.

Am I ready? I know what they'll ask me. Am I ready?

The elevator reached the floor, 400 metres under the Italian surface. The secret bunker didn't have a name; it was built to host the most important meetings of the Foundation, and the Foundation wasn't in the habit of giving a place a name if it didn't officially exist. As the door opened, Dr. Herrero was greeted by two men in black uniforms. Robert knew one of them, the German, Captain Strauss. He was rapidly making a career for himself, and his presence there made Herrero think about his son, Martin. Made him think about how much Martin hated him. What hurt Robert the most was that Martin *had* a good reason to hate him.

Strauss saluted him. "Greetings, Dr. Herrero," he said in awkward English. "I have been ordered to inform you that the assembly is about to begin. Your presence is required as soon as possible." Robert nodded and walked down the gently sloping hallway, heading to the conference room. All his confusion disappeared during that walk, supplanted by a sense of urge and anxiety. After all, he was a member of the Foundation, and he had made vows to it. Most of the researchers laughed at those vows, laughed at the old words. *Secure, contain, protect.* Robert lost a lot for those vows, and they were all he had left. He had lost his wife. He had lost his sons. The words were what he hadn't lost.

Arriving in front of the room, Dr. Herrero stopped, revised mentally the information he had, breathed deeply to calm himself, and opened the door.

The room was occupied by a large, round mahogany table. Around it there were almost two dozen people, speaking in a low tone. There were members from every secret department of the Foundation, though oddly not a single member of the Senior Staff. Robert noted in particular three figures, two men and a woman, in black business suits. He had never seen them before. As soon as he walked into

the room, Dr. Jonathan Redwood, the American presiding over the meeting, welcomed him. “Hello, Robert. We were waiting for you. Please, have a seat.” Robert walked to the nearest empty chair and glanced at his colleagues; most looked nervous and stressed. *This probably feels awkward for them,* Robert thought. Redwood stood up.

"Gentlemen’’, said Redwood. "Before we begin, I’d like to remind you all that this meeting is classified Level 5-Black, as per protocol GK-09-Black, and what we are going to discuss today is classified for all individuals without level 5, O5, or GK-X clearance. Our orders come from the director of Project Green King, and to him and him alone do we report our actions.” He looked at the people around him. "Is that clear?’’ Everyone nodded.

"Good. In that case, we can begin." he said, clearing his throat. “As you have been informed, Project Green King is focused on the containment of an entity considered one of the most powerful beings the Foundation has ever faced. This being is a reality bender identified as Entity HL-49, or by its original codename, 'Green King.' This entity may have existed for years, maybe decades, before its interactions with the organizations predating the Foundation. At some point after this "discovery", it began to investigate us. Our best psychological profile—"

"Guess," one of the dark-suited men said, his Krakow accent showing. "Your best guess."

Dr. Redwood cleared his throat, looked around nervously. "Our profile suggests that it was scared. It knew that, if we captured it, we’d eventually find a way to keep it contained forever.” Redwood stopped, drank a sip of water and began talking again. "To obtain the information it needed to escape us, the Green King resorted to an ingenious strategy, as Operative Magnus will now explain you. Magnus?”

The dark-suited heckler from before stood up. “Thank you, Dr. Redwood. Green King, thanks to its abilities, managed somehow to create a reality bender under its control using only an ordinary man. This person, contained by us, is SCP-343. His infiltration was total, and after him came others, but for a long time we didn't suspect

anything. And this gave the Green King enough time to spy us…spy on us." Magnus shook his head at the English phrase.

"Today, we have uncovered three different entities within the Foundation that worked for the Green King," Magnus continued. "And we would have never discovered we were being spied upon at all were it not for the Green King's difficulties in controlling its puppets.'' Magnus stopped for a second, then resumed talking: "It made a mistake. During an attempt to gather information, the entity appears to have suffered some sort of episode or break; during this, its puppet, a young Palauan girl, was freed from its control and began confessing to us that it had been "possessed," as she put it, by a being that was giving it anomalous abilities and monitoring its interactions with Foundation personnel. In combination with the already extant evidence of the Green King's existence that the Foundation had, we were able to deduce this particular entity's involvement. That was the beginning of our problems. It became more careful, more shrewd, it found methods to prevent us from finding it. We continued looking for it, winning some battles, losing others. The situation, however, remained somewhat stable. Back then, the Green King was a powerful reality bender, but still a reality bender like many others, simply trying to escape from us.''

Magnus lowered his voice. "Operative Amber will continue the briefing from this point." He sat, and the black-suited woman sitting beside him stood up.

"On 11 February 1974, during our sole offensive measure to date, two unnamed mobile task forces launched a direct assault upon a suburban home in eastern Pennsylvania where it was believed the Green King was basing its operations at that time."

"Its base was in a populated town?" one of the other, unnamed researchers asked.

"This is not a press conference," Operative Magnus said. "Please remain silent throughout the briefing, Taurus." He turned to the woman. "Please continue."

"During the attack," Amber continued, "two civilians were killed. Judging from radio transmissions from operating agents in the field,

the civilians were between the ages of eight and fifteen years of age, both male. Entity HL-49 was engaged moments thereafter, the entity apparently having discovered the deaths of the two civilians in the house. A screaming was heard over the radio just before contact with the assault force was lost entirely. Moments afterward, an explosion was registered within the on-site fission reactor of Site 86, from which the assault was launched. The Site was lost with all hands."

The room sat in silence while the assembled individuals absorbed this information. Operative Amber continued moments later.

"Event E-GK-04 was one of the largest attacks against the Foundation ever recorded in our history. Perhaps most frighteningly, our psychological analysis of the Entity suggests that its restraint came primarily out of a lack of thorough intelligence gathering."

"Restraint?" a voice in the room said.

Operative Amber paused, looked at the speaker. "The Entity's restraint in not killing every man and woman working for the Foundation was due to ignorance. It didn't take the time to track us all down, then burned down one of its best leads; one of its operatives was working out of that Site. The annihilation of Site 86 was, in the end, just a self-defence act, and the Green King kept running away without any actively hostile action against us, but it was starting to break down mentally. It might have lost its mind entirely. Then, it…" Amber paused a moment, cleared her throat. She briefly made eye contact with Herrero, looked down at her notes. "Several years later—"

"I can tell the story from here out," Herrero said. Robert stood up, slowly, while the people in the room looked at him. His blue eyes seemed like trying to incinerate Amber. He knew she knew the story; at least, her version of it, but he was nevertheless raging. It wasn't her place. "Sit down," he said to Amber. "Now.'' The wrath in his voice made the woman turn pale slightly, and she sat.

"I was twenty-seven when I met her, my wife." Herrero continued. "We met in a park one night, late at night, later than either of us should have been out. We were both running away from something,

wandering, hoping to find something better, and we found each other. She told me about her first love, the breakup. I told her about mine. I told her a little bit about the Foundation, some of it a cover story, some of it…maybe more than I should have. She told me about her job, how much she hated it, how much she—"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand how this is relevant—"

"You can wait a goddamned minute, Jeff. Yeah, I know I'm not supposed to call you by your names. But you dragged me in here, and you know what you're asking me to do, and I know what you're asking me to do, so you can sit through my little pity party." Herrero sighed. "It was a quick courtship, a quick…it was just all so *fast.* I fell in love with her. We were happy, for the first time in our lives. That was all I knew."

"One morning, right around four o'clock, we were asleep. I was restless, I got up and went to the kitchen. Right at that moment, there was an explosion. Explosions. An attack. I was a desk worker, I had no experience with what was happening. I was knocked unconscious by some force. When I woke up, I was blindfolded, tied to a chair. A voice kept asking me questions, random questions. Pain happened. I blacked out."

"The Green King used torture? Can't it—" The black-suited man stopped, seeing the look Magnus gave him. Robert couldn't see that look, but he was sure the operative wouldn't be interrupting again.

"No," Robert said. "Two mobile task forces swarmed our house, took me into custody. She had left already, had known what was coming. The Foundation had figured it out somehow. It was just another operation for them." Robert looked up at the ceiling. "She knew I worked for the Foundation. It was infiltration for her, at least at the beginning. Maybe the whole time. I lost my wife, and I'll never know if she felt anything for me or not or if she used me to get to the Foundation. I'll never know if she thinks I set her up. I'll never have an answer to that I can believe. Ever."

The room was silent as the implications set in.

Redwood stood up and coughed, embarrassed. Then he spoke:

"After… after this Event, E-GK-06, the Green King became actively hostile to the Foundation, and the leaders of the Green King Project decided to make its existence a secret to everybody but a few personnel. This happened twenty-five years ago. And now, I'll let Operative Taurus conclude.'' Then he sat, and he looked sideways at Robert, feeling bad for him. Robert looked like he had lost all energy, and simply sat there, staring at the table.

Operative Taurus, a corpulent Hispanic, stood up: "Since E-GK-06, the Green King has become more hostile, dangerous and aggressive to the Foundation as time passed. As years gone by, the deterioration of its mental and moral conditions, which had stopped during its relationship with Dr. Herrero, resumed at an even faster pace. Now, we think it is at a final stage. As the psychological evaluations say, the Green King is tired, exhausted, and doesn't want to fight or hide anymore, and these discouragement and depression can lead to unpredictable consequences. As you know, four days ago we had two more Events, and yesterday Site 40 was attacked. We know the Green King is involved.''

"Thus, the Green King Project leaders have decided to eliminate this threat once and for all. The Neutralization Committee expressed their agreement, and our R&D division has developed a weapon that we believe will be able to render the Green King harmless for enough time to kill it. All what we need'', he said, looking at the people around him, "are the right time and place, and a bait to lure it and maintain it in the same spot for enough time to let us activate the weapon."

The people around the table started talking all together, and Taurus had to speak up to make them stop. "It will have to be a carefully chosen bait. Considering its hate towards us and its powers, we'll have to choose the right person, someone able to speak with it for several minutes without being annihilated.'' He looked at Robert. "Dr. Herrero, we think the best candidate for this task is you.''

The room was again silent. Everyone was speechless. Robert seemed not having heard at first, then he started emitting a guttural sound that made the people around him shiver, while his shoulders winced. The laughter exploded, harsh and raucous. The laughter of an insane man. It seemed like boiling water was gurgling in the

man’s throat, and when it faded, its echo resounded on the walls. Dr. Herrero stood up, his face darkened and pointing towards the floor. He spoke with a low and dreadful tone.

"You are asking me to help you kill the woman I love, trying to take advantage on an oath I took when I was too young to really understand it and that I am too honest, or stupid, to stop observing. You take advantage on the fact that I haven’t seen her for decades, hoping I accept. Now tell me, you manipulative sons-of-bitches: why should I do it?’’

"Dr. Herrero," Magnus said, a frown flashing across his face.

"No, goddammit, I deserve an explanation. You tell me *exactly* why I haven't given enough yet."

"Robert."

Robert threw his hands up. His mind was confused, but in the great storm of thoughts, one of them stood mighty and beautiful, like a beacon in the darkness. *I would see her again.*

Am I ready? I know what they'll ask me. Am I ready?

He looked up, and a single, bright tear fell from his right eye.

"All right. I'll do it."

Castles 2

A Year of Reprieve

An Amateur Play in (Two) Acts
by
Researcher Talloran

Copyright © 452381, by Researcher Talloran

« **I See a Darkness** | **Castles 2** | **Only God Can Judge Me and More** »
Hub

Cast of Characters

Researcher Talloran:	Foundation Researcher of indeterminate age eternally punished.
The Being: Doctor Hikari Yamada:	The one who is correct. Medical professional at Site-??. Hates being called "nurse".
Doctor Simon Glass:	Head of Psychology. Had two appointments with Talloran.
Paul McGann:	The Eighth Doctor.

Scene

Beach-side resort.

Time

Data not found.

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING:	We are on the balcony of the second-floor of a lovely, expensive beach-side resort. The weather is perfect for relaxing outside; at 35°C (or 95°F), there is no reason not to get some fresh air. The wind is, at worst, incredibly light. Seagulls are out on the sand, and the ocean is still. We see our main star, RESEARCHER TALLORAN, lying in a soft

	chair underneath a parasol. Meanwhile, DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA has opted directly for sunbathing. Despite the weather, both are in their professional work clothes. If one didn't know better, they'd think that it was colder than it actually is. PAUL MCGANN is on the beach, lying down on the sand and tanning.
AT RISE:	RESEARCHER TALLORAN awakens with a startle, with it being the first time in 452,380 years that a new cycle began in a place not born of darkness. The area is unfamiliar; when was the last time TALLORAN ever been to anything like a hotel, let alone a beach? To the right is someone real familiar; DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA. It doesn't take YAMADA long to notice TALLORAN, now shuffling around the balcony in a nervous sweat. She looks up from her Wired June 2017 issue and chuckles.

YAMADA

You're finally up and about. You've been conked out for such a while, I thought maybe you'd have

Sleeping Beauty Syndrome.

(TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

TALLORAN

Hey, hey hey hey hey hey, w-where are we exactly? This is different. It's way, way different from before. Are… are, crap, are you —

YAMADA

Relax. The Being can't follow you here. You managed to get some breathing room.

(TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

TALLORAN

B-but I don't understand. What's —

YAMADA

If I knew the answers here, so would you.

(YAMADA takes out a lantern from underneath her chair and starts to light it. TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

Right now, I'm just an extension of your memories and emotions. I guess you always thought highly of me, huh? Calm under pressure, even when shit hits the fan, the Foundation ideal. You definitely wanted that. Maybe that's why I'm here?

TALLORAN

But, but… I just don't understand. It's… it's bright out here, and happy, it's gonna get fucked isn't it?

(YAMADA smiles, finishing the process of lighting the lantern. She gets up and gestures to the door of the resort.)

YAMADA

Try and relax. It gets dark in there, so you'll need to just trust me and follow closely so you don't get lost. We have to move fast in there.

(TALLORAN halts, looking towards the inside of the resort. Now that it was mentioned, it is incredibly dark in there. Before TALLORAN can get more confused, YAMADA grabs TALLORAN's arm and walks over to the door. With that forceful determination, even if the world isn't making sense, an obvious, if small, look of relief spreads over TALLORAN's face.)

TALLORAN

I… sure. Only as long as you explain to me what is happening with all of this.

YAMADA

I will. Just do us a favor. The moment I open the door, close your eyes and imagine this is Site-118. And if you must open your eyes, don't look up at me.

(Before TALLORAN can say anything, YAMADA opens the door. Immediately, an overwhelming sense of darkness and fluidity floods the area, and

TALLORAN is forced not to look. Site-118 starts to come to mind. TALLORAN remembers; that was where last worked. Shit, THE BEING'S claws are scratching the eyelids. Site-118. It was a small enough site that it was easy to map out the area. That's right… down the stairs. Then take two lefts. Go down another flight of stairs. Claws have reached the cornea. Circle around behind the stairs, then open the door in front. You take one more right, and that's how you get to…)

YAMADA

We're outside again. Open your eyes now.

(TALLORAN'S eyes open. It's a starry night.)

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING:	It's a clear, starry night. The resort is behind RESEARCHER TALLORAN and DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA, and a path in a sparse forest stretches outwards.
AT RISE:	TALLORAN is in awe of the surroundings. It's been ages since there was such a peaceful moment as this one. Back when reality still existed, if one

were to be generous. YAMADA waits a few seconds for TALLORAN to get a bearing for the setting before walking forward, dragging TALLORAN along with her with the lantern in the other hand.

YAMADA

See, isn't it fine?

TALLORAN

Yeah… I guess it was. It's uh. Wow. Shit. It's really nice out here, isn't it. Is this still a trap?

YAMADA

No. If it was a trap, you'd have been caught in it already. We have a bit of a walk to get to what I want to show you, so let's talk some.

TALLORAN

I guess. You're not The Being, but what are you? Why is everything here all safe and cozy? How come —

TALLORAN I still remember you?	YAMADA You still remember me?

YAMADA

Hah! Thought you'd say that. I mean, you do have to keep in mind, I am only an extension of you in here. You must remember enough about me though, if I'm here now.

TALLORAN

So you… aren't actually Dr. Yamada then. For certain.

YAMADA

Yeah, though I can't say that's a bad thing. I'm sure the real real Yamada would hate to be in the position we're in right now.

TALLORAN

But wait!

(TALLORAN slips out of YAMADA's grasp and looks at her quizzically.)

You don't… you don't fully act like her. She was… shit. I can't remember that well. She wasn't as dry though.

(YAMADA pauses to think of an answer. Only the sound of crickets float by the two, before all she is able to do is shrug.)

YAMADA

Not sure! I guess it's because you can't remember me well enough to fully capture my personality. How do you think I acted then?

TALLORAN

More uh… playful? Sparkly? Yeah. I think so anyway.

YAMADA

Alright then. Just —

(Immediately, YAMADA spins once on her heels.)

— like —

(After spinning, she lands on her feet and points her finger in TALLORAN'S face.)

— that?

(TALLORAN snorts.)

TALLORAN

A little bit too peppy, but in the right ballpark.

(The two share some laughs as they continue to walk on, conversation having died down a substantial degree. It's only a full minute before TALLORAN speaks up again.)

Why is it that I'm safe here? What makes this different from all the other times The Being got to me?

YAMADA

You'll have to think about what was different from usual in the past couple years then! Surely you must have an idea, O Grand Researcher Talloran.

TALLORAN

That's just it though. You obviously don't remember because I can't remember. I don't know why The Being would let up on me now when it never has. At least, I don't think it ever has. Maybe this thing has happened before, and I can't

remember that! Fuck, why does any of this happen?

(There is a short pause as they approach a grand, scenic gate by the end of the path.)

YAMADA

Maybe it's because you came to an understanding about something. You didn't just spend the last few hundred thousand years in vain. I'm not sure what you finally understood, but it had to have been something, right? That's the only thing I can think of. And maybe that's why we're coming here. Do you remember now, where we are?

(YAMADA sets the lantern down and opens the gate with both of her hands, motioning for TALLORAN to go in.)

TALLORAN

I definitely would have remembered this giant gate. I guess the forest and its path are familiar… shouldn't it be ladies first?

(YAMADA smiles and continues to motion. TALLORAN breathes in deeply, exhaling with as much force. TALLORAN sighs, tenses up, and heads through the gate.)

(The dirt path quickly transitions into one made of stone. As TALLORAN continues on it, a look of familiarity and shock starts to appear, eyes opening wide. YAMADA follows behind, quickly keeping pace. The two eventually reach their destination, and TALLORAN quickly runs over to it; **a calm, quiet pond**.)

Oh… oh wow. How serene. It's still here…

YAMADA

Mmhmm! Spick and span, isn't it? No ducks out here, unfortunately. I really wish they came by more often. Once in a while was never enough.

I-2-8

TALLORAN

That's right. Yeah. Yeah! The one time I was here, we both came together on assignment. And, and we stayed here for the full week. This place was… real nice. Why didn't we get assigned to it more often?

YAMADA

I don't know. You were always so stressed, why didn't you come here more often? Also, I'm not exactly —

TALLORAN

Please don't remind me of that. I just need this bit of joy right now.

(TALLORAN splashes the pond, sighing.)

That also explains the gate; I remember you showing me that once.

(YAMADA sits down by TALLORAN, dipping her feet in the water.)

YAMADA

Ah, how nice. You remember working with me, right? You got to hear my patients express gratitude for

my work… heh, they even called me something real particular around you. You remember, right?

TALLORAN

Yeah. "My ray of light." How endearing. You were some people's reason for living. That's an amazing quality in and of itself.

I-2-9

Somehow, I forgot about this… I didn't think I'd be finding the pond here of all places. But wait… I remember. When we were here, we got interviewed by… uh, by…

YAMADA

Dr. Glass, wasn't it?

TALLORAN

Yeah, but I didn't see him when we walked in. I don't even know if I can see more than one of my own manifestations of people I know.

(TALLORAN looks up at YAMADA before realizing someone is sitting on the bench behind her. The figure's back is to everyone. He waves his hand and calls out.)

GLASS

Hey! Long time no see, Talloran.

(BLACKOUT)
(CURTAIN)
(END OF SCENE)
(END OF ACT)

ACT II

Scene 1

SETTING:	The duck pond.
AT RISE:	TALLORAN, YAMADA, and GLASS are all on a bench overlooking the pond. The perspective has shifted now, as everything but the bench have moved around to accommodate the three overlooking the pond. While GLASS and TALLORAN are in full-focus, YAMADA starts to loose transparency and clarity.

GLASS

Funny that you remember me better than Yamada. If she were here, that'd be real insulting to her, wouldn't it?

(GLASS takes a bite of an apple. Despite the apple and GLASS appearing solid, GLASS phases through the apple. Crunching noises can be heard as GLASS continues to chew, throwing the apple in the pond for the ducks.)

YAMADA

I still feel insulted, you know! Hmmph. I guess I get it though.

TALLORAN

Huh?

GLASS

Well, people tend to remember the negatives much better than the positives. That's just how our brains adapted to survive. You may have been great friends with Dr. Yamada, but the two times you've spent with me is easier to remember specifics for. We didn't exactly talk about the happiest of stuff, right?

TALLORAN

I guess not? I guess if I'm seeing the Head of Psychology himself, then it's very much not a happy case.

YAMADA

What did you two talk about anyhow? That's not something the calm and steadfast side of you would be dealing with.

TALLORAN

I remember the first session for sure. It was about the uh… the roughness I've had dealing with anomalies. No one tells you this when you first join, but you're just so likely to end up traumatized and messed up. I thought I got through my first couple years fine before they found me having a meltdown by some humanoid's cell.

GLASS

Do you remember the anomaly?

TALLORAN

Would that even matter, really?

GLASS

No wonder I couldn't figure out which one that was just now. And the second session?

TALLORAN

Hey, wait… if I remember it, that means you would, so why don't you say it?

(TALLORAN stares down at the ground, frustrated, as GLASS gets up to pick another apple off of a nearby tree.)

GLASS

For patients undergoing psychotherapy, it helps them process stuff a lot easier when they explain what they are feeling or remember of events. A manifestation is still just a manifestation, but you are you yourself. So you should say it.

TALLORAN

You're no fun.

GLASS

I'm only fun on my off-days.

(GLASS bites into the apple.)

TALLORAN

It was… about my teenage years and young adulthood. I had a real rough time surviving before I got picked up by the Foundation. It's tough. But it's hard to remember that many details

about it. I just know quite a bit of it was my own fuck-ups.

GLASS

Like?

TALLORAN

Again, hard to remember, but… not taking the chance to move houses when I had the finances, or not sticking up for myself when it would have saved me jobs. Shit like that.

GLASS

Maybe The Being is eating up your negative emotions. That could be likely, especially if you're at the point now where you're unstressed enough that you can spend time here and enjoy it. I mean, relative to everything else.

TALLORAN

Fuck, I don't like that. That'd mean that being hurt for all this time is supposed to be a positive!

GLASS

And to you, that'd be wholly negative, ri —

TALLORAN

Yeah actually, it would be! Hey, Yamada, aren't you still there?

(TALLORAN looks up, only to see YAMADA completely gone.)

GLASS

Oof. Unfortunate.

TALLORAN

W… what? But I can still remember her. Why isn't she here?

GLASS

I think our subject of discussion's finding you.

(The two remain silent for minutes. THE AUDIENCE grows impatient. The world gradually shifts itself again. GLASS looks up at the sky.)

GLASS

Hey… our session is almost up. But I just want to ask you about something. Earlier, you talked about the Foundation being traumatizing, and having a rough young adulthood. But you didn't say anything about it being wholly your fault when it wasn't, and vice versa, right?

(TALLORAN remains silent for twenty seconds.)

GLASS

Do you think you've accepted that oftentimes, the bad shit that happens to you isn't your fault? And that when it is your fault, you know it and can accept it?

(TALLORAN remains silent for another minute. THE AUDIENCE starts to riot.)

GLASS

Sometimes, if you shift your point of view, you can reach new levels of understanding with yourself, and with your actions. I didn't have time to teach you that out there in reality, but here I think you understand.

TALLORAN

I…

(As TALLORAN stands up, the physical form that is taken begins to gradually break off and disintegrate. Bits detach, and TALLORAN shakes, staring at GLASS surprised.)

GLASS

Who knows when our next chance at calm is? But when you get it, remember what you learned on your way there.

(THE AUDIENCE floods the stage, taking the form of THE BEING now, and the world shatters. TALLORAN hesitantly nods and reaches out to GLASS, before the body completely breaks and there is no remaining light.)

(BLACKOUT)
(CURTAIN)
(END OF ACT)
(FIN)

Acknowledgments and Attributions

085-Romance-Adult (http://www.scp-wiki.net/085-romance-adult) - DrClef (author).

1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1) - Jack Ike (author).

1,001 Dark and Stormy Nights (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1-001-dark-and-stormy-nights) - fieldstone (author).

1. Mr. Headless (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1-mr-headless) - Anaxagoras (author).

10:30 A.M. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/10-30-a-m) - Djoric (author).

10. Mr. Mission (http://www.scp-wiki.net/10-mr-mission) - Dr Gerald (author).

100 Feet of ROPE! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/100-feet-of-rope) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

11. Mr. Feather (http://www.scp-wiki.net/11-mr-feather) - Sophia Light (author).

12 Tales About A Factory (http://www.scp-wiki.net/12talesaboutafactory) - TheDuckman (author).

13. Mr. Purple (http://www.scp-wiki.net/13-mr-purple) - Faminepulse (author).

13th-23rd December 2008 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/13th-23rd-december-2008) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

14. Mr. Brass (http://www.scp-wiki.net/14-mr-brass) - GrandEnder (author).

15-11-2012 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/15-11-2012) - Jacob Conwell (author).

15. Ms. Sweetie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/15-ms-sweetie) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Sixteenth Wondertainment Donation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/16th-wondertainment-donation) - Dr Reach (author).

173 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/173) - tunedtoadeadchannel (author).

1914 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1914) - Vezaz (author).

1st - 12th December 2008 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1st-12th-december-2008) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

First CETRes Donation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/1st-cetres-donation) - Dr Reach (author).

20,584 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/20-584) - Litfried (author).

20 GOTO 10 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/20-goto-10) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

24th December 2008 14th January 2009 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/24th-december-2008-14th-january-2009) - Kain Pathos Crow (author).

269 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/269) - A Fat Ghost (author).

3. Mr. Money (http://www.scp-wiki.net/3-mr-money) - Tanhony (author).

Third Vesta Donation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/3rd-vesta-donation) - Dr Reach (author).

4. Mr. Lie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/4-mr-lie) - Salman Corbette (author).

5. Mr. Mad (http://www.scp-wiki.net/5-mr-mad) - thedeadlymoose (author).

5th Global Occult Coalition Donation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/5th-global-occult-coalition-donation) - Dr Reach (author).

6. Mr. Stripes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/6-mr-stripes) - TroyL (author).

7 Degrees of Separation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/7-degrees-of-separation) - Wils (author).

728 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/728) - A Fat Ghost (author).

780-PCS Incident (http://www.scp-wiki.net/780-pcs) - Dexanote (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 1: Contact (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident1) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 2: Negotiation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident2) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 3: Escalation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident3) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 4: Breach (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident4) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 5: Breaking Point (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident5) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 6: Escape (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident6) - DrClef (author).

The 784 Incident: Part 7: Conclusion (http://www.scp-wiki.net/784incident7) - DrClef (author).

8. Mr. Moon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/8-mr-moon) - Anaxagoras (author).

9. Mr. Clumsy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/9-mr-clumsy) - Tanhony (author).

A Breath Of Relief No Different From Drowning (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-breath-of-relief-no-different-from-drowning) - SoullessSingularity (author).

A Brief Explanation of Demonics (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-brief-explanation-on-demonics) - AJMansfield (author).

A Broken Machine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-broken-machine) - Mr Self Destruct (author), Gene R (translator).

A Broken Tool (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-broken-tool) - weizhong (author).

A Burial In The Woods (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-burial-in-the-woods) - Gaffney (author).

A Cackmas Carol (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-cackmas-carol) - daveyoufool (author).

A Calculated Risk (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-calculated-risk) - Aelanna (author).

A Canticle For Bright (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-canticle-for-bright) - Smapti (author).

A Chance at Freedom (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-chance-at-freedom) - MorgiePie (author).

A Chance Encounter (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-chance-encounter) - Quikngruvn (author).

A Child to Teach (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-child-to-teach) - Pixeltasim (author).

A Circus Come To Not (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-circus-come-to-not) - DrChandra (author).

A Circus for MC&D Ltd (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-circus-for-mc-d-ltd) - Tara Unknown (author).

A Circus Milked Dry (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-circus-milked-dry) - OZ Ouroboros (author).

A Circus of a Wreck (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-circus-of-a-wreck) - OZ Ouroboros (author).

A Circus With Paranoia (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-circus-with-paranoia) - OZ Ouroboros (author).

A Completed Chronicle (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-completed-chronicle) - The Great Hippo (author).

A Concrete Shrine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-concrete-shrine) - Roget (author).

A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-confluence-of-clandestine-conferences) - TyGently (author).

A Convincing Lyre (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-convincing-lyre) - psul (author).

A Cooler Manifesto (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-cooler-manifesto) - Randomini (author).

A Darke Tale - New Age (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-darke-tale-new-age) - Captain Cain (author).

A Day, A Night and Some Lead. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-a-night-and-some-lead) - Esheter (author).

A Day at the Call Center (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-at-the-call-center) - Dmatix (author).

A day at the (un)stables (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-at-the-un-stables) - Cavalry (author).

A Day In The Life (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-in-the-life) - Drewbear (author).

A Day in the Life of Alto Clef (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-in-the-life-of-alto-clef) - TroyL (author).

A Day Of Infamy - A short story of SCP-705 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-day-of-infamy) - Waxx (author).

A Diminished Thing (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-diminished-thing) - PeppersGhost (author).

A Discussion with L. E. T. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-discussion-with-l-e-t) - Bunton (author).

A Disturbance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-disturbance) - Zolgamax (author).

A Double Life (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-double-life) - DrWaverton (author).

A Dysfunctional Heist (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-dysfunctional-heist) - Vincent_Redgrave (author).

The Little Buck-Toothed Boy: A Fairy Tale (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-fairy-tale) - psul (author).

A Fan's Fans (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-fan-s-fans) - UglyFlower (author).

A Fancy Dinosaur (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-fancy-dinosaur) - TwistedGears (author).

A Farewell To Arms (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-farewell-to-arms) - Weryllium (author).

A Farewell To Kings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-farewell-to-kings) - GreenWolf (author).

A Few Memos (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-few-memos) - Salman Corbette (author).

A Few More Words From "The Administrator" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-few-more-words-from-the-administrator) - Roget (author).

A Fitting End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-fitting-end) - Djoric (author).

A Foul Storm in a Fair Land (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-foul-storm-in-a-fair-land) - DrChandra (author).

A Friend's Words (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-friend-s-words) - GibberingEloquence (author).

A Funeral On Mars (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-funeral-on-mars) - Djoric (author).

A Greater Darkness (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-greater-darkness) - fastandbulbous (author).

A History of Reaction (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-history-of-reaction) - TyGently (author).

A Holiday Appeal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-holiday-appeal) - eric_h (author).

A Hopeless Case (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-hopeless-case) - fenton-st (author).

A Jester's Tale (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-jester-s-tale) - Smapti (author).

A journal found in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Natural History (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-journal-found-in-the-collection-of-the-peabody-museum-of-n) - Ihp (author).

A Keter Kinda Christmas (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-keter-kinda-christmas) - Smapti (author).

A Kind Of Christmas (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-kind-of-christmas) - Gaffney (author).

A Lesson in Power (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-lesson-in-power) - renacer (author).

A Life that Was Simple (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-life-that-was-simple) - SunnyClockwork (author).

A Long Time Past (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-long-time-past) - Djoric (author).

A Long Ways from Home (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-long-ways-from-home) - Pixeltasim (author).

A Lovely Day in the Garden (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-lovely-day-in-the-garden) - comwilson (author).

A Man At the Top of His Profession (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-man-at-the-top-of-his-profession) - name (author).

A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-man-of-clay-and-men-formerly-men) - 9Volt (author).

A Matter Of Faith (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-matter-of-faith) - CryogenChaos (author).

A Memorandum (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-memorandum) - Taffeta (author).

A Merry Fellow (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-merry-fellow) - Ihp (author).

A Most Unfortunate Reunion (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-most-unfortunate-reunion) - Smapti (author).

A Multi-Universal Affair (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-multi-universal-affair) - Ihp (author).

A Night at the Movies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-night-at-the-movies) - Kalinin (author).

A Normal, Daily Routine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-normal-daily-routine) - Dr Samuel Harsen (author).

Business as Usual (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-normal-week) - DrKens (author).

A Personal Connection (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-personal-connection) - CapnThatguy (author).

A Place In The Back Of Your Mind (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-place-in-the-back-of-your-mind) - Sir Baubius (author).

A Place To Call Your Home (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-place-to-call-your-home) - TheBillith (author).

A Poem for Nobody (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-poem-for-nobody) - Kuroiten (author).

A Price to be Paid (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-price-to-be-paid) - MegalomaniacInchworm (author).

A Question of Commerce (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-question-of-commerce) - Dmatix (author).

A Real Humdinger (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-real-humdinger) - DrChandra (author).

A Reason To Die (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-reason-to-die) - Shaggydredlocks (author).

A Researcher's Tale (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-researcher-s-tale) - deValmont (author).

A.S.S. and Other Low-threat Groups of Interest (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-s-s-and-other-low-threat-groups-of-interest) - Salman Corbette (author).

A Scip Or A Star? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-scip-or-a-star) - DrChandra (author).

A Shift at The Factory (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-shift-at-the-factory) - TwistedGears (author).

A Simple Paradigm Shift (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-simple-paradigm-shift) - MissMercurial (author).

A Simple Solution (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-simple-solution) - GibberingEloquence (author).

A Site-19 Christmas Carol (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-site-19-christmas-carol) - djkaktus (author).

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-slumber-did-my-spirit-seal) - Dmatix (author).

A Small Town in Arizona (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-small-town-in-arizona) - AkariStar (author).

Track 3: Uh... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-song-about-serious-information-leaks) - Faminepulse (author).

A Sort of Challenge (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-sort-of-challenge) - Zyn (author).

A Study of Anomalous Art (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-study-of-anomalous-art) - Djoric (author).

A Suicide Note (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-suicide-note) - Ihp (author).

A Swingset's Song (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-swingsets-song) - trennerdios (author).

A Thin Dangerous Line (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-thin-dangerous-line) - sirpudding (author).

Ruiz Sobers Up (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-trip-down-substance-lane) - Leviathan34 (author).

A Vale of Tears (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-vale-of-tears) - DrChandra (author).

A Very Bailey Christmas (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-very-bailey-christmas) - Ihp (author).

Love and Relative Safety in Sex (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-viscous-green-substance) - Cyantreuse (author).

A Visitation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-visitation) - AssertiveRoland (author).

A Waking Nightmare (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-waking-nightmare) - TwistedGears (author).

A Wandsman in the Court of the Hanged King (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-wandsman-in-the-court-of-the-hanged-king) - Metaphysician (author).

A Witch's Tale - Mistakes Were Made (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-witch-s-tale-mistakes-were-made) - sirpudding (author).

A World's Legacy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-world-s-legacy) - KnightKnight (author).

A World We Live In (http://www.scp-wiki.net/a-world-we-live-in) - Watery (author).

Abject Blue Insomnia (http://www.scp-wiki.net/abject-blue-insomnia) - Pedantique (author).

Able Baker Charlie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/able-baker-charlie) - Djoric (author).

Aboard the Train to Berlin (http://www.scp-wiki.net/aboard-the-train-to-berlin) - Jacob Conwell (author).

About Deer College (http://www.scp-wiki.net/about-deer) - ch00bakka (author).

About the Serpent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/about-the-serpent) - SunnyClockwork (author).

About Tree Fiddy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/about-tree-fiddy) - Gargus (author).

Absolute Self-Control (http://www.scp-wiki.net/absolute-self-control) - Doctor Whiteface (author).

Abstract Naught (http://www.scp-wiki.net/abstract-naught) - 9Volt (author).

Acquisition Log SCP- - (http://www.scp-wiki.net/acquisition-log-scp) - Adam Smascher (author).

Acquisitions - a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/acquisitions1) - SRegan (author).

Acquisitions - a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/acquisitions2) - SRegan (author).

Acquisitions - a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale Act III (http://www.scp-wiki.net/acquisitions3) - SRegan (author).

Across the Hills so Quiet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/across-the-hills-so-quiet) - Djoric (author).

Activity Documentation File 11-A (http://www.scp-wiki.net/activity-documentation-file-11-a) - Roget (author).

July 5th, 1975 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/acts-of-abuse) - Perelka_L (author).

Ad Majorem Bonum (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ad-majorem-bonum) - spikebrennan (author).

Adam's Worthless - Choose Yokim (http://www.scp-wiki.net/adams-worthless-choose-yokim) - Jack Ike (author).

ADANA Protocol (http://www.scp-wiki.net/adana-protocol) - Urbanmyth (author).

Additional Resources (http://www.scp-wiki.net/additional-resources) - djkaktus

(author), LurkD (author).

Address to the Students and Faculty (http://www.scp-wiki.net/address-to-the-students-and-faculty) - Anaxagoras (author).

Addressing the Second (http://www.scp-wiki.net/addressing-the-second) - GrandEnder (author).

Adventuring Interlude (http://www.scp-wiki.net/adventuring-interlude) - Djoric (author).

After Action Report 2272' (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-action-2272) - Kalinin (author).

Cover Letter for After-Action Report: Operation Free Market (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-action-report-cover-letter) - Boogey_Man23 (author).

After Amusement (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-amusement) - Gargus (author).

After Destruction (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-destruction) - NovaeDeArx (author).

After that / Until then (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-that-until-then) - psul (author).

After The End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-the-end) - weizhong (author).

After They Broke Our Fists (http://www.scp-wiki.net/after-they-broke-our-fists) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Aftermath (http://www.scp-wiki.net/aftermath) - Agent MacLeod (author).

Agent Apocalemur's Journal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agent-apocalemur-s-journal) - apocalemur (author).

Agent Brown and the Case of the Missing Amulet (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agent-brown-and-the-case-of-the-missing-amulet) - Roget (author).

Agent Imants Plumbing Pool Repair And Pizza Delivery Service (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agent-imants-plumbing-pool-repair-and-pizza-delivery-service) - Eekium (author).

Agent Spoon's Personnel Request (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agent-spoon-s-personnel-request) - SpoonOfEvil (author).

Agent Ukelele (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agent-ukelele) - DrClef (author).

Agricola In Insula Est Poeta (http://www.scp-wiki.net/agricola-in-insula-est-poeta) - Djoric (author).

Ailier (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ailier) - Zyn (author).

ALERT! LOCKDOWN INITIATED! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alert-lockdown-initiated) - LurkD (author).

Alexei and the Walrus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alexei-and-the-walrus) - Agent MacLeod (author).

All Along (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-along) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

All Hallows' (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-hallows) - Jacob Conwell (author).

All of Me Wants All of You (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-of-me-wants-all-of-you) - Decibelles (author).

All That I Am (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-that-we-are) - Cyantreuse (author).

All They Want is the Blood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-they-want-is-the-blood) - Sorts (author).

All Things Considered (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-things-considered) - Photosynthetic (author).

All Words Are Lies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-words-are-lies) - TheBillith (author).

All Work and No Play (http://www.scp-wiki.net/all-work-and-no-play) - weizhong (author).

Allegory Of The Two Bothers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/allegory-of-the-two-bothers) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Alone (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alone) - Dr Gears (author).

Along Came A Spider (http://www.scp-wiki.net/along-came-a-spider) - apocalemur (author).

Also This All Happened On The Same Day, So I Don't Know Why He Said It Like That. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/also-this-all-happened-on-the-same-day) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

Alternate Character Interpretations (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alternate-character-interpretations) - Ihp (author).

Alternate Hypotheses (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alternate-hypotheses) - Roget (author).

Alto Clef Jr.: Fins of the Father (http://www.scp-wiki.net/alto-clef-jr-fins-of-the-father) - DolphinSlugchugger (author).

Amnestic (http://www.scp-wiki.net/amnestic) - LordStonefish (author).

Amnestic Use Guide (http://www.scp-wiki.net/amnestic-orientation-manual) - LurkD (author).

An Alchemist Goes To War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-alchemist-goes-to-war) - DrMagnus (author).

An Angel who has Forsaken Sympathy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-angel-who-has-

forsaken-sympathy) - Gabriel Jade (author).

An Arm and a Leg (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-arm-and-a-leg) - Zachary Maxwell (author).

An Armenian Bodybuilder Exercises His Legal Rights (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-armenian-bodybuilder-exercises-his-legal-rights) - Randomini (author).

An Audience (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-audience) - Djoric (author).

An Average Life (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-average-life) - TroyL (author).

An Evening With Bright (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-evening-with-bright) - TheDuckman (author).

An Evergreen Affair (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-evergreen-affair) - Bennings (author).

An Excerpt from Goodbye Ghost (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-excerpt-from-goodbye-ghost) - Salman Corbette (author).

An Faq Part Two; Or, Your Hume Questions Answered (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-faq-part-two-or-your-hume-questions-answered) - Jekeled (author).

An Impenitent Thief (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-impenitent-thief) - psul (author).

An Old Woman and her Garden (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-old-woman-and-her-garden) - fieldstone (author).

An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-overview-of-foundation-journals-published-in-may-2017) - Kate McTiriss (author).

An Unconventional Tail (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-unconventional-tail) - lhp (author).

An Unusual Incident (http://www.scp-wiki.net/an-unusual-incident) - Toa_Vine (author).

Ana Hums (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ana-hums) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Anachronisms (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anachronisms) - Djoric (author).

Anart Antics (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anart-antics) - TwistedGears (author).

Anart Lecture Caught inbetween a Dying Riverside Tree and a Discarded Campus Bench (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anart-lecture) - SunnyClockwork (author).

And Again (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-again) - Kalinin (author).

And He Will Crash Upon The Rocks (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-he-will-crash-upon-the-rocks) - trennerdios (author).

And I Feel Fine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-i-feel-fine) - lhp (author).

...And I'm the Star! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-i-m-the-star) - DarkStuff (author).

And It Starts With A Song (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-it-starts-with-a-song) - Nioki (author).

And Now, He Is Gone (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-now-he-is-gone) - lhp (author).

And So It Is Now (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-so-it-is-now) - Djoric (author).

And So On And So Forth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-so-on-and-so-forth) - Djoric (author).

And so the Crows Laughed (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-so-the-crows-laughed) - SunnyClockwork (author).

And the Winner Is... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-the-winner-is) - Smapti (author).

"And Then I Died" Archive (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-i-died) - TroyL (author).

And Then I Died... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-i-died2) - TroyL (author).

And Then I Died... Part III (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-i-died3) - Decibelles (author).

And Then, Kit Slept (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-kit-slept) - Zachary Maxwell (author).

And Then There Were None (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-there-were-none) - Bennings (author).

And Then What Happened? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-then-what-happened) - Randomini (author).

An FAQ; Or, What The Hell Is A Hume? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/and-this-one-explains-humes) - Jekeled (author).

Anderson the Alternative (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anderson-the-alternative) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Angel Of Red And White (http://www.scp-wiki.net/angel-of-red-and-white) - Randomini (author).

Anima Ex Machina (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anima-ex-machina) - djkaktus (author).

Animalia (http://www.scp-wiki.net/animalia) - Drewbear (author).

Anniversary (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anniversary) - Mortos (author).

Anno Domino (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anno-domino) - Rioghail (author).

Annon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/annon) - TheDuckman (author).

Anomalous Incidents (http://www.scp-wiki.net/anomalous-incidents) - Roget (author).

Another Boring Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-boring-day) - MrUnpleasant (author).

Another Day On The Job (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-day-on-the-job) - weizhong (author).

Magic Orientation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-goddamn-magic-system) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Another Good Dream, Another Strange Dream (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-good-dream-another-strange-dream) - Eekium (author).

Another Lost Legacy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-lost-legacy) - Ekronak (author).

Another Rainy Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-rainy-day) - Moohab (author).

Another Star On The Wall (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-star-on-the-wall) - Hornby (author).

Another Thursday (http://www.scp-wiki.net/another-thursday) - Dexanote (author).

Antediluvian (http://www.scp-wiki.net/antediluvian) - Wogglebug (author).

ANTI-PUBLIC Interference (http://www.scp-wiki.net/antipublicinterference) - ObserverSeptember (author).

"Apakht" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/apakht) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Application to Form MTF Mu-3 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/application-to-form-mtf-mu3-cover-letter) - Boogey_Man23 (author).

Application to Form MTF Mu-3: Documents (http://www.scp-wiki.net/application-to-form-mtf-mu3-supplementary-docs) - Boogey_Man23 (author).

Application to form MTF Rho-87 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/application-to-form-mtf-rho-87) - ACal (author).

April 9th, 2690 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/april-9th-2690) - J E S T E R (author).

April Fools (http://www.scp-wiki.net/april-fools) - Zappanale (author).

ARBH-Class Debrief File (http://www.scp-wiki.net/arbh-class-debrief-file) - SeptemberJackal (author).

Arbitrary Darkness (http://www.scp-wiki.net/arbitrary-darkness) - Zyn (author).

Are We Christmas Yet? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/are-we-christmas-yet) - Randomini (author).

Are We There Yet? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/are-we-there-yet) - LurkD (author).

Ars Gratia Artis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ars-gratia-artis) - Joreth (author).

Aryanne's Tail (http://www.scp-wiki.net/aryanne-s-tail) - MrRonin (author).

As Time Draws Near (http://www.scp-wiki.net/as-time-draws-near) - Wilt (author).

Ash and Maple ~ Part 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ash-and-maple-part-1) - SifSeeker (author).

Ash and Maple ~ Part 2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ash-and-maple-part-2) - SifSeeker (author).

Ask Doctor Mann (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ask-doctor-mann) - DrEverettMann (author).

Ask Lord Blackwood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ask-lord-blackwood) - Smapti (author).

Ask Dr. Spanko (http://www.scp-wiki.net/askinate-herr-spankoflex) - Edrobot (author).

Assault on Site-64 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/assault-on-site-64) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Assistance for the Boss Lady (http://www.scp-wiki.net/assistance-for-the-boss-lady) - Djoric (author).

Astronomical (http://www.scp-wiki.net/astronomical) - Sophia Light (author).

Asymptomatic Carrier (http://www.scp-wiki.net/asymptomatic-carrier) - Chubert (author).

At the Library (http://www.scp-wiki.net/at-the-library) - Wils (author).

Attack of the Keter Skeeters! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/attack-of-the-keter-skeeters) - Ihp (author).

Atzak I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/atzak-i) - djkaktus (author).

Atzak II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/atzak-ii) - djkaktus (author).

Atzak III (http://www.scp-wiki.net/atzak-iii) - djkaktus (author).

Intermission: Audience of Crowns (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audience-of-crowns) - KnightKnight (author).

Audio Log 185-53 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audio-log-185-53) - Salman Corbette (author).

Audio Log From December 24th, 2010 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audio-log-from-december-24th-2010) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

Audio of War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/audio-of-war) - Salman Corbette (author).

August 19, 2035 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/august-19-2035) - Toa_Vine (author).

Authenticity Trip (http://www.scp-wiki.net/authenticity-trip) - Roget (author).

Autocorrect (http://www.scp-wiki.net/autocorrect) - Wils (author).

Autoerotic Assassination (http://www.scp-wiki.net/autoerotic-assassination) - A Random Day (author).

Automata Et Cetera (http://www.scp-wiki.net/automata-et-cetera) - Ihp (author).

Automatic Stop (http://www.scp-wiki.net/automatic-stop) - TyGently (author).

Autonomy, Part I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/autonomy-part-i) - Cyantreuse (author).

Avatara (http://www.scp-wiki.net/avatara) - A Random Day (author).

Ave Imperator (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ave-imperator) - MaliceAforethought (author).

Avian Anthology I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/avian-anthology-i) - Dr Aers (author), Quantum Physician (author), FloppyPhoenix (author), not_a_seagull (author).

Avian Anthology II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/avian-anthology-ii) - Dr Aers (author), Quantum Physician (author), FloppyPhoenix (author), not_a_seagull (author).

Awakenings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/awakenings) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Awakenings, Part Two (http://www.scp-wiki.net/awakenings-part-two) - Communism will win (author).

Awesome Meets an Old Friend (http://www.scp-wiki.net/awesome-meets-an-old-friend) - CadaverCommander (author).

"Baby's First Guide to Keter-Class Anomalies" & Other Questionable Documents Recovered from the Hard Drive of Dr. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/baby-s-first-guide-to-keter-class-anomalies-and-other-questi) - Cyantreuse (author).

Back Alley Deals (http://www.scp-wiki.net/back-alley-deals) - DrEverettMann (author).

Back Into Hell (http://www.scp-wiki.net/back-into-hell) - tomode (author).

Backstage (http://www.scp-wiki.net/backstage) - Esheter (author).

Bad Dreams (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bad-dreams) - thefriendlyvandal (author).

Badges And Scorecards (http://www.scp-wiki.net/badges-and-scorecards) - Waxx (author).

Bal-chatri (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bal-chatri) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Ball Gags and Scrambled Eggs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/ball-gags-and-scrambled-eggs) - DrClef (author), LurkD (author).

Banana Smoothie (http://www.scp-wiki.net/banana-smoothie) - InsipidParoxysm (author).

Bananazilla Begins, Part I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bananazilla-begins-part-i) - OZ Ouroboros (author).

Bananazilla Begins, Part II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bananazilla-begins-part-ii) - OZ Ouroboros (author).

Basic Observations (http://www.scp-wiki.net/basic-observations) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Gotham's Strangest Criminal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/batman-s-newest-threat) - (account deleted) (author).

Bavarian Fire Drill (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bavarian-fire-drill) - Roget (author).

Bazyliszek (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bazyliszek) - Ihp (author).

Be a Dali and Help a Mann Out, or The Lamentable State of Modern Art (http://www.scp-wiki.net/be-a-dali-and-help-a-mann-out-or-the-lamentable-state-of-mod) - DrEverettMann (author).

It will be fun, they said. (http://www.scp-wiki.net/be-a-wizard-they-said) - Rigen (author).

Be Strange or Be Forgotten (http://www.scp-wiki.net/be-strange-or-be-forgotten) - DarkStuff (author).

Beasts of the Old Letters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/beasts-of-the-old-letters) - OZ

Ouroboros (author), KnightKnight (author).

Bed, Breakfast, Plague (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bed-breakfast-plague) - Dr Reach (author).

Bedtime S(CP)tory (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bedtime-s-cp-tory) - Maddy L (author).

Bees (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bees) - Communism will win (author).

Behind the Scenes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/behind-the-scenes) - Tanhony (author).

Being Cactusman (http://www.scp-wiki.net/being-cactusman) - Riemann (author).

Belation In the Evening (http://www.scp-wiki.net/belation-in-the-evening) - Djoric (author).

Bell Weather (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bell-weather) - Etteilla (author).

Bending Over Backwards (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bending-over-backwards) - Bennings (author).

Beneath The Council (http://www.scp-wiki.net/beneath-the-council) - Pr10r (author).

Beneath the Name (http://www.scp-wiki.net/beneath-the-name) - Dmatix (author).

Beneath Two Trees (http://www.scp-wiki.net/beneath-two-trees) - Djoric (author).

Best as it Gets (http://www.scp-wiki.net/best-as-it-gets) - AndarielHalo (author).

Betrayal Will Not Save You (http://www.scp-wiki.net/betrayal-will-not-save-you) - Gargus (author).

Between Shelves (http://www.scp-wiki.net/between-shelves) - rumetzen (author).

Second Interlude: In Session (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bicentennial) - Roget (author).

Big and Happy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/big-and-happy) - daveyoufool (author).

Bigger Than Jesus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bigger-than-jesus) - WrongJohnSilver (author).

Birdseed (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birdseed) - Zyn (author).

Birth by Guitar (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birth-by-guitar) - Zolgamax (author).

Birth of a New Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birth-of-a-new-day) - Decibelles (author).

Birth of an Angel (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birth-of-an-angel) - GrandEnder (author).

Birth of the Cool (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birth-of-the-cool) - Smapti (author).

Birthday Every Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/birthday-every-day) - CityToast

(author).

Black Lotus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/black-lotus) - Faminepulse (author), SoullessSingularity (author), Crayne (author).

black white black white black white black white black white gray (http://www.scp-wiki.net/black-white-black-white-black-white-black-white-black-white) - tunedtoadeadchannel (author).

Blind Date (http://www.scp-wiki.net/blinddate) - TheDuckman (author).

Blood Is Thicker Than Water (http://www.scp-wiki.net/blood-is-thicker-than-water) - red-rogue (author).

Blood, Sweat, and Beers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/blood-sweat-and-beers) - Boogey_Man23 (author).

Bloodletting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bloodletting) - Aelanna (author).

Bloodlines (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bloodlines) - psul (author).

Bloody (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bloody) - Dr Gears (author).

Blue Lily Chains (http://www.scp-wiki.net/blue-lily-chains) - thedeadlymoose (author).

Blue Brotherhood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bluebrotherhood) - Tuomey Tombstone (author).

Interlude: An Excerpt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/board-meeting-transcript) - Drewbear (author).

BobbleCon 2018 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bobblecon-2018) - Tanhony (author).

Body Bags (http://www.scp-wiki.net/body-bags) - Hercules Rockefeller (author).

Boiled, Scrambled, and Fried (http://www.scp-wiki.net/boiled-scrambled-and-fried) - TheWydness (author).

Bones of Autumn (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bones-of-autumn) - trennerdios (author).

Bong Rip Tendency (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bong-rip-tendency) - kinchtheknifeblade (author).

Boron Blisters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/boron-blisters) - TwistedGears (author).

Boss of Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/boss-of-me) - Roget (author).

Boxes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/boxes) - psul (author).

Brainstorm (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brainstorm) - Von Pincier (author).

Love and Relative Dimensions in Fate: Dr. Clef/Doctor Who (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breach-my-containment-baby) - Cyantreuse (author).

Break On Through (http://www.scp-wiki.net/break-on-through) - bleggs (author).

CONFISCATED DOCUMENT 847-26, "CALENDAR" (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breakcalendar) - Waxx (author).

Breaker 1 9 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaker-1-9) - Dr Gears (author).

Breakfast For Dinner (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breakfast-for-dinner) - Djoric (author).

Breaking Dawn (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaking-dawn) - Zachary Maxwell (author).

Breaking It All Down On Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaking-it-all-down-on-me) - Dr Reach (author).

Breaking It Down For Me (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breaking-it-down-to-me) - Dr Reach (author).

The Battle of the Toys: The Breakroom Routing (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breakroom-routing) - Sad Xiao (author).

Breath, Pulse, Blood, Spine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/breath-pulse-blood-spine) - Dmatix (author).

Bridges Burnt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bridges-burnt) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Bring It Back (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bring-it-back) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Chapter 1: Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It... (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brink-dangerguts-chapter-1) - thattallfellow (author).

Chapter 2: How to Hold a Debate while Skydiving (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brink-dangerguts-chapter-2) - thattallfellow (author).

Chapter 3: Lights, Cairo, Action!! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brink-dangerguts-chapter-3) - thattallfellow (author).

Broadcast (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broadcast) - Gaffney (author).

Brökkën Güd (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broekken-gued) - LilyFlower (author).

Broken? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broken) - Boa Noah (author).

Broken Faith (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broken-faith) - ChaoSera (author).

The Broken Mind (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broken-mind) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

Broker-Bailer-Grifter-THIEF (http://www.scp-wiki.net/broker-bailer-grifter-thief) - DrStranger (author).

Bronze (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bronze) - DrBerggren (author).

Brother's Keeper (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brother-s-keeper) - zaratustra (author).

Brotherhood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/brotherhood) - Randomini (author).

Budget Cuts (http://www.scp-wiki.net/budget-cuts) - Hercules Rockefeller (author).

Bugbears (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bugbears) - AndarielHalo (author).

Bugs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bugs) - giant enemy spycrab (author).

Bugs in the Process (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bugs-in-the-process) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

Building Up (http://www.scp-wiki.net/building-up) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Bumaro and Ion sat at a table (http://www.scp-wiki.net/bumaro-and-ion-sat-at-a-table) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Burden of Humanity (http://www.scp-wiki.net/burden-of-humanity) - AndarielHalo (author).

Business As Usual (http://www.scp-wiki.net/business-as-usual) - Djoric (author).

Busy Office Bees (http://www.scp-wiki.net/busy-office-bees) - DrMagnus (author).

But Life Goes On (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-life-goes-on) - rumetzen (author).

All This Wandering (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-some-time-we-cant-erase) - Eskobar (author).

But We Do Not Talk About That (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-we-do-not-talk-about-that) - Randomini (author).

In Dread Forever Fled (http://www.scp-wiki.net/but-when-they-opened-it-they-turned-and-swift) - GrandEnder (author).

By One Iota (http://www.scp-wiki.net/by-one-iota) - Smapti (author).

C-Sharp (http://www.scp-wiki.net/c-sharp) - Sophia Light (author).

Cactus Insurgent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cactus-insurgent) - TwistedGears (author).

Cakework (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cakework) - CirclesAndSquares (author).

Can Haz Memes (http://www.scp-wiki.net/can-haz-memes) - Drewbear (author).

Can't Catch a Break (http://www.scp-wiki.net/can-t-catch-a-break) - Montala (author).

Candy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/candy) - Sorts (author).

Canola Oil Panic (http://www.scp-wiki.net/canola-oil-panic) - InsipidParoxysm (author).

Capone (http://www.scp-wiki.net/capone) - Fantem (author).

Care for You (http://www.scp-wiki.net/care-for-you) - fastandbulbous (author).

Carlysle Aktus is a prickly bastard (AN: high school AU) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/carlysle-aktus-is-a-prickly-bastard-an-high-school-au) - Bouncl (author).

Cart can, Can cart (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cart-can-can-cart) - Randomini (author).

CASE COLOURLESS GREEN (http://www.scp-wiki.net/case-colourless-green) - qntm (author).

Casefile for Simferopol (http://www.scp-wiki.net/casefileforsimferopol) - Technician Downs (author).

Cassandra (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cassandra) - Silberescher (author).

Cast On (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cast-on) - Eskobar (author).

Castling By Hand (http://www.scp-wiki.net/castling-by-hand) - Silberescher (author).

Cat In A Box (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cat-in-a-box) - LurkD (author).

Cat's in the Cradle (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cat-s-in-the-cradle) - Dewman (author).

Catch Your Death (http://www.scp-wiki.net/catch-your-death) - Gargus (author).

Catharsis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/catharsis) - toastedraptor (author).

A Defection (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-001) - Randomini (author).

Nucleation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-002) - Communism will win (author).

An Inspection (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-003) - TwistedGears (author).

Ouroboric Tango (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-004) - Chubert (author).

Stuck (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-006) - Crayne (author).

A Crossing (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cav-007) - Bryx (author).

Cave Paintings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cave-paintings) - DexX (author).

Caveat Emptor (http://www.scp-wiki.net/caveat-emptor) - Varian (author).

Cells (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cells) - Roget (author).

Chains (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chains) - Dmatix (author).

Challenge Accepted! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/challenge-accepted) - doomsniffer (author).

Change (http://www.scp-wiki.net/change) - Lumancer (author).

Change In The House Of The Flies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/change-in-the-house-of-the-flies) - rumetzen (author).

Change the World (http://www.scp-wiki.net/change-the-world) - AndarielHalo (author).

Changes at Site-18 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/changes-at-site-18) - Faminepulse (author).

Channeling Flows (http://www.scp-wiki.net/channeling-flows) - DrMagnus (author).

Chaos Praxis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chaos-praxis) - DolphinSlugchugger (author).

Husk (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-1-1-husk) - RecursiveRecursion (author).

Fresh Air (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-1-2-fresh-air) - RecursiveRecursion (author).

Corvophobia (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-1-corvophobia) - Ihp (author).

Chapter 1: Verse 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-1-verse-1) - Djoric (author).

A Brief Flashback (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-10-a-brief-flashback) - Ihp (author).

Equinox's Rise (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-11-equinox-s-rise) - Ihp (author).

Autumn's End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-12-autumn-s-end) - Ihp (author).

Here Comes The Bogeyman (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-2-here-comes-the-bogeyman) - Ihp (author).

Pictures of Plastic People (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-3-pictures-of-plastic-people) - Ihp (author).

Bloody Pulps and Vines (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-4-bloody-pulps-and-vines) - Ihp (author).

Following The Leylines (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-5-following-the-leylines) - lhp (author).

Scarecrow Factory (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-6-scarecrow-factory) - lhp (author).

Unshelved (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-7-unshelved) - lhp (author).

...But You Can Never Leave (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-8-but-you-can-never-leave) - lhp (author).

It's Just A Jump To The Left (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chapter-9-it-s-just-a-jump-to-the-left) - lhp (author).

Charcoal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/charcoal) - Boogey_Man23 (author).

Charon (Part 1: Nekyia) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/charon-part-1-nekyia) - Jack Ike (author).

Charon (Part 2: Katabasis) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/charon-part-2-katabasis) - Jack Ike (author).

Charon (Part 3: Asphodel) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/charon-part-3-asphodel) - Jack Ike (author).

Chasing Interest (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chasing-interest) - Dmatix (author).

Chasing Tails (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chasing-tails) - Drewbear (author).

Children Of Doubt (http://www.scp-wiki.net/children-of-doubt) - Roget (author).

Children Will Listen (http://www.scp-wiki.net/children-will-listen) - Jekeled (author).

Track 1: Old Chilly The Space Trucker (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chilly-the-space-trucker) - djkaktus (author).

Chowderclef (http://www.scp-wiki.net/chowderclef) - DrClef (author).

Christmas (http://www.scp-wiki.net/christmas) - DrEverettMann (author).

Christmas Dinner (http://www.scp-wiki.net/christmas-dinner) - Snowshoe (author).

Christmas Propaganda (http://www.scp-wiki.net/christmas-propaganda) - Jack Ike (author).

City of Wonder™ (http://www.scp-wiki.net/city-of-wonder) - DrChandra (author).

(http://www.scp-wiki.net/claire) - thefriendlyvandal (author).

Class Omega (http://www.scp-wiki.net/class-omega) - eric_h (author).

Interlude 1: Patches (http://www.scp-wiki.net/classicalinterlude) - Djoric (author).

Notes From the Great Mare (http://www.scp-wiki.net/classicalinterlude2) - Djoric

(author).

Clavis (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clavis) - TroyL (author).

Clean Sweep (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clean-sweep) - DrClef (author).

Clean Up Act (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clean-up-act) - GibberingEloquence (author).

Cleaner (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cleaner) - DolphinSlugchugger (author).

Cleaning Larry (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cleaning-larry) - Salman Corbette (author).

Clef And Dimitri Hit The Road (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clef-and-dimitri-hit-the-road) - DrClef (author), Waxx (author).

Clef Dies (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clef-dies) - The Raven (author).

Transcript of Dr. Clef's seminar, "Reality Benders and You: How to Survive When Existence Doesn't." (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clef101) - DrClef (author).

Cleon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cleon) - Gaffney (author).

Climber (http://www.scp-wiki.net/climber) - Dr Gears (author).

Clippings (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clippings) - Aelanna (author).

Out of Time (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clock-is-ticking) - Goodwill (author).

Clock Multiplier (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clock-multiplier) - LurkD (author).

Clockwork Time (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clockwork-time) - Dr Gears (author).

Close of Play (http://www.scp-wiki.net/close-of-play) - TwistedGears (author).

Clouds (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clouds) - minmin (author).

Cloudy With A Chance Of Showers (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cloudy-with-a-chance-of-showers) - Djoric (author).

Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C. Normus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clown-breeding-101-with-prof-richard-c-normus) - DrChandra (author).

Clowning Around (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clowning-around) - Pata H (author).

ClusterfREDACTED (http://www.scp-wiki.net/clusterfredacted) - agatharights (author).

Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered (http://www.scp-wiki.net/coach-panagakos-eldest-and-most-revered) - djkaktus (author).

CODE NAME: - The Truth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/code-name-the-truth) - Jack Ike (author).

Code Brown (http://www.scp-wiki.net/codebrown) - TheDuckman (author).

Coffee Date (http://www.scp-wiki.net/coffee-date) - Aggressive Pepsi (author).

Cold (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cold) - Dr Gears (author).

Collected Data (http://www.scp-wiki.net/collected-data) - Sorts (author).

Collecting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/collecting) - azzleflux (author).

Colors (http://www.scp-wiki.net/colors) - Cyantreuse (author).

Colors, Part II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/colors-part-ii) - Cyantreuse (author).

Come Back Kid (http://www.scp-wiki.net/come-back-kid) - Doctor Cimmerian (author).

Comfort Breaks (http://www.scp-wiki.net/comfort-breaks) - Wils (author).

Command Performance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/command-performance) - DrEverettMann (author).

Command-Query Separation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/command-query-separation) - LurkD (author).

Commentary on Selected Items in the Seimei Gallery (http://www.scp-wiki.net/commentary-on-selected-items-in-the-seimei-gallery) - MrWrong (author).

Communication Log Magenta (http://www.scp-wiki.net/communication-log-magenta) - Tanhony (author).

Compromised (http://www.scp-wiki.net/compromised) - giant enemy spycrab (author).

Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora (http://www.scp-wiki.net/concerto-in-d-major) - Drewbear (author).

Conclusions RE: D-173-2263 Incident (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conclusions-red-173-2263-incident) - Adam Smascher (author).

Items Seized, March 2022, Site-42 Sapient Object Containment (http://www.scp-wiki.net/confiscated-documents-march-2022) - Cyantreuse (author).

Conqueror Worm (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conqueror-worm) - A Random Day (author), Ramona Vonnegut (author).

Consent Form 3436-A (http://www.scp-wiki.net/consent-form-3436-a) - scpcrnp (author).

Conservation of Bullshit (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conservation-of-bullshit) - MaliceAforethought (author).

Conservation Of Momentum (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conservation-of-momentum) - Randomini (author).

Consolidation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/consolidation) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Conspiracy, Epilogue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-epilogue) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part I (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-i) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-ii) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part III (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-iii) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part IV (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-iv) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part IX (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-ix) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part V (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-v) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part VI (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-vi) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part VII (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-vii) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part VIII (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-viii) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part X (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-x) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part XI (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-xi) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Part XII (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-part-xii) - Hornby (author).

Conspiracy, Prologue (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conspiracy-prologue) - Hornby (author).

Contact (http://www.scp-wiki.net/contact) - TroyL (author).

CONTAIN (http://www.scp-wiki.net/contain) - ghostchibi (author).

Contain Yourself (http://www.scp-wiki.net/containing-yourself) - TroyL (author).

Containing Creation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/containingcreation) - MisterBibs (author).

Containment Breach The Musical (http://www.scp-wiki.net/containment-breach-the-musical) - PeppersGhost (author).

Containment Engineer - A Typical Day (http://www.scp-wiki.net/containment-engineer-a-typical-day) - rioludoodle (author).

Contingency (http://www.scp-wiki.net/contingency) - DrClef (author).

Continued Deliberations (http://www.scp-wiki.net/continued-deliberations) - Kalinin (author).

Contrast (http://www.scp-wiki.net/contrast) - Gargus (author).

Convergence (http://www.scp-wiki.net/convergence) - Eekium (author).

Conversation 1: Omicron (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conversation-1-omicron) - Eskobar (author).

Conversation 2: Numberless (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conversation-2-numberless) - Eskobar (author).

Conversation 3: Decommissioning (http://www.scp-wiki.net/conversation-3-decommissioning) - Eskobar (author).

Chapter Three: Corn Starch (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corn-starch) - tunedtoadeadchannel (author).

Corner Pocket (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corner-pocket) - FortuneFavorsBold (author).

You're a Toy, Mr. Sanderson (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corporate-responsibility) - Cyantreuse (author).

Correspondence (http://www.scp-wiki.net/correspondence) - GrandEnder (author).

Corroded Relations (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corroded-relations) - AndarielHalo (author).

Corvus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/corvus) - TroyL (author).

Costume Change (http://www.scp-wiki.net/costume-change) - TheGlyphstone (author).

CotBG Bible Fragments (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cotbg-bible-fragments) - Dr Gears (author).

Siren's Song (http://www.scp-wiki.net/could-find-my-way-to-mariana) - Faminepulse (author), djkaktus (author), SoullessSingularity (author).

Countdown (http://www.scp-wiki.net/countdown) - ModernMajorGeneral (author).

Counterpoint (http://www.scp-wiki.net/counterpoint) - psul (author).

Covert Cursing (http://www.scp-wiki.net/covert-cursing) - TwistedGears (author).

Coyotl (http://www.scp-wiki.net/coyotl) - Ihp (author).

Crier (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crier) - DolphinSlugchugger (author).

Critiquing A Cardboard Box (http://www.scp-wiki.net/critiquing-a-cardboard-box) - Scorpion451 (author).

Critters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/critters) - Dexanote (author).

Crossing the Frame (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crossing-the-frame) - Taffeta (author).

Crossing The Streams (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crossing-the-streams) - Djoric (author).

Crunch (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crunch) - Gargus (author).

Crunch Is A Beautiful Sound (http://www.scp-wiki.net/crunch-is-a-beautiful-sound) - DrChandra (author).

CryogenChaos' Comment Tales (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cryogenchaos-comment-tales) - CryogenChaos (author).

Cubes On A Slope (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cubes-on-a-slope) - Dr Reach (author).

Cursed (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cursed) - Eskobar (author).

Cut Up While Thinking (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cut-up-while-thinking) - SRegan (author).

Cygnus (http://www.scp-wiki.net/cygnus) - TroyL (author).

D-2000 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/d-2000) - Jack Ike (author).

D-5111 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/d-5111) - Jacob Conwell (author).

D-Class Orientation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/d-class-orientation) - Dr LosER (author).

Da Capo al Fine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/da-capo-al-fine) - DrClef (author).

To my staff (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dad-please-it-isnt-funny) - thefriendlyvandal (author).

Daddy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daddy) - Jack Rankin (author).

Daddy Long Legs (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daddy-long-legs) - Arlecchino (author).

Daffodils (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daffodils) - Dexanote (author).

Dai-tō-a (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dai-to-a) - MrWrong (author).

Damnatio Memoriae (http://www.scp-wiki.net/damnatio-memoriae) - Taffeta (author).

Damnation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/damnation) - Wils (author).

Dance The Danse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dance-the-danse) - Ihp (author).

Of Multiverses and Dandelion Wine (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dandelions) - DrClef (author).

You Ain't No Family (http://www.scp-wiki.net/danger-in-the-manger) - Decibelles (author).

Dark and Disquieting (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dark-and-disquieting) - DrChandra (author).

Dark Arts and Crafts (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dark-arts-and-crafts) - Faminepulse (author), Randomini (author).

Database error? (http://www.scp-wiki.net/database-error) - MrWrong (author).

Date Night (http://www.scp-wiki.net/date-night) - Hercules Rockefeller (author).

Le Fou d'Avril (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daveyouaprilfool) - daveyoufool (author).

Daydreamin (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daydreamin) - Roget (author).

Daylight Come (http://www.scp-wiki.net/daylight-come) - azzleflux (author).

Prelude: First Bell (http://www.scp-wiki.net/days-gone-by) - Roget (author).

Dead End (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dead-end) - Crayne (author).

Deadalive Deadalive (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deadalive-deadalive) - KnightKnight

(author).

Deals with the Devil (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deals-with-the-devil) - Sophia Light (author).

Dear Cavalier (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dear-cavalier) - GrandEnder (author).

Dear Diary (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dear-diary) - Nioki (author).

Decency (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decency) - Gargus (author).

Decisions We Make (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decisions-we-make) - Jacob Conwell (author).

Decomm (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decomm) - buckyboy (author).

Decomm Anon (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decomm-anon) - Roget (author).

Decommissioned (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decommissioned) - Dillinger PhD (author).

Decompression (http://www.scp-wiki.net/decompression) - Zyn (author).

The Battle of the Toys: The Defense Of Hive Skittles (http://www.scp-wiki.net/defense-of-hive-skittles) - Sad Xiao (author).

Delia (http://www.scp-wiki.net/delia) - Dr Gears (author).

Deliverance (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deliverance) - Wils (author).

Denton and McDowell Save Sixty Dollars (http://www.scp-wiki.net/denton-and-mcdowell-save-sixty-dollars) - DrMagnus (author).

Der Machandelbaum (http://www.scp-wiki.net/der-machandelbaum) - Oboebandgeek99 (author).

Deranged Ditties (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deranged-ditties) - DrEverettMann (author).

Descent (http://www.scp-wiki.net/descent) - Bryx (author).

Detained (http://www.scp-wiki.net/detained) - Randomini (author).

Deus Vult (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deus-vult) - Smapti (author).

Deus Vulture (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deus-vulture) - A Random Day (author).

Deus Volt! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/deusvolt) - kenneth1221 (author).

Devotion (http://www.scp-wiki.net/devotion) - Dr Gears (author).

Dial S For SCP (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dial-s-for-scp) - Loiterer87 (author).

Diary of a Young Girl (http://www.scp-wiki.net/diary-of-a-young-girl) - Roget (author).

The Diary of Captain Henry Hughes MCCLVII, Captain of the H.M.S Sprint - Page 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/diary-of-captain-henry-hughes-mcclvii-captain-of-the-hms-spr) - Swaghetti (author).

Dichotomy (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dichotomy) - Dr LosER (author).

Different Kinds of Nihilism (http://www.scp-wiki.net/different-kinds-of-nihilism) - kinchtheknifeblade (author).

Dimensions 2, 3, and Onward (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dimensions) - Kalinin (author).

This Is A Direct Appeal (http://www.scp-wiki.net/direct-appeal) - Sophia Light (author).

DIRECTIVE A-42 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/directive-a-42) - Cyantreuse (author).

Directive Legends (http://www.scp-wiki.net/directive-legends) - DrMagnus (author).

Disciplinary Report 51b-46 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/disciplinary-report-51b-46) - Dexanote (author).

Discovered Attack (http://www.scp-wiki.net/discovered-attack) - Dr Gears (author), DrClef (author).

Discussion (http://www.scp-wiki.net/discussion) - Gargus (author).

Disinformation Bureau Orientation (http://www.scp-wiki.net/disinformation-bureau-orientation) - Lazar Lyusternik (author).

Dispatch from the Paintball War (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dispatch-from-the-paintball-war) - rockyred9 (author).

Disposal And Discourse (http://www.scp-wiki.net/disposal-and-discourse) - Randomini (author).

Divine Demands (http://www.scp-wiki.net/divine-demands) - TwistedGears (author).

Do Not Collect $200 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/do-not-collect-200) - SeptemberJackal (author).

Do Not Go Gentle (http://www.scp-wiki.net/do-not-go-gentle) - Taffeta (author).

I Am Not There, I Did Not Die (http://www.scp-wiki.net/do-not-stand-at-my-grave-and-cry) - Taffeta (author).

Another Boring Night (http://www.scp-wiki.net/do-you-remember-these-guys) - Ihp (author).

Recovered Documents (Translated into English from Russian) (http://www.scp-wiki.net/doc-491) - Flah (author).

Doctor Doctor Doctor (http://www.scp-wiki.net/doctor-doctor-doctor) - TheDuckman

(author).

Doctor Ronald Stimson's Personnel File (http://www.scp-wiki.net/doctor-ronald-stimson-s-personnel-file) - TroyL (author).

Document #017-1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-017-1) - Roget (author).

Document # -002 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-348-002) - Projekt616 (author).

Document 48116-88 ("Son of the Earth") (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-48116-88-son-of-the-earth) - Blackbird5154 (author), iavev (author), Gene R (translator).

Document Alpha-Zeta-2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-alpha-zeta-2) - Aeish (author).

Document C 88 II (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-c-88-il) - Dr Gears (author).

Document Recovered From The Marianas Trench (http://www.scp-wiki.net/document-recovered-from-the-marianas-trench) - Dr Gears (author).

Documents recovered from the residence of Agent Waters (http://www.scp-wiki.net/documents-recovered-from-the-residence-of-agent-waters) - hylli (author).

Dog Eat Dog, Part 1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dog-eat-dog-part-1) - Dmatix (author).

Domo Arigato (http://www.scp-wiki.net/domo-arigato) - A Random Day (author).

Don Ferreiro's Lie-Katana (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-ferreiros-lie-katana) - Impslayer (author).

Don't Blink (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-t-blink) - Gargus (author).

Don't Call Us, We'll Find You (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-t-call-us-we-ll-find-you) - Heiden (author).

Don't Forget (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-t-forget) - Roget (author).

Don't Forget The Dead (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-t-forget-the-dead) - XilasCrowe (author).

Don't Worry About It (http://www.scp-wiki.net/don-tworryaboutit) - DrClef (author).

Don't Get Used To It (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dont-get-used-to-it) - Captain Kirby (author).

Closure (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dontcallitacomebackbecauseidontknowifillstay) - Ihp (author).

Dossier - FSF Delivery (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dossier-fsf-delivery) - Zolgamax (author).

Doublehorses (http://www.scp-wiki.net/doublehorses) - DrBerggren (author).

Down by the River (http://www.scp-wiki.net/down-by-the-river) - Djoric (author).

Down the Silver River (http://www.scp-wiki.net/down-the-silver-river) - SunnyClockwork (author).

Downvoted (http://www.scp-wiki.net/downvoted) - ashausesall (author).

Dr. Bridge Over Troubled Water (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-bridge-over-troubled-water) - Kestin (author).

DR. COG AND THE PLASTIC FANTASTIC (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-cog-and-the-plastic-fantastic) - A Fat Ghost (author).

Dr. Ikari, I presume (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-ikari-i-presume) - Edrobot (author).

Dr. Keith Partridge and the Strawberry Banana Smoothie of DOOM! (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-keith-partridge-and-the-strawberry-banana-smoothie-of-doo) - Ihp (author).

Dr. Robinson's Statement (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dr-robinsons-statement) - Smapti (author).

Dragon's Teeth (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dragon-s-teeth) - Gaffney (author).

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.1 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dream-report-990-1) - Kalinin (author).

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dream-report-990-2) - Kalinin (author).

Dreaming (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dreaming) - Zyn (author).

Despair Rage Envy Aye Mak Sicur (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dreams) - MisterBibs (author).

Dreams of the Dead Sea (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dreams-of-the-dead-sea) - Smapti (author).

Girls' Night Out: Dressing Up (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dressing-up) - DrClef (author).

If It Looks Like a Duck, Swims Like a Duck, and Quacks Like a Duck, It's Probably a Shapeshifting Living Nightmare (http://www.scp-wiki.net/duck-rule) - Eta Carinae (author).

Duets (http://www.scp-wiki.net/duets) - psul (author).

Duke 'till Dawn (http://www.scp-wiki.net/duke-till-dawn) - Dr Kondraki (author).

Dull Ache Hand (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dull-ache-hand) - Randomini (author).

Dusk (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dusk) - djkaktus (author).

Dust (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dust) - Wogglebug (author).

Dust and Blood (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dust-and-blood) - Djoric (author).

Dust in the Wind (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dust-in-the-wind) - PeppersGhost (author).

Duty (http://www.scp-wiki.net/duty) - Rain42 (author).

Castles 2 (http://www.scp-wiki.net/dying-out-west) - Decibelles (author).